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Title: Doors of the Night

Author: Frank L. Packard

Release Date: April 10, 2011 [EBook #35818]

Language: English

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DOORS OF THE NIGHT

BY FRANK L. PACKARD

AUTHOR OF

"Pawned," "The Night Operator," "The Adventures
of Jimmie Dale," "The Wire Devils," etc.

A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers — New York

Published by arrangement with George H. Doran Company
Printed in U. S. A.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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DOORS OF THE NIGHT

I—ACROSS THE THRESHOLD

Billy Kane paused for an instant in the doorway of the room before him, as his dark, steady eyes travelled over the appointments in a sort of measured approval such as a connoisseur who knew his art might bestow upon a canvas in which he found no flaw. The apartment was quite in keeping with everything else that pertained to the palatial residence in that upper Fifth Avenue section of New York. The indirect lighting fell soft and mellow upon the priceless Oriental rug, the massive desk of dark, carved wood, the wide, inviting leather-upholstered chairs, the heavy portières that filled the window spaces and hung before the doors, the bookshelves that lined the walls almost ceiling high and that were of the same dark, polished wood as the desk and chairs. There was luxury here, and wealth; but it was luxury without ostentation, and wealth that typified only good taste and refinement.

He closed the door behind him, and began to pace slowly up and down the room. And now he frowned a little. He had dined alone with his employer as usual, for Mrs. Ellsworth being an invalid was rarely in evidence, and David Ellsworth usually so genial an old gentleman, had not been entirely himself. From the pocket of his dinner jacket Billy Kane took out his cigarette case, selected a cigarette, and lighted it. Mr. Ellsworth had lingered in the dining room, and had said that he would come presently to the library—that there was a little matter he wished to attend to. There was nothing strange in that, for they often worked together here in this room in the evenings, and yet Billy Kane's puzzled frown deepened. There was something certainly amiss with the old multi-millionaire tonight, and that anything should disturb the old philanthropist's tranquillity, except when his sympathies had been aroused and the man's heart, that was softer

than a woman's, had been touched by some pathetic appeal, was decidedly strange.

Billy Kane continued his pacing up and down the room in long, athletic strides, the great, broad shoulders squared back as his hands were thrust into the pockets of his jacket. It was far more than a feeling of respect or mere liking that he held for his employer, for there had come esteem for the old gentleman's sterling qualities, and with the esteem a sincere affection, and out of it all, very curiously, a sort of fathering, or protecting interest for this man of millions.

The frown passed away, and Billy Kane smiled a little whimsically at the somewhat quaint conceit. Fathering! Nevertheless, it was true! There was scarcely an hour of the day that some appeal for charity, ranging from a few cents to many thousands of dollars, was not made upon David Ellsworth—too many of them spurious, and it was his, Billy Kane's, self-appointed task to stand between his employer and these fraudulent attempts. All the world, at least all the world within reach, seemed to be thoroughly conversant with the old gentleman's ask-no-questions liberality—and to lose no opportunity in taking advantage of that knowledge! For instance, though here he was forced to the belief that it was genuinely worthy, there was the case of the deformed beggar, one Antonio Laverto, who, during the last week, had taken up his station on the corner a block away from the house. The beggar had already secured the old gentleman's attention, and also a dollar or two every time David Ellsworth passed; in return for which David Ellsworth had become possessed of a very pitiful life history, and also possessed of a desire to set the man squarely on his feet again.

Billy Kane paused abruptly in his stride, as his eyes rested on the portières that hung before one of the two doorways at the lower end of the room. Behind that door, which was one of wood matching the other doors of the room, was a door of solid steel, and behind the steel door was one of the strongest vaults in the city of New York, and in the vault, besides the magnificent collection of rubies that nestled in their plush-lined trays, a collection that, while but a hobby, had yet made their owner even more famous and widely known than had his millions, were thousands of dollars—*the money kept there for the sole purpose of being given away!* Eccentricity? Well, perhaps—but if so, it was a very fine eccentricity, the eccentricity of one of God's own noblemen.

One of God's own noblemen! Yes, he had good reason to call David Ellsworth that! Billy Kane's strong face softened. As a boy is acquainted with his father's companions, he had been acquainted with David Ellsworth for many years, it was true; but he had never known the other for his real worth until the last three months, during which time he had been the retired magnate's confidential secretary. His father had been an old friend of David Ellsworth; and a little more than three months ago his father had died, just as he, Billy Kane, had graduated from Harvard. His father's estate, supposedly large, had turned out to amount to comparatively nothing; the net residue of the estate, which had just been wound up, being represented by the sum now at his credit in the bank, a matter of something less than five thousand dollars. Apart from that, there was nothing. His mother had been dead many years; and, with no ties to hamper him, he had been casting around for some opening where he could utilize his university degree in arts to the best advantage, when he had received the offer from David Ellsworth to act as the latter's confidential secretary. He had accepted at once, and since then he had led a rather singular existence.

Billy Kane tamped out his cigarette on the edge of an ash receiver, and stood leaning with his back against the desk, facing the hall door. Yes, it was a very singular existence! His new home was veritably a palace, with servants at every beck and call. His work was not onerous; and his salary was over-generous. He, in turn, had a private secretary, or at least a most capable stenographer, who, having been long in David Ellsworth's employ, took care of the daily routine; and it was mostly routine as far as business went, for the millionaire had long since retired from any active participation in the various interests through which he had acquired his fortune. But the work, that is the bulk of it, had now taken on quite a different angle, due to his, Billy Kane's own initiative, than had been thought of when he had accepted the position. He had not been there a week before he had realized that the old philanthropist was being victimized right and left by fraudulent appeals for money. It had been sufficient simply to excite David Ellsworth's sympathy in order to open the ever-ready purse. David Ellsworth had inquired no further. He, Billy Kane, but not without protest from the old gentleman, to whom the loss of the money was nothing, but to whom the uncovering of some pitiful fraud was a cause of genuine distress, had instituted a new régime, and had undertaken to investigate every case on its merits.

The whimsical smile came back to his lips. Born and brought up in the city, he had imagined that he knew his New York; but the last three months had opened his eyes to a new world around

him—the world of the Bad Lands, with its own language, its own customs and its own haunts. He knew his New York a great deal better now! Those three months had brought him into intimate touch with the dens and dives, and many of the habitués of the underworld, since it was amongst those surroundings that his investigations had mainly led him. He had even been in the heart of that sordid world no later than that afternoon.

Behind his back, Billy Kane's fingers were drumming a meditative tattoo upon the desk. His train of thought had brought him back to the crippled Italian beggar, Antonio Laverto. The man was a pitiful looking object enough—one of those mendicants commonly designated in the vernacular as a "flopper." His legs were twisted under him in contorted angles at the knees, and his means of locomotion consisted in lifting himself up on the palms of his hands and swaying himself painfully along a foot or so at a time. Laverto's story, told in halting and broken English, was equally pitiful. The man had been a photographer, an artist he had called himself, and he had come to America a few years before from some little town in Italy, lured by the high prices that he had heard the rich New World would pay him for his work. But within a few days of landing he had met with an accident in a tenement fire that had crippled and maimed him for life. He had been practically destitute, his sole possessions being the camera and a few of the cherished photographs he had brought with him. The camera had gone to pay for his support during convalescence; and subsequently, reduced to beggary, most of his pictures had gone the same way.

That, in substance, was the Italian's story. Billy Kane shook his head impatiently. The man bothered him. He had been frankly skeptical and wholly suspicious at first; but investigation had only confirmed the man's story. Certainly, an Italian by that name, newly arrived in the country, had been badly hurt and crippled in a tenement fire a few years ago, and had been treated in one of the city hospitals. That much, at least, he had discovered! Also, no more than a few hours ago, he had gone to Laverto's home and found the man existing in a small, miserable room on the East Side, and surrounded by every evidence of squalor and abject poverty; and the man, he was obliged to confess, had got his sympathy too. There were two exquisite little photographs, landscapes, real gems of art, wrapped up in fold after fold of newspaper. Laverto had shown them to him, and had told his story again, begging him to buy one of the pictures—and when he had produced the money the cripple had drawn his treasures back, and had clutched them to his breast, and had cried over them, and finally had refused to sell at all.

Billy Kane's fingers continued to drum on the desk. David Ellsworth would undoubtedly want to know about Laverto to-night—and the man bothered him. He had no grounds for further suspicion, fairness compelled him to the admission that the man's story seemed true; and yet, based on nothing more tangible than intuition, there still lingered a doubt about the whole matter in his mind.

Billy Kane straightened up from the desk. Jackson, one of the footmen, had opened the door from the hall, and David Ellsworth, an immaculate little gray-haired old gentleman, in evening clothes, stepped into the library.

The footman closed the door silently.

David Ellsworth wore glasses. He took them off, polished them with nervous energy while his blue eyes swept around the room, fixed on Billy Kane's face, and swept around the room again. He cleared his throat once or twice before he spoke.

"I've kept you waiting, Billy," he said abruptly. "You must have noticed that I had finished dinner at the same time as yourself; but I have been very much disturbed and perplexed all day, and I have been trying to solve a problem before saying anything to you."

"I hope there's nothing seriously wrong, sir," Billy Kane answered quickly. "May I ask what ___"

"Yes," said David Ellsworth, a sort of curious reluctance in his voice. He took a letter from his pocket, and handed it to Billy Kane. "It's this."

Billy Kane opened the letter—and, staring at the type-written words on the sheet in his hand, suddenly an angry red tinged his cheeks and mounted to his temples. His eyes mechanically travelled over the lines again:

Like father like son may be an old adage, but like a good many old adages its face value is not always to be relied upon. It might pay you to keep an eye on your confidential secretary—and on the contents of your vault.

A Friend.

Billy Kane laid the letter down upon the desk without a word—but his lips were tight.

"You understand, Billy," said the old millionaire eagerly, "that the only reason why I did not show this to you immediately when I received it this morning was because I wanted, if possible, to formulate a definite conclusion as to the motive that prompted the writing of the contemptible thing. You understand, my boy, don't you? I could talk to you then about it without hurting you. As for the actual letter itself, there is, of course, but one answer, and that is—this!"

David Ellsworth reached out for the letter—but Billy Kane had already picked it up.

"You were going to tear it up, sir," he said deliberately. "I'd rather you wouldn't. There may be a chance some day of showing this to the cur who wrote it—and I wouldn't like to lose that chance."

"Then keep it, by all means!" agreed David Ellsworth. He nodded his head in vigorous assent, as Billy Kane restored the letter to its envelope, and placed the letter in the pocket of his dinner jacket. "So much for that! But what do you make of it, Billy?"

"It's object is obvious enough," Billy Kane replied savagely. "Somebody appears to have it in for me."

David Ellsworth was polishing his glasses again.

"You've told me that I was the most guileless man you ever knew, Billy," he said, shaking his head slowly; "and perhaps I am, and then again perhaps I'm not—and perhaps it isn't always because I'm guileless that I close my eyes to many things. But I guess, after all, that I can peer as far through a stone wall as the next man. I've had to do some pretty stiff peering in the days gone by to get the few millions together that I've got now. I mention this, Billy, so that you may not confuse my idiosyncrasies with—well, whatever you like to call it. Those dollars, my boy, didn't just drop into my hands—they were *thought* there. And so you think that letter means someone has it in for you? Think a little deeper, Billy."

"I don't quite follow you," said Billy Kane, in a puzzled way.

"And yet it is quite simple—although I've spent a day over it!" returned the old millionaire, with a wry smile. "I have known you from a child. Nothing has ever occurred to shake my confidence in you. The person who wrote that letter was obviously acquainted with my past friendship for your father and my long knowledge of yourself, and, with nothing to back it up, he would be a madman indeed who would expect a scurrilous missive such as that to have any weight with me. Am I right—or wrong, Billy?"

"Well; yes, sir—I suppose you're right," Billy Kane answered.

"I am sure I am," declared the old gentleman decisively. "Quite sure of it! But suppose, Billy, that to-morrow, or at any time *subsequent* to my having received that letter, something *did* occur here—what then?"

The old millionaire's face was grave. Billy Kane leaned sharply forward.

"What do you mean?" he questioned in a startled tone.

"Sit down there at the desk, Billy, and I'll tell you," said David Ellsworth; and then, as Billy Kane obeyed, he stepped swiftly across the room, opened the hall door, looked out, closed the door softly again, and from there walked to one of the two doors at the lower end of the room, opened this, looked into the room beyond, and closed it again.

Billy Kane watched the other in frank amazement. The door that David Ellsworth had just opened was the door of the "office"—the room that during working hours, which were from ten to five, was occupied by the stenographer. True, the room opened on the back hallway and had a separate entrance from the courtyard in the rear, an entrance always used by the stenographer, but it was always locked by Peters, the butler, at night, and he, Billy Kane, had the only other key.

David Ellsworth returned, and halted before Billy Kane's chair.

"No, I am not in my second childhood, Billy," he said quietly. "That letter was certainly not written without a purpose; and yet from every angle that I have been able to view it, except one, it would have been exactly that—without purpose. I believe it is the first step in a carefully laid plan that will divert, or fix, suspicion upon you."

Billy Kane shook his head in perplexity.

"A plan?" he repeated. "I don't understand."

David Ellsworth's only reply was to jerk his head significantly toward the other of the two doors at the end of the room.

Mechanically Billy Kane followed the direction of the gesture with his eyes; and then he was on his feet, his face suddenly grim and set.

"My God!" he murmured under his breath. "You mean——"

"Yes," said David Ellsworth evenly. "Why not? I couldn't tell you myself exactly how much those stones in there are worth, but they are ranked as one of the most valuable single collections of rubies in existence, and certainly the figures would run somewhere between two and three hundred thousand dollars. Besides, there's always a little cash there—you know better than I do precisely how much at the present moment."

"Fourteen thousand five hundred odd," Billy Kane answered automatically.

"Quite so!" nodded the old millionaire. "Well, it's worth it, isn't it, Billy? I've never been afraid of any ordinary cracksman's attempt against that vault; but, if I am right now, this wouldn't be any ordinary attempt. I believe we are dealing with—*brains*. I believe, further, that instead of you and I being the only ones who know the combinations, as we have imagined, they are known to someone else. Suppose, then, that the vault is found empty some morning? I immediately recall to mind that letter. I remember that you are the only one to whom I have confided the combinations. And suppose that some additional clue pointing to you is left on the scene of the robbery? It would look pretty black for you, Billy, would it not? Naturally the stolen stones and money would not be found in your possession; but the plain, logical supposition would be that, not being a fool, and believing that you were above suspicion, you had secreted the proceeds of the robbery, and were pursuing what you considered the safest course—that is, to brazen it out and indignantly proclaim your innocence. The object of all this, of course, being immunity for the real authors of the crime, for if you were accused and convicted it is obvious that the police would look no further and consider the case closed."

Billy Kane did not reply for a moment. He had been startled at first, but now he was conscious rather of a slight sense of inward amusement. The old millionaire's deductions were, of course, plausible and possible; but, also, they appeared to be a little labored, a little far-fetched, a little visionary. Apart from being based on a premise that entailed somewhat elaborate preparations, there was one very weak point in the old gentleman's argument. The combinations being known only to the two of them, David Ellsworth had failed to explain how, or where the combinations had been obtained by a third party; and Billy Kane was even more than ever confirmed in his mind that there was a very much simpler, and a very much more creditable motive for that letter—spite. Through his efforts there was more than one none too reputable a character who otherwise would have partaken liberally of the old philanthropist's bounty; and that was probably the secret of the letter. That the day's cogitations of David Ellsworth had resulted in the discovery of a mare's nest was the way it struck Billy Kane now; but if the old gentleman found satisfaction in his deductions, he, Billy Kane, was of no mind to dispute them. There was nothing to be gained by it, and on occasions he had known even David Ellsworth to grow stubborn and most unpleasantly irascible.

"You may be right, sir," Billy Kane said deliberately.

David Ellsworth's two hands fell on Billy Kane's shoulders, and pressed him back into his chair again.

"So you think I may be right, do you?" There was a twinkle in the blue eyes. "Tut, tut! You can't fool the old man, Billy, my boy! What you really think is that I've got a brain storm. But"—his voice grew suddenly grave and agitated—"I *know* I'm right, Billy—I *feel* it. I'm as sure now, as though it had already happened. But we'll beat them, my boy! Take your pen, and a blank card—there are some in the top drawer there. Being forewarned, all that's necessary is to change the combinations. And I guess that will be an answer to their letter that they didn't expect!"

David Ellsworth was already across the room. Billy Kane took a small blank card from the drawer of the desk, picked up a pen, and, without comment, turned in his chair to watch the other. After all, little as he shared the old millionaire's alarm, the changing of the vault's combination was a precaution well worth while under any circumstances. If it even became a habit, so much the better!

The portières were swung back now, the innocent looking door that matched the others in the room was opened, and the nickel-plated knobs and dials of the massive steel inner door glistened in the light. Came a faint musical tinkle, as the dial whirred under David Ellsworth's fingers; then, presently, a soft metallic thud, as the old millionaire swung the handle over and the bolts shot back. The heavy door moved slightly inward, there was the click of an electric-light switch, the vault was flooded with light, and from where he sat Billy Kane could see into the interior. It was as large as a small sized room, and built of the finest steel throughout. Steel shelves piled with document cases lined the vault, and at the far end was a huge safe of the most modern and perfected design. Billy Kane smiled a little to himself. In one thing, at least, that David Ellsworth had said, the old millionaire had indubitably been justified. The vault was as

impregnable as human ingenuity and skill could make it, and there was very little indeed to be feared from any ordinary attempt upon it.

A few minutes passed while David Ellsworth worked with the key used for changing the combination and with the mechanism on the inner side of the door, and then he began to call out a series of numbers. Billy Kane jotted them down on the card.

"We'll test it now—call them back," said David Ellsworth; and then, as Billy Kane obeyed: "All right, Billy. Now we'll do the same thing with the safe."

He moved down to the end of the vault, spent a moment or two over the safe's dial; and, as this door in turn was swung open, Billy Kane caught a glimpse of the tiers of plush-lined trays that held the famous ruby collection, and of the score of packages of banknotes that lay neatly piled in the compartments inside the safe.

Again David Ellsworth called out a series of numbers, and as before tested the new combination; and then, from beside the open door of the safe, he spoke abruptly:

"Before I lock up again, Billy, what about our friend Laverto? You went down there this afternoon, I believe?"

"Yes," Billy Kane answered—and frowned. "But there's no hurry about it, is there? I'm bound to confess that his story seems to be straight enough, and that I can't find anything wrong, but —"

David Ellsworth chuckled suddenly, as he reached inside the safe and took out a package of banknotes.

"You've been laughing at me up your sleeve for fussing around with those combinations, my boy—I know you have. But you're the old woman of the two, Billy. If you couldn't find anything wrong, I guess everything is all right. If it isn't"—he chuckled again, as he closed and locked the safe—"it would do my heart good to see someone put something over on you!"

The light in the vault went out. The vault door was closed and locked, the outer door shut, the portières drawn back into place, and David Ellsworth, coming back across the room, dropped the package of banknotes on the desk.

"Take 'em to him, Billy," he smiled; "and take 'em to him now. He'll have twelve hours more joy out of life than if you waited until to-morrow morning." He picked up the card upon which Billy Kane had written the combinations, and placed it in his pocket. "You've got a better memory than I have, Billy," he observed, "and I guess you've got this down pat now; but I'm afraid I'll have to study the memo over a few times before I take a chance on destroying it."

Billy Kane was paying little attention to the other's words; he was riffing the banknotes through his fingers—they were of all denominations, from hundred-dollar bills down to fives. It was, in fact, a package of loose bills that he remembered having counted that morning.

"Do you happen to know how much there is here, Mr. Ellsworth?" he inquired abruptly.

"Not precisely"—David Ellsworth peered over the rims of his glasses at the package—"but I should say around a couple of thousand dollars. I—er—promised him that, if he turned out to be deserving, and I'd—"

"There are two thousand dollars here exactly," said Billy Kane a little curtly. "What I understood that you promised him was that you would start him up in life again, but it doesn't require two thousand dollars to start a man of his type going as a photographer."

"H'm! Don't you think so, Billy?" David Ellsworth's blue eyes were twinkling, and he was drawling his words. "Well, let's see! Now, first of all, judging from the photographic landscape he showed me, the man's a real artist, and he ought to have the best of tools to work with. A good lens is a rather expensive commodity. I'm not much up on photographic apparatus, but I'll bet you could pay as high as a thousand dollars for one outfit. And then there's all the paraphernalia, and a little place to furnish, and a little something to keep things going until returns come in. Two thousand dollars—shucks, my boy! Indeed as a matter of fact, now that you call my attention to it and I come to think it over, Billy, I'm not sure that two thousand dollars is—"

And then Billy Kane laughed, and picked up the money, and went to the door.

"All right, sir, I'll go—at once," he said, laughing again.

II—THE CRIME

Upstairs in his room Billy Kane changed from his dinner clothes into a dark tweed suit, a very less noticeable attire for that neighborhood where Antonio Laverto had his miserable home, and choosing a slouch hat, left the house. A bus took him down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square, and from there, crossing over Broadway, he continued on down the Bowery.

It was still early; and it was as though the night world here had not yet awakened from its day's slumber. The "gape wagons" had not yet begun to bring their slumming parties to rub shoulders with the flotsam and jetsam of the underworld, and to shudder in pharisaical horror at "planted" fakes; true, the ubiquitous gasoline lamps glowed in useless yellow spots against the entirely adequate street lighting in front of many shops of all descriptions, and the pavements were alive with men, women and children of every conceivable nationality and station in life, but—Billy Kane smiled a little grimly, for he had learned a great deal, a very great deal in the last three months, about this section of his city—it was still early, and it was not yet the Bowery of the night.

Some half dozen blocks along, Billy Kane turned into a cross street and headed deeper into the East Side.

And now Billy Kane's forehead drew together in puckered furrows, as he approached the lodging of Antonio Laverto, the cripple. In the inside pocket of his vest were two thousand dollars in cash, for the outlay of which, in spite of the old millionaire's attitude in reference to it, he, Billy Kane, held himself morally responsible. The frown deepened. It was strange, very strange! He had logically convinced himself that Laverto's was a worthy case—but the intuition that something was wrong would not down, and the nearer he approached the miserable and squalid dwelling in which the Italian lived, the stronger that intuition grew.

And then Billy Kane shrugged his shoulders. He could at least put the case to one more test, and if Laverto came through that all right that was the end of it, and the man got the money. Laverto would certainly not anticipate another visit this evening, so soon after the one of the afternoon; and if he could come unawares upon the man, and observe the other unawares perhaps, the chances were decidedly in favor of Laverto being caught napping if he were sailing under false colors.

Billy Kane, reaching his destination, paused in front of a tumble-down and dilapidated frame house, and glanced around him. The little side street here was dirty and ill-lighted, but populous enough. Small shops, many of them basement shops with cavernous, cellar-like entrances opening from the sidewalk, lined both sides of the street; for the rest, it was simply a matter of two rows of flanking, dingy tenements and old houses—save for the usual saloon, whose window lights were bright enough on the corner ahead.

The house door was wide open, and Billy Kane, pulling his slouch hat down over his eyes, stepped into the dark unlighted interior. The place was a hive of poverty, a miserable lodging house of the cheapest class; and the air was close, almost fetid, and redolent with the smell of garlic. How many humans eked out an existence here Billy Kane did not know; but, though he knew them to be woefully many, for he had seen a great number of them on his visit here that afternoon, the only evidence of occupancy now was the occasional petulant cry of a child from somewhere in the darkness, and a constant murmuring hum of voices from behind closed doors.

Antonio Laverto's room was the second one on the right of the passage. Billy Kane moved quietly forward to the door, and stood there in the blackness for a moment listening. There was no sound from within; nor was there any light seeping through the keyhole or the door panels, which later, he remembered, were badly cracked. Satisfied that the cripple, unless he were asleep, was not inside, Billy Kane tried the door, and, finding it unlocked, opened it silently, and stepped into the room.

He lighted a match, held it above his head, and glanced around him. It was a pitiful abode, pitiful enough to excite anyone's sympathy—as it had his own that afternoon. There was a cot in one corner with a thin, torn blanket for covering, a rickety chair, and an old deal table on which stood a cracked pitcher and wash basin, and the remains of a small loaf of bread.

The match went out, and Billy Kane retreated to the door, and from the door, to the street again. It was pretty bad in there, and evidently just as genuinely on the ragged edge of existence as it had been that afternoon—but still the persistent doubt in his mind would not down. It was a sort of dog in the manger feeling, and he did not like it, and it irritated him—but it clung

tenaciously.

He lighted a cigarette, and, frowning, flipped the match stub away from him. In any case, he had to find the man before he went home, whether it resulted in his paying over the two thousand dollars or not. His eye caught the lighted window of the saloon, and he started abruptly forward in that direction. If there was anything at all in his suspicions, the saloon was the most likely place in the neighborhood where they would be verified; but in any event, the barkeeper, who probably knew everyone in the locality better than anyone else, could possibly supply at least a suggestion as to where the Italian spent his evenings and might be found.

Billy Kane chose the side entrance to the saloon—it would probably afford him a preliminary inspection of the place without being observed himself—and entered. He found himself in a passageway that was meagerly lighted by a gas jet, and that turned sharply at right angles a few steps ahead. He reached the turn in the passage, and halted suddenly, as a voice, curiously muffled, reached him. The passage here ahead of him, some four or five yards in length, was lighted by another gas jet, and terminated in swinging doors leading to the barroom; but halfway down its length, in a little recess, most thoughtfully situated for the privacy and convenience of the saloon's perhaps none too reputable clientele, was a telephone booth.

Billy Kane drew back, and protected from view by the angle of the passage while he could still see the telephone booth himself quite plainly, stood motionless. The booth, like a good many others, was by no means sound-proof, and the voice, though muffled seemed strangely familiar to him. Billy Kane's brows drew together sharply. Through the glass panel of the upper portion of the booth he could see the figure of a man of about his own height, and he could see, as the man stood a little sideways with his lips to the transmitter, the man's profile.

And then Billy Kane, with a grim smile, reached suddenly up to the gas jet over his head and turned it out. This left him in darkness and made no appreciable diminution in the lighting of the passage leading to the barroom. The man who stood upright in the booth at full height, and who was speaking most excellent English, was Antonio Laverto, the maimed and broken cripple whose pitiful and heart-rending story had been so laboriously told in the few halting and hardly understandable words at his command!

And now, Billy Kane, listening, could make out snatches of what the man was saying.

"... That's none of your business, and I guess the less you know about it the better for yourself... What?... Yes, Marco's—the second-hand clothes dealer... What?... Yes, sure—by the lane... The back door's got a broken lock—it's never been fixed since he moved in two weeks ago. All you got to do is walk in. It's a cinch.... Sure, that's right—that's all you got to do. Marco don't keep open in the evening and besides he's away, you don't need to worry about that.... Eh?... No, there won't be no come-back.... You pull the break the way I tell you, and you get a hundred dollars in the morning... What?... All right then, but don't make any mistake. You got to be out of there before a quarter of eleven! Get me? Before a quarter of eleven—that's all I care, and that's give you all the time you want.... Eh?... Yes—sure.... Good-night."

The grim smile was still on Billy Kane's lips, as he crouched back against the wall. The door of the telephone booth opened, and Laverto stuck his head out furtively. The little black eyes, staring out of the thin, swarthy face, glanced up and down the passageway, and then the head seemed to shrink into the shoulders, the body to collapse, and, with legs twisted and dragging under him, there came the *flop-flop* of the palms of the man's hands on the bare wooden flooring, as he started along the passageway.

But Billy Kane was already at the side door of the saloon—and an instant later he had swung around the street corner, and was heading briskly back in the direction of the Bowery. He laughed shortly, as his hand automatically crept into his inside pocket. The two thousand dollars were still there—and they would stay there! His intuition, after all, had not been at fault. The man was a vicious and damnable fraud, and, as a logical corollary to that fact, was moreover a dangerous and clever criminal. What was this "break" that was to be "pulled" at Marco's before a quarter of eleven?

Quite mechanically Billy Kane looked at his watch. He and David Ellsworth had dined early, and it was even now barely eight o'clock. Billy Kane's face hardened, as he walked along, reached the Bowery, and, by the same route he had come, gained Washington Square, and swung onto a Fifth Avenue bus. Why Marco's? There was surely nothing worth while there! Marco's was little more than a rag shop. He happened to know Marco, because on the corner next to the tumble-down place that, as Laverto had said, Marco had rented a week or so ago, there was a small notion shop kept by an old Irish widow by the name of Clancy, where, more than once on his visits to the East Side, he had dropped in to buy a paper or a package of cigarettes. Why

Marco's? It puzzled him. The old white-bearded, stoop-shouldered dealer did not seem to have much that was worth stealing!

The bus jolted on up the Avenue. Billy Kane shifted his position uneasily on the somewhat uncomfortably hard seat on the top of the bus. His first impulse had been to confront Laverto on the spot, but quick on the heels of that impulse had come a better plan. With rope enough the man would hang himself. If there was anything in this Marco affair, a robbery as was indicated, Marco would obviously report it to the police as soon as it was discovered, and he, Billy Kane, being in possession of the evidence that would convict its author, would then be in a position to put an end, for a good many years at least, to Laverto's criminal career; and besides this, there was David Ellsworth—he did not want to wound or hurt the other's finer sensibilities, but that David Ellsworth should see Laverto for himself in the latter's true colors was essential, for it would and must make the old philanthropist in the future less the victim of that over-generous and spontaneous sympathy which was so easily excited by those who preyed upon him.

The thought of David Ellsworth brought back again the thought of David Ellsworth's anonymous letter. Billy Kane lighted a cigarette, and smoked it savagely. It was someone of the same breed as Antonio Laverto, and for the same reason that Laverto would soon have for revenge, who had written that letter. He was quite sure of that in his own mind. What else, indeed, could it be? Not David Ellsworth's explanation! That was entirely too chimerical! One by one he reviewed the cases where he had uncovered fraudulent attempts upon the old millionaire's charity during the past three months; but, while more than one was concerned with characters vicious, dissolute and criminal enough, not one seemed to dovetail into the niche in which he sought to fit it.

A second cigarette followed the first, and his mind was still busy with his problem, as he pressed the button at the side of his seat, clambered down the circular iron ladder at the rear of the bus, stepped to the sidewalk as the bus drew up to the curb, and stood waiting for the bus to pass on—David Ellsworth's residence was on the first corner down the cross street on the other side of the Avenue. The bus creaked protestingly into motion, and Billy Kane, in the act of stepping from the curb to cross the Avenue, paused suddenly, instead, as a voice spoke behind him.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Kane, sir, may I speak to you for a moment?"

Billy Kane turned around abruptly. He stared at the other in surprise. It was Jackson, the footman.

"Why yes, of course. But what on earth are you doing out here, Jackson?" he demanded a little sharply.

"I was waiting for you, sir," the man answered hurriedly. "I knew you'd gone out, Mr. Kane; and I knew I couldn't miss you here, sir, when you came back, as you always come by the Avenue, sir. And, begging your pardon again, sir, would you mind if we didn't stand here? You wouldn't take offense, sir, if we went in by the garage driveway where we could be alone for a minute, sir?"

Billy Kane eyed the man critically. Jackson, immaculate in his livery, appeared to be quite himself; but Jackson at times had been known to possess a greater fondness for a bottle than was good for him.

"What is it, Jackson?" he demanded still more sharply. "Did Mr. Ellsworth send you here?"

"No, sir; he didn't," the man answered nervously. "But, if you please, Mr. Kane, sir, that is, if you don't mind, sir, I'd rather wait until——"

"Very well, Jackson!" Billy Kane interrupted curtly. "I suppose you have a reason for your rather strange request. Come along, then, and I'll listen to what you have to say."

"Thank you, sir," said the man earnestly.

They crossed the Avenue, passed down the cross street, turned the corner, and a moment later, entering by the garage driveway, gained the courtyard in the rear of the house. It was dark here, there were no lights showing from the back of the house itself or from the garage; and here, close to the private entrance to the "office" and library, Billy Kane halted.

"Well, Jackson, what's it all about?" he inquired brusquely.

"If you please, Mr. Kane, sir"—the man's voice had taken on a curious, quavering note—"don't speak so loud. We—you—you might be heard, sir, from the servants' entrance over there. I—Mr. Kane, sir—Mr. Ellsworth has been murdered, and the money, sir, and the rubies are gone."

Billy Kane was conscious only that he had reached out and grasped the footman's arm. They were very black, the shadows of the house, and it was dark about him, but strange quick little red

flashes seemed to dance and dart and shoot before his eyes; and in his brain the man's words kept repeating themselves over and over in an insistent sort of way, and the words seemed meaningless except that they were pregnant with an overwhelming and numbing horror.

"For God's sake, sir, let go my arm—you're breaking it!" moaned the footman in a whisper.

The man's voice seemed to clear Billy Kane's brain. David Ellsworth—murdered! The horror was still there, but now there came a fury beyond control, and a bitter grief that racked him to the soul. David Ellsworth, his second father, the gentlest man and the kindest he had ever known—*murdered!* His hand dropped to his side, and, turning, he sprang up the few steps to the entrance just in front of him. He whipped out his key, opened the door, and stepped forward into the passageway. At his right was the door to the stenographer's room, and beyond, opening from that room, was the door to the library. He felt for the door handle, for there was no light in the passage, and, finding it, opened the door—and stood there rigid and motionless like a man turned to stone. Across the blackness of the intervening room the library door was partially open, and sprawled upon the floor lay the figure of a white-haired man, only the hair was blotched with a great crimson stain—and it was David Ellsworth. And something came choking into Billy Kane's throat, and a blinding mist before his eyes shut out the sight.

"In Heaven's name, don't go in there, sir!" Jackson was beside him again, whispering in his ear, and pulling the door softly shut. "Don't, sir—don't go—they'll get you!"

"Get—*me!* What do you mean?" Billy Kane whirled on the man.

"For the love of God, sir," pleaded Jackson, "don't speak so loud! I'm risking my neck for you, as it is, sir. There's a couple of plain-clothesmen waiting up in your room, sir, hiding there, and there's another two hiding in the front hall."

"Are you mad, Jackson!" Billy Kane's voice was low enough now in its blank amazement.

"I'm telling you the truth, sir," Jackson whispered tensely. "They've got you dead to rights, sir. There ain't a chance, except to run for it—and that's what I'd do, sir, if I were you, Mr. Kane. I didn't mean you to enter the house at all, but you acted so quick I couldn't stop you."

Billy Kane's two hands fell in an iron grip on the other's shoulders, and in the darkness he bent his head forward to stare into the man's face and eyes.

"You mean, Jackson," he said hoarsely, "that *you* believe I did that?"

The man wriggled himself free from Billy Kane's grip.

"It's not for me to say sir," he answered uneasily. "I—I can only tell you what they say."

"Tell me, then!" Billy Kane's voice, low as it was, was deadly in its even, monotonous tone.

"Yes, sir," said Jackson. "Keep your ear close to my lips, sir. If anyone hears us, it's all up. They found him, Mr. Ellsworth, sir, lying there dead in the library with his head split open, about half an hour after you went out, sir. You were with him in the library after dinner alone, sir; and no one was with him after that, and—don't grip me again like that, sir, or I can't go on. You don't know your own strength, sir, Mr. Kane."

"Go on, Jackson!" breathed Billy Kane. "I'm sorry! Go on!"

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir. It was Peters, the butler, sir, who found the body, and he sent for the police. Mrs. Ellsworth doesn't know anything about it yet, sir. They're afraid to tell her, she's so delicate and sick, sir. It was about half an hour after you went out, sir, as I said, that Peters went to see Mr. Ellsworth about something, and found him there like you just saw, sir. And then the police came, sir, and they figured that you did it before you went out, and that you went out to dispose of the money and jewels, sir, in some safe place, and maybe also as a sort of alibi like, so that they'd think it was done while you were away, sir, and that when you returned, if you did return, sir, you would profess horror and surprise, sir."

"Are you mad, Jackson!" Billy Kane said again.

"No, sir—you'll see, sir—they've got you dead to rights. Both the vault and safe doors were open, and the money and rubies gone, and on the floor of the vault, way in by the wall under the lower shelf, like it had fluttered in there without you noticing it, sir, was a card with the combinations on it, and it was in your handwriting, Mr. Kane, sir. And in Mr. Ellsworth's hand, clutched there tight, sir, was a little piece of black silk cord, and on the floor, under the table, sir, where it must have rolled without you knowing it, sir, was a black button."

"I don't understand," said Billy Kane, a little numbly now. There had been something grotesquely absurd, something in the nature of a ghastly, hideous and ill-timed joke, something that was literally the phantasm of a diseased brain in the murmur of this man's voice whispering out of the darkness; but there was creeping upon him now a prescience as of some deadly and remorseless thing that was closing down, around and upon him with inexorable and crushing force. "I don't understand," he said again.

"Yes, sir." Jackson's low, guarded voice went on. "It's not for me to say, sir. You'll remember, Mr. Kane, that you were wearing a dinner jacket, and that before going out you went up to your room and changed. I suppose it was excitement, sir, and you never noticed it, and it's not to be wondered at under the circumstances, sir. The button had been pulled off the jacket, sir, and had taken the black silk loop with it. And the button had rolled under the library-table, Mr. Kane, sir, and the loop was clutched in Mr. Ellsworth's hand."

Billy Kane said no word. There was a strange whirling in his brain. Some insidious and abhorrent thing was obsessing his consciousness, but in some way it was not fully born yet, nor concrete, nor tangible. He raised his hand and brushed it across his eyes.

"But that's not all, Mr. Kane, sir." The whispering voice was coming out of the darkness again, and it seemed curiously fraught with implacability, as though, not content with its unendurable torture, it must torment the more. "They found a letter in the pocket of your dinner jacket, Mr. Kane. It was a letter addressed to Mr. Ellsworth, which the police figure you must have intercepted so that he wouldn't see it, you being the one who opens the mail, sir. It was a letter warning him to look out for you, sir."

And now it had come like a flash, the clearing of Billy Kane's brain, and now it was brutally clear, clear beyond any possibility of misunderstanding; and, as a man walking in a fog that had suddenly lifted, he found himself reeling, in the full consciousness of its horror, on the brink of a yawning chasm.

"My God!" he cried heavily. "This is damnable! I—"

"Keep quiet, sir!" implored Jackson frantically. "They'll hear you! If you care anything about a chance for your life, don't make a sound. The police figured that you would do one of three things, sir. They figured that after you had hidden the loot somewhere, you would walk back here as though nothing had happened, and pretend innocence, not knowing about that button and the cord, sir; and so there's a couple of them waiting for you in the front hall, sir. Or they thought that you might discover you had lost the card with the combinations written on it and remember the letter in your dinner-jacket pocket, sir, and try to get back unobserved, just as you've come in now, sir, and hoping that the murder hadn't been discovered in the meantime, try to recover the card and the letter before you played any other game; and they meant to let you, sir, only, as I told you, there's a couple more hiding up in your room, and you couldn't step into the library without the fellows in front seeing you. Or they thought you might just simply make a break for it, make your getaway, sir, and never come back at all; and so there's an alarm out, and your description, sir, in every precinct in the city, and all the railway stations are being watched. But that's your only chance, sir, to run for it."

It was silent here in the great house, ominously, strangely silent; and the silence grew heavy, and grew *loud* with great palpitating throbs that hammered at the ear drums—and then, in the distance, from the other side of the door in the long passage leading to the front of the house, faint but nevertheless distinct, there came the sound of an approaching footstep.

"There's someone coming!" whispered Jackson wildly. "Run for it, sir—while you've got the chance!"

Billy Kane's lips were thinned into a hard, straight line. Run for it! He had never run from anything in all his life! And now his brain was working in a sort of lightning debate, battling it out—logic that bade him go, against that finer sense that bids a brave man drop where he stands rather than turn his back.

Still nearer came that footstep.

"Run!" prompted Jackson again. "In another minute it will be too late!"

Billy Kane's hands were clenched until the nails bit into the flesh. David Ellsworth had been right. That letter was but part of a deliberate plot; and the plot had been framed with hellish ingenuity, not only to secure the fortune in the vault, but, safeguarding its authors, to fix irrevocably the guilt upon someone else, upon *him*, Billy Kane. Not a loophole for escape had been left, every detail had been worked out with a devil's craft; the evidence was damning, incontrovertible, and if, in spite of all, there might still have lingered a doubt in any jury's mind, he, Billy Kane, by an ironic trick of fate had—

"Run, I tell you!" came Jackson's voice again. "Run, or—" And then Jackson's voice lost its deference, and his whisper was like the snarl of a savage beast—the door along the passage was opening. "You damn fool! I gave you your chance, and you wouldn't take it—now take this!"

Billy Kane reeled suddenly back from the impact, as the man sprang viciously upon him—and for a moment again his brain groped blindly in confusion, even as he fought.

Jackson was yelling wildly at the top of his voice.

“Help! Here he is! Quick! Help! I’ve caught him!”

III—INTO THE UNDERWORLD

It had been dark before the opening of the door had thrown a dim glow along the rear of the passage, and Jackson, in his onslaught, had missed what was evidently intended for a throathold, and his hands, slipping down, had caught at and bunched the shoulders of Billy Kane’s coat. But now Billy Kane was in action. His arms, straightened, shot back behind him—and the coat alone was in Jackson’s hands.

With an oath, the man dropped the coat to the floor, and wrenched a revolver from his pocket. But there was light enough to see now—to see the murder in the other’s eyes—and to see something there as well that brought a surging fury whipping through Billy Kane’s veins.

“You devil! I understand it now!” he gritted, as he snatched and gripped at the other’s wrist.

Jackson was twisting, squirming, fighting like a maniac.

“Help!” he shrieked. “Help! Here he is!”

Cries and shouts answered the man. There came the sound of racing feet. Then a blinding flash—a wild scream. And Jackson, the revolver going off in his hands as they struggled, sagged limply, and, with the revolver clattering against the wall, slid to the floor—and Billy Kane, with a bound, was through the back door, and leaping down the steps to the courtyard.

There was no question in his mind now as to whether he should run for it, or not. Jackson was one of the murderers ... there must ... be others.... Jackson could hardly have staged it all alone ... but to remain there and be caught was but to play into their hands! His brain was working in flashes swift beyond any measure of time. If there could still have remained a lingering doubt favorable to him in any jury’s mind, fate had played him an ironic trick that would dispel any such doubt instantly. *He had two thousand dollars of the money from that vault in his vest pocket at that moment!* And to be caught there, having presumably gained entrance stealthily by the rear door, would condemn him out of hand. To run, too, was to condemn him, that was their hell’s snare that they had laid for him ... but there was a chance this way! A rage that was merciless was upon him now. There was a chance this way ... one chance ... the only chance, not alone of saving his own life and clearing his own name, but of bringing to justice the inhuman fiends who had taken David Ellsworth’s life ... there was a chance ... one chance ... this way ... that someone would pay ... if he, Billy Kane, lived, that someone *would* pay!

There came a short, curt shout from behind him, an imperative order to halt. He had gained the courtyard now, and was running along the garage driveway, heading for the street. He glanced back over his shoulder. In the darkness he could just make out a number of shadowy forms rushing down the steps.

The order came again. Then the tongue-flame of a revolver split through the black. And as though a red hot iron had been laid suddenly across his left shoulder, Billy Kane gritted his teeth together in pain—and stumbled—and recovered himself—and plunged out through the driveway gates to the street.

Halfway down the block, he remembered, was an alleyway; and, running like a deer now, Billy Kane again glanced behind him. Forms, a great many of them, though perhaps his fancy exaggerated the number, were pouring out into the street in pursuit. The men servants had evidently joined forces with the detectives; and yelling hoarsely, a pack of human hounds in cry, with the blood-scent in their nostrils, were some twenty-five to thirty yards behind.

How curiously warm his shoulder was! He clapped his right hand upon it, and drew his hand away, red and dripping wet. He began to feel strangely giddy. The shots were coming now in a fusillade—but they missed him. He was even gaining a little, and if it were not for that queer giddiness, that sense of nausea that seemed to be creeping steadily upon him, he could have outdistanced them all, and laughed at them—except that the entire district would soon be aroused, and speed and lightness of foot would therefore ultimately avail him little.

He laughed out harshly in grim, mirthless facetiousness. Logically then, it made small

difference whether he had been hit, or not! It was his head, and not his feet, that must be depended upon to save him! If he could only get out of the immediate neighborhood ... yes, that was it ... and his head must find the way ... only, and he was not very logical after all, his head seemed possessed with that sick, swimming, impotent sensation.

He reeled again. Then his teeth clamped hard, and the sheer nerve of the man asserted itself, and fought back the purely physical weakness. There was a way, at least a chance, perhaps a desperate chance, but still a chance—if the alleyway, that was just ahead now, was dark enough, and if—

A yell, chorused wildly, went up from behind him, and a bullet struck the pavement with an angry *spat*, as Billy Kane swerved into the alleyway. And again he laughed, gasping out the laugh in a sort of desperate relief. Yes, the alleyway was black enough, he could not distinguish an object twenty yards ahead; and that other "if," something that would furnish temporary sanctuary, was here, too, at his right—and five yards in from the street, he sprang for the top of a board fence, flung himself over, dropped down on the other side, and lay motionless upon the ground.

It was a matter of seconds—no more. The pursuers swept into the alleyway, and tearing down its length, shouting as they went, rushed by that spot, so *innocently close* to the street, where their quarry lay.

And now Billy Kane was on his feet again, and cautiously, silently, raised himself to the top of the fence once more. He had counted on just this exactly, it was simply what was naturally to be expected, and he knew no elation on that score. The chance, the one chance he had, still lay ahead of him, and was still to be taken—and to be taken without an instant's loss of time before the neighborhood became aroused to the extent of pouring curiously out-of-doors. Across the intervening street the alleyway extended in the opposite direction, and if he could gain the other side, double on his tracks, he would, for the time being at least, be safe.

The sound of the pursuit came from well down the alleyway now, and the pursuers were lost to sight in the blackness. He swung himself over the fence, dropped without a sound into the alleyway, and keeping close against the fence, crept forward to the edge of the street.

And then Billy Kane's lips moved in a silent prayer of fervent thankfulness for that quiet and sedate neighborhood that had not instantly responded to the disturbance. It had seemed hours, of course, since that shot had been fired at him in the courtyard of David Ellsworth's home, but in reality he knew that it could scarcely have been much more than a minute ago. The street, to all appearances, was deserted; and Billy Kane, quick now, running again, darted out from the lane; and, mindful that if he crossed the street in a direct line, he would be in the light, and that any one of those in the alleyway behind who might chance to look back would see him, made a slight detour, and a moment later gained the alleyway again where it continued on from the opposite side of the street.

He ran on now breathlessly. It had been raining hard that morning, and the ground under foot was soft and slippery. He reeled once, and fell—and rose splattered with grime and mud. He laughed again, but his laugh was desperate now. It had been bad enough before—coatless, and with a blood-soaked shirt—but his appearance must be disreputable beyond description now, so disreputable that he would attract instant suspicion the moment he were seen by anyone, and this quite apart even from the fact that before very long the net spread for the "murderer" of David Ellsworth would widen, and every man and woman abroad in that great city to-night would automatically become allies of the police in apprehending him.

He stopped. He was at the end of the alleyway, and it did not seem to extend again on the other side of the next street. But he must go on—somehow. He brushed his hand across his eyes. His shoulder pained him, and those dizzy flashes kept recurring, though perhaps not now with such great frequency. He must go on—somehow. That was essential. He must put as great an immediate distance between himself and the Ellsworth mansion as possible; later, if by some means he could get there, if luck broke for him just a little, his chances would be better, thanks to those three months of intimacy with the underworld, if he could get somewhere into the maze of the East Side.

He peered out into the street, waited for some pedestrians who were near at hand to pass further on, and then, moving quickly forward, crouched down in the shadows made by the flight of front door steps of the nearest house.

If he only had a coat! He could walk boldly then along the street without the blood showing on his white shirt, and it would cover up enough of the mud so that no one would pay any particular attention to him. If he only had a coat! He had two thousand dollars in his vest pocket

—but it was not worth a coat. Anybody would sell him a coat for two thousand dollars, but— His hands went to his eyes, and then pressed against his throbbing temples. Yes, certainly, his brain was verging on delirium! Why should he think of Marco's? Yes, yes, he remembered now! Somebody was going to break into Marco's to-night ... and Marco was a second-hand clothing dealer ... and the back door had its lock broken ... and the way was open. He could steal too ... a coat ... at Marco's ... and that was the only way he could get a coat ... to steal it ... he dared not make any attempt to buy one ... and he must have a coat.

His brain cleared again, and he smiled a little ironically at himself. But the thought of Marco's now stuck persistently. It was possible, of course—if he could get to Marco's! But Marco's was a long way off. Marco's was a long way downtown on the East Side. He shook his head, smiling ironically again. Yes, he would very much like to be there now! That was where he wanted to be—in the East Side, instead of here!

Billy Kane peered up and down the street again, and again moved stealthily forward. He repeated these tactics over and over, sometimes covering only a few yards at a time, sometimes making as much as half a block, and sometimes even more when a friendly lane or alleyway offered him the opportunity. And at the expiration of half an hour he had covered a distance that surprised even himself, for, though still uptown, he had succeeded in getting entirely away from the more wealthy neighborhood.

Another ten minutes passed, and hidden again in the shadows of a porch, he was staring now with feverish eagerness at a great, covered motor truck, a furniture van, that was drawn up in front of what appeared to be a truck-man's office across the street. The driver had gone into the office, but there was the street to cross—and two men were coming leisurely in his direction along the sidewalk. He clenched his hands fiercely at his sides. Here was the chance flaunting him in the face and tantalizing him, the chance that was a far greater chance even than he had dared hope for, and he was powerless to avail himself of it unless those two men passed by before the driver came out again. He could read the name and address in the huge letters on the side of the van. It belonged down on the East Side. This was probably only a small uptown branch office, and the odds were a hundred to one that the van would be going home now. And if the driver took a direct route he was bound to use a cross street that would intersect that lane in the rear of Marco's, and intersect it within at least a few blocks of the second-hand dealer's shop. Billy Kane's hands clenched tighter, and his face was strained and drawn, as from his hiding place he alternately watched the van and the two men. Those few blocks through a lane would be nothing! God, if he could only reach Marco's—and a coat! A coat! It seemed an absurd thing to be of such moment—a coat! But it meant life or death. A coat would cover his blood-stained shirt, and he would be able to move with freedom enough to give him at least a fighting chance, and

The two men had passed by; there was no one else in sight. He waited another moment until they were still further away—and then, in a flash, Billy Kane was across the road, and had swung himself over the tail-board into the van. It seemed like some vast cavernous place here inside, for the van was empty, save for what appeared to be, as nearly as he could make out in the gloom, some large pieces of crated furniture piled at the front end just behind the driver's seat. Billy Kane's eyes swept the interior anxiously—and the drawn, strained look in Billy Kane's face relaxed. By lying flat on the floor of the van the driver would hardly be likely to notice him in any case; but, to make assurance doubly sure, some bits of sacking, evidently used to wrap around and protect furniture from being scratched and marred, were strewn about on the floor. Billy Kane pulled off his slouch hat, that had been jammed down over his eyes, drew a piece of the sacking over him, and lay still.

And then presently he heard the driver come out from the office. The man climbed to his seat. The van jolted forward. Billy Kane's hand, under the sacking, felt tentatively over his shoulder. It was paining him brutally, and was burning and hot, but it seemed to have stopped bleeding, and the sense of nausea and giddiness had passed away. It was a flesh wound only, probably; or, at least, the bullet had not fractured any bone, for he could move both shoulder and arm readily.

And now, safe for the moment, Billy Kane's mind was back on the events of the evening; and for a time grief for the man he loved had its sway; and then came fury, pitiless and remorseless, and a cry in his soul for vengeance; and then a quiet, measured analysis of every detail, an analysis that was deadly in its cold, unnatural calm. Jackson's acts in that back passageway, Jackson's possession of a revolver, and Jackson's words at the end stamped the footman irrevocably as being one of the men in the murder plot. And with Jackson's guilt established as a premise, the rest unravelled itself step by step, clearly, logically, irrefutably.

David Ellsworth's deductions had proved themselves in ghastly truth. The letter had been written as the initiatory step toward incriminating him, Billy Kane, in the robbery that was to follow; and this demanded, even as he had argued before, that the vault and safe combinations should be known to a third party. Who knew them? The answer came now quickly and emphatically enough—someone within the house—Jackson. He remembered now, though he had paid no attention to it before, that Jackson had been in the library on several occasions when he, Billy Kane, was opening the vault. It had probably taken the man a month or two, perhaps more, watching both David Ellsworth and himself at every opportunity and with infinite patience, to pick up little by little, possibly but a single number or turn at a time, the combinations—but he had undoubtedly accomplished it finally.

The original plan had certainly not contemplated the murder of David Ellsworth, for the letter was primarily intended to make the old millionaire one of the first to accuse him, Billy Kane, of the crime—there having been left on the scene of the crime, of course, in that case, as David Ellsworth had also reasoned, some further damning evidence of his, Billy Kane's, supposed guilt. But the changing of the combinations had completely upset that original plan. Who was it, then, who knew that the combinations *had* been changed? Again the question answered itself almost automatically. It must have been someone in the house at the time, and someone who was both listening and watching—Jackson. True, David Ellsworth had looked out into the hall, and had opened the door and looked into the unlighted stenographer's room, but he had done it only cursorily, and Jackson all the time might well have been hiding in that room—in fact, must have been hiding there.

The rest was self-evident. Without the combinations they were helpless, but the new combinations were on a card in David Ellsworth's pocket. It had been necessary, then, only to add *murder* to the theft, employing as accessories the card, the letter, the button and the black silk loop, in order to seize the opportunity of the moment; for, the card bearing the combinations once destroyed or out of reach, the months of work that had been put in to secure the old combinations would have to be repeated to obtain the new—and with very little likelihood of success, since Jackson would know that David Ellsworth's suspicions were thoroughly aroused.

The van rolled rapidly downtown. Billy Kane, peering out from under the sacking, kept watch on the streets through which he passed. But his mind was still busy with its problem.

Jackson's act in accosting him on the corner, and afterwards luring him by suggestion to the rear of the house, had puzzled him at first, but that, too, was clear enough now. There was a grain of truth in what the man had said about giving him a chance, though Jackson would care little enough whether he ultimately got away, or not. Jackson's idea, or perhaps the idea of a keener brain behind Jackson, was to prevent him, Billy Kane, from entering the house at all, and so, by inducing him to run for it, to corroborate the evidence of guilt against him, in which case, being a self-elected fugitive, he would be doubly condemned if eventually caught. On the other hand, if he refused to listen and insisted on entering the house, as they were afraid he might do, they meant to see to it that his entrance was made by apparent stealth, and here again he but added the final touch to the evidence against him, and discredited himself beyond any hope or possibility of recovery. Jackson had taken no personal risk or chance in doing this, as far as the police were concerned; and it was evident now that Jackson had meant to *kill* him there in that back passageway should he, Billy Kane, persist in refusing to run. The case and all investigation would have ended automatically if he, Billy Kane were killed under such circumstances. It was all simplicity itself! Jackson had only to call for help, as he had done when the issue was forced by that approaching footstep, pretend that he had discovered him, Billy Kane, creeping into the house, and had rushed upon him—that he, Billy Kane, had drawn the revolver, but that in the struggle had been shot himself. With the evidence as it stood, with his, Billy Kane's guilt so apparently obvious, Jackson would not only have been believed, but would have been rewarded and lauded as a hero.

Still the van rolled on—mostly through deserted streets, for the traffic was light at that time of night. Perhaps another twenty minutes passed. Then Billy Kane began to edge toward the rear end of the truck. He was in the East Side now, and approaching the neighborhood of Marco's second-hand clothing store.

Was Jackson dead? Billy Kane shook his head. He did not know. A grim smile twisted his lips. He hoped not—not from any sympathy for the man, for the man's punishment in that case had been almost too merciful a retribution, but because in Jackson was embodied the clue that would lead, if he, Billy Kane, escaped, to that day of reckoning that, cost what it might, he meant should come.

The van was in a narrow and ill-lighted street now. Marco's was still two streets further downtown, but in the block ahead was the lane that, running north and south, passed the rear of Marco's place.

Billy Kane sat suddenly upright on the tail-board of the van, the piece of sacking thrown now around his shoulders. If the driver happened to look around and see him, the supposition would be that he had hopped on to steal a ride; and if the driver ordered him off it mattered very little, since, in another yard or so anyhow, the van, as far as he was concerned, would have lost its usefulness. He leaned out, and glanced ahead of him up the street. There were a few people about, but not many, and none in the immediate vicinity of the lane that was now just at hand; but even if he were seen for an instant as he left the van, he would not be running any very great risk for he would be out of sight again before any particular attention could be riveted upon him; and, besides, in that miserable and sordid quarter a man might do many things out of the ordinary, for instance, dive suddenly into a lane and disappear, without exciting even passing curiosity or notice.

He jerked his slouch hat over his eyes, flung off the sacking, dropped to the ground, and slipped across the sidewalk into the lane. And now he was running again. He reached the next intersecting street, and was forced to draw back under cover to wait for an opportunity to cross unnoticed. And then the chance came, and he continued on down the lane on the opposite side of the street again.

Marco's was the second store in from the next corner on the street that paralleled the lane, and halfway down he stopped running and began to move forward cautiously. It was very black in here, and he wished now that he had looked at his watch when he had had the opportunity; but it must be somewhere around ten o'clock. It was two hours, then, since he had overheard that telephone conversation in which Laverto had said that all he cared was that the man to whom he was telephoning should be away from Marco's before a quarter of eleven.

Billy Kane was crouched now in the darkness against the back door of the second-hand shop. The chances were that whoever Laverto had been telephoning to had already been here and gone. Certainly two hours would have given any one ample time, and as Laverto had said that Marco did not keep open in the evening there would have been no cause for delay on that score.

He placed his ear to the panel of the door, and listened. There was no sound, and he tried the door. It stuck a little in spite of its broken lock, and gave with a slight squeak. Billy Kane drew in his breath sharply, and listened again. There was still no sound. He closed the door behind him, and crept forward, feeling his way with his hands along the wall in the pitch blackness. The flooring was old, and once it creaked under his foot, causing his lips to tighten rigidly, and his face to set in a hard, dogged way. He had no matches—they, in the match-safe that he usually carried in the ticket-pocket of his coat, were gone with the coat. A coat! All sense of absurdity in the length to which he was going to obtain so common-place an article as a coat had vanished. It was the one, final, ultimate, essential thing that he must and would have if he was to know a single chance for life. Without it he might as well throw up the sponge at once, but if his luck still held he would get one now. Marco's stock of clothing would naturally be in the shop in front, and

His hand dove suddenly forward into space, and he halted for an instant. He had come to an open doorway on his right. He felt around him in all directions. The passage seemed to end a foot or so ahead, and to lead nowhere but into what was probably the back room here at his side. The entrance, then, to the shop proper would be through the back room.

Again he moved forward, crossed the threshold, and again halted. It was dark, intensely dark, and he could see nothing; and it was still and silent, and there was no sound. But suddenly he found himself standing in a tense, strained attitude, his head thrown a little forward, his eyes striving to pierce the darkness. He could hear nothing, see nothing—but the sense of *presence* was strong upon him.

A minute passed, the seconds dragging out interminably—and he did not move. And then it seemed that close to him he caught a faint stirring sound. But he was not sure. It might have been his imagination. The silence, so heavy and prolonged, had taken on strange little noises of its own. Billy Kane's lips thinned. He was bare-handed, wounded and unarmed, but he had a stake that he would fight for with a beast's ferocity. And that stake was a coat! If there was anyone here, if it was more than his excited and wrought-up fancy playing tricks upon him, it was certain at least that it was not the police, for the police would have no incentive to play at cat-and-mouse, and therefore it was probably the man, not yet through with his work, to whom Laverto had telephoned; it was probably a *fellow* thief, fellow since he, Billy Kane, had also come

to steal—a coat. Well, he would at least end the suspense! He turned in the direction from which he thought the sound, imaginary or real, had come, took a step forward—and stood still, hands clenched at his sides, as he blinked, through the ray of a flashlight that was suddenly thrown full in his face, at the round, ugly muzzle of a revolver that held a steady bead upon him on a level with his eyes.

A voice came through the silence in a savage, guttural snarl:

“Throw up yer mitts, youse—” The words ended in an amazed and startled oath. The revolver muzzle sagged downward, as though the hand that held it had become suddenly powerless. “Well, fer Gawd’s sake, if it ain’t de Rat!” gasped the voice in a hoarse whisper. “When did youse get back? I thought youse was hobnobbin’ wid some of de swells youse used to know, an’ was givin’ Noo Yoik de icy paw until next month!”

IV—ALIAS THE RAT

Billy Kane’s face was impassive. The keen, alert brain was working with desperate speed. There had come in a flash with the other’s words a vista, not quite clear, nor distinct, but a vista that seemed to promise the way and the chance, not only of immediate escape from this place here, but perhaps more than that—assistance, help, perhaps even refuge and temporary sanctuary from the police who, before morning, would be scouring every quarter of New York in an effort to capture him. This man, a thief, a criminal, one of the underworld himself, had obviously mistaken him, Billy Kane, for another of his own ilk—for one known as the Rat. His appearance, disreputable, blood-stained and mud-covered, had undoubtedly been a very large factor in bringing about the man’s mistake, it was true; but that did not in any way apply to his, Billy Kane’s, *face*, and his face had been, and was still, full in the pitiless glare of the flashlight. Therefore he must to a very remarkable extent resemble this so-called Rat. And, moreover, this Rat must be a figure of some consequence in the underworld; for, even through the man’s hoarse and amazed tones, Billy Kane’s quick ear had caught a note of almost cringing deference. And then Billy Kane’s under jaw crept out a little, and his eyes narrowed. Well, for the moment, at least, he would play the part—because he must.

“Who in hell are you?” he demanded gruffly. “I can’t see you behind that light.”

“I’m Whitie Jack,” the other answered mechanically.

“Whitie Jack, eh?” snapped Billy Kane. “Well, then”—his hand shot out, and pushed the flashlight roughly away—“take your cursed lamp out of my eyes? What are you playing at?”

“Sure!” mumbled the man. “Sure—it’s all right! Only youse gave me de jumps sneakin’ in here. Bundy Morgan—de Rat! Wot’s de idea?”

Nothing perhaps would confirm the man more in his mistake than an allusion to the common enemy—the police. Billy Kane dropped into the vernacular. But the man’s reference to “de swells youse used to know” had given him his cue. The Rat at one time had probably known quite a different station in life, and the Rat’s speech therefore, even in the vernacular, would hardly be ungrammatical.

“A coat,” said Billy Kane tersely. “The bulls have got my costume spotted.”

“Swipe me!” Whitie Jack drew in his breath in a low whistle. “De bulls—eh? So dat’s de lay! Well, youse wait a minute, an’ I’ll get youse one. Youse look as though youse had blamed near cashed in! Youse have spilled a lot of red out of dat shoulder, eh?”

“It’s pretty bad,” answered Billy Kane laconically.

“Sure!” said Whitie Jack again; and then, eagerly, the deference back in his voice: “Well, youse wait a minute, Bundy, an’ I’ll get youse de best coat de old geezer’s got—though dat’s not sayin’ much, for dere’s nothin’ here but a bunch of rags.”

The man was gone. Billy Kane leaned back against the wall. His hand swept across his eyes. It seemed as though for hours he had been living through some horrible and ghastly nightmare from which he could not awake. He was Billy Kane, whom the world, in the morning, would proclaim the murderer of David Ellsworth; but he was also now Billy Kane, alias Bundy Morgan,

alias the Rat! Again his hand swept across his eyes. And the Rat—who was the Rat? And what—
Whitie Jack was back.

"Here!" said Whitie Jack. "Here youse are!" He handed Billy Kane a coat, and his flashlight fell again on Billy Kane's shoulder. "Say, dat's bad!" he jerked out; and then, irrelevantly, "Say, wouldn't it sting youse—youse showin' up here! When did youse blow into town, Bundy?"

"To-night," said Billy Kane.

"Well, youse didn't take long in startin' something!" said Whitie Jack admiringly. He helped Billy Kane on with the coat. "Was it a big one, Bundy?"

"No," said Billy Kane. "Only a fight, but someone got *hurt* in the fight—get me, Whitie? And the bulls are out for fair."

Whitie Jack drew in his breath in a low, comprehensive whistle again.

"Sing Sing, an' de juice route—eh?" he muttered. "Did dey spot who youse were?"

"No," said Billy Kane.

"Aw, well den, wot de hell!" observed Whitie Jack, with a sudden grin. "Dat's easy! Youse have got a coat now, an' we'll beat it over for yer dump, an' dat's de end of it! You have got to get dat shoulder fixed, an' I'm some guy wid de bandage stuff—believe me!"

Billy Kane did not answer for a moment. Well, why not? He had accepted the absent Rat's personality, why not the absent Rat's hospitality? It would afford him shelter for the moment, and he was living, feeling, groping his way now only from moment to moment. Also, and what was of even more urgent importance, he must somehow and in some way get his wound dressed.

The flashlight in Whitie Jack's hand was sweeping in a circle around the room—in a sort of precautionary leave-taking survey of the place, as it were. The room was evidently the proprietor's office; but from what Billy Kane could see of it, it was bare and uninviting enough. He caught a glimpse of a rough table and a couple of chairs, and then the flashlight went out. But he was still staring, through the darkness now, toward the far end of the room—and it seemed that he could still see just as vividly as though the light still played upon the spot. There was an old safe there, a large and cumbrous thing, long out of date, and the door sagged on its hinges where it had been blown open, and the floor around it was littered with the books and papers it had evidently contained.

"That's a bum job you made, Whitie!" commented Billy Kane sarcastically. "You're an artist, you are! What did you expect to get out of a piker hang-out like this?"

"Aw, forget it!" returned Whitie Jack. "It ain't so bum! I'd like to see youse crack a box in here wid soup, an' not wake de whole town up. Dat's wot I get mine for—a century note—see? Dere wasn't nothin' in de safe! Not a nickel! It's a stall—savvy? But, come on, Bundy, we'll beat it out of here, an' get youse fixed up."

A stall! What did Whitie Jack mean? Whitie Jack, at Antonio Laverto's instigation, had blown open the safe, knowing beforehand that there was nothing in it! What was Laverto's game? Billy Kane mechanically made his way out along the passage, the flashlight winking in Whitie Jack's hand behind him. What was the game? Laverto was no fool, and there seemed an ominous something back of it all, but he dared not press Whitie Jack, or appear too inquisitive. His own position now was precarious enough as it was, and needed all his wits to see him through. For instance, they were going now to the Rat's quarters, to what was supposedly *his*, Billy Kane's, quarters—and he had not the faintest idea where, or in what direction, those quarters might be! Billy Kane smiled grimly in the darkness. But Whitie Jack evidently knew. Therefore Whitie Jack, without knowing it, must be made to act as *guide*!

They were outside now. Whitie Jack had closed the door. Billy Kane raised his hand to his head, smiled grimly again to himself in the darkness, and stumbled heavily against his companion.

"Wot's wrong?" whispered Whitie Jack anxiously. "Here, buck up, Bundy!"

"I guess I'm bad—worse than I thought I was—my head's going round," mumbled Billy Kane. "You'll have to help me, Whitie."

"Sure, I will!" returned Whitie Jack encouragingly. He slipped his arm through Billy Kane's. "Youse just buck up, Bundy! An' don't youse be afraid to throw yer weight on me. 'Taint far, an' we'll make it all right."

Billy Kane, his object accomplished, leaned not lightly on Whitie Jack. Occasionally, as he walked along, he staggered and lurched, playing up his rôle—but only when the street in his immediate neighborhood was clear, and he ran no risk of attracting attention to himself and his companion!

It was not far, a few blocks; and then Whitie Jack, still unsuspectingly acting as guide, was

helping Billy Kane down the half dozen steps of one of those cellar-like entrances to the basement of a low building in the middle of a block.

The building seemed to be a store of some kind, but it was closed, the dingy front window dark, and in the none too well lighted street Billy Kane could not make out exactly what it was. At the bottom of the steps they halted—before a locked door—and for an instant again that grim, desperate smile twisted Billy Kane's lips. And then he laughed shortly, as his free hand fumbled in the pockets of the stolen coat.

"Kick it in, Whitie!" he growled. "I haven't got the key. I lost my coat."

"Nothin' doin'!" said Whitie Jack complacently. "I got de goods, ain't I? Wot d'youse think!"

From his pocket Whitie Jack produced a bunch of what were evidently skeleton keys; and, trying first one and then another, finally opened the door. His flashlight played through into the interior, and indicated a chair that stood before a table.

"Youse go over dere an' sit down, an' get yer coat an' shirt off, an' leave de rest to me," he directed.

Billy Kane, lurching again, stumbled into the chair, as Whitie Jack, closing and locking the door, located an incandescent that hung from the ceiling, and switched on the light.

"Say, where do youse keep yer stuff?" demanded Whitie Jack. "A shirt'll do—anything to tear up an' make a bandage wid, see?"

Billy Kane did not answer. He did not know! Instead, he let his head sag limply forward, and fall on his crossed arms upon the table.

"Aw, buck up, Bundy!" pleaded Whitie Jack anxiously. "Youse'll be all right in a minute. Dat's de boy! Buck up! It's all right! Leave it to me! I'll find something!"

Still Billy Kane did not answer. His face hidden in his arms, he was making a surreptitious, but none the less critical, survey of his surroundings. It was a large room, evidently comprising the entire basement of the building; and the single incandescent that it boasted seemed only to enhance, with its meager light, the sort of forbidding sordidness, as it were, that pervaded the place. There were no windows. The walls had been boarded in with cheap lumber that had warped and bulged in spots, and the walls had been painted once—but so long ago that they had lost any distinctive color, and had faded into a murky, streaky yellow. The room was dirty and ill-kempt. A few old pieces of carpet were strewn about the floor, and for decoration prints from various magazines and Sunday supplements were tacked here and there around the walls. There was a bed in one corner; a wardrobe made by hanging a piece of old cretonne diagonally across another corner; a sink at one side of the room; and, at the far end, a bureau, whose looking-glass seemed to be abnormally large. Billy Kane studied the looking-glass for a moment curiously. It seemed to reflect back some object that he could not quite identify, something that glittered a little in the light. And then Billy Kane smiled a sort of grim appreciation. Whitie Jack had left his keys hanging in the lock of the door—the mirror held in faithful focus the only entrance to the place that the Rat's lair apparently possessed!

And now the reflection of the door in the mirror was blotted out, and the figure of Whitie Jack took its place. The man had crossed the room from an apparently abortive search behind the cretonne hanging, and was rummaging now in the drawers of the bureau. And then, with a grunt of satisfaction, and with what looked like a shirt and some underclothing flung over his arm, Whitie Jack made his way to the sink, filled a basin with water, and returned to the table.

Billy Kane raised his head heavily—and with well-simulated painful effort aided in the removal of his coat, vest and shirt.

"Dat's de stuff, Bundy!" said Whitie Jack approvingly.

It was a flesh wound, angry and nasty enough in appearance when the clotted blood was washed away, but still only a flesh wound. Whitie Jack surveyed it judicially.

"'Tain't so worse, Bundy!" he announced reassuringly. "Youse'll be all to de good in a day or so." He began to rip and tear the underclothing into strips. "Youse'll need de shirt to wear, an' dis stuff'll do for de bandages," he explained. "See?"

"Yes," said Billy Kane.

The man dressed the wound with amazing deftness, stepped back to observe his own work admiringly, and then, picking up the folded shirt, shook it out, and began to unbutton it.

"Now den, Bundy," he said, "get dis on, an'——" He stopped. From where it had been hidden in the folds of the shirt, a little black object dropped to the floor. Whitie Jack stooped, picked it up, glanced at it, and tossed it on the table. "An' dat ain't so dusty a place to hide it, neither!" grinned Whitie Jack. "Now den, up wid yer arms, an' on wid de shirt."

Billy Kane made no comment. The object Whitie Jack had picked up was a black mask. He

raised his arms, and with deliberate difficulty struggled into the shirt.

"How d'youse feel now?" inquired Whitie Jack.

"Better," said Billy Kane. "You're an artist with the swab rags, Whitie."

"Sure!" said Whitie Jack. "Well, I guess dat's all. Youse go to bed now, an' keep quiet. I'll tip de fleet off dat youse are back on de job."

Billy Kane shook his head sharply.

"I don't want anybody butting in around here to-night!" he said roughly.

"No, sure, youse don't!" agreed Whitie Jack, with an oath for emphasis. "Don't youse worry, I'll wise 'em up to dat. Dere won't be nobody around here till youse says so—youse know dat, don't youse? I ain't never heard of any guy huntin' trouble wid de Rat yet—an' I guess dat ain't no con steer!"

Billy Kane was standing up now. It seemed strange, almost incredibly strange that this man, one who evidently knew the so-called Rat intimately and well, had accepted him, Billy Kane, without the slightest suspicion that there could exist any question regarding his identity. He had been watching and on his guard all the time that Whitie Jack had been dressing his wound, but though Whitie Jack had seen him under the full glare of a flashlight, and again in this lighted room here, their heads close together as the other had bent over him, Whitie Jack was obviously possessed of no doubts that he, Billy Kane, was anyone other than the Rat! Well, it might be strange, but at least it was undeniably true; so true that now that vista, which he had glimpsed with Whitie Jack's first words of mistaken recognition, was spreading out again before him, but more concretely now, opening a staggering possibility; so true that he dared not jeopardize anything by appearing too inquisitive about Marco's, for instance—much as Marco's was still in his mind! Marco's! No, he was not through with Marco's, for more reasons than one. There was some queer deviltry that Laverto was hatching there—at a quarter to eleven—and he meant to see it through. But, after all, even if he broached the subject again to Whitie Jack, who was patently only a tool in the affair, what more could Whitie Jack tell him, except the name of the man who had hired him to blow open an old safe whose contents were worthless—and that man's name he, Billy Kane, already knew. No, he was not through with Marco's! But he would gain nothing, save perhaps to excite suspicion, by speaking of it again to Whitie Jack.

"Youse get to bed, an' get some sleep!" prompted Whitie Jack. "Youse can leave de mob to me."

"Thanks, Whitie," said Billy Kane. He moved across the room, and flung himself down on the bed. "I'm not going to forget this. You've handed me the glad paw to-night—and I'm not going to forget it."

"Aw, dat's all right!" said Whitie Jack earnestly. "I knows youse ain't! An', say, youse can take it from me on de level dat I'd rather have had dis chance dan have a thousand long green bucks in me mitt dis minute. Say, I knows it, don't I, dat de Rat never forgets; an' I knows dere's about a million guys around here dat would give deir eye teeth for de chance dat came my way to-night!"

It was strange again—but the servility in the man's tones that was coupled with elation was genuine beyond doubt. The Rat was unquestionably a character of prominence and power in the sordid realm wherein he appeared, by some at least, by this Whitie Jack for example, to be held in awe. That being so, it was obviously the Rat's prerogative to command—Whitie Jack.

"All right, Whitie—that goes!" said Billy Kane tersely. "And now, beat it! But before you go leave me your gun. I got cleaned out when I lost my coat, and if anything comes of that little game of mine to-night I might need your iron. Yes, and leave those keys, too—I've no other way to lock the door."

"Sure!" said Whitie Jack promptly. He took his revolver from his pocket, laid it on the table, and walked to the door. "Are youse sure dere's nothin' else youse wants, Bundy?"

"No, that's all," said Billy Kane.

"Well den, so long, Bundy!" said Whitie Jack. "I'll see youse in de mornin'!"

"So long, Whitie!" said Billy Kane.

V—THE SECOND-HAND DEALER

The door closed behind Whitie Jack, the man's footsteps echoed back as he climbed to the street, echoed faintly again from the pavement, and then died away.

Billy Kane got up from the bed, went to the door, locked it, and then walked down the length of the room—and standing in front of the mirror stared into the glass in a grimly impersonal way. It was himself—Billy Kane. His face was in no whit changed, except perhaps that there was a slight pallor there due to loss of blood, and that the lines were sharper and harder, as though he were, as indeed he was, under a tense and heavy strain; but, with his collarless shirt, his trousers covered with mud and dirt, his whole appearance had taken on an aspect that was at once sinister and forbidding.

He laughed shortly, and turning abruptly from the mirror, crossed the room again, and pushed aside the cretonne hanging. There were some clothes on the wall pegs here. He gathered them up, and took them nearer to the light for an inspection. They were old, somewhat greasy, and wholly disreputable. He laughed shortly again, as he changed into them. As the Rat, he might venture out, though he would do well to take care not to be recognized, since Whitie Jack would have spread the report that he was wounded and in bed; but he could at least go out without inviting instant pursuit as the "murderer" of David Ellsworth. He was safe now for the moment, safe until morning anyhow—and he could even use those hours, if he would, in an attempt to put as many miles as possible between himself and New York! His hands clenched, and into the pallor of his face the red came burning hot. But he wasn't going to do that! That "staggering possibility" was clear before his mind's eye now. He wasn't going to do that; he was going, instead—to play the Rat—to play the cards that fate, if one believed in fate, had thrust into his hands—to take the chance, the one chance, *if the Rat did not come back too soon*, of clearing his own name, and of bringing to justice the hell-hounds, who had struck down that gentle gray-haired man who had been his friend. His hands clenched harder, until, as they had done once before that night, the nails bit into the palms. He, Billy Kane—the murderer of his father's friend, the murderer of the man who had trusted him and loved him! It was getting him now with all its brutal and remorseless force! Broadcast over the country, by morning his name would have become the synonym of all that was vile and hideous, and Billy Kane would be known as one of the most revolting characters in the annals of crime—a foul and filthy thing who typified the dregs and lees of human degradation—a thing from whom the friends of old would turn in horror and in shame, and—

Slowly his hands unclenched. The surge of fury that had been almost ungovernable passed, and he knew again that cold, unnatural, deadly calm. If he lived, the guilty man, or men, would pay! If he were taking a chance now, a desperate chance, he was taking a chance that no *man* could do otherwise than take. It was the chance to live—for one might better otherwise be dead! A chance! He had picked up Whitie Jack's revolver, and was twisting it in his fingers, and now he thrust it suddenly into his pocket. A chance! He was taking no chance, indeed, save with the stake that was already flung upon the table—his life. It was the one way! As the Rat, doubtless well known to the authorities, he could move under the very noses of the police at will without suspicion arising that he was Billy Kane; and as the Rat, if Whitie Jack was to be relied upon as a criterion, he would have the run of the underworld, and in the underworld were many secrets, and amongst those secrets was perhaps the one he sought—the clue to Jackson's associates in the murder of David Ellsworth. He was not blinded to the difficulties of this picking up of the thread of another man's life; nor blinded to what was perhaps the greatest difficulty of all, the necessity of being able to recognize those with whom he *should be* acquainted, but even that was not insurmountable. He could see a way, he believed, to accomplish even that.

But all this was for to-morrow—and the to-morrows after that! To-night he was going out again—to Marco's. That was why he had changed his clothes just now. A graver thing, the thought of merging his identity with the Rat's, had impinged, obtruded itself, as it were, upon his mind. But he had not forgotten Marco's.

He picked up his discarded vest, transferred the package of banknotes and his watch to the pockets of the one he now wore, and as he did so, he looked at the time. Laverto had said a quarter to eleven. It was almost that now. Billy Kane's eyes strayed over the table, and fell upon the black mask. The mask, too, went into his pocket. It might prove a most valuable discovery, that mask—under certain circumstances even the *Rat's* identity was not lightly to be disclosed.

He collected the muddy garments he had taken off, and tucked them under the mattress on the bed. It was not likely that anyone would come here, much less attempt to enter, in his absence; but he was fully aware that now, and from now on, his life depended upon his caution in every detail. He extinguished the light, put on his hat, walked to the door, unlocked it—and stood for a moment hesitant. Was he a fool to take this added risk, when already his own back was against the wall, when already he was in desperate case himself? He shook his head in a sort of exasperated remonstrance with himself for even his momentary hesitation, then opening the door, he locked it behind him, and crept cautiously up the stairs to the street.

Whitie Jack had been only a tool used for the stage-setting of some devilry that was to follow—at a quarter of eleven. That was obvious. He, Billy Kane, had intended that the police should be informed and should deal with Laverto, and that he in person should give evidence against Laverto; but he could no longer inform the police, no longer give evidence. He was wanted now himself for *murder*, and so upon him fell the moral obligation to prevent or render abortive, if he could, a crime that he knew was pending. And besides—his face hardened suddenly, as he moved swiftly along, evading the direct rays of the street lights, and keeping in the shadows—he had a personal account to settle with Antonio Laverto. If it had not been for the man's damnable imposition having succeeded to the extent that it had, he, Billy Kane, would not have left the Ellsworth house to-night, and David Ellsworth would not now—

Billy Kane's hand, in his pocket, tightened over the butt of Whitie Jack's revolver. Unconsciously he quickened his stride.

Always hugging the shadows, his hat drawn far down over his face, giving the passers-by he met as wide a berth as possible, Billy Kane covered the short distance that separated the Rat's den from Marco's. He slipped into the lane unobserved, and for the second time that night crouched against the door with the broken lock. But now, mindful of the door's tendency to squeak, he pushed it open cautiously an inch at a time. And then, with the door slightly open, he stood motionless, a puzzled and amazed expression on his face. Just exactly what he had expected to find here, he was not prepared to say—but certainly not this! A faint light came through from the door of the back room into the hallway, and from the room there came a woman's voice that mingled a sort of pitiful defiance with a sob.

"It's not true! I tell you it's not true! The boy never did it!"

"So!" It was a man's voice now, caustic and unrelenting. "Well, where is he now, then?"

"I don't know," the woman replied. "I haven't seen him since supper. But that's got nothing to do with it. That doesn't prove anything."

"So!" It was the man again. "Well, maybe not! But I am not to be fooled! I am a poor man. I cannot afford to lose my money. So, it has nothing to do with it, eh? You say that because you are his mother, eh? But did he tell you at supper that I had discharged him this afternoon? Eh? Answer me that!"

"N-no." The answer seemed to come reluctantly.

Billy Kane pushed the outer door a little wider open and slipped through. Keeping close to the wall, he edged forward until he could see into the back room through its open door. A frown came and knitted his brows in hard furrows. He was frankly puzzled now. The woman, a tall, powerful, muscular woman of middle age, but curiously frail now in obvious fear and emotion, was Mrs. Clancy, who kept the little notion shop next door on the corner; and the other, bent-shouldered, in long, greasy black coat, with long, untrimmed and dirty white beard, whose eyes were distorted behind the heavy lenses of his steel-bowed spectacles, was Marco, the proprietor of the second-hand store. Marco was apparently in a state of equal distress and excitement. He alternatively wrung his hands together and gesticulated furiously.

"Eight hundred dollars!" he cried out wildly. "Do you hear, you, the mother of that brat? Eight hundred dollars! All I have on earth! And it is gone! Stolen by that cursed young prison bird of yours! So he did not tell you, eh, that I discharged him this afternoon because I was sure he was making little stealings from me all the time? But you are not surprised, eh? Maybe he has stolen from you, too, eh?"

The woman did not answer. She seemed to shiver suddenly, and then sank down heavily in the chair before the table, near which she had been standing.

Marco paced up and down the room, back and forth, from the table to where the floor was littered with the erstwhile contents of the rifled safe.

Billy Kane's puzzled frown grew deeper. Evidently there *had* been money in the safe, but in some way Laverto had got it before he had set Whitie Jack at work upon a stall, and it was obvious that Laverto had maneuvered to plant the crime on the shoulders of this woman's son.

But what then had been Laverto's object in bringing Whitie Jack into it at all? It did not somehow seem to fit, or dovetail, or appear logical, or— And then, with a sudden start, Billy Kane leaned tensely forward, his eyes fixed narrowly on Marco. Yes, it *did* dovetail! He had it now—all of it—all of the damnable, unscrupulous ingenuity of the plot that had been hatched in Laverto's cunning brain. The frown was hidden now by the mask which Billy Kane slipped quickly over his face, but his lips just showing beneath the edge of the mask were tight and hard.

"I was a fool—a fool!" Marco cried out sharply. "A fool, ever to have taken him in here as my clerk! I might have known! He has already been in jail!"

"It was only the reform school." Mrs. Clancy was wringing her hands piteously. "He is only a boy—only seventeen now. And he did not mean any harm even then—and—and since then he has been a good boy."

"Has he?" Marco flung out a clenched fist and shook it in the air. "He has—eh? Well, then, where did he get this? Answer me that! Where did he get this?" Marco's closed hand opened, and he threw what looked to Billy Kane like a little brooch, a miniature in a cheap setting, upon the table. "That's you, ain't it? That's his mother's picture, ain't it? Do you think I do not recognize it? That's you twenty years ago—eh? Did you *give* it to him—eh? Answer me that—did you *give* it to him?"

The woman had risen from her chair, and was swaying upon her feet.

"Did you think I did not have reason to be pretty sure when I asked if he had not stolen from you, too?" Marco, apparently beside himself with rage, was gesticulating furiously again. "And you said I had no proof of *this*—eh?" He shook his fist in the direction of the safe. "Well, I found that brooch there on the floor where he must have dropped it out of his pocket when he blew my safe open, and he didn't know he'd dropped it in the dark, and then some of the papers he pulled out covered it. That's where I found it—under the papers! That's proof enough, ain't it? I guess with his record it will satisfy the police—no matter what his mother thinks!"

A great sob came from the woman. The tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"My boy!" she faltered. "It's true—I—I am afraid it's true. Oh, my boy—my boy—my fatherless boy!" She thrust out her hands in a sudden imploring gesture toward the other. "Listen! I will tell you all I know. I will show you that I am honest with you, and you will have mercy on us. To-night, after supper, I found that the little chamois bag in which I keep the few little things I have like that brooch, and the money I take in from the store during the day, was gone. Yes, I was afraid then. I was afraid. But he is all I have, and—"

"And my eight hundred dollars, that he came over here and stole afterwards, was all *I* had!" screamed Marco. "You tell me only what a blind man could see for himself! Did I not put two and two together myself? He has run away now—eh—with all he could get? That he stole from you does not give me back my money. But the police will find him! Ha, ha! The police will find him, and when they do they will remember the reform school and he will get ten years—yes, yes, ten years—for this!"

"Listen!" Mrs. Clancy's voice choked. She brushed the tears from her cheeks with a trembling hand. "If—if I give you back the money, will you let him go?"

"Ha!" Marco stood stock still, staring at her. "What is that you say? You will give me back the money? You! Are you trying to make a fool of me?"

"No, no!" she cried. "I've got that much—it is my savings—it is in the bank. Listen! Oh, for God's sake, be merciful! Give him a chance! You'll get your money back, you won't lose anything, and—and you would the other way, because—because before they caught him he would perhaps have spent a lot of it."

"That is true!" said Marco, in a milder tone; and then, a hint of suspicion in his voice: "What bank is it in? The bank down the street?"

"Yes," she answered.

"That is my bank, too," said Marco. He stared at the woman for a moment speculatively, then his eyes circled the room, and he stared at the broken safe. "Will you pay for my safe?" he demanded abruptly.

"Yes," she agreed eagerly.

"Fifty dollars," said Marco. "It would be fifty dollars."

"Yes—oh, thank God!" She was crying again.

"So!" Marco shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I will do it." He walked back toward the safe, picked up a check book from amongst the debris on the floor, tore out a blank check, dropped the book on the floor again, and returned to the table. He pushed the slip of paper toward Mrs. Clancy, and pulled out a fountain pen from his pocket. "So! Well, make out a check for eight

hundred and fifty dollars." He shrugged his shoulders again.

It was slow work. Mrs. Clancy's hand trembled, and she stopped at intervals to wipe her eyes. Billy Kane edged closer to the door. It was probably all she had, the savings of years from the little shop, but the fear and strain was gone from her face, and her lips were quivering in a smile, as she signed her name at last, and handed the check to Marco.

But now Billy Kane's revolver was in his hand—and suddenly, as Marco held the check close to his eyes to peer at it through his thick lenses, Billy Kane stepped forward across the threshold. And then Billy Kane spoke.

"Drop that, Marco!" he said quietly.

There was a cry of terror from the woman, as she whirled around, white-faced, clutching at her breast; it was echoed by a frightened gasp from Marco, and as though the slip of paper in his fingers had suddenly turned to white hot iron, he snatched his hands back in a sort of grotesque jerk, and the check fluttered to the table.

Billy Kane stepped toward the man.

"You've made a mistake, Marco, haven't you?" he inquired coolly. "Instead of this woman's son being the robber, are you sure it isn't—yourself?"

The man shrank back.

"What do you mean—myself?" he stammered hoarsely. And then, recovering a little of his self-control: "Who are you? And what are you butting in here for? What's your game to say I did that?" He jerked his hand toward the safe. "You can't bluff old Marco, whatever you're up to! I was in Morgenfeldt's café all evening until half past ten, and I can prove it; and ten minutes after that I was pulling her"—he jerked his hand toward Mrs. Clancy now—"out of her shop next door to show her what I had found here. She'll tell you so, too! I couldn't have come all the way from Morgenfeldt's, and done all that, and blown that safe open in ten minutes, could I?"

Billy Kane's smile was unpleasant.

"Don't be in such a hurry to produce your alibi, Marco," he said evenly. "It sounds suspicious—and it also accounts for a good deal. I think we'll take a look through your pockets, Marco—not for the eight hundred"—Billy Kane's smile had grown still more uninviting—"but on the chance that we may find something else. Put your hands up!"

The man hesitated.

Billy Kane's revolver muzzle came to a level with the other's eyes.

"Put them up!" he ordered curtly; and, as the man obeyed now, he felt deftly over the other's clothing, located a revolver, whipped it out, and laid it on the table behind him. A moment later, also from the man's pocket, he took a chamois bag, which, too, he placed upon the table.

Mrs. Clancy, with a startled cry, snatched at it.

"Mary, Mother of Mercy, what does this mean!" she gasped out. "It's—it's my bag!"

"It means that our friend Marco here is a very versatile rogue," said Billy Kane grimly. "You may put your hands down now, Marco, and"—he was clipping off his words—"you won't need that beard, or those glasses any more! Take them off!"

The man had gone a sudden grayish white. Mechanically he obeyed—and cowered back, his eyes in terror fixed on Billy Kane's mask. *It was Antonio Laverto.*

With a scream of rage, Mrs. Clancy rushed at the man.

"You—you devil!" she shrieked. "You made me believe my boy was a thief—God forgive me for it! And—ah, let me at him! I'm only a woman, but—"

Billy Kane had stepped between them.

"Wait!" he said. "There's a better way, Mrs. Clancy." He swung on the Italian. "If it hadn't been for your voice, Laverto—you see, I know you—you might have got away with it. I didn't recognize you at first. You're clever, damnably clever, I'll give you credit for that, if it's any satisfaction to you. You must be a busy man! Are there any more rôles in your repertoire? Well, no matter! The Italian crippled beggar, and Marco the second-hand clothing dealer are enough for now—and enough to put you where you belong!" His voice rasped suddenly. "You blotch on God's earth!" he said between his teeth. "You knew Mrs. Clancy had a little money, and you knew that her son had a reform school record against him. And so, about two weeks ago, you rented this place next to hers that was then vacant, and you stocked it with a few old clothes, and you hired her son to act as clerk; and you hired him, not with an idea of doing any business, but as a necessary part of your plan to incriminate him in his mother's eyes, and also to enable you, without arousing suspicion by appearing to neglect business here, to attend to other irons equally as despicable that you had in the fire at the same time—playing the flopper, for instance, up on Fifth Avenue. The whole outlay probably cost you but a few dollars—and in return you meant to

get all of this woman's life savings. I say all, because you probably found out how much she had, and if she had had much more than eight hundred dollars you would have set your fake loss higher. And to-night in some way—the details do not matter at this moment—you stole from her that chamois bag, both to impress her with the belief that the boy had stolen from her too, and also to secure spurious evidence to prove that he had been guilty of what you claimed had happened here."

Billy Kane paused. His eyes had travelled to the wrecked safe—and sharp and quick had come the thought of Whitie Jack. He smiled grimly. He did not want Whitie Jack to appear in this. He owed Whitie Jack a good deal to-night—and the "Rat" never forgot! His eyes came back to Marco. The man was circling his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"You're going up for this, Marco," Billy Kane said in level tones. "But I'll give you a friendly tip—for reasons of my own. Maybe you didn't pull this safe-cracking game yourself, maybe your alibi stands on that count; but, if it does, you got some tool to pull it off for you just for that reason, and possibly also because you didn't know how to handle the 'soup' yourself—and if it's one of the boys it won't help your case any to snitch on him, for you're caught open and shut in this anyhow, and maybe, Laverto, some of his friends might remember it when you *got out* again! You get the idea, don't you? Yes, I see you do! Well, then, there's just one thing more. If this little game of yours had broken right for you, Mrs. Clancy's son—to make it appear that he had run away—would have had to disappear for several days, until you could have pulled up stakes here without exciting suspicion, and have pretended to move away. Therefore, where is he now—Laverto?"

There were beads of sweat on the man's forehead. His lips moved mumbly.

"Where?" Billy Kane's revolver edged viciously forward. "I didn't hear you!"

"Wong Yen's," the man whispered.

Billy Kane's jaws snapped together. He had heard of Wong Yen's! It was one of the most infamous Chinese underground dives in the Bad Lands.

"Doped?" He bit off the word.

"Yes," the man whispered again.

Billy Kane turned to Mrs. Clancy.

"He's yours now, Mrs. Clancy. You know the story, and you know where to send them for your boy. I guess I can leave him to you. They say the female of the species is more deadly than the male! There's his revolver. Do you think you could march him out of the front door, and hand him over to the first officer you see?"

There was a bitter, hard look on Mrs. Clancy's face. Big and brawny, she towered over the cringing figure of the Italian—and the Italian shrank still farther away from her, as she snatched up the weapon.

"I can!" she said, and her short laugh was not a pleasant one. "And I can shoot if I have to, and, faith, there'd be joy in the doin' of it; but you"—her voice broke suddenly—"I don't know who you are, and I owe you——"

Billy Kane was backing toward the rear door.

"You'll pay it all, and more, Mrs. Clancy, when you hand him over to the police," he said quickly—and, stepping out into the passageway, he ran down its length, whipping the mask from his face as he went; and in another instant, from the lane, had gained the cross street.

VI—A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

Keeping in the shadows and avoiding the passers-by as on his way to Marco's, Billy Kane hurried even more now on his return to the Rat's. In a moment or so, when Mrs. Clancy reached the front street with her prisoner, there was likely to be an uproar, and he wanted to be housed and under cover if possible before that broke loose. Mrs. Clancy's story could hardly omit reference to the man in the mask, and the police, to say nothing of the on-lookers, might evince a most unpleasant degree of practical curiosity—and he, Billy Kane, was in no condition, either mental, or, above all,

physical, to play hare to the hounds of the law again that night. He was conscious now, as he made his way swiftly along, that his shoulder was paining him intensely again, and that, though through nerve force, his feet moved quickly enough under him, his knees were wobbly and weak.

He turned a corner, and still another—and drew a deep breath of relief. He was out of range of the second-hand shop now, and the Rat's den was just ahead up the street, and there was no one in sight.

Billy Kane swept his hand heavily across his eyes. It was strange! There was not far from being a very close analogy between himself and Mrs. Clancy's son to-night. Mrs. Clancy's son had been selected as the victim of a "plant" much like himself—only there had been no murder, and the "plant" had failed. It was curious, very curious, that the two should have been so much alike, and that though he had been able to save the other, he himself was being searched for at that moment in every corner of New York, and that the human drag-net was spread for him, and that the wires all over the country were hot with his description, and that into every newspaper office in every state was pouring the story that would make of him an abominable and an abandoned thing!

His head was singing. He stumbled a little, as he made his way down the stairs, and fumbled with Whitie Jack's key in the lock of the Rat's door. Well, if the Rat, who was away, did not return too soon, and if—he shook his head, as he opened the door, and stepped inside, and locked it behind him—no, he was too tired, and too near the breaking point to think any more. He had a chance to rest now until morning. Whitie Jack had said that no one would dare disturb the Rat, and that was enough—he did not want to think any more—until morning.

He groped his way forward to the electric light, reached up to turn it on—and, with his arm poised in mid-air, stood suddenly tense and rigid. He listened. It came again—as though some one were knocking cautiously on the wall—and it seemed to come from the far end of the room near the bureau.

Billy Kane's hand shot into his pocket and closed on his revolver; and, quick and silent in every movement now, he tiptoed across the room in the darkness, slipped in behind the cretonne hanging and waited, peering through a corner of the hanging.

And now it was absolutely silent again. Perhaps a half minute passed, and then, grotesquely, as though it came through the wall itself, the white ray of a flashlight streamed into the room, and circled it slowly and deliberately. And then a form moved forward—a woman's form—and crossed the room to the table. There was a slight sound as of the rustling of paper, and, with the ray now flooding the top of the table, Billy Kane could see that she was writing; but her back was turned, and he could not see her face. For a moment more she stood there bending over the table, and then, turning, she retreated again to the rear of the room.

The flashlight now was full on the rear wall—but there was no opening there. Billy Kane leaned tensely forward, watching through the corner of the hanging. This den of the Rat's that he, or fate for him, had appropriated, promised much more than appeared on the surface! It was obvious that there was another entrance than that from the street, and to obtain its secret now was a matter upon which his life, sooner or later, might very easily depend.

She was stooping now slightly, and her hand in the glare of the flashlight was moving in a slow, tentative way up and down one of the wall boards—and then her hand for an instant remained motionless. Billy Kane drew in his breath softly. It was ingenious, clever, cunning—and a craftsman's work. A small door swung open into the room—a most curious door! Its top was of an absurd zigzag shape—due to the fact that it followed the natural joints of the wall boards. And the whole, three boards in width, in no part therefore, to casual or even critical examination, would show any signs of an opening, since it opened only where boards joined one another, and since everywhere in the room all the wall boards were more or less warped and ill-fitting!

The light was suddenly shaded, obliterated almost, as she passed through the opening—and then was blotted out. The door had closed without a sound. She was gone.

Billy Kane did not move. His eyes, as though fascinated, as though fearful that he might lose it, were fixed through the darkness on the particular spot on the wall where this strange midnight visitor had run her hand up and down. A minute, two, three, passed. Wherever that opening led to, she must be far enough away now to make it safe for him to act. But he dared not turn on the electric light. It might throw a glimmer to the street. He was none too sure of either the sill or panels of that front door! Whitie Jack had passed the word around of the Rat's return—was this woman one to whom that word had come? In any case, she had thought the room empty, the Rat away, and therefore he could not run the risk of exposing the fact that he had been *hidden* there—he knew too little—and perhaps already too much!

He stepped silently over to the wall now. If he only had a match! But he had lost his match-safe with his coat—no, there were matches here, a box of them—his fingers had been mechanically searching his pockets—he had forgotten—it was not even the coat White Jack had given him at the second-hand shop, it was the Rat's coat now he was wearing!

He struck a match, located the board, pressed his hand up and down its length, and felt something give slightly. The door began to swing open. He blew out the match instantly, and, crouched there, listened. He could hear nothing. He lighted another match, and this time held it above his head. A short, tunnel-like passage through the ground, strongly braced and stayed, and trending gently upward, confronted him.

He stepped forward into the opening, and, bending head and shoulders, for the roof was scarcely four feet in height, followed the passage for some five or six yards to where it ended abruptly in a blank wall of earth, but where, above his head, a third match disclosed a trap-door. Again Billy Kane listened, and then cautiously raised the door. It was pitch black now. He drew himself up, and once more listened. There was no sound. He lighted another match—the stub of the one before being carefully consigned to his pocket—and nodded his head in understanding. The passage had led him into a shed, evidently little used, for it was littered and stored with odds and ends that, judging from the accumulated dust and dirt, had been untouched for a long time; and the shed itself—yes, he was right—he had pushed the back door open a little—the shed gave directly on a lane.

Billy Kane closed the shed door; and, noting with grim appreciation that the trap-door, as he closed it above his head, was an ingenious arrangement of the floor planking similar to the construction of the door within the Rat's quarters, and was moreover, as an added precaution, surrounded by an apparently careless stowage of the shed's litter, he made his way back along the passage again. The room door he examined as he passed through. It was manipulated from the *inside* of the passage by an ordinary and frankly obvious spring lock. He closed it, and stood for a moment staring at it speculatively. There seemed no way of locking it here in the room, of protecting himself from an intrusion through the night that might not be either as instructive or as harmless as this first one had been. There might be a way, and there probably was a way of fastening it, the Rat would surely have seen to that, but he, Billy Kane, was too far gone, too weak, too tired, too nearly all in to hunt or search for it now—and there *was* a way of obviating the possibility of the door being opened without first arousing him and putting him on his guard. He went to the table, picked up a chair, and, carrying it back, tilted it against the door in the wall.

And now he swayed a little, and his hand sought his eyes. He was conscious again of his aching shoulder, and that his head was swimming dizzily—but he seemed to have forgotten something—yes, he remembered now—that paper—that paper on which she had written something. He laughed in a strained, almost delirious way. He must be worse than he imagined, if he had, even for an instant, forgotten that! Or was it just simply the reaction coming now?

He stumbled toward the table, and, feeling with his hand, secured the paper—but there was no chair here now, and he stumbled across the room, and sat down on the edge of the bed. He lighted another match, held it close to the paper, and read the pencilled lines.

So you are back, are you?

Well, so am I! *Remember!*

The match burned down to his fingers, and he dropped it on the floor. What did it mean? Who was she? He shook his head. And then, with a queer, twisted smile, he folded the paper, thrust it into his pocket—and, stretching himself out fully dressed upon the bed, lay there staring into the darkness.

VII—WHISPERING SHADOWS

It was the next evening—in the Rat's den. Through half closed eyes, as he lay stretched out on the bed, Billy Kane watched Whitie Jack across the room. The man was tilted back in his chair, his legs were sprawled across the table, and from his cigarette, which dangled from one corner of his lower lip, a thread of blue smoke spiraled lazily upward. Whitie Jack was not smoking; the cigarette simply hung forgotten on the man's lip. For the moment Whitie Jack with bated interest was poring over the evening paper.

And then Whitie Jack looked up suddenly, and spoke—out of the unoccupied corner of his mouth.

"Say, dat secretary guy dat croaked de old geezer last night was a sweet, downy bird—nit! But believe me, he made some haul—*some* haul!"

Billy Kane made no reply. Whitie Jack resumed his absorbing perusal of the newspaper. Billy Kane's eyes closed completely—but not in sleep. It had been a day that, viewed in retrospect, made the brain whirl. It had been a wild untrammelled phantasmagoria. That was it—phantasmagoria. There was no other word. The day was expressed in shadows, moving shadows, shadows that came and went, many of them, shadows that were paradoxically real and concrete, and shadows that were the reflection of things felt and sensed, but unseen. And these latter, the shadows of the mind, were weird, uncanny things like denizens out of some black world apart—ghoulish things. And the shadows that were real and concrete, that spoke and whispered, seemed to take it for granted that he was and always had been in their evil confidence, and so their words were not rounded out, and there was only the hint of dark and hideous things in which he was supposed to have his part. It had been a day of mutterings, of whisperings, of skulking things that had fled the sunlight. The brain and mind was in riot from it. It was evening now; it had been the strangest day through which any man had ever lived.

He had held court that morning and through the day, here in the Rat's lair—a sort of grim, unholy court to which grim, unholy courtiers had flocked to pay him homage. And these courtiers had been admitted to the presence one by one, their names announced by Whitie Jack, who had acted—quite innocently, quite free from any thought of connivance—as the master of ceremonies. Billy Kane's lips twisted in a mirthless smile. It had been very simple, that part of it; much more simple than he had dared to hope it would be. Bundy Morgan, alias the Rat, was supposed to know all those who composed the élite of the underworld intimately and well—but Billy Kane upon whom fate had thrust for the moment the personality and entity of Bundy Morgan, alias the Rat, knew none of them. And yet it had been simple—so simple that, against the peril, the certain death that would follow fast on the heels of even a misplaced word or an unguarded look, it had been even grotesquely absurd in its simplicity. Through the dens and dives of the Bad Lands, spread by Whitie Jack when he had gone away the night before, the whisper had passed that the Rat had returned; and so, throughout the day, stealthy footsteps had descended from the street to the basement door here, and in response to the knock Whitie Jack had opened the door a cautious inch, peering out; and then he, Billy Kane, from the bed, his voice querulous for the occasion, had demanded who it was, and Whitie Jack had answered—and the unsuspected introduction thus performed, he had bidden Whitie Jack admit the visitor.

There had been many like that—very many. And he had learned many things. His hands clenched suddenly at his sides. The rôle he played promised well! Innuendoes, words toying with the fringe of things, had made it only too glaringly clear that the Rat was enmeshed in devilishness that ran the gamut of every crime in the decalogue. And for the moment he was the Rat! There was some hell's syndicate, whose scope and power he could only dimly plumb though he was satisfied that its branches were rooted in every nook and corner of the underworld. And of this syndicate he was now, by proxy, a member; and he was not only a member, but he was one of those magnates of crime who composed its inner council, its unhallowed directorate.

He twisted a little on the bed—more in mental than in physical unrest. His wounded shoulder was still far from healed of course, but it gave him very little discomfort, and in no way interfered with his freedom of action—but it had been the safer way, this accentuating of his hurt, this pretended state of semi-helplessness. It had brought those he must know *here* to him; it had brought about those unsuspected introductions without which, had he first left this lair of the Rat's and attempted, trusting to luck, to pick up the threads of the Rat's life, would inevitably have plunged him in his blind groping to certain destruction. Also it had brought him a quite thorough understanding of Whitie Jack—the man's deference that had been almost cringing at their first meeting, and then the man's subsequent eagerness to serve.

Whitie Jack was one of the lesser breed that looked up to the heights the Rat had attained with both awe and unbounded admiration. The man had come like a dog to heel, but like a

faithful dog. Whitie Jack was living in a sort of reflected glory—he would be the envy of the proletariat of the Bad Lands—he was associating now, was even on terms of certain intimacy, with one of those in high places in that inglorious commonwealth of crime to which, both by birth and inclination, he owed allegiance. It opened a new prospect to Whitie Jack, one that was full of dazzling possibilities—and it had made of the man an invaluable ally. Whitie Jack had been at once valet, nurse, surgeon and attendant all through the day. He had returned at daylight that morning, dressed the wound, and thereafter had not left the place except to go out and buy certain necessities, such as food—and a pocket flashlight, which Billy Kane, mindful of his previous night's experience in the underground passage to the shed and lane, had ranked amongst those necessities as the first on the list.

Billy Kane shifted his position restlessly on the bed again. His mind was in a turmoil of feverish activity. It seemed as though a thousand divergent thoughts fought with each other to obtain undivided attention and recognition each for itself, and the battle went on incessantly. Who was the woman who had crept in here in the darkness through that secret door last night? What did it mean, that message she had written and left on the table? "So you are back, are you? Well, so am I! *Remember!*" There was something malignant, something ominous in that word—"remember." Remember what? Why? What sinister thing was it that lay between her and the Rat—that he, Billy Kane, must now accept and stand sponsor for—since he was now the Rat!

The Rat! The Rat! The Rat! His brain was off again at another tangent. In Heaven's name, who was the Rat? Where was the Rat at this moment? When would the Rat return? Guarded questions all through the day helped him little. The Rat's absence had been accepted, that was all—none seemed to know, or have any interest in the cause of it. One ray of reassurance only had filtered through the murk. The Rat's return in his, Billy Kane's, person, had seemingly been premature, the Rat had seemingly not been expected; and he could argue from that, and with fair logic, that he might for a little while at least be left undisturbed in his possession of the Rat's personality, and the Rat's belongings—as far as the Rat was concerned. The Rat! Those innuendoes, those whispers, those shadows, that strange woman's stranger message were back again, seething and boiling in his brain. Naked ugliness! What mess of iniquity was the Rat not mixed up in! And what mess of iniquity might not he, Billy Kane, accepted without question as the Rat now, with the Rat's face and features, with the Rat's satanic partnerships, be forced to wallow in to save his life, and, more than life, to—

The paper rustled in Whitie Jack's hand.

"Some haul!" Whitie Jack rolled the words on his tongue like some sweet morsel. "S'help me! Five hundred thousand dollars' worth of rubies! Dat guy Kane is some slick gazabo! Say, d'youse get it, Bundy? Five hundred thousand—an' a bunch of de green stuff, too!" He licked his lips. "Some haul!"

The paper had exaggerated. David Ellsworth's rubies at the outside would not exceed three hundred thousand dollars in value. Billy Kane found himself curiously and querulously irritated at the inaccuracy. He opened his eyes, nodded unconcernedly at Whitie Jack—and closed his eyes again. His mind was suddenly alert and concentrated. In a few minutes now some of those who composed that inner council of crime would be here. He had arranged that this morning—with Red Vallon. Red Vallon was the biggest gangster in New York. Whitie Jack had dropped that information in an enthusiastic eulogy of Red Vallon. And Vallon had bent over the bed that morning and whispered of a meeting to-night at the usual time and place. But he, Billy Kane, was not ready for that yet. He knew too little, it was too great a risk; and he knew too much—to escape alive, if a chance word or act betrayed him. But there had come a thought, swift, in a blinding flash, a staggering thing, a gambler's stake, and he had whispered back what was apparently the obvious reply—that he was too badly hurt to go. And then: "One or two of you slip in here on your way over," he had said quickly. "Get me? I've got something!" And Red Vallon had agreed—and with Red Vallon would come Karlin. Karlin! The name had somehow seemed familiar; but though Whitie Jack had subsequently furnished a partial clew by referring to Karlin as one of the high-brow lawyers of the city, he could not definitely place the man.

Billy Kane turned on his side, with his face away from Whitie Jack. Red Vallon and Karlin would be here in a few moments—and he must make no mistake now. What he meant to do was an impudent thing—impudent with a Titanic impudence. He meant to pit the underworld in a fight on the side of justice against the police. He meant to use the craft, the cunning and the stealth of the Bad Lands to establish his innocence. He too had read the papers—the morning and the evening papers—and the headlines had shrieked out at him the infamy of which he was accused. His name was a by-word now from one end of the country to the other. A viper and a

degraded wretch, a thing inhuman and apart, the papers had called him.

He had read them all to the last word. Murderer of his benefactor! A thief—an assassin thief, who had fled for his life with those blood-red rubies! A bead of sweat came out on his forehead, and he raised his hand and brushed it away. Yes, he had fled—to fight—to take the only chance he had of bringing to justice the hell-hounds who had struck down his old friend, the only chance he had of clearing his own name.

Well, he would fight! It was beginning now, that fight. But he was between two fires that threatened him at any instant with destruction. The police, not only in New York, but from the Atlantic to the Pacific, would search ceaselessly for him, and if he were caught it was death. Fate, that had made him the double of a character that ironically seemed to measure up to everything the papers had said about himself, had thrown in that way a temporary mantle of protection over him, but let that mantle slip but ever so slightly and he would better a thousand times hand himself over to the law and have done with it—the end would be more merciful!

But fate, too, had given him a weapon with which to fight; and, two-edged though it was, with a chance always that it might turn upon himself, he meant to use it now—and that weapon was the underworld. He did not know yet, he was not sure yet just how high he stood in that unsavory command, but he had discounted rather than overrated his power, and he believed he had power enough for his purpose—those whispers and those shadows had seemed to assure him of that. The Rat seemed to be the driving strategical force in this crime syndicate that appeared to permeate the Bad Lands with its influence, and move and sway the underworld at its own imperious pleasure—and for the moment he was the Rat!

There was Jackson—and Jackson was dead. His mind had flown off at another apparently irrelevant tangent. But it was not irrelevant. The papers had said that Jackson, the footman, had died that morning after lingering in a semi-conscious state through the night. Jackson was the single clue in his possession. Jackson, he knew, was one of the murderers, but Jackson was the *only* man he knew who was concerned in that devil's work last night—and Jackson was dead. And now he, Billy Kane, was "wanted" on a double charge of murder—for the murder of Jackson, who had probably himself struck old David Ellsworth down, as well as for the murder of the old millionaire! Yet Jackson, even if dead, must still have left some clue behind him, if only that clue could be found. Who was Jackson? The man had already been in service at David Ellsworth's before he, Billy Kane, had gone there as the old philanthropist's secretary, and he had naturally had neither motive nor interest then in any of the footman's personal concerns. But those facts were vital now. Who was Jackson? Where had the man come from? Who were—

Footsteps were descending from the street. There was a low knock, twice repeated on the door. Whitie Jack was on his feet, and looking inquiringly toward the bed.

"Watch yourself!" said Billy Kane gruffly. "I'm not entertaining to-night, except—"

"Sure—I know!" said Whitie Jack. He crossed the room, and, opening the door a crack, peered out. "Red and Karlin," he informed Billy Kane in a whisper.

VIII—A LEASH IS SLIPPED

Billy Kane lighted a cigarette. Red Vallon he already knew—Karlin he was *supposed* to know. "Let them in," instructed Billy Kane.

He raised himself on his elbow.

"Hello, Karlin!" he greeted, as the two men stepped into the room. "Red's told you I was laid up—eh? Glad to see you! Shake!"

His eyes, half closed, fixed on the other in scrutiny, as the man advanced toward the bed. Karlin was immaculately dressed—in sharp contrast to the untidy and careless attire of the stocky, brutal-faced gangster who followed close at his heels. The man was tall, slimly built, and, save that the black eyes were too close together and too small, had a pleasant and attractive face. It was a mask perhaps! The smile was too engaging; and it was rather curious how small the ears were, and how tightly they hugged the skull. He toyed with a little black Vandyke beard, as

he shook hands.

"Same to you, Bundy!" The voice was soft, silky, persuasive. "Glad you're back, too!" He made an almost imperceptible movement with his head toward Whitie Jack, who still remained near the door.

Red Vallon was more blunt.

"What about *him*, Bundy?" he growled, and jerked a thumb in Whitie Jack's direction. "We got to mosey along as soon as we can. Savvy?"

"Sure!" said Billy Kane. "Whitie, you take a holiday for the night. Come back in the morning. Beat it!"

The cigarette hanging on Whitie Jack's lip drooped in sudden dejection; but if he swallowed hard to choke back what was evidently a very grievous disappointment, he made no demur.

"All right, Bundy, if youse says so," he blurted out, and went from the room, closing the door behind him.

The man's footfalls mounting the cellar-like stairs to the street died away, and for a moment there was no sound except for a faint, irregular *tapping* from the floor above.

"What's that?" demanded Karlin sharply.

Billy Kane blew a ring of smoke ceilingward, and lazily watched it dissolve into air. Whitie Jack, through judicious prodding, had served him well that day.

"Old Ignace—keeps the cobbler's shop above—half blind, and has to work overtime—wife's nearly seventy, and deaf." Billy Kane was explaining almost wearily. "What do you think I hang onto this hole for?"

"Sure!" grunted Red Vallon corroboratingly. "But Karlin's never been here before." He pushed a chair with the toe of his boot across the floor toward Karlin, and appropriated one beside the table for himself. "Well, spill it, Bundy!" he invited. "We got to hurry! It's too bad you're laid up an' can't sit in on the showdown, but Merxler's plum's got ripe, an' we got to pick it to-night. Savvy?"

Billy Kane duplicated the first smoke ring. Merxler! He had identified Karlin now! Karlin and Merxler! That was where he had heard Karlin's name—in connection with Merxler—and it must, necessarily then be the same Merxler. Was young Merxler, whom he had heard of and had even met through David Ellsworth, more than simply the notorious spendthrift that he was credited with being? Karlin, it was obvious, was leading a double life. Was Merxler another of the inner circle, another from the higher ranks of society—and the greater criminal therefor!

"Piker stuff!" commented Billy Kane complacently.

Karlin leaned forward with a jerk in his chair.

"Piker stuff!" he ejaculated, and the little black eyes contracted and fixed on Billy Kane in a puzzled glitter. "Piker stuff!" he echoed challengingly.

Billy Kane nodded indifferently. He was skating on thin ice, on perilously thin ice. Whatever the "Merxler plum" might be, it was obviously far from the definition he had given it, and having apparently displayed an intimacy with the affair, an intimacy that he was evidently supposed to possess, it was decidedly best left alone!

"That's what I said," he drawled deliberately. "Piker stuff—compared with what I've got. I told you I had something, Red—didn't I?"

Red Vallon hitched sideways in his chair, his head thrust forward.

"Go to it, Bundy! Spill it!" He circled his lips with his tongue. "If you say so, that goes! What's the lay?"

"Five hundred thousand dollars—a half million—cold"—Billy Kane had lowered his voice.

He did not look at either of the men, but he was watching them both intently—his eyes were on the mirror, the mirror of the bureau at the far end of the room, that bore testimony to the cunning of his unwitting host. The mirror held the door and the upper part of the room in focus; and, lying there on the bed, he had the profiles of the two men in distinct outline. Karlin was fingering his Vandyke in a sort of hesitant incredulity. Vallon's face had suddenly blotted red with rapacious excitement.

"Gawd!" Red Vallon spluttered out. "D'ye mean that, Bundy?"

"Sure, I mean it!" Billy Kane answered a little curtly. "What do you think I told you to come here for? Sure, I mean it! It's all there—right on the table, hitting you between the eyes."

Red Vallon jerked himself around; and, as though he had taken the words literally, stared with a frown of bewilderment at the only thing in view upon the table—the newspaper that Whitie Jack had dropped there when he had answered the summons at the door.

Billy Kane laughed quietly.

"Get it, Red?" he inquired. "Five hundred thousand dollars—better than diamonds—blood-red rubies—red with blood, the paper says. Can't you read?"

Karlin had forgotten his beard. His hands clenched on his knees.

"You mean the Ellsworth murder—the robbery?" He was whispering hoarsely.

"You win!" said Billy Kane.

"My God!" whispered Karlin. "Do you know where that stuff is?"

Billy Kane's eyes had returned to the mirror, and now suddenly they shifted a little to the wall at the side of the bureau. Something cold and forbidding seemed to grip at him, numbing for an instant mental and physical action—and then left him in a state of grim, unnatural calmness. Was it imagination? He could have sworn that the wall *moved* slightly. He swung over on his left side, as though to face Karlin and Red Vallon more directly before he answered them—but his hand, slipping into his coat pocket, closed over his revolver. It *might* be imagination, but the possibility remained that someone was on the other side of that secret door, and, having pushed the door almost imperceptibly open, was listening there. If that were so, he must get rid of Red Vallon and Karlin before any dénouement came if possible, get rid of them without an instant's loss of time; but equally vital was the necessity of setting in motion, and equally without loss of time, the machinery of the underworld upon which now he was practically staking his all.

"Pull your chair over here, closer to the bed, Red—and you, too, Karlin," he said coolly. "We aren't likely to be heard from the street, but that's no reason for shouting. No; I don't know where they are, I haven't got the rubies in my pocket—but I know how to get them there. What?"

Red Vallon's face was working in a sort of anticipatory and avaricious ugliness; Karlin's expression was scarcely less rapacious.

"Go on, Bundy!" Karlin said under his breath. "What do you know about it?"

"What you could have read for yourself in the paper," Billy Kane answered tersely. "And it looks like a cinch. It's just a case of beating the police to it, and it sizes up as though we had the jump on them." He was speaking almost mechanically. His mind was on that section of the wall that *might* have moved; and through half-closed eyes, but as though deep in thought and as though concentrated on what he was saying, he was watching it narrowly. It had not moved a second time, of that he was sure; perhaps it had not moved at all, it might be only nerves on his part, nerves high strung, taut to the breaking point, but his fingers were still rigid around the stock of his revolver, and, in the pocket, the weapon, resting on his hip as he lay sideways, held a bead on the panels of the secret door.

"I don't quite get you," muttered Karlin, with a frown.

Red Vallon swore roughly, intolerant in his eagerness.

"Aw, give him a chance!" he said impatiently. "If he says so, that's good enough for me. Bundy never pulled a steer in his life, an' if he says this is a cinch—that goes! Give him a chance!"

"It's like this," said Billy Kane. "It's a thousand to one shot that this secretary chap who croaked the old millionaire and got away with the goods is still in New York. Why? Well, I'll tell you why. After pulling the murder, according to the papers, he beat it out of the house with the loot, and evidently hid the stuff somewhere. Then he came back to the house again, and the footman, Jackson, grabbed him. But there was a good half hour between the time the police found out about the murder and before this guy Kane came back to the house. Get me? And during that time the police got busy and shot flycops around all the stations and ferries. It's a cinch, the way I look at it, that after he crawled into that lane and they lost him there, that he's been crawling ever since somewhere around New York. He never left the city—he never had a chance."

Red Vallon whistled low and complacently under his breath; Karlin, fingering his Vandyke again, nodded sharply now in approval.

"Besides," added Billy Kane, "he had sort of queered his own game. He'd hidden the loot somewhere, and he couldn't make a direct get-away then. He had to get hold of the goods again before he went. All right! What I want to know is who's got the better chance of grabbing him—us or the police? He isn't one of us. He's working on his own. Well, all right! If we nip him, and he's satisfied with a little rake-off, and is willing to cough up the rest, that'll be treating him fair. If he isn't strong on coughing up, we'll find another way of making him come across that he won't like so well, and we'll get the half million, and he'll get——" Billy Kane completed his sentence with a significant shrug of his shoulder.

An oath, the more callous and brutal for the soft purring way in which it fell from his lips, came from Red Vallon.

"What do you want done, Bundy?" Karlin was terse and to the point. "It looks good to me, if

you can pull it off."

"It's the biggest haul we'll ever get our mitts on if we live a hundred years!" Billy Kane's eyes shifted for an instant from the wall to fix themselves impressively on the two men. "I've been lying here all day thinking it out. What do I want done? Well, I'll tell you! I want every string and every wire we've got pulled. Savvy? We've got to beat the police to it. We've got to get Kane—*first*. I want all the boys that the bulls think they've got sewed up as stool pigeons to stool-pigeon the police and get all the inside dope. And then that fellow Jackson, the footman, looks like a bet we can't throw down. He's dead—but he looks like a good bet. He lived all through the night, but the papers don't say anything about the story he told. Perhaps he knew something that will help, perhaps he didn't; but he doesn't go into the discard yet. Find out who he was and all about him, and get next to his family if he's got one. If he told any story to the police, any of the family that were clustering around the bedside will be wise to it. Get the idea?"

"Birdie Rose is the boy for that!" Red Vallon's bullet head was thrust forward in vicious earnestness, his red-rimmed black eyes were glittering with a feverish light.

"Let Birdie go to it, then!" said Billy Kane.

"Birdie was slated for the Merxler affair to-night." Karlin spoke a little dubiously.

"Shift him!" snapped Billy Kane curtly. "Red's right! Birdie's the boy for this job."

"All right!" agreed Karlin, and shrugged his shoulders. He turned to Red Vallon. "Put Bull McCann in Birdie's place, then. See that he gets to Jerry's back room before ten."

"I'll fix it!" grunted Red Vallon. "What's next, Bundy? This goes—all the boys'll fall for it."

"There's only one thing more—until something begins to crack open." Billy Kane's lips had tightened, his eyelids had drooped still lower. It was only a bare fraction of an inch at most—if at all—but it seemed that door had moved again. His words were coming barely above a whisper now. "There's only one way he can get anything out of those rubies, and that's through a 'fence.' They're no good to him unless he can cash in. He'll try to get rid of some of them as soon as he can. How soon depends on how well he knows his way about. But he's probably slick enough to have got a line on a blind uncle or two. All right! The police, of course, have passed the word down the line, but here's where we put one over on the police. There's some of the joints they don't know—we know them all. Kane might get away from the police there—but he can't get away from *us* on that deal. I want every 'fence' in New York tipped off that he's to stall on the job the minute he gets his lamps on a ruby that's being shoved his way, and that instead of opening up to the police he's to wise us up on the hop. That's all for a starter—and now go to it!"

Red Vallon drew in his breath noisily, as though he were sucking at some luscious and juicy fruit.

"Some head, Bundy!" he applauded with undisguised admiration, as he pushed away his chair and stood up. "Sure, we'll go to it! Karlin's running the Merxler game to-night; but I'll start this other thing bumping along on the high gear. What about the reports? Who'll the boys make 'em to? You? Here?"

It was a moment before Billy Kane answered. It was the one thing he must have, the one thing upon which he was staking everything—an intimate knowledge of the result of every move made in this game that he had initiated, and, beyond that again, it was vital that he, and no one else should control each successive move. But Whitie Jack was gone for the night. In one way he deplored that fact, in another way he was relieved. If it was only imagination, if there was no one crouching there now on the other side of that secret door, Whitie Jack's presence would not matter, but otherwise—his mind leaped to that other point—if Whitie Jack was not here to perform those very necessary introductions, and Red Vallon's messengers came, messengers that he would be supposed to know but would not be able to recognize, it would spell almost certain disaster, and—

"There isn't anything likely to break to-night, Red," he said deliberately. "If there does you look after it; or if it's anything very important you come here yourself. I want to get a night's sleep if I can, I'm feeling pretty rocky. But I ought to be on my feet to-morrow, and in the morning you can swing the whole business over to me, and I'll run it."

"Attaboy!" said Red Vallon heartily. "See you in the morning, then."

Karlin too had risen from his chair.

"Good-night, Bundy!" he said—and grinned. "I pay you the compliment of being the trickiest crook unhung!"

IX—BEHIND THE DOOR

The door closed behind the two men. Billy Kane lay motionless, save that, as they climbed to the street and their footsteps echoed back from the stairs, his hand, gripping his revolver, stole silently from his pocket. There was a grim whiteness around his set lips. His ears strained to catch the slightest sound from within the room, and strained to catch the last echo of those retreating footfalls. He dared not make a move until they were well away—out of earshot, say, of a revolver report. If it were fancy, if the movement of that door were only his imagination unhealthily stimulated, and unhealthily preying upon his nerves, he would at least put an end to it in short order now! The steps rang faintly back from the pavement, still more faintly, and were lost. And then Billy Kane spoke—a cold deadly monotony in his voice:

“Those boards are thin! Come out into the room with your hands up before I count three, or I’ll put a bullet through. One—two——”

There was a laugh, undisguised in its mockery, but low and musical. The door, bizarre and grotesque in its zigzag projections, due to its ingenious adherence to the natural joints in the wall boards, swung open wide, and a woman stood in the room.

“I was only waiting for your friends to go, Bundy,” she said coolly.

The revolver sagged a little in Billy Kane’s hand. He could not see her face very well, the single incandescent dangling from the ceiling was miserably inadequate, but dark eyes flashed at him out of an oval face, and the chin thrown up gave a glimpse of the contour of a full throat, ivory white—and all this was merged in the background of a slender figure clothed and cloaked in some dark material, unrelieved by a single vantage of color.

She spoke again.

“I don’t think you are quite as badly hurt as you pretend, Bundy,” she said, with a sort of icy composure. “You were out last night when I came here, and if you could prowl around the streets, I think perhaps you could manage now to get from the bed over to the door there and back again without doing yourself any serious injury. The door has been unlocked since Red Vallon went out, and it might be safer—locked.”

Billy Kane did not answer her. He got up, crossed to the door, locked it, and, returning, sat down on the edge of the bed. She had not moved from her position near the far end of the room. He became conscious that he was still holding his revolver in his hand, and he thrust the weapon quietly now into his pocket. A grim smile came and hovered on his lips. This complication, another of the ramifications of his stolen identity, he did not understand at all—except that it promised him no good. She was the author of last night’s note—she had just said as much—and the wording of that note was not reassuring as to her attitude toward him, nor was the mockery in her laugh, nor was the self-contained, almost contemptuous note of command with which she had just spoken. Who was she? What was she to the Rat, that she knew the secret of that underground tunnel, and the secret of that door?

He jerked his hand toward the chair Red Vallon had vacated.

“Sit down, won’t you?” There was a tingle of irony in his voice. His invitation was at least safe ground.

She came forward toward the table, a subtle, supple grace in her movements. Subconsciously he noted that she made no sound as she crossed the room. She was like a cat—but a very beautiful cat. He could see her face better now. The eyes were hard and unfriendly, but they were great, brown, steady eyes of unfathomable depths.

She leaned against the table.

“I prefer to stand.” There was a challenge in her tones. “What I have to say will not take long.”

Billy Kane waited. The initiative was with her. He meant it to remain so. Her small white hand, ungloved, clenched suddenly at her side until its knuckles stood out like little chalky knobs.

“You look sleeker about the face, clearer about the eyes—you beast!” There was a studied deliberation in her voice that gave the words the sting of a curling whip lash. “Perhaps you’ve been——”

“You were listening there at the door?” suggested Billy Kane imperturbably, as he reached into his pocket for a cigarette.

There was a mocking little lift to her shoulders.

“Of course! That is what I came for. I followed Red Vallon here. I supposed that you would

meet at the old place, now that you are back; but since you are an invalid——” Again the shoulders lifted.

“I am afraid it hardly paid you for the trouble—to listen,” Billy Kane murmured caustically. “I’m sorry! I rather fancied I saw the door move, and you see, my illness has affected my voice, and at times I can scarcely speak above a whisper, otherwise you might have overheard——”

“I overheard enough!” She took a sudden step toward him. Her eyes were flashing now; there was a flush, angry red, mounting from the white throat, suffusing her cheeks. She raised her clenched hands. “You will die with insolence and bravado on your lips, I believe!” she cried out passionately. “How I *hate* you! But I’ve got you—like *that*”—she flung out an arm toward him, and the small clenched hand opened and then closed again, slowly, as though in its grip it were remorselessly crushing and exterminating some abhorrent thing. And then her hand was raised again, and was brushed across her eyes, and a little quiver ran through her form, and she spoke more calmly. “I overheard enough. I thought this Merxler affair would be worked to-night, and I came to tell you that you are to stop it. I came to tell you to—*remember!* I promise, before God, that if there is murder done to-night you will be in the hands of the police within an hour. And it’s not very far from the Tombs to the death chair in Sing Sing—Bundy Morgan.”

Billy Kane’s eyes were hidden by drooped lids. His eyes were studying with curious abstraction the pattern of the faded, greasy, threadbare strip of carpet on the floor beside the bed. Murder! The word had come with a shock that for a moment unnerved him. He had not associated anything that Red Vallon or Karlin had said with murder. They had spoken so lightly, referred to it in so humdrum a way. Murder! There was something ghastly in that lightness now. A tightness came to his lips, a horror was creeping into his soul. He was only on the verge of things, of hidden and abominable things, here in this shadow land, this night land of skulking shapes, this sordid realm of the underworld. He pulled himself together. He was the Rat—he had a part to play. He was conscious that those brown, fearless eyes were fixed on him contemptuously.

“What have I to do with it?” he muttered sullenly.

“Do with it! *You!*” Her voice rose, as though suddenly out of control. “You dare ask that! You, with your devil’s brains—you, who planned it all before you went away!”

The cigarette that he had lighted had gone out. He sucked at it, circling it around his lips. He was fencing now with unbuttoned foils.

“Well, you’ve said it!” There was a snarl creeping into his voice. “I’ve been away. I don’t know what they’ve done since I’ve been away.”

“You know about the will, and the sealed envelope in Merxler’s safe, and you know the combination to the safe,” she said levelly. “And that’s all you need to know to stop this from going any further.”

He laughed out shortly.

“And suppose I don’t know the combination! You don’t think I can carry a thing like that in my head forever, do you?”

“No,” she said. She smiled curiously, and one hand slipped into the bodice of her dress. “I don’t think you ever did memorize that combination. But perhaps you will recognize it again—the original in your own handwriting.” She held up a crumpled piece of paper before him, then tossed it on the table.

“Where did you get that?” he demanded roughly.

Her shoulders lifted mockingly again.

“There are other secrets in this room besides that door and the tunnel to the shed, aren’t there—Bundy?”

He eyed her now for a long minute, biting openly at his lip, his face twisted in a well-simulated ugly scowl.

“So, I’m to queer this game, am I?” he snarled suddenly. “And if I’m caught—as a snitch—they’ll tear me to pieces!”

She leaned a little forward from the table, a tense, lithe thing, and her voice came low with passion:

“We’re wasting time—and you’ve none to lose. We’ve gone over this ground before, haven’t we? It’s the one chance you have—to save yourself. Some day you won’t be able to save yourself. Some day the reckoning will come; but you will always have the *hope* that it won’t, and that you will always succeed in staving it off each time as you have in the past. But until that day does come the only chance you have for life is to pit your wits against the fiends like yourself that are around you. For what you have done there is no atonement—only punishment. I mean you to live

in suspense, but even while that suspense lasts you will pull apart and unravel your devil's work as fast as you knit it together. You have a chance that way! When the end comes and they get you, you know how the underworld will pay—but there is the chance—that is what holds you—and with the alternative—the police—there is no chance.”

She was breathing hard. She leaned back against the table, her hands gripped tightly at its edge.

For a moment there was silence in the room. Billy Kane's mind was groping blindly now, as in some utter darkness. In some way, for there was no question of the genuineness of her self-assurance, her very presence here in seemingly placing herself in the Rat's power proved that she held the Rat, and the Rat's life and liberty in the hollow of her hand, at her beck and call. How? What was the secret of the power she possessed over him? He lighted a match nonchalantly, and, as he applied the flame to the half-burned cigarette he lifted his eyes to her through the blue haze of smoke that he blew negligently in her direction.

“Sometimes,” he said in a low, menacing tone, “people, even women, who grow troublesome, have been known in this neighborhood—to disappear.”

She laughed sharply.

“You have no time to waste in foolish words!” she warned him curtly. “You know the consequences of my—disappearance. You are at liberty to take those consequences any time you choose. But you do not like them, do you—Bundy?” She moved suddenly across the room, back to the secret door through which she had entered. “I am going now,” she said steadily. “If there is murder to-night, or if any part of that plan goes through—*remember!*”

X—THE PIECES OF A PUZZLE

Billy Kane made no effort to stop her, as she closed the door silently behind her. She was gone. The minutes passed, and he still sat there on the side of the bed, his eyes mechanically fixed on the spot, an innocent blank wall now, where she had disappeared. His face, hard and set at first, grew harder. What was he to do? There seemed to yawn before him, to have opened at his feet an abyss, bottomless, pitiless, and he tottered on the brink of it, and unseen hands reached up and snatched at him to drag him from the narrow ledge that was all that was left to him of safety. What was he to do? To go on? Every hour that he clung to this role of the Rat held a surer promise, not only of desperate peril to himself, but a promise that he would find himself launched in a sea of crime, of shuddering things, of murder, of blood, of sordid viciousness, of hate. In God's name, who was this Rat, who in this hole here with its secret opening and its gnawed tunnel to the daylight made the pseudonym so apt!

He clenched his hands suddenly, and rising to his feet began to pace the room. He began to see now what, strangely enough, though it should have been plainly obvious all through that day, he had not seen until she, this unknown, mysterious woman, had, herself unconscious of it, made him see. Her power over the Rat to which he was subject in his assumed character, did not, in the final analysis, whatever the source of that power might be, materially affect the situation. It was not her threat that was the driving force that must actuate him. There was another and a far greater force which he could neither ignore nor escape. He saw that now. If the foreknowledge of proposed crime came to him, he was as guilty, if he stood idly by, as those who became the actual perpetrators of that crime. To-night, if there was to be murder done, and it was within his power to prevent that murder, or even if it were only within his power to attempt to prevent that murder—and he did nothing—he was a murderer himself. And so to-night he had no choice. He must act. It did not seem to him that there had been any question in his mind about this in a specific way at all from the moment she had spoken of murder. But afterwards—if he went on—the crimes that Red Vallon and Karlin and their confederates would plot, and that he would know of—what then?

He halted by the table, and laughed in a short, harsh way, and in the dark eyes there burned a sudden fire. Was there really any question about that, either? Had there ever been! He asked only one thing in life now, and to that everything else was subordinate—to feel his hands upon

the throat of the man who had murdered David Ellsworth, and who had fastened that guilt upon him—Billy Kane—to wring from that man a confession that would clear his name. Nothing else mattered. He could run for it, discard this rôle of the Rat, and perhaps effect his escape, but he would thereby throw away almost every hope of bringing the guilty man to justice. The other way was to fight. Well, he would fight! It would be a good fight! And, as the Rat, he would not have to fight alone! If he accepted the chances as they stood, he must accept the risk involved in foiling the plots and crimes of those who thought him their confederate; but against this, the first step already inaugurated, he had the craft and cunning of the underworld at his back in the one purpose that meant anything to him now. It would be a good fight! If he failed, he might as well go out this way as any other—better this way, for then at least some of the projected devilry would never know fruition. He drew in his breath sharply as in a sort of strange relief. It was settled now, once for all! He would go on—as the Rat—to the end. And to-night he would see this Merxler plot through to the end.

Billy Kane picked up the crumpled piece of paper she had dropped on the table, studied it for an instant, then placed it in his pocket. It contained the scrawled figures of a safe's combination, nothing more. And now, glancing at his watch and finding that it was already a little after eight o'clock, Billy Kane worked quickly. The mask that had served him the night before was already in his pocket, as was his revolver. To these he added the electric flashlight that Whitie Jack had procured for him that morning, and, from where they dangled in the lock of the door, Whitie Jack's bunch of skeleton keys. He extinguished the light; then passing out through the secret door, which he closed carefully behind him, he made his way quickly through the little underground passage, gained the shed through the trap-door, emerged on the lane, and from there, cautiously, he reached the street.

He walked rapidly now, but keeping always in the shadows, shunning the direct rays of the street lamps. He cared nothing for the police; his danger did not lie in that direction. Seen anywhere in the city by either police or plain-clothes man he would be recognized, not as Billy Kane, but as the Rat—and the authorities, he was fairly well satisfied, had no particular or immediate interest in the Rat. His danger lay to-night in an unlucky recognition by some prowler of the underworld, the report of which might reach the ears of Red Vallon and his crowd. Supposed to be confined to bed, pleading physical inability to take his place at that unhallowed council board of which he was accepted as a member, it would be very awkward to explain his presence on the street within half an hour after Red Vallon and Karlin had left his room! Tomorrow, the day after, it would be a different matter, he could go and come then as he pleased, but to-night it multiplied his difficulties and his dangers a thousandfold. And yet, after all, that was the most simple of the problems that confronted him—with luck, he could see his way out of that. But for the rest, he was almost like a blind man groping his way along in what was already near to an inextricable maze. He knew something of Merxler both by sight and hearsay, he knew where Merxler lived, that there was a will in the safe which he must secure, that he possessed the combination of the safe, and that afterwards there was "the back door of Jerry's before ten," which referred undoubtedly to the notorious gambling hell of that name, and that in these fragments, once pieced together, there was murder—that was all he knew. And there was something grim, and horribly ironic, and mocking, and something forbidding, and ominous and premonitory in the fact that he was supposed to know *all!*

The street for the moment in his immediate vicinity was deserted, and just well enough within the radius of a street lamp to enable him to see, he drew the package of money from his vest pocket that the old millionaire had confided to his keeping the night before. He selected several bills of the smaller denominations, placed them in his trousers' pocket, and returned the package to the inside pocket of his vest. Thank God for the money! He had enough in the bank twice over to replace this two thousand that now belonged to the Ellsworth estate, but he could not get it! He was a fugitive from the law! But this should see him through—by the time two thousand was exhausted he must either have won or lost. He smiled a little bitterly. Win or lose, the estate at least would get its two thousand back! If he won, he would pay it back himself; if he lost—well, his money in the bank had probably already been attached!

And now he retreated to the shadows of the buildings again as he went along. His surreptitious excursion from the Rat's den last night had, to one who knew the East Side as intimately as he knew it, supplied him with a mental map, as it were, of the neighborhood in which the Rat had chosen to reside. A block further on was The Purple Scarf, a so-called Bohemian restaurant and dance hall, as lurid as its name, that for the moment was the craze with the slummers and those of New York's upper strata who aped all things Bohemian—and from

early evening until early morning a line of taxis waited to snatch their share of the spoils from the free-handed and, quite often, hilarious clientele. It was a taxi that he wanted—without attracting any unnecessary attention to himself—a taxi that he could not stand on a crowded thoroughfare and hail—and there was, as usual, a line of them there now in front of the restaurant.

He reached the corner, drew his hat far down over his eyes, stepped out into the street, and approached the last taxi in the line from the side away from the curb. The chauffeur was nodding in his seat. Billy Kane touched the man on the arm.

"I want to go up to the Nineties—Broadway—probably several places after that," said Billy Kane pleasantly.

The chauffeur yawned, and shook his head.

"I'm waitin' for a party in there." He jerked his hand toward the restaurant. "I got a fare."

"I know you have," said Billy Kane coolly. "You've got me." He extended a ten-dollar bill. "There's another one just like this, perhaps more than one, coming later—on top of the fare."

The chauffeur grinned, pocketed the banknote, and, leaning out, opened the door. His grin broadened.

"What did you say the address was?" he inquired.

"The one I gave you will do for the present," Billy Kane answered quietly. "I'll let you know where to stop. Get up there as fast as you can. I'm paying for speed to-night. Get the idea?"

"Leave it to me!" said the chauffeur. "Hop in!"

Billy Kane settled back in the seat. The car swung out of the line, shot forward, and took the first corner on little better than two wheels. Billy Kane smiled grimly. Between here and that purposely vague address in the Nineties which he had given, the chauffeur could very obviously be depended upon to do his part! In the meanwhile, and for the first time, he, Billy Kane, had an opportunity to study those scattered pieces of the puzzle in detail.

He lighted a cigarette. That there should be a will in Merxler's safe at all had a nasty look—unless it were Merxler's own will, which was altogether too highly improbable a supposition to be entertained seriously. And besides, in that case, what was Karlin's, and Red Vallon's, and the underworld's interest in the matter? He shook his head decisively. The existence of a will did not tend to place young Merxler in an enviable light.

Merxler's uncle, a man by the name of Theodore Rodgers, who had died some few months before, had been quite an intimate friend of David Ellsworth—that was where his, Billy Kane's, personal knowledge of Merxler came from. He had met Rodgers several times at the old millionaire's home; and once he had met the nephew there as well. The two did not get on very well together. Young Merxler was a notorious "high-roller." Left a large fortune by his father two years ago, he had squandered it to the last copper. Theodore Rodgers, his uncle, had time and again, both privately and publicly, stated that he would have nothing more to do with the boy. That was the gist of it. It had occasioned some surprise then that, when Rodgers had died, it was found that he had taken no steps to keep his money, what he had of it, some sixty or seventy thousand dollars, out of the young spendthrift's hands. But no will had been found. Rodgers was a bachelor; young Clayton Merxler was a dead sister's only son—and Merxler had inherited as next of kin, and had promptly moved his family—he was married—into his late uncle's residence.

Billy Kane finished his cigarette, and finished still another, as the taxi made its way uptown. There had never been anything criminal, so far as was known, about young Merxler, nothing wrong up to now, except that he had gone the pace, and that, perhaps more than anything else, he had been a foolish and unbalanced boy and had lost his head; but now there were two very unpleasant facts that loomed up insistently. First, it was common knowledge that at the time of his uncle's death young Merxler was having an exceedingly hard time of it to make both ends meet. And, second, was the fact that Karlin was in this too. Knowing Karlin now for what Karlin really was, it looked ugly enough for young Merxler. Karlin, accepted in the upper circles in which he moved, as a respected citizen and an excellent attorney, had always been trusted as a friend and the legal adviser of both young Merxler's father and uncle—which placed him now in a position where he could be a very useful, if not indispensable confederate in assisting Merxler to enter without obstacle into the possession of his uncle's estate.

The minutes passed. Billy Kane, within a few blocks of his destination, noted the cross streets carefully now, as he shook his head again. The pieces did not fit so perfectly after all. Suppose that Rodgers *had* left a will disinheriting his nephew, and suppose that young Merxler had found that will and that it was in Merxler's safe now, and that Karlin was a party to it—why hadn't the will been *destroyed*? That would seem the obvious and safe thing to have done! And if Merxler and Karlin and Red Vallon were all hand in glove in the affair, where was the incentive for

murder that she had spoken of? Whose murder? There was a snarl in the thing. He was conscious that he had not untangled it at all to his satisfaction.

He tapped suddenly on the glass front, signalling the chauffeur; and, as the taxi drew up at the curb, he stepped quickly to the sidewalk.

"Wait for me here," he directed, and started at a brisk pace up the block.

He turned at the first corner, heading east along the cross street. It was purely a residential neighborhood here. There was no other pedestrian in sight for the moment. Merxler's house was one of a row halfway up the block. Billy Kane's pace became a nonchalant stroll. He passed the row of houses slowly, though apparently indifferent to their existence, and then, retracing his steps quite as negligently, slipped suddenly into the shadows of a flight of high front steps, and the next instant was crouched against the basement door.

A skeleton key from Whitie Jack's comprehensive assortment crept into the lock. It proved abortive. Billy Kane, as he made a second attempt with another key, was subconsciously rehearsing certain details in his mind. There was a light in the vestibule or front hallway above him, but the windows on that floor were dark. Above that again the windows were lighted, and it was a fair presumption that the family proper were all upstairs. There was probably a maid, but as there was no sign of life here in the basement it might well be her evening out.

Again Billy Kane selected another key, still another—and then the door opened silently under his hand. He stepped inside, closed the door noiselessly behind him, and stood listening. There was no sound and no light. It was pitch black. He could not have seen his hand before his eyes. And then his flashlight winked through the black, went out, winked inquisitively again, and he moved forward. The stairs were just at his right, and made a right-angled turn halfway up. He gained the stairs and began to mount them, testing each separate tread cautiously before the next step was attempted. Stairs before now had been known to creak out discordantly! Billy Kane smiled in a grim, mirthless way. He was becoming an adept at this burglarious trade where silence was so prime a factor. Since last night he—

What was that?

He felt his muscles, as though without volition of his, strain suddenly and grow rigid. He was halfway up the stairs now, and he drew back into the angle made by the turn, his body hugged tight against the wall. What was that! He thought he had heard a sound as of someone moving in the hall above, but it was gone now and there was only a stillness in the house, a stillness that, as he listened, became exaggerated until it seemed to possess noises of its own that began to throb, and pound, and palpitate, and make his eardrums ring, and—*no!*—there it was again—a light, quick step—and, unmistakably now, upon the topmost stair.

It was inky black. He could not see. He pressed still closer, flattening himself against the wall. The step was very light, scarcely audible; a woman's step probably, and probably the maid's. Billy Kane held his breath. If he were found here, discovered, caught, the Rat would— He did not care to dwell upon the consequences.

Something, a shapeless thing, a deeper, shadowy blackness passed by him. It seemed to escape contact with him by the barest fraction of an inch. He heard the sound of breathing—then a step along the passageway below—and the basement door closed quietly. There was silence again, save for that din infernal that beat at his eardrums. He lifted his hand to his forehead—it was moist as he brought it away again.

A moment more, and he was grimly composed again. It was the maid probably. That seemed the natural conclusion. Who else would have gone out by the basement door? Well, if that were so, he was left now with almost unrestricted freedom of action; the family being all upstairs, he might reasonably expect to have the first floor quite to himself without very great fear of interruption.

He crept on up the stairs, and reached the main hallway. Here the dim light in the vestibule sifting down the length of the hall metamorphosed the blackness into a murky gloom. He listened again. A murmur of voices came intermittently from above. There was no other sound.

There was a door at his right. He opened it silently, and stepped through into the room beyond. He closed the door, and the flashlight winked out again. He was in luck now! This, at the first venture, was the room he was looking for. The round, white ray of the flashlight, cutting a filmy path through the darkness, fell upon the nickel dial of a small safe that stood against the opposite wall. He crossed to the safe, knelt before it, and took the crumpled piece of paper that bore the combination from his pocket. Thereafter for a moment, as his fingers moved swiftly, the silence was broken by the faint, musical whirling of the dial—and then a low, metallic thud, as he shot the lever over—and the safe door swung open.

The ray from the flashlight flooded the interior of the safe. It was a small safe, but even so it was evidently more than large enough for its requirements. On the floor of the safe was a package of securities, held together by broad elastic bands, but the pigeon-holes were but sparsely filled, some being entirely empty. A few minutes' examination disposed of the pigeon-holes—and the skeleton keys came into service again on a little locked drawer. The drawer contained a single envelope, sealed. He slit the envelope open. It contained two folded sheets of paper. He examined only one of them, and that only to the extent of glancing at the first few words: "I, Theodore Rodgers, being of sane mind and——"

Billy Kane's face darkened, as he thrust the envelope into his pocket and locked the drawer. It was true then! His lips pursed grimly, as his eyes fell upon the package of securities again. He took up the package and riffled it tentatively through his fingers. Theodore Rodgers had perhaps been a little eccentric—if eccentricity was defined by a divergence from the general habits and customs of others! He had made no secret that he kept his securities in his own safe, preferring that method to depositing them in a safe-deposit vault, and claiming that, as the securities were made out in his name and were therefore valueless to anyone else, they offered no temptation for robbery. Young Merxler had evidently followed in his uncle's footsteps in this particular! But Theodore Rodgers had been credited with being worth in the neighborhood of seventy thousand dollars! Billy Kane's lips pursed tighter, as he replaced the package of bonds and stock certificates in the safe, and closed and locked the safe door. At a generous estimate there remained no more than twelve or fifteen thousand dollars. Young Merxler, in the brief period following his uncle's death, had evidently done well!

Billy Kane retreated from the room, descended the stairs, and let himself out through the basement door—and five minutes later, in his taxi, was being whirled downtown again. "The back room at Jerry's before ten." He had directed the chauffeur to drive to a side street just off the Bowery near Chatham Square—that was close to Jerry's. He had looked at his watch, as he had entered the taxi. It was just nine o'clock. He had therefore plenty of time now. He took the envelope from his pocket and extracted the two folded sheets. There was not light enough to read by, but that was quite easily rectified. He had his flashlight.

He bent well down toward the floor of the cab so as not to attract the chauffeur's attention, read both of the papers, read them again—and a look of stunned surprise and bewilderment settled on his face. One was a will, evidently drawn and written by Rodgers himself, and duly witnessed, bequeathing practically everything to charity, and specifying four or five different organizations as the beneficiaries. It appointed Karlin, who was referred to as a "trusted and lifelong friend," the sole executor; and, "as a mark of personal esteem," and as a "slight compensation" for the administration of the estate, left Karlin a legacy of two thousand five hundred dollars. The other paper was a letter signed by young Merxler. Billy Kane read this again for the third time:

"If I die before Karlin does, this is a joke on Karlin; if Karlin dies before I do the will and this letter go into the fire. Damn him—I hate him! He's a smooth oily-tongued hypocrite! It was Karlin more than anybody else who backed my uncle up in the idea of cutting me off. Well, I guess this is where I get even! If there's two thousand five hundred dollars left when I get through, I hope Karlin will enjoy it—but there won't be! I just wanted him to know how thoughtful my uncle was, and it was worth the risk of keeping the cursed will for the sake of the jolt it will give Karlin's miserly, snivelling soul. If there's anything Karlin loves, it's money. If Karlin's got any God at all, it's money. He worships that, all right!"

Here the letter veered abruptly into direct address:

"It'll break your heart, Karlin, won't it, to think I spent two thousand five hundred dollars of *your* money! That's the joke, Karlin! It's rich, isn't it? And I just want to tell you, too, that you had the will in your own hands once—and overlooked the bet! That's where you slipped up, Karlin. It was the day my uncle died, and we were going over the papers together. It was in a plain, unsealed envelope—and didn't look like anything. You tossed it on a heap of other stuff to be looked into later—all you could think of was counting stocks and bonds, getting your fingers into money—that you didn't know was yours—

some of it, anyway! I was looking for something else—and found it. I only had to read about two words and see that it was in my uncle's handwriting, and—well, since you're the executor, you'll find it enclosed herewith!

Clayton Merxler."

Billy Kane refolded the papers, returned them to the envelope, restored the envelope and flashlight to his pockets, and leaned back in his seat. The taxi lurched and swayed along at a pace that gave small deference or heed to speed laws. Billy Kane stared out of the window.

The letter was viciously facetious, callous and unscrupulous. The boy was a self-confessed and blatantly unrepentant thief. In that at least his first supposition had evidently been justified, and it was quite clear now why Merxler had not destroyed the will—but otherwise the whole affair had now assumed an entirely different aspect. Instead of Karlin being in league with Merxler, Karlin, unknown to Merxler, it now appeared, was aware of the existence of the will—and Karlin, if *she* had not exaggerated, meant murder. And, since no one else was involved, meant Merxler's murder.

Billy Kane's face hardened in perplexity. But why? What could Karlin hope to gain thereby? Certainly it was not on account of the little legacy of two thousand five hundred dollars—Karlin had only to expose the fact that the will existed to obtain that. And that applied equally to the executorship. And what good could the executorship do Karlin? With the stocks and bonds there open to inspection and their value known, Karlin's executorship could afford no opportunity for crooked work—he could simply turn the securities into cash, turn the cash over to the various charities, and the cash must correspond with the valuation of the estate's schedule of assets. Why, then—murder? Personal enmity? No; Red Vallon and the underworld were interested in this, and the enmity that had caused Merxler to preserve the will, an enmity that no doubt was fully returned by Karlin, had nothing to do with Red Vallon and the rest.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes went by. The taxi reached the lower section of the city. Billy Kane still stared from the window, his face still hard in perplexity. Murder! No, he did not understand. But there was still the "back room at Jerry's"—where he was going now! Did the answer lie there? Jerry's, safely entrenched in one of the most abandoned neighborhoods of the city, was a gambling hell that yet boasted a certain exclusiveness—and its patrons quite made good the boast. It was an open secret that men whose names ranked high in the city's commercial and professional world went there for their fling. Jerry, it was said, was an ex-croupier from Monte Carlo, and had brought the spirit of Monte Carlo with him. He, Billy Kane, had heard of the place often enough—the entertainment was lavish, the play unlimited. Did the answer lie there—in the back room at Jerry's? He shrugged his shoulders philosophically now, and a grim little smile came and flickered across his lips. Well, if there were any means by which an uninvited guest could gain access to that back room, he would know within a very few minutes now!

XI—THE BACK ROOM AT JERRY'S

The taxi drew up to the curb. Billy Kane's hat was far over his eyes as he stepped out. He stood an instant debating with himself, then handed the chauffeur another bill. What might happen at Jerry's he did not know—he was going it blind again. But as a means of retreat, a taxi waiting around the corner would at least add to his chances, if necessity arose. And a chauffeur well paid was a guarantee of fidelity than which there was none better.

"You've struck a gold mine to-night," he said coolly. "I may be gone half an hour, or I may be gone an hour—wait for me."

"You bet your life, I'll wait!" said the chauffeur fervently. "I—"

Billy Kane was hurrying down the street. He turned the first corner, and headed along the intersecting street, that was dark, narrow and deserted. He passed another cross street, and thereafter counted the houses as he went along. Here tenements and the old-fashioned dwellings of New York's early days incongruously rubbed shoulders with one another. Jerry's, he found,

was the fifth house from the cross street. There was no mistaking Jerry's. It was one of the old private dwellings, and it had been pointed out to him more than once. He returned to the cross street, turned down it, slipped into the lane that passed in the rear of the houses he had just inspected from the front, and, guardedly now, making his way silently along, he again counted the buildings that here in the darkness loomed up like black, uncouth shapes against the sky line. He stopped in the rear of the fifth house. Here and there a thread of light showed from a window, but it was a stealthy light, a light that played truant through the interstices of closed shutters, or seeped perhaps through the folds of curtains hanging inadvertently awry. It was abnormally dark, and in the darkness there seemed to lurk a somber secrecy, like a pall, cloaking evil things.

Billy Kane swung himself up and over a high fence, and dropped noiselessly to the ground on the other side. He found himself in a yard that, even in the darkness, he could make out was strangely restricted in area. A few feet in front of him was the wall of the building itself. He crept forward, skirting along this wall. There was no window, but opening almost on a level with the ground were shuttered French doors. He continued on, rounded the angle of the building, and suddenly stooped down in a crouching posture. There was a window here just above his head, and from it came a meager gleam of light. His eyes grown accustomed to the darkness, he could distinguish his surroundings a little more clearly now. The yard here, a narrow strip of it paralleling the side fence, seemed to run back quite a distance, taking up a jut in the building. They had puzzled him, those shuttered French doors where logically he had expected to find an ordinary back door and porch, but it was obvious now that the "back room at Jerry's" was an addition that had been built onto the house, extending almost to the fence in the rear.

The window beneath which he crouched was shoulder high. He straightened up. The light came through slightly parted, heavy portières. He felt the blood quicken suddenly in his veins. He could see in quite well. There were two men in the room—Karlin, and another man whom he did not recognize. The room was luxuriously, if somewhat garishly furnished. A green baize card table, with several unopened packs of cards upon it, stood in the center; there was a blue-and-gold Chinese rug with a huge dragon pattern upon the floor; and at one side a large buffet groaned under a load of wine and whisky bottles, bowls of fruit, and refreshments of various descriptions. The two men were talking earnestly. Karlin pulled out his watch, and scowled.

Billy Kane's lips tightened. He could see, but he could not hear. He took his penknife from his pocket, and slipped the blade under the window sill. If he had luck, if the window was not locked, he—ah!—his breath came in a soft, long-drawn intake—the window gave slightly under a cautious pressure. An inch was all that was necessary, half an inch even. The window went up by infinitesimal fractions of that inch.

Billy Kane returned the penknife to his pocket. He could hear them now. Karlin was speaking; and the other man, it appeared now, was the proprietor of the place, Jerry, the ex-croupier of Monte Carlo.

"What's the matter with you, Jerry—getting nervous waiting?" said Karlin curtly. "Well, forget it! This is the Rat's plan—and that ought to be good enough, what? Nothing is going wrong, nothing can go wrong. Certainly, the police will close you up for a month, but that's all there is to it, so far as you are concerned. They have nothing on you. That's the inside of the whole thing—that the killing is done in an unpremeditated, drunken brawl over cards—that it just happened—just an untimely end without any other strings to it! There's no reason why you should lose your nerve—your story is straight. Young Merxler came here often. He gives a little party here to-night. Neither you nor your doorkeeper knows a damned one of his guests. He vouched for them, and that's all you know. You heard a row in here, then a revolver shot, and when you got here the table was upset, wine, cards and glasses all over the place, the boys beating it out through the French doors there, and young Merxler dead on the floor. You just notify the police. Your loss through being closed for a month makes it a cinch your story's straight—you don't have to tell the police that your share of the split is the best bet you ever made in your life! Let *me* do the worrying! I'm the one who's taking the risk. I'm the one who's been showing a seamy side to Merxler in confidence lately. I'm the one who's invited him to the party that the police will be told *he* was giving. You can leave it to me that nothing goes wrong. I've got my own skin staked on this. There won't be any mistake made—dead men can't talk. The only thing I'm bothering about is what is keeping Bull McCann. He might—"

Billy Kane drew suddenly back from the window, and crouched down again against the wall of the building. Someone, unless he were curiously mistaken, was out there in the lane at the rear of the place. He was listening intently now—but there was a strange turmoil in his brain that seemed somehow to divide his attention, that had made his act of caution one that was almost

purely automatic. Murder! That *casual* discussion of murder! There was something within him, soul deep, that he could not quite analyse—save that it seemed a lust for murder was upon him too, possessing him, engulfing him. Would *that* be murder? Was it murder to crush out the life of a poison-fanged snake! There was a fury upon him, but a most strange fury, a fury that was utterly cold—and utterly merciless. Murder! Yes, he knew now beyond question that there was to be murder, that the stage for it was set with a devil's craft, with the craft of the Rat whose identity *he* had assumed; that it would appear on the face of it nothing more than quite a logical outcome of the life led by young Merxler, that there would appear to be no connection whatever with young Merxler's death and what was to follow—but what was it that was to follow? How, in what way, was this murder, in dollars and cents, to show a profit at the next meeting of that unhallowed directorate of crime? How did Karlin—

Strange how his mind should isolate itself from his immediate surroundings, and yet leave him fully conscious of those surroundings! He was still listening—listening intently. There was no mistake. A boot scraped against a board. Someone was climbing the fence. Came then the soft thud of feet dropping to the ground, and now a quick step across the yard.

Billy Kane's revolver was in his hand. If the newcomer came around the corner of the house, dark as it was, it was almost certain that—no! The other had halted evidently before those shuttered French doors, and was rapping softly—three raps, a single rap, two raps. The raps were repeated. Someone moved swiftly across the floor of the room. There was the faint clash of portière rings, and the sound of the French doors being opened.

Billy Kane was at the window again. A third man was in the room now. Karlin was speaking sharply.

"You've been a long time coming, Bull!"

The newcomer, his back turned to Billy Kane, shrugged his shoulders.

"I had to wait until Merxler went out," he answered. "I didn't lose no time after that, an' I came downtown as fast as I could. I ain't been much more'n half an hour from Merxler's to here."

"Well, all right!" grunted Karlin. "Have any trouble?"

"Nix!" said the other. "I slipped the envelope into the drawer of the safe, all right. It was a cinch! The family was all upstairs."

Karlin nodded.

"Where are the securities?" he demanded.

The man took what Billy Kane could see were a number of stock and bond certificates from his pocket, and handed them to Karlin.

Karlin nodded again, as he ran through the papers rapidly.

"How much did you leave in the safe?" he inquired crisply.

"What Red told me—about ten or twelve thousand."

"All right!" said Karlin. "Good work, Bull! Beat it, now!"

The man turned, and left the room. Billy Kane heard him step across the yard, heard him climb the fence, heard Karlin within the room close the shuttered French doors—but this time Billy Kane made no movement, save that there was a curious twitching of his face muscles as his jaws locked together. All the bald, hellish brutality of the scheme was beginning to take form now in his mind. It was a plant, all of it, the letter, the will; a plant with the devil's stamp of ingenuity upon it—and it was the man who had just gone from the room, Bull McCann, who had passed him on that black stairway from the basement in Merxler's home!

Karlin was laughing in a viciously jubilant way, as he came back to the ex-croupier's side.

"Fifty thousand dollars!" said Karlin, as he thrust the securities into the inside pocket of his coat, and patted the pocket complacently. "Fifty thousand, Jerry, and all of it in Theodore Rodger's name—I kept stalling the kid on the idea of transferring the securities into his own name—told him there was no hurry—that he could clip the coupons and get the dividend checks through all right, just the same. I was his attorney too—see? Works pretty smooth, eh, Jerry? Too bad you didn't get a chance to have a look at that letter and the will! The Chipper did the job, and they're the best pieces of forged penwork that were ever pulled in America! Some head the Rat's got, I'll give him credit for that—he worded the letter. It's *prima facie* evidence that the kid was blowing the coin just as fast as he did when he came into his father's money—and nobody's surprised that most of it has gone up in smoke. And, besides that, it's a confession. Well, what happens? Merxler is killed in a gambling brawl—at which nobody is surprised, either!—his safe is opened, the will is found, and with it that little hymn of hate against me, which accounts for what would otherwise have been a fool play in having kept the will. I am found to be the executor, empowered to transfer and sell, and administer the estate—and we find that all that's left is

about ten thousand—which is *all* I have to account for. I enter that as the value of the estate, split it up among the beneficiaries, and”—he chuckled softly—“I generously waive my claim to any share in the legacy on the score that the estate has been so hard hit. Neat little play, eh, Jerry? Well, after that, there’s nothing to it! My signature is legally good on any document, and little by little, here and there, we turn the fifty thousand into the long green—and pocket it. If it’s done quietly, a security or so at a time, no one would ever think of digging around to find out if it was one of those on the schedule filed by the estate. Feeling better, Jerry?”

The ex-croupier walked over to the buffet, poured out for himself a stiff four fingers of whisky, and tossed off the neat spirit at a gulp. He forced an uneasy grin.

“I don’t often drink in business hours,” he said nervously. “But I’m not used to playing this high—maybe I’m a little shaky. Are you sure-fire on the witnesses to that will? Their signatures would have to be proved.”

“They’re the only things that are genuine,” said Karlin, with a malicious laugh. “We had two of our boys working around the hotel down on Long Island where Rodgers spent a month this spring, and where he is supposed to have written the will. They identify their signatures, and their story’s straight. Rodgers asked them to witness his signature to a paper, that’s all. He didn’t tell them what the paper was, and they didn’t know—see? If there’s any question crops up, the hotel proves that the two men were its employees at the time Rodgers was staying there.” He pulled out his watch again. “It’s ten o’clock!” he said brusquely. “Merxler ought to be showing up. I—”

The ex-croupier had suddenly laid a finger to his lips in caution. A knock was sounding on the hall door.

“Here he is now,” said the ex-croupier, in a lowered voice. “I told them to send him here as soon as he came.”

“All right, let him in,” instructed Karlin. “And tell the boys to drift along as soon as they like. *It’s the man who cuts the first jack.*”

The ex-croupier opened the door, and was instantly continental in both manner and speech. He bowed profoundly, as a young man entered.

“Ah, Monsieur Merxler—a great pleasure! I was telling Monsieur Karlin that—”

Billy Kane had drawn slightly back from the window. His lips were thinned, compressed. The fiendishness of it all had got him now—Karlin with his suave, oily, Judas smile, preening at his Vandyke beard—and Merxler, for all that he had played the fool for several years now, still with a frank and boyish face, his broad shoulders squared back as he laughed a pleasant greeting. There was a whiteness in Billy Kane’s face, a whiteness that was like to the fury, no longer cold, that was white-hot in his soul. Murder! Well, perhaps—but it would not be Merxler’s murder! He whipped his mask from his pocket, and adjusted it swiftly over his face. His fingers automatically tested the mechanism of his revolver, as he again looked in through the window. The ex-croupier was bowing himself out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Quick and silent now in every movement, Billy Kane crept around the corner of the house, and crouched before the shuttered French doors. He had a minute, perhaps two at the outside, in which to act before Karlin’s confederates entered the room. He tapped softly with his revolver on the shutters—three raps, a single rap, two raps; he repeated it—three raps, a single rap, two raps.

From within a step came hurriedly across the floor, there was the faint clashing of the curtain rings again as the portières were drawn aside, and through the interstices of the shutters came little gleams of light. Billy Kane shifted his grip upon his revolver—to the muzzle end. The doors opened a few inches cautiously. And then Karlin’s voice:

“Who’s there? What—”

But Billy Kane was in action now, and the words ended in a wild shout of alarm. His left hand shot forward like a flash into the opening, wrenching the doors wide apart; and, lithe as a panther in its spring, he launched himself forward, and struck with the butt of his revolver, struck as he would have struck at a mad dog, full on Karlin’s head.

There was a crash as the man went limply, senseless, to the floor, and another cry, from Merxler now, and then, dazing Billy Kane for an instant by the sudden and unexpected onslaught, Merxler had sprung and locked his arms around him in a grip of steel. They crashed against the table, upsetting it.

“Let go!” Billy Kane panted frantically. “The hall door—lock it! You don’t understand!”

There was no answer from Merxler, save another hoarse shout for help. The boy was fighting like a demon. Here and there about the room they lurched, staggered, reeled, but Billy Kane was

the stronger. It seemed only by inches, but still by inches they were nearing the hall door. There was something of ghastly irony in this frenzied effort of the boy to bar his own road to safety; but there was something fine in it too, something that, even as he fought, found recognition in Billy Kane's mind. The boy, spendthrift though he might be, a fool with his money though he might be, was game to the core in standing by a man whom he believed to be his friend.

There was an uproar now from the interior of the house. There came the rush of feet along the hall. Another instant and they would be at the door. Massing his strength for the effort, Billy Kane tore himself free, flung Merxler back, and plunged forward. The door was being opened now. He hurled his weight against it.

"Quick, Merxler! Quick! The inside pocket of Karlin's coat!" he gasped out. "Quick!"

There was a yell of fury from the hall, as the door slammed shut, and Billy Kane turned the key—and then a crash upon it, and another, as human battering rams launched themselves madly against the panels. Over his shoulder Billy Kane saw Merxler standing hesitant, glancing in stupefaction alternately from the door to Karlin on the floor.

A panel cracked and splintered. Billy Kane's revolver roared like a cannon shot through the room. The bullet, aimed low, ripped along the threshold.

"Merxler, the inside pocket of Karlin's coat!" he said in deadly quiet. "Man, are you mad! Hurry! They'll have us both in another minute!"

The revolver shot had checked the rush against the door for an instant, though only for an instant, but that instant was enough. Merxler, stung into action, had leapt to Karlin's side, and was bending over the man. And then he was on his feet, staring wildly at the papers in his hand.

"Good God, what's this!" he cried out. "What's—"

"The French doors—the fence—run for it!" said Billy Kane tensely, and fired again. And the next instant the room was in darkness, as he switched off the light; and in another, with Merxler running now beside him, he had crossed the few feet of yard and was swinging himself over the fence.

From behind came the rip and tear and smash of the yielding door, shouts, yells, oaths, a confusion of noises; but Billy Kane had reached the cross street now, and, pulling the mask from his face, jerking his hat brim far over his eyes, turned in the opposite direction from that in which he had entered the lane, and, urging Merxler on, was running at top speed. At the next block they swerved again—and Billy Kane, with a restraining pressure on Merxler's arm, here dropped into a slower and less noticeable pace. There was little or no chance of pursuit now; no one, it seemed, had taken the immediate initiative of following them into the lane, yet Billy Kane made a wide detour before he finally reached his waiting taxi cab.

"Get in," he said to Merxler; and, crisply, to the chauffeur: "Drive as fast as you know how! Go up the street at the rear of The Purple Scarf!"

He followed Merxler into the cab.

Merxler drew his hand across his eyes in a dazed way, and laughed nervously.

"I can't see your face now, and you had a mask on before," he said jerkily. "This is a queer business! Who are you? What's it mean? Those securities were in my safe an hour ago—how did they get into Karlin's pocket? What was he doing with them?"

"Stoop over!" said Billy Kane quietly. He handed Merxler the forged letter, and flashed the ray of his lamp upon the paper.

His head bent forward, Merxler read the letter, and his face, already white under the ray, gradually took on a drawn, grayish pallor.

"I—I never wrote this," he faltered. "It's my handwriting, but I—I never wrote it."

"Nor your uncle this," said Billy Kane, the same grim, quiet intonation in his voice, as he placed the will in turn in Merxler's hand.

The light played on the paper, and over Merxler's face. Billy Kane sat drawn back in the shadows.

There was moisture on Merxler's forehead, as he looked up after a moment.

"My God," he whispered hoarsely, "what does this mean?"

The flashlight was out. It was dark in the cab now, and the taxi rattled on traversing block after block. Billy Kane spoke swiftly, sketching the events of the night. Merxler did not move, save that at the end his hand sought and found and closed tight upon Billy Kane's arm.

It was Merxler in a new light who spoke.

"You've saved my life—and you haven't preached," he said slowly. "I'm a fool! I've played the fool—they never would have tried to get away with it if I hadn't played the fool all my life. I guess perhaps I've had my lesson tonight. But fool, or not"—his voice rasped suddenly, bitter hard

—“Karlin will pay for this, or——”

“You will—yet!” Billy Kane cut in grimly. “You know too much, and you haven’t a minute to lose. They lost their heads for a moment in the confusion and the darkness when we got away, but their one hope now will be to get you before you tell your story. They may figure that you will hesitate about telling it, as you would have to admit your presence at Jerry’s gambling hell—and they may figure that you wouldn’t act anyway before morning. Do you understand? That’s *their* chance. Your chance is the police without a second’s delay—you may even get Karlin before he regains consciousness, or before they try to move him, if you’re quick enough. I know your story will sound strange with an unknown man in a mask running through it, but you have only to tell the truth. You have all the evidence you need. The police will know the Chipper, who forged the papers; and the police will know how to make those fake witnesses to the will squeal—it’s a different proposition now with them than simply appearing before Karlin and a notary public and swearing to the signatures. Understand?”

“Yes,” said Merxler tersely. “You’re right—and I’ll see it through. But you—you saved my life, and——”

“I get out here,” said Billy Kane, and leaning forward suddenly, tapped sharply on the glass front. They had turned into the street that was not only in the rear of The Purple Scarf, but was equally in the rear of that secret entrance into the Rat’s lair. He held out his hand to Merxler. “Good-night, Merxler—I——”

“But,” Merxler cried, as the taxi stopped, “I can’t let you go like this! I owe you too much. Who are you? What is your name? Where can I find you to——”

“I’m trying to find—myself,” said Billy Kane, with grim whimsicality. “Let it go at that!” He caught Merxler’s hand in a hard grip. “Good-night, Merxler—and good luck!” he said, and stepping quickly from the taxi, closed the door. He handed the chauffeur another bill. “Drive this gentleman to police headquarters—fast!” he ordered, and, turning, moved swiftly away down the street, hugging the shadows again, avoiding the rays of the street lamps.

He slipped into the lane, gained the shed, and from the shed made his way through the underground passage to the secret door, listened here intently for a moment, then stepped through into the Rat’s room, and groped forward toward the electric light that hung over the table.

It was strange! There was something almost mockingly ironic in it all! It was like the night before again. In peril himself as grave as Merxler’s, he had saved Merxler—and his own peril remained, was increased even, for the inner circle of this crime world that ranked him as a trusted confederate would be aroused now to an unbridled pitch of fury and excitement, seeking the unknown man in the mask who had foiled them to-night. Suspicious as they would be of every one, he now had that suspicion to combat, and he could ill afford that a breath of it should touch him. His all was at stake—Red Vallon, with the underworld at his heels, was enlisted now in a hunt for those rubies, which, if successful, must inevitably discover too the identity of the man, or men, who had murdered David Ellsworth, and who had driven him, Billy Kane, into this damnable exile! It was paramount, vital, that he should preserve his authority to keep the underworld at that work, the power to command, the——

Billy Kane switched on the electric light, and stood staring at the table, grim faced, his jaws locked tight together, his hand like a flash seeking his revolver in his pocket. His eyes lifted, and swept around the room. The swift, quick glance went unrewarded. The room was apparently as he had left it. He crossed quickly to the street door. It was still locked.

Again his eyes searched the room. He remembered that she had spoken of other secrets that the room possessed. What were they? Still another entrance? There was no sign of it! He knew only that someone had been here in his absence—and was now flaunting that visit in his face. Was it mockery? A warning? What?

It could not have been Red Vallon, or any of his pack. It was almost certain that Red Vallon had no knowledge of any secret entrance, and besides it was too soon for Red Vallon. Was it the woman? He shook his head. It was hardly likely, and his reason told him no—she had been outspoken enough that evening, and she had given no hint of *this*. Who then? And what was its meaning? Was it grim mockery? A grimmer warning? What?

On the table, ostentatiously placed in full view, and identified beyond possibility of mistake by a piece cut from the corner of the original plush tray on which it and many of its fellows had rested, was one of the rubies stolen from David Ellsworth’s vault!

XII—A CLUE

Billy Kane's eyes lifted from his plate, and fixed in a curiously introspective way on Whitie Jack's unhandsome and unshaven face across the little table. Twenty-four hours! He was out in the open now—"convalescent." Twenty-four hours—and as far as Red Vallon and Birdie Rose were concerned specifically, and the underworld generally, there had been not a shred of success. He had unleashed the underworld, but the underworld had picked up neither thread nor clue; the underground clearing houses for stolen goods, the "fences," had yielded up no single one of the rubies belonging to the Ellsworth collection; the lead that he had given Birdie Rose in respect of Jackson, the dead footman, had, up to the present at least, proved abortive.

Well, perhaps he, Billy Kane, would be more successful! The twenty-four hours had not been wholly fruitless. Perhaps before the night was out there would be a different story to tell—perhaps a grim and ugly story. There was one clue which had developed, but a clue that was to be entrusted to neither Red Vallon, nor Birdie Rose, nor any of the pack. Even they, case-hardened, steeped in crime though they were, might balk at pushing that clue to its ultimate conclusion. They might weaken at the limit! He, Billy Kane, would not weaken, because, as between his own life and the life of one who he was already satisfied was a murderer, he would not fling his own life away! His life was at stake. Red Vallon's wasn't. Birdie Rose's wasn't. It made a difference in—the limit!

An attendant, in a dirty, beer-stained apron, sidled to the edge of the table. The man had been eager in his attentions, deferential, almost obsequious.

"Wot're youse for now, Bundy?" he inquired solicitously.

Billy Kane smiled, as he shook his head and jerked his hand by way of invitation toward Whitie Jack. He, Billy Kane, was the Rat, alias Bundy Morgan! He had never in his life before been in this none-too-reputable place run by one Two-finger Tasker, that combined at one and the same time a restaurant and dance hall of the lowest type, yet he found himself not only well known but an honored guest! He had known of the place by name and reputation; it was the sort of place that seemed naturally one the Rat would frequent, and he had told Red Vallon that he would "eat" here this evening. Red Vallon would have to make a report somewhere, and he, Billy Kane, had become none too sure of his own temporary quarters—that secret door, that underground passage into the Rat's lair had not proved an altogether unmixed blessing! There was the Woman in Black, who had been an uninvited, unwelcome, and almost sinister visitor on two occasions already; and there was, far more disturbing still, the matter of that ruby from the Ellsworth collection which had found its way mysteriously to the table in that room—the single stone from the collection that had come to light since the murder two nights ago.

Whitie Jack accepted the unspoken invitation.

"Gimme another mug of suds," he said.

The glass was replenished.

"You seem to have pulled a good job, Whitie," said Billy Kane approvingly. "The tenement is next to the café on the corner, eh? All right, I know the place. What next?"

Whitie Jack gulped down half the contents of his glass.

"I guess I did," he said complacently. "I wasn't pipin' de lay all day for nothin'—wot? De place has three floors, an' two flats on each floor, savvy? It ain't much of a place, neither. Peters' flat is on de second floor, on de right as youse go up. Dere's nobody at home, but he comes down dere himself to give de place de once-over one night a week. De family's away somewhere for a vacation, sniffin' in de ocean breezes at some boardin' house. Gee, say, de guy must have money to pull de high brow, out-of-town-in-de-summer stuff for de family!"

Billy Kane nodded.

Whitie Jack finished his glass, and drew his sleeve across his mouth.

"Two of de flats is vacant," he said. "One on de second floor, an' one on de top. De other one on de top over Peters' flat is where dat crazy old fiddler guy, Savnak, hangs out all by his lonesome. But Savnak won't bother youse none. He's out every night. He goes down to Dutchy Vetter's jewelry shop, an' him an' Dutchy, bein' nuts on music an' pinochle, dey goes to it for half de night. Old Savnak's got bats in his belfry, I guess; but I guess he can fiddle all right. I heard he used to be a big bug leadin' some foreign or-kestra, an' was a count or dook or something, an' den de dope got him, an' den he came out here. He ain't livin' like a dook now, an' I guess it takes him all his time to scratch up his rent. Bats, dat's wot he's got—bats an' dope. Dey got him

to play one night down to Heeney's music hall, an' he went up in de air an' quit flat 'cause de waiters kept circulatin' around an' dishin' out de suds while he was playin'! Say, wot do youse know about dat! An' den——"

"Stick to cases, Whitie," interrupted Billy Kane patiently. "I'm expecting company in a few minutes. What about the ground floor? Who lives there?"

"Oh, dere!" said Whitie Jack somewhat contemptuously. "I dunno wot yer lay is, but dere's nothin' dere to bother youse neither. Dere's a couple of sisters about sixty years old apiece on one side, an' a young guy dat's just got married on de other."

"Back entrance?" inquired Billy Kane casually.

Whitie Jack shook his head.

"Nope!" he said. "Nothin' doin'! Dere's a back yard about four inches square, but the buildin' behind butts right up against it, an' dere ain't no lane. But youse can get in de front door to-night whether it's locked or not, for dere ain't any street lamp near enough to do youse any harm."

"Good work!" said Billy Kane. He pushed his plate away from in front of him. "I guess you'd better beat it now, Whitie."

Whitie Jack, of the lesser breed of criminal, self-attached familiar to the man he believed to be the Rat and an aristocrat of Crimeland, rose from his seat with evident reluctance. There was a sort of dog-like faithfulness and admiration in his eyes, the same deference in his manner that seemed to mark the dealings of everyone in the underworld with the Rat; but the look on Whitie Jack's face was nevertheless one of undisguised disappointment.

"Ain't I in on dis any more?" he pleaded. "Ain't I got anything more to do?"

"Yes," said Billy Kane. He lowered his voice. "You've got more to do, and what will count for a lot more than you've already done—keep your mouth shut tight." He leaned across the table, and his hand closed in a friendly pressure on the other's arm. "Take the night off. Show up in the morning. Beat it now, Whitie."

Whitie Jack left the place. The waiter removed the dishes from the table. Billy Kane leaned back in his chair, and his eyes, the introspective stare back in their depths, travelled slowly over his surroundings. The tables, ranged around the sides of the room, were but sparsely occupied; the polished section of the floor in the center was deserted—it was too early for the votaries of the bunny-hug and the turkey-trot to start in on their nightly gyrations. Two-finger Tasker's was in a state of lethargy, as it were; a few hours later it would awake to a riot of hilarity, and come into its own with a surging crowd and packed tables, but it was too early for that yet.

Billy Kane's fingers slipped mechanically into his vest pocket, and, hidden there, mechanically began to twirl a small, hard object, irregular in its shape, between their tips. His face hardened suddenly. The touch of that little object stirred up in an instant a grim flood of speculation. It was the ruby from the Ellsworth collection that he had found on his return to the Rat's den last night. It worried him. How had it got there? Who had put it there? And why? Above all—why?

Only a few hours before, turning his purloined authority to account, he had set the underworld the task of tracing the Ellsworth collection—and mysteriously there had appeared upon his table this single stone, ostentatiously identified by a piece cut from one of the original plush trays in which the stones had been kept. The bare possibility that it had been Red Vallon, or some of his breed, who had stumbled upon the stone in their search through the underground exchanges, and had left it there as evidence of a partial success for him to find on his return, had occurred to him; but a cautious probing of Red Vallon that morning had put a final and emphatic negative on that theory.

Who, then? And why? It had seemed like a ghastly jeer when he had seen that stone there on the table, and the prelude to some sinister act that he could not foresee, and against which therefore he could not prepare any defense. Did someone know that he was not the Rat, that, desperate, with no other thing to do, he had snatched at the rôle fate had thrust out to him, and was playing it now?

Who, then? Not the Woman in Black—her acceptance of him as the Rat had been altogether too genuine! Not the underworld—even a suspicion there would have been followed by a knife thrust long before this. Not the actual perpetrators of David Ellsworth's murder, if they knew him to be Billy Kane—for their one aim had been to fasten the crime irrevocably upon him, all their hellish ingenuity had been centered on that one object, and they would certainly, therefore, have lost no time in giving the police, in some roundabout, guarded way, a tip as to his identity.

His brain whirled with the problem, and ached in an actual physical sense. It had been aching all day. He could minimize his peril, if he cared to make the wish father to the thought; he could

not exaggerate it. It seemed impossible that his identity was known, but, even so, the question as to where that stone had come from, and why, still remained unanswered. Was it, then—another possibility—the murderers of David Ellsworth, who, while still believing him to be the Rat, and having discovered in some way that, as the Rat, he was working against them, had given him this ugly and significant warning to keep his hands off? Well, if that were so, he was still in no less danger, for he must go on. To turn aside was to fail, and to fail, quite equally, meant death.

The hard pressure of his lips curved the corners of his mouth downward in sharp lines. Nor was the question of that stone all! Since last night when the cloak of respectability had been stripped from Karlin, and the “man in the mask” had turned the tables on the crime coterie in the gambling hell run by Jerry, the ex-croupier of Monte Carlo, the underworld had been in a nasty mood, ugly, suspicious, in a ferment of unrest. It was another alias added to his rôle, another alias to safeguard even more zealously, if possible, than his unsought rôle of the Rat. He was the man in the mask. He shrugged his shoulders suddenly. Quite so! The mask was even at that moment in his inside coat pocket. If it were found there! He laughed harshly. It seemed as though he were being sucked in nearer and nearer to the center of some seething vortex that hungrily sought to engulf him. It seemed as though his brain ground and mulled around in a sort of ghastly cycle. When he tried to bring one thing into individual outline some other thing impinged, and all became a jumbled medley, like pieces of a puzzle, no one of which would fit into another.

The underworld looked askance and whispered through the corners of its mouth as it asked the question: Who was the man in the mask? And he, Billy Kane, who could answer that question, sitting here in Two-finger Tasker’s in the heart of that underworld, was asking himself another, a dozen others, whose answers were vital, life and death to him in the most literal sense. Who was the Woman in Black, who, like a Nemesis, hovered over the Rat? Where was the man whose personality had been so strangely thrust upon him, Billy Kane? When would the Rat return? Had he, Billy Kane, even the few hours at his disposal this evening that were necessary to enable him to run down the clue which he had discovered, and upon which he was banking his all now to clear himself, to bring to justice the murderers who had so craftily saddled their guilt upon him—had he even that much time before the inevitable crash came?

This evening! Yes, this evening! His fingers came from his vest pocket, and his hand clenched fiercely at his side. He would go the limit. His mind was made up to that. He had never thought that he would consider, calculate and weigh the pros and cons of taking another’s life, much less come to a deliberate decision to do so! But he had made that decision now; and, if it were necessary, he would carry it through. It seemed to affect him with an unnatural, cold indifference that surprised himself—that decision. It seemed to be only the result, the outcome that continued to concern him. If he had luck with him to-night he would win through. Red Vallon, Birdie Rose and the underworld had so far failed. He had kept prodding them on, and would continue to prod them on even now on the basis that he could not afford to let go of a single chance; but his hopes, that amounted now to a practical certainty of success, were almost wholly centered on his own efforts in the next few hours.

He stirred impulsively in his chair. The murderers of David Ellsworth had been *too* cunning, it seemed, had overstepped themselves at last in their anxiety to weave their net of evidence still more irrevocably around him. The affair of last night, the capture of Karlin by the police, and the social prominence of both Karlin and Merxler, had furnished the morning papers with material for glaring headlines and columns of sensational “story”; but, even so, all this had not by any means overshadowed the Ellsworth murder and robbery. The press was still alive with it, New York was still agog with the old millionaire-philanthropist’s assassination, and with what it believed to be the traitorous and abandoned act of, not only a trusted and confidential secretary, but of one who at the same time was the son of a lifelong friend.

The blood surged burning hot into Billy Kane’s face. From coast to coast they had heralded him as the vilest of his kind—he was a pariah, an outcast, a thing of loathing! Yes, the papers were still giving him and the Ellsworth murder prominence enough! But that prominence was not without its compensation, since it had furnished him with the clue now in his possession.

The inquest had been held late yesterday afternoon, too late for more than brief mention in the evening papers, but this morning the papers had carried a full and practically verbatim report of the proceedings. He had read the report, not daring at first to believe what he wanted to believe, afraid that his eyes were playing a mocking trick upon him—and then he had read it again in a sort of grim, unholy joy.

Jackson, the footman, who he knew was one of the murderers, was dead, and so far Birdie Rose had been unable to trace the man’s family or connections; but Peters, the butler, was not

dead, and out of Peters' own mouth, in his effort apparently to seal for all time his, Billy Kane's, guilt, Peters had convicted himself!

True, before a jury, Peters had done himself no harm—that was the hellish ingenuity of the scheme that fitted in with all the rest of the devil's craft with which the affair had been planned. Peters, in the public's eyes, or before any court, was treading on safe and solid ground, for his, Billy Kane's, simple denial was worth nothing in any man's opinion to-day; but he, Billy Kane, *knew* that Peters' testimony was not fact. Peters had testified that he had seen him, Billy Kane, leave the house about seven o'clock—which was true. Peters had then deliberately testified that half an hour later, though he had not seen Mr. Kane return, he had seen Mr. Kane come quietly down the back stairs, and enter the library—which, besides being untrue, since he, Billy Kane, was not even in the house at that time, was also equivalent to swearing away his, Billy Kane's, life. Peters, continuing his evidence, had stated that he was quite sure he had not been seen by Mr. Kane, as he, Peters, at that moment was standing just inside the cloakroom off the hall. He did not see Mr. Kane emerge again from the library, but some fifteen minutes later a telephone call came in for Mr. Ellsworth, and, knowing Mr. Ellsworth to be in the library, he connected with that room. He tried several times, but could get no reply. Finally he went to the library door and opened it, and found Mr. Ellsworth with his skull crushed in, dead upon the floor, the private vault and safe open and looted. He at once called the police. He stated that it was obvious Mr. Kane had made his escape from the library through the stenographer's room at the rear, and from there to the back entrance, where, later on again, as the police already knew, returning once more in the hope presumably of recovering the card with the combinations of the safe and vault on it in his handwriting, he had been discovered by Jackson, the footman, and had killed Jackson, who had tried to capture him.

Billy Kane's hands were shoved in an apparently nonchalant manner into the side pockets of his coat—to hide them from view now. The nails were biting into the palms of his hands. "*Killed*" that was the word Peters had used—"killed." It was very subtle of Peters to have used that word—it just clinched the whole story with the seemingly obvious. Everybody believed that he, Billy Kane, had killed Jackson, as well as David Ellsworth. Yes, Peters had put the finishing touch on the evidence that was meant to free the actual perpetrators, himself quite evidently amongst them, from punishment, and to send him, Billy Kane, if caught, as their proxy to the death chair in Sing Sing.

Quite so! And Peters thought himself quite safe. What had Peters to fear from a hunted wretch who he undoubtedly believed was miles away, fleeing for his life, cowering from the sight of his fellow humans, afraid to show his face? But Peters and his accomplices had overshot the mark! The evidence was final, incontrovertible, damning—only it was not *true*. He, Billy Kane, would not dispute it with a jury—he would put Peters on a witness stand of a grimmer nature than that! He had known on the night of the crime that Jackson, the footman, was one of the guilty men; but he had not suspected that the dignified, perfectly trained Peters, the butler, with his fastidiously trimmed, gray, mutton-chop side-whiskers, was likewise one of the band. And now he wondered why he had not thought of it.

He saw Peters in quite a different light now! A hundred little incidents metamorphosed the man's excessive efficiency and attentiveness into a smug mask of hypocrisy. And, corroborative from this new viewpoint, where, for instance, had Peters, as it now appeared, got the money to send his family away even to a boarding house? Butlers were not in the habit of sending their families away to the seaside for the summer! Even Whitie Jack had not failed to comment on that fact. Well, he was satisfied that he knew the real Peters now, and it was not too late. It was Peters, or himself now. It was his life, or Peters' life—unless Peters laid bare to the last shred the whole plot, and the name of every man connected with it.

And the stage was set. From the moment he had read the papers that morning, he had put Whitie Jack at work—and Whitie Jack had done well, exceedingly well. He, Billy Kane, knew that Peters was married and had a family, but he had not known Peters' home address. Whitie Jack had proved a most praiseworthy ferret. He, Billy Kane, knew that Thursday was always Peters' night off. This was Thursday night. Peters, then, if he followed his usual custom, would visit his flat to-night; and, since the man's family was away, Peters and he would be *alone*. It was fortunate that the family was away, luck seemed to be turning; it precluded the necessity of getting Peters somewhere else—alone. It simplified matters. Peters' flat would serve most excellently for that interview!

He laughed a little now. He was strangely cool, strangely composed. He was in a mood in which he found difficulty in recognizing himself. He was going to-night to wring from a man

either that man's life, or that man's confession. He was absolutely merciless in that resolve; he would not turn back, nothing would make him swerve one iota from that determination, he would go the limit—and yet he sat here entirely unmoved, callous.

Well, after all, why not? If the man was already a murderer, his life was already forfeit. If he, Billy Kane, must choose between losing his own life and permitting one of the murderers of David Ellsworth to profit further thereby, would one hesitate long over that choice, or hesitate to go—the limit?

XIII—THE CIPHER MESSAGE

Billy Kane's hands came from his pockets again, and he leisurely lighted a cigarette. Though sitting sideways to the door, he nevertheless unostentatiously commanded a full view of the entrance. Red Vallon had just entered, and, after a moment's pause in which the man's eyes searched around the dance hall, was coming forward, threading his way through the intervening tables. Billy Kane flung a short nod of recognition in the direction of the approaching gangster; and then his eyes fastened in a sort of hard, curious expectancy on the street door again. Whether or not it was intuition or premonition, induced by what had happened the previous night when Red Vallon had been followed, he did not know, but he was somehow prepared now, a little more than prepared, almost sure, in fact, that there would be a repetition of last night's occurrence.

Red Vallon dropped into the seat vacated by Whitie Jack.

"Hello, Bundy!" he greeted affably.

"Hello, Red!" The response was purely mechanical. Billy Kane shifted his cigarette from one corner of his mouth to the other—to hide a smile in which there was no humor. His intuition, if it were intuition, had not been at fault. A woman had just entered the dance hall. He was not likely to mistake that slim, graceful figure, nor those dark, steady eyes—that were spanning the room and resting upon him. He could not see the lurking mockery in those eyes, the distance was a little too great for that, but his imagination could depict it readily enough. Nor did it require much imagination! It was the Woman in Black. He glanced at Red Vallon. Red Vallon's back was turned to the door, and he had quite evidently not observed her.

The beer-stained attendant hurried to the table.

"What'll you have, Red?" inquired Billy Kane pleasantly.

Red Vallon waved the man away.

"Nix!" he said in a lowered voice. "I got to beat it—I got to meet Birdie Rose. There's something doing."

Billy Kane, even as he watched that trim figure make its way to a table near the wall on a line with his own, leaned abruptly, eagerly forward, toward Red Vallon. He felt his pulse throb and quicken. Luck seemed to be breaking wide open at last. If, coupled with his own clue, Red Vallon and Birdie Rose had unearthed another, this infernal masquerade that threatened his life at every turn was as good as ended.

"What is it?" he demanded sharply. "Have you spotted the stones?"

Red Vallon shook his head.

"Not them stones," he said a little uneasily. "Some others. I got orders."

Billy Kane's face hardened.

"Orders!" he echoed shortly. "Didn't I tell you last night that everything else was piker stuff? A half million in rubies, that's what we're after—to the limit! Understand? To the limit! Orders! Who gave you any orders except to stick to the game?"

"You know," said Red Vallon, and pushed a sheet of paper across the table. "Tear it up when you're through. It's no good to me any more. I just wanted to show it to you, so's you'd know I wasn't side-stepping on my own."

Billy Kane did not tear it up. His face, still set hard, showed no other signs of emotion, as his eyes studied the paper, but inwardly there came a sort of numbed dismay. It was a code message.

It meant nothing to him in one sense, in another it meant a very great deal. He was *supposed* to know what this jumble of letters signified. Red Vallon expected him to know. To arouse Red Vallon's suspicion for an instant was simply and literally equivalent to bringing down the underworld upon him—and the underworld would be as gentle and merciful as a pack of starving wolves! The jumble of letters seemed to possess a diabolical leer all their own, as he stared at them.

zidu6vesfuu6fwefwjf8dfsuofnIlohjtopdteop8nbje3ofueobt8v
piutsb7mmpez5bepun4psgnb9esfutnbf4wbiopjubIInspgoj3fiuf
m4p2ntjho6jzbImbuo5bm2qpou3fhnf4iuuih7jopuoff7xufcu5ih
j3feobf4ojold6pmd3peobu6sfwjeopjd9jqtv2tpuf4np3tfopf4tm
3fov3sf4iufmp2npui5usb3fe4obflb3nn5jiih2vdpdqv.

Was it a code that, with the key in one's possession, one could read at a glance? He did not know. Was it a code that required elaborate and painstaking effort to decipher? He did not know. Did Red Vallon, sitting there across the table watching him, expect him to give instant indication that the code message was plain and intelligible to him? He did not know. There was only one course to take—the middle course. He laid the paper on the table, and laid his clenched fist over the paper, as he leaned farther over, truculently, toward Red Vallon.

"I tell you again that everything else is piker stuff," he said angrily. "Do you get me? What have you done, you and Birdie, and the rest? Have you got anywhere to-day? Do you know where that secretary guy, Billy Kane, is? Do you know where those rubies are?"

"No," said Red Vallon hurriedly, "we haven't turned anything up yet, but——"

"But you're going to—by nosing around after something else!" snapped Billy Kane. "Do you think I'm going to see the biggest thing that was ever pulled slip through my fingers? If you do, you've got another think coming! Things have changed since I've been away—eh? How long since there's been any monkeying with what I dope out?"

"Don't get sore, Bundy," said Red Vallon appeasingly. "It's nothing like that. You know how it was. Karlin's arrest last night queered everything. That cursed snitch with the mask on put everything on the rough. There wasn't any meeting. You know who sent that code there; well, *he* didn't know about the other job, or that he was butting in on you. Tumble? There ain't nothing to be sore about, Bundy. Say, me and Birdie ain't going to be more'n an hour or two doing this trick, anyhow. Someone of the Mole's gang must have leaked; or maybe one of our boys piped him off. I dunno. But we got him cold this trip. He's a slick one all right, and he's been getting away with the goods quite a lot lately, and giving us the laugh. You know all about that. Well, this is where he doesn't laugh—see? He's pulling a nice one to-night. Got it all fixed up to make it look like somebody else did it. Sure! Well, we're not kicking at that—so long as *we* get the loot. Sure! We'll let him pull it, all right, all right, believe me!"

Billy Kane appeared to be unmoved. He studied the gangster coldly.

"And how does it happen that you and Birdie, out of all the rest, are picked for this?"

Red Vallon indulged in an ugly grin.

"'Cause we know the Mole down to the ground," he said; "but principally because the Mole knows *us*! There won't be any fooling when we spring a show-down, he's wise to that, and he'll come across. And, besides, 'tain't only Birdie and me, I'm taking some of my own gang along as well."

Billy Kane scowled. It probably mattered very little indeed that Red Vallon's efforts were to be sidetracked for the next few hours, and should he, Billy Kane, during that time, be successful, it mattered not at all; but his play for the moment was to preserve his rôle in Red Vallon's eyes, to keep away from anything intimate concerning the purport of this cipher message that still lay beneath his clenched hand, and that might so easily betray his ignorance, and above all now to get rid of Red Vallon before any such awkward and dangerous *impasse* could arise. He shrugged his shoulders, but his voice was still sullen as he spoke.

"Well, go to it!" he growled. "Go and pick up your chicken feed! But you get this into your nut, Red, and let it soak there. After this"—he leaned far over the table, his face thrust almost into Red Vallon's—"you stay with the game every minute, or quit! It's the limit, or quit! There's just one thing that counts—those rubies, or the man who pinched them. If we get the man, he'll cough—red—the stones, or blood. Do you think I'm going to let anything queer me on my share of half a million? You don't seem to get what I mean when I say the limit. Look out I don't give you an object lesson!"

Red Vallon licked his lips, and drew back a little. There was something in Red Vallon's eyes that was not often there—fear.

"It's all right, Bundy," he said with nervous eagerness. "I'm with you. Sure, I am! This thing must have broke loose quick, and there wasn't no idea of crabbing anything you'd started. I got ten of the best of 'em combing out the 'fences' for you right now."

"All right," responded Billy Kane gruffly. "Make a report to me on that before morning."

"Where'll you be?" Red Vallon was apparently relieved, for his voice had recovered its buoyancy.

"At my place—some time," said Billy Kane curtly. "You can wait for me there." He smiled suddenly with grim facetiousness. "My shoulder's a lot better—enough so that maybe I can sit in for a hand myself to-night."

"I hope you do," said Red Vallon fervently. "You always had the knock-out punch, Bundy, and it'll seem like old times." He half rose from his chair; then, looking furtively about him, bent forward over the table. "There's something else, Bundy, before I go—that snitch last night at Jerry's, the man in the mask. He's played hell with the crowd. There's no telling what'll tumble down behind Karlin. And it don't look like he's just stumbled on that deal by *accident*. It don't look good, Bundy. We got to get him, and get him quick, before he pulls anything more. The word's out to bump him off."

Billy Kane nodded.

"Well, don't lose your nerve over it, Red," he said coolly. "If it was by accident, he won't do us any more damage, and we've only got to settle with him for what he's done, providing we can ever find him; if it wasn't accident he'll show his hand again—won't he?"

"Yes," said Red Vallon.

Billy Kane's smile was unpleasant.

"Well, you'll know what to do with him then, won't you?" he inquired softly.

The gangster's red-rimmed eyes narrowed to slits.

"Yes, I'll know!" said Red Vallon coarsely. He made an ugly motion toward his throat. "Well, so long, Bundy!"

Billy Kane nodded again by way of answer. He watched Red Vallon thread his way back among the tables, and pass out through the front door. With the gangster out of the way, he picked up the sheet of paper upon which the code message was written, studied it for a moment, then thrust it into his pocket—and his glance travelled to the table opposite to him and against the wall, where that slim little figure in black was seated. She appeared to be quite indifferent to his presence, and quite intent upon the consumption of a glass of milk and the sandwich on the plate before her.

Billy Kane smiled with grim comprehension. The frugality of the meal was not without its object. It was fairly obvious that she could dispose of what was before her in short order, and leave the place at an instant's notice without inviting undesirable attention to an unfinished meal—if she so desired! It was his move. She had followed Red Vallon in, but she had not followed Red Vallon out—she was waiting for him, Billy Kane. The seat she had chosen had been in plain view of Red Vallon, therefore she was evidently free from any fear of recognition on the part of the gangster, and, as a logical corollary, from probably anybody else in the room. That she gave no sign now therefore could mean but one thing. It was his move. If he cared to cross swords with her here, he was at liberty to do so; if he had reasons of his own for preferring a less public meeting, he had only to leave the place—and she would undoubtedly follow.

In one sense she was most solicitous of his welfare! She would do nothing to hamper or hinder him in protecting himself, as long as he continued to double-cross and render abortive the crimes of that inner circle of the underworld in which she believed him to be a leader; failing that, as she had already made it quite clear, she proposed, as near as he could solve the riddle, to expose some past crime of the Rat's to the police, and end his career via the death chair in Sing Sing. Also she had made her personal feelings toward him equally clear—she held for him a hatred that was as deep-seated as it was merciless and deadly.

He shrugged his shoulders. He, by proxy, stood in the shoes of one who, seemingly, had done her some irreparable wrong, and since she would dog him all night until she had had the interview that she evidently proposed to have, it might as well be here as anywhere. It mattered very little to him, as the Rat, that he should be observed by those in the room to get up from his table and walk over to hers. He was not being watched in the sense that anyone held surveillance over him, and, in any case, the conventions here in the heart of the underworld were of too elastic a character to have it cause even comment; and, besides, in a few hours from now, if luck

were with him, he would be through with all this, done with this miserable rôle of super-crook, which, though it brought a new and greater peril at every move he made, was the one thing that, for the present, he was dependent upon for his life.

He rose, crossed the room nonchalantly, and dropped as nonchalantly into the chair at the end of her table, his back to the door.

She greeted him with a smile—but it was a smile of the lips only. The dark eyes, under the long lashes, studied him in a cold, uncompromising stare; and there was mockery in their depths, but deeper than the mockery there was contempt and disdain.

A cigarette, pulled lazily from his pocket and lighted, preserved his appearance of unconcern. In spite of himself, in spite of the fact that that contemptuous stare was his only through a damnable and abhorrent proxy, he felt suddenly ill at ease. He had never seen her as closely as this before. He had only seen her twice before—once in the dark; and once with the width of the Rat's den separating them. He had been conscious then that she was attractive, beautiful, with her clustering masses of brown hair, and the dainty poise of her head, and the pure whiteness of her full throat; but he was conscious now that beyond the mere beauty of features lay steadfastness and strength, that in the sweetness of the face there was, too, a wistfulness, do what she would to hide it, and that there was strain there, and weariness. And he was suddenly conscious, too, that he disliked the rôle of the Rat more than he had ever disliked it, and that the loathing in those eyes, which never left his face, was responsible for this added distaste of the fact that nature had, through some cursed and perverted sense of humor or malevolence, seen fit to make him the counterpart of a wanton rogue, and, worse still, seen fit to force upon him the enactment of that rôle.

He could not tell her that he was not the Rat, could he?—that he was Billy Kane! Would the loathing in those eyes have grown the less at that? Billy Kane—the thief, the Judas assassin, whose name was a byword throughout the length and breadth of the land at that moment, whose name was a synonym for everything that was vile and hideous and depraved! He was the Rat—until to-night was over! After that—well, after that, who knew? Now, he was the Rat, and he must play the Rat's part.

She broke the silence, her voice cool and even:

"I left it entirely to you as to whether you would come over to this table here or not."

"I quite understood!" Billy Kane forced a sarcastic smile. "You are almost too considerate!"

"Am I?" she said. Her eyes flashed suddenly. "Well, perhaps you are right! I have thought sometimes that even the chance I give you is more than you deserve. I feel so strongly about it, in fact, that the only thing which prevents me from putting an end to it—and you—is that by using you to defeat the ends of your own criminal associates a great deal of good is being done. They will trap you sometime, of course, and, knowing them, you know what will happen, and I am satisfied then that, as an alternative, you would prefer Sing Sing and the chair; but you are clever—that is why you grasp at the chance I give you. You are extremely clever—and you believe you can continue to outwit them indefinitely. I don't think you can, though I admit your cleverness, cunning and craft."

"You flatter me!" said Billy Kane ironically.

"No," she said, her voice suddenly lowered, passionate, tense; "I hate you."

"You told me that last night." Billy Kane indolently blew a ring of cigarette smoke ceilingwards. "I am beginning to believe you. Did you follow Red Vallon in here to tell me the same thing again?"

She did not answer for a moment.

"Sometimes you make me lose my faith in God," she said, in a slow, restrained way. "It is hard to believe that a God, a just God, could have created such men as you."

Billy Kane removed his cigarette from his lips, and flicked the ash away with a tap of his forefinger. He felt the color mount and tinge his cheeks. There was something, not alone in her words, but in her tone, that struck at him and *hurt*. The brown eyes, deep, full of implacable condemnation, burned into his. What was it that the Rat had done to her, or hers? He turned slightly away. An anger, smoldering in his soul, burst into flame. He was the Rat by proxy—and the proxy was damnable. He could not tell her he was not the Rat. He could not tell her he was—Billy Kane. He must play on with his detestable rôle! He must play the Rat. What answer would the Rat have made to her?

"Cut that out!" rasped Billy Kane.

"Yes," she said quietly, "I spoke impulsively. There are only two things in life that affect you—your own safety, and to be quite sure that you get all of your share out of your crimes, and, if

possible, somebody else's share as well. But the latter consideration is at an end now, isn't it, Bundy? I think I have taken care of that. It's just a question of whether you can save yourself or not with those clever wits of yours. Well"—she shrugged her shoulders suddenly—"you did very well last night. His life would not be worth very much if the underworld should ever lay hands on the man in the mask. Would it, Bundy?"

He did not answer her.

"Yes, you did very well, indeed," she went on calmly. "You will meet somewhere else, of course, as soon as you can find a suitable place, but you will hold no more of your secret council meetings at Jerry's for some time to come."

Billy Kane's face was impassive now. He was apparently intent only on the thin blue spiral of smoke that curled upward from the tip of his cigarette. So those meetings of that cursed directorate of crime had been held at Jerry's, had they? He had not known that.

"Suppose," suggested Billy Kane, curtly, "that we come to the point. What is it that you want to-night?"

"I am coming to the point," she answered levelly. "Owing to the events of last night your organization is in confusion, some of the more faint-hearted of your partners have temporarily even taken to their heels; but, even so, the organization's activities can hardly come to an abrupt standstill. You will perhaps remember a somewhat similar occasion once before? There are perhaps certain matters that are imperative, that cannot wait. Is it not so, Bundy? And in such an emergency it is left to—shall we call him the organization's secretary?—to keep things going. Personal touch is lost with one another, but there is still a way. I know, it does not matter how, that Red Vallon received a written order a little while ago. I followed Red Vallon here. I *think* he gave that order to you."

Billy Kane looked at her for a moment, a quizzical, whimsical expression creeping into his face. She was in deadly earnest, he knew that well. And yet there was a certain sense of humor here too—a grim humor with something of the sardonic in it, and nothing of mirth. Red Vallon's code order was quite as meaningless to him as it would be to her!

"Sure!" said Billy Kane, alias the Rat—and chuckled. "Sure, he gave it to me! You don't think I'd hold anything out on *you*, do you? Sure, he gave it to me!" He tossed the paper across the table toward her. "Help yourself! All you've got to do is ask for anything *I've* got, and it's yours. You're as welcome as the sunshine to it."

She studied it for an instant calmly. Billy Kane, watching her narrowly, frowned slightly in a puzzled way. She appeared to be neither agitated nor confused. She raised her eyes to his, a glint half of mockery, half of menace, in their brown depths.

"Did you think I did not know it was in cipher?" she inquired coldly. "You would hardly have been so obliging otherwise, would you? It is always in cipher under these circumstances, isn't it? Well, what is the translation?"

"Red Vallon didn't tell me," said Billy Kane complacently.

"Quite probably not!" she countered sharply. "It was hardly necessary, was it? But since you have decoded it yourself?"

Billy Kane shrugged his shoulders.

"I've been away so long," he said, "that I've forgotten the key."

"Really!" She was smiling at him in derision now. "In other words, you refuse to tell me what it is."

"Don't you think you expect a little too much from me?" He forced a sudden roughness into his tones. "I haven't decoded it yet, as a matter of fact; but if I had, do you think I'm looking for trouble—to give you the chance to force me into another mess?"

She shook her head in a sort of mocking tolerance.

"Does it really matter, Bundy?" she asked softly. "You are not as bright this evening as usual. I know that some crime is planned and set forth here on this paper. It really makes no vital difference to me to know beforehand specifically just what that crime is, for if it succeeds I shall know about it, and, in that case, I shall equally know that you did not prevent it. I think you quite understand what that means, don't you, Bundy? However"—she smiled again, as she opened her purse and took out a pencil—"let us put it down to a woman's insatiable curiosity, if you like, and decode it together."

Decode it! The twisted smile that came to his lips was genuine enough. He couldn't decode it. He had only one card to play—a flat and unequivocal refusal.

"Nothing doing!" he snarled.

"Oh, yes, I think there is," she said softly again.

He stared at her. Her pencil was flying across the paper. Who was this woman? She knew the key! Was there anything that she did not know? He watched her in a stunned way, his mind in confusion. And then he leaned forward to observe her work more closely. Beneath the original cipher she had written this:

ziduve sfuufw efwjfdfs uofnohjtopd teopnbje ofu eobtvpui
tsbmmpe zbepu npsg nbesfutnb fwbi opjubnspgoj fiu fmpn
tj hojzmb b uobmq pu ufh nfiu uihjopu offxufc uihjf eob
fojo lpmdp eob usfwje opjdtvtv pu fnpt fop ftmf ovs fiu
fmpn pu iusbf eob flbn nji ihvdp qv.

"It is so simple, Bundy," she murmured caustically. "The numerals to designate the number of letters in the words, the transposition of 'a' for 'b', and so on, and the words spelled backwards. It is so simple, Bundy, that it is strange you should have forgotten—and forgotten that there are other secrets I have found in that den of yours, apart from that very convenient and ingenious door!"

She was working as she spoke, paying no attention to him. He made no reply, only watched her as she set down a second series of letters:

yhctud rettev deviecer tnemngisnoc sdnomaid net dnasuoh
srallod yadot morf madretsma evah noitamrofni eht elom
si gniyal a tnalp ot teg meht thginot neewteb thgie dna enin
kcolco dna trevid noicipsus ot emos eno esle nur eht elom
ot htrae dna ekam mih hguoc pu.

A moment more, and she had written out the message in plain English:

Dutchy Vetter received consignment diamonds ten thousand dollars to-day from Amsterdam. Have information the Mole is laying a plant to get them to-night between eight and nine o'clock, and divert suspicion to some one else. Run the Mole to earth and make him cough up.

She was studying the paper in her hand. Billy Kane lighted another cigarette. He was still watching her, but it was in a detached sort of way. Between eight and nine o'clock! Peters was rarely able to leave the Ellsworth home on his evenings off until well after eight o'clock; Peters, therefore, would not reach his flat much before nine, and certainly was not likely to leave there again immediately.

Billy Kane's mind was working in quick, and seemingly unrelated snatches of thought. There was time enough to see this Vetter game through without interfering with that interview he meant to hold with Peters.... It was strange that it should be Vetter ... Whitie Jack had spoken of Vetter ... Savnak, the violin player, and Vetter ... Whitie Jack said that Savnak and Vetter spent most of their evenings together at Vetter's playing pinochle and the violin.... Savnak would likely be there then between eight and nine.... Upon whom was it that the so-called Mole intended to point suspicion?... Here was the moral obligation again.... He had fought that out last night.... She, this woman here, was not the driving force.... She only represented disaster from an entirely different source if he failed.... If he stood aside with the foreknowledge of crime in his possession he was as guilty as this Mole.... Perhaps he had been trying to trick his own conscience in not pressing Red Vallon for explanations.... Perhaps, in a measure, he had allowed the argument that he might invite Red Vallon's suspicions to act as an excuse for evading the responsibility that this foreknowledge of crime entailed.... Well, that responsibility was his now, thanks to her.... He had no choice.... It was likely to be the man in the mask again, and—

She pushed the paper toward him.

"Perhaps you would like to destroy this—for safety's sake," she observed complacently.

He took the paper mechanically, and mechanically tore it up.

"I do not know the Mole personally"—she was speaking almost more to herself than to him, as though feeling her way cautiously along a tortuous mental path—"I only know him as an exceedingly clever scoundrel, and as the head of a small, but very select, band of criminals. He is a sort of competitor of yours, I believe, and more than once has had the temerity to act as a thorn in the side of your own rapacious and diabolical crime trust. But I do know that this Vetter is an

honest old man. It would be too bad"—her voice, still low, was suddenly vibrant with a significance that there was no mistaking—"if Vetter should lose his diamonds, wouldn't it, Bundy?"

The spiral of cigarette smoke again occupied Billy Kane. It was quite true that his mind was already made up; but for the moment he was the Rat, and the Rat would not be likely to accede to her suggestion with any overwhelming degree of complacency.

"You are a little inconsistent, aren't you?" he inquired sarcastically. "If you are so anxious to prevent this crime, why don't you warn the police?"

"You can put down my inconsistency to the frailty of my sex again, if you like," she answered quickly. "But you know quite well why. And, besides, one Bundy Morgan, having more at stake than the police, is more likely to accomplish the task successfully. Yes—Bundy?"

"But this isn't my hunt!" he protested, with a snarl. "I can't stop all the crimes in the world! This isn't *my* crowd! I'm not responsible for the Mole. I don't know *his* plans. How can I put the crimp in them? The game is to let the Mole go ahead, isn't it, and then Red Vallon is to grab the chestnuts out of the Mole's pocket? Well, that's all right! But suppose I butt in, and, knowing nothing about the Mole's plans, fall down, and he gets away with the goods, and is too sharp for Red Vallon so that I can't even get the loot away from Red—am I responsible?"

"I'm not unreasonable," she said—and smiled. "There is a good deal of truth in what you say. But there is a way to provide against both contingencies."

The snarl was still in his voice.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Steal the diamonds yourself before the Mole gets to work," she proposed calmly.

Billy Kane's gasp was wholly genuine.

"What?" he ejaculated.

"You've plenty of time," she said sweetly. "Vetter's isn't far from here, and it's not much more than half past seven now. The diamonds can be returned to Vetter tomorrow. After having had them stolen once, I think Vetter could be trusted to put them somewhere where neither the Mole nor anyone else would be likely to succeed a second time."

"But I don't know where the diamonds are now!" His voice was helpless in spite of himself.

She lifted her shoulders.

"Neither do I," she said imperturbably.

"Well, you've got your nerve!" he burst out—and it was Billy Kane, not the Rat, who spoke.

The interview, as far as she was concerned, was evidently at an end. She had resumed her frugal meal, and was picking daintily at the sandwich on her plate. Her eyebrows arched.

"I hope you've got yours," she murmured.

He stood up. He could have laughed ironically, and likewise he could have sworn. She was distractingly pretty, as she sat there quite the mistress of herself; but her profound and utter disregard as to how the perilous project might result for him personally brought suddenly a vicious sweep of anger upon him—and abruptly, without a word, he swung from the table, and made his way toward the door. But the few steps cleared his brain a little, brought things into sharper focus. After all, he had forgotten! To her, he was the Rat. And the Rat—he did not question it—merited little of either mercy or consideration at her hands. At the door he looked back. She nodded to him pleasantly, and smiled—not in the manner of one who might very well be sending another to his death!

"Well, I'll be damned!" muttered Billy Kane, and, opening the door, stepped out to the street.

XIV—THE ROBBERY

It was not far to Vetter's place, but—Billy Kane looked at his watch under a street lamp—it was later than she had said. It was ten minutes of eight. He knew where Vetter's was. That point presented no difficulties; he could hardly have spent the months he had amongst the queer, heterogeneous lives of the East Side without knowing at least that much about so outstanding a

character as the old Holland diamond merchant—but that was quite another matter from knowing where the old Hollander domiciled his diamonds!

Billy Kane frowned, as he went along. Well, was it necessary to steal the diamonds? That task, on the face of it, was so almost practically impossible as to render it bizarre. He had nothing to work on, no information, just the cool suggestion that he should steal the diamonds *first*; and, under ordinary circumstances, he might well be filled with dismay at the prospect of failure in view of the threat which she held over his head, though that side of it need not, and did not, concern him to-night. In a few hours from now he no longer expected to be the Rat; in a few hours Peters would have had his choice between losing his life and telling the truth, and under those conditions there was very little room for doubt but that Peters would have told—the truth. If, however, he could meanwhile save the old Hollander from loss, he, Billy Kane, was quite ready to go to almost any length to do so.

He went on at a quick pace, traversing block after block. He smiled ironically to himself, as he finally turned a corner, and with more caution now, approached a low frame building that was bordered by a dark and narrow lane. Yes, it was bizarre enough! He could not very well inform the police himself! The Rat—and particularly Billy Kane—was not at the moment on speaking terms with the police! But was it necessary to steal the diamonds?

Her idea, of course, was that then they would be absolutely safe from any attempt, or, perhaps what she feared most, physical coercion on the part of the Mole—even if Vetter were given a warning.

But surely Vetter could take care of himself if he were warned! He, Billy Kane, certainly preferred that method! But, even that, as an alternative, was not quite so simple as it appeared. He was still the Rat. He did not know the plan this so-called Mole had evolved, and, more vital still, he did not know how closely Red Vallon was, in turn, watching the Mole. It was eight o'clock now, and any or all of them might already be here. If he, Billy Kane, were discovered there would never be that little interview with Peters! The corollary was self-evident. Even for the purpose of warning the man, to reach Vetter inside this house here, that he was just passing, demanded the same degree of caution and secrecy on his part as though he entered for the purpose of stealing the stones himself. Also the little shop that made the front of the building was closed and dark. Vetter's living quarters, he had heard, which was one of the eccentricities that had made the man a talked-of character on the East Side, consisted of no more than a single room, serving for every purpose, at the rear of the shop itself. He did not dare take the risk of inviting attention by rapping and bringing the old Hollander to the door.

He turned, and retracing his steps, sauntered nonchalantly along, passed by the house again—and slipped into the lane. Circumstances, as he found them, alone could govern his actions.

Billy Kane took stock now of the surroundings. The frame building was an old affair, and the floors therefore would be outrageously creaky. Billy Kane scowled. The prospect of creaky floors and protesting boards was not a pleasant one. And then the scowl vanished, and a smile flickered across his lips. From somewhere at the back of the house there came suddenly the throbbing notes of a violin. The smile broadened. That was Savnak, doubtless, and, for the moment at least, it was the violin, rather than pinochle, that was engaging the two men. Personally, under the circumstances, he, Billy Kane, was very much in favor of the violin. The violin would help a good deal—if it became a question of creaky floors!

He moved silently forward now farther into the lane, keeping close to the wall in the darker shadows of the house. The old Hollander and his crony were obviously in the back room. He glanced sharply up and down the length of the building. He could see nothing. It was intensely dark. The wall of the house was blank. There were no windows opening on the lane.

An expression, grimly quizzical, settled on his face. It was a queer setting for a robbery, this unpretentious, even tumble-down, little shop, with its back-room living quarters! But the unpretentiousness of the old Hollander's surroundings in no way argued poverty! He had known of Vetter by reputation, quite apart even from any connection with the East Side. The man had a clientele among the best in the city. He was an authority on diamonds. He dealt only in the choicest stones, and he was absolutely reliable and honest. The world of fashion had made a path to Vetter's door, not he to theirs. In this ten-thousand-dollar consignment, for instance, there would probably not be more than fifty or sixty stones, not enough to make a small handful, but not one of them, probably, would be worth less than a hundred dollars, and most of them would be worth a great deal more.

Billy Kane reached the end of the building, and found that a board fence, some seven or eight feet high, continued on down the lane, obviously enclosing the back yard of the place. The violin

throbbled on. The notes came clear and sweet, entirely unmuffled now, as though from an open window. He stood there for a moment listening. The playing was exquisite. It was some plaintive, haunting melody given life by a master touch. He remembered Whitie Jack's description of the expatriated musician. Without question Savnak could "fiddle"; the man, in spite of having come a moral cropper, was, if he, Billy Kane, were any judge, little short of a genius.

Glancing sharply about him once more, Billy Kane, with a lithe spring, caught the top of the fence, and drew himself cautiously up until he could peer over. He hung there motionless for a moment. A few yards away from him, in a slightly diagonal direction, and between himself and the back door, was the window of the rear room; and, as he had suspected, the window was open. He could see inside; that is, in a restricted sense. A man, it was Savnak of course, chin on his violin, standing, was swaying gently to and fro on his feet to the tempo of the music, his back to the window; and at the table, side face to the window, but with his back toward Billy Kane, Vetter, the old Hollander, white-haired, sat rapt in attention, staring at the violinist.

Billy Kane drew himself further up, and straddled the fence. The position of the two men rendered him safe from observation. The notes of the violin, in a tremolo, died softly away. The old Hollander dug his knuckles across his eyes; and his words, spoken in perfect English, evidently the language common to the two men of diverse nationalities, reached Billy Kane distinctly:

"You are wonderful, my old friend Savnak. It is divine. My friend, you are wonderful."

The violinist shrugged his shoulders.

"Once," he said, "I could really play. Yes, I tell you, you who will believe me, that I could sway the people, that I could do with them as I would, that I——" He stopped abruptly, and shrugged his shoulders again. "But what is the use of memories? Memories! They are bad! They leave a bad taste! Let us forget them! You were to show me the great purchase that arrived to-day."

"These!" The old Hollander took from his pocket what looked like a soft, pliable, chamois-skin pocketbook, which he opened and laid on the table, disclosing a cluster of gems that, nesting on a snowy bed of wadding, sparkled and scintillated as the rays of the gas jet above the table fell upon them; and then, impulsively closing the pocketbook again, he pushed it a little away from him. "They can wait!" he said. "By and by, we will look at them one by one. But they do not feed the soul, my Savnak, like your music. Play some more. They are not worth one of your notes."

"Are they not?" Savnak's voice seemed tinged with bitterness. "The soul may be well fed, Vetter, but that does not keep one often enough from tightening the belt! I think I would be fortunate to make the exchange—my gift, such as it is, for your diamonds."

"You do not mean what you say!" the old Hollander replied, shaking his head reprovingly. "I know better! But I do not like to hear you talk like that. Things are not so bad with you now. You are moody. Play some more, my friend."

"As you will!" Again Savnak shrugged his shoulders. He nestled his chin on the violin. "It will be something gay, then, and lively—eh, Vetter?—to chase the blue devils away."

The notes of the violin rose again. Billy Kane began to lower himself from the fence into the backyard. His mind was made up now. Since there were two of them there, a warning surely was all that was necessary. The window was not much more than shoulder high from the ground, and he had, then, only to cross the yard and call to Vetter through the window. His appearance there would no doubt startle and alarm the old Hollander half out of his wits, but that was exactly what would cause the man to guard his diamonds all the more zealously for the rest of the night. Once warned, the two men in there between them ought certainly to be able to take care of themselves and that chamois pocketbook.

Billy Kane dropped softly to the ground, straightened up, took a step forward—and stopped as though rooted to the spot. There had come a cry from Vetter. The violin broke off with a jerky, high-pitched, screaming note. Then silence. Billy Kane raised himself on tiptoes. He could just see in through the window; no more. It seemed like some picture flashed on a cinema screen, quick, instantaneous. A third man, hat drawn far over his face, was standing by the table, covering Vetter and Savnak with a revolver. The man snatched up the chamois pocketbook, reached above his head, turned out the gas—and the room and window were in blackness.

It had happened with the suddenness and swiftness of a lightning flash, so quick that the brain stumbled a little in a dazed way in an effort to grasp its significance. And then Billy Kane wrenched his automatic from his pocket. The thief, when or in whatever way he had got into the house, must necessarily make his escape either by the front door, or by the back door and through the yard here. If it were the latter, which seemed the more likely, he, Billy Kane, had the man at his mercy; if it were the former, the man would probably reach the street, in any case,

before he, Billy Kane, could get over the fence and rush down the lane.

Billy Kane was moving swiftly in the direction of the back door. He had to choose one way or the other. He could not attempt to guard both exits at the same time! If the man—

Vetter's voice rose in a furious cry from the room:

"It is by the front, Savnak, he has gone! Quick! I hear him going out! Quick! The street!"

"Yes! Quick! The street!" Savnak, like a parrot, in a shrill, hysterical voice, was echoing the other's words. "Quick! Chase him! And shout for the police!" A chair fell over. The two men were evidently floundering their way to the door. "Curse him for turning out the light!"

Billy Kane whirled, and dashed for the fence. As he straddled the top, he saw a figure, thrown into relief on the lighted street, speed past the head of the lane—and then, with a wry smile at a sudden realization of his own impotence, he dropped to the lane, and, instead of running now, made his way slowly and cautiously forward, hugged close against the wall. If he ran out of the lane into the arms of Vetter and Savnak, besides hampering the pursuit by distracting their attention from the fugitive, he invited the decidedly awkward and very natural suspicion of being connected with the thief himself; and the police would be very apt to listen with their tongues in their cheeks to any explanation that the Rat might offer to account for his presence in the lane at that particular moment! And if there was any one thing that he wished to avoid to-night, it was a complication with the police that would inevitably interfere with his freedom of action during the next few hours.

Came a wild cry now from both Vetter and Savnak from the front of the house; and then the two men, yelling at the top of their voices, both hatless, Savnak, apparently unconscious in his excitement that he was brandishing his violin frantically in one hand and his bow in the other, tore madly down the street in pursuit of their quarry.

Billy Kane slipped out to the street. Doors of tenements and houses were beginning to open; heads were beginning to be thrust out through upper windows; the street was beginning to assume a state of pandemonium. A block down, the quarry, well in the lead of the old Hollander and the violinist, leaped suddenly into a waiting automobile, and vanished around the corner.

Billy Kane turned away. He felt a curiously chagrined resentment against this so-called Mole, that was quite apart from his angry resentment of the fact that the old Hollander had been victimized. He had expected something quite different from the Mole! Red Vallon—and she, too—had given the Mole a reputation for cleverness, craft and cunning; but, instead of having shown any cleverness, or even a shred of originality, the Mole, or his minion, had perpetrated nothing more than a bald, crude theft that any house-breaker, or broken-down old "lag" could have pulled off with equal lack of finesse! Well, anyway, for the moment so far as he was concerned, the affair was at an end, and he could only await developments. It all hinged on Red Vallon now—on Red Vallon, who proposed in turn to rob the robber—on Red Vallon, who, later on, would keep an appointment with him, Billy Kane, in the Rat's den!

As he turned a corner, Billy Kane consulted his watch. It was still early, just a trifle after eight—too early for that interview with Peters yet. He might as well go back to Two-finger Tasker's then. It was scarcely likely that *she* was still there, but, if she were, so much the better! She could hardly hold him responsible for failure; and, in any case, she would realize that there was still the chance of recovering the stones by, in turn again, outwitting Red Vallon, if the gangster had been successful. If she were not there, Two-finger Tasker's was as good a place as any in which to put in the time.

He reached the dance hall, and found, as he had half expected, that she had already gone. He sat down at a table, ordered something from the waiter, and, apparently absorbed in the dancers, who had now begun to gather, he made a sort of grimly-reassuring inventory of his equipment for the night's work that still lay ahead of him—his mask, his automatic, Whitie Jack's skeleton keys, were in his pockets. His lips twisted in a curious smile. The Mole, Vetter, the diamonds, the old violinist—all these seemed suddenly extraneous, incidents thrust upon him, dragged irrelevantly into his existence. They sank into inconsequential obtrusions in the face of the stake for which he was now about to play: his freedom, a clean name again, the end of this devil's tormenting masquerade, his life or, perhaps, another man's life—Peters'?

Half an hour passed. Once more he looked at his watch. A few minutes later he consulted it again. And then at a quarter to nine he rose from the table, and left Two-finger Tasker's resort.

XV—THE ALIBI

Twenty minutes later, having satisfied himself that the immediate neighborhood was free of passers-by for the moment, and that he had not been observed, he tried the street door of the tenement that had been the subject of Whitie Jack's earlier investigations. The door was unlocked, and he stepped silently into the vestibule, and closed the door softly behind him.

He stood for a moment listening, and taking critical note of his surroundings. A single incandescent burning here in the lower hall supplied ample illumination. The stairs were directly in front of him, and on the right of the hallway. There was a closed door, also on the right and just at the foot of the stairs, and from behind this there came the murmur of voices. There was no other sound.

He moved quietly forward, mounted the stairs, gained the landing, and, with more caution now, turned back along the hall, making for the door on the right—Peters' door, according to Whitie Jack—that, if in the same relative location as the one below, would be at the foot of the next flight of stairs. A faint light came up through the stair well, but the end of the hall itself beyond the second flight of stairs was in blackness. He nodded grimly in satisfaction. He would not need any light to find Peters' door!

His lips pressed hard together. He had reached the door now, and now he crouched against it, his ear to the panel. He listened intently. A sudden doubt came and tormented him and obsessed him. What, if by any chance Peters had someone with him! A bead of moisture oozed out on his forehead, and he brushed it hurriedly away. He was not so callous now! Behind that door lay, literally, life and death; behind that door, if it proved necessary, he meant to take a man's life, a miserable life, it was true, a murderer's life, a life that had no claim to mercy, but still a man's life. Had he ever laid claim to being callous? But that did not mean that his resolution was being undermined. The issue to-night was clearly defined, ultimate, final, and he had accepted that issue, and he would see it through. His lips relaxed a little in a smile of self-mockery. Well, suppose Peters were *not* alone he, Billy Kane, had only to wait until the visitor conjured up by his doubts had gone.

He steadied himself with a mental effort. His nerves were getting a little too high strung. To begin with, there wasn't anybody in there with Peters. He would have heard voices if there had been, and he had heard none. He glanced around him now, but the act was wholly one of exaggerated caution. Here at the end of the hall he could see nothing. Opposite him was probably the door of the other apartment on this floor that Whitie Jack had said was unoccupied. There was no fear of interruption. He took his automatic from his pocket, tried the door cautiously, and finding it locked, knocked softly with his knuckles on the panel.

There was no response. He knocked again, a little louder, more insistently. There was still no response. Billy Kane was gnawing at his under lip now. Not only had Peters no visitor, but even Peters himself was not there! Out of the darkness it seemed as though a horde of mocking devils were suddenly jeering at him in unholy glee. He had somehow been very sure that everything to-night would go as he had planned, and, instead, there had been nothing so far but stark futility.

But the night was not ended yet! He thrust the automatic abruptly back into his pocket. There was still time for Peters to come. It was only a little after nine. And Peters would have a visitor after all—a visitor waiting there inside that room for him!

Billy Kane drew Whitie Jack's bunch of skeleton keys from his pocket, and, crouching now low down in front of the door, inserted one of the keys in the lock. It would not work. He tried another with the same result. He was not an adept at lock-picking as yet! He grinned without mirth at the mental reservation—and suddenly drew back from the door, retreating into the deeper blackness at the end of the hall. Here was Peters now, and Peters would have much less trouble in opening the door!

Footsteps were ascending the stairs. A figure, in the murky light from the stair well, gained the landing, and came forward along the hall. Billy Kane's sudden smile held little of humor. It was not Peters. It was Whitie Jack's tenant of the third floor, Savnak, the old violin player, hugging his violin case under his arm, and as he came into the shadows, feeling out with his other hand for the banisters of the second flight of stairs. Fifteen feet away, flattened against the wall, himself secure from observation, in the darkness, Billy Kane, in a sort of grim philosophical resignation, watched what was now little more than a shadowy outline, as the other went on up the stairs to the third floor.

A door above slammed shut. Billy Kane returned to Peters' door. Again he tried a key, and still another, until, with a low-breathed ejaculation of satisfaction, he finally unlocked the door. He exchanged the keys for his automatic once more; and once more his hand on the doorknob, he held tense and motionless, listening. From below there came again the sound of footsteps on the stairs. It was Peters at last, probably; but, if it was Peters, Peters was *not* alone. The footsteps of two men were on the stairs.

Futility again! The door was unlocked, but it availed him nothing at all now. He had meant to go in and wait for Peters, but it would be a fool play from any angle to go in there now if Peters had anybody with him. Nor was there time to lock the door again. He had returned the bunch of keys to his pocket, and it would take a moment to sort out the right one, and there was not that moment to spare. The footsteps were already on the landing. Billy Kane drew back once more silently and swiftly to the front of the hall. He was tight-lipped now. It seemed as though every turn of the luck had gone against him. Peters was certain to notice that the door was unlocked. What effect would that have on Peters? What would the man do, and—

Billy Kane was staring down the hall in a numbed, dazed way. Two men had come into the radius of light from the stair well, and were moving quickly along the hall in his direction. He brushed his hand across his eyes. That little horde of devils were at their jeers of unholy mirth again. Peters! There was no such man as Peters! Peters was a myth! The whole cursed night was a series of damnable hallucinations. This wasn't Peters—it was Red Vallon, and Birdie Rose.

Out of the darkness he watched them, his mind fogged. What were they doing here? Why had they become suddenly so quiet and stealthy as they went up that second flight of stairs—where Savnak had gone! Savnak—Vetter—the diamonds—Red Vallon! He remembered the tribute paid to the Mole's cleverness, a tribute that, in his estimation as an eyewitness to the theft, had come far from being borne out in practice. Was there something that he had not seen, something behind that bald, crude scene which he had witnessed? His brain was stumbling on, groping, striving for understanding. He remembered the code message—the Mole was to divert suspicion to someone else. Had the Mole in some way outwitted Red Vallon? Birdie Rose and Red Vallon obviously believed that the old violinist had the diamonds—there was no other possible explanation to account for their presence here hard on Savnak's trail. And if that were so, it would go hard with Savnak, very hard, indeed, when, believing Savnak was lying, Red Vallon failed to secure the stones. Red Vallon was not a man to trifle with; Red Vallon was perhaps the most dangerous and unscrupulous gangster in New York, and—

Billy Kane was creeping forward, and mounting the stairs step by step with infinite caution. They had disappeared now into Savnak's room, presumably.

He had no choice, had he? The man-handling they would give Savnak would be little short of murder. Murder! His lips tightened. There was to have been murder in that room below there—wasn't there? But that was different—one man was guilty, the other innocent. Much as it meant to him to settle with Peters, he had no choice but to let that go to-night now, if necessary—to let it go, if necessary, until to-morrow, or until he could formulate some other plan, for it was not likely that he could frustrate Red Vallon now, and still be left quietly to return to a reckoning with Peters.

His fingers closed in a sudden spasmodic clutch over the stock of his automatic. He had passed Peters' door, and left it unlocked, and Peters might come in the meantime. Well, it didn't matter now! His own luck was out! The night had done nothing but toss him hither and thither like a shuttlecock in mockery and sport. And at the last fate had played him this most scurvy trick of all. He could not stand aside and see an innocent man left to the mercy of a devil like Red Vallon, and so, instead of playing Billy Kane to Peters, he was playing the man in the mask to Red Vallon and Birdie Rose! And that jeering horde of imps out of the darkness were shrieking in his ears again!

He slid his mask over his face. He had reached the door over Peters' flat, which Whitie Jack had described as Savnak's. Red Vallon had failed to close it tightly behind him—perhaps unwilling to risk the chance of any additional sound. It was slightly ajar. A dull glow of light, as though from an inner room, seeped through the aperture. Came a sharp, startled exclamation, and then Red Vallon's voice, snarling viciously:

"Come on! Come across! And come—*quick!*"

Billy Kane pushed the door open inch by inch, and suddenly slipped into the room. He was quite safe, providing he made no noise that would betray his presence. Across from him, at an angle that kept him out of the line of light, was the open door of what was obviously the front room of the apartment. Savnak had evidently been flung violently down into a chair; Birdie Rose's

fingers were crooked, claw-like, within an inch of the violinist's throat; and Red Vallon, leaning on a table in front of the two, was leering at Savnak in ugly menace. Savnak was speaking, low and earnestly, but Billy Kane could not catch the man's words. Red Vallon interrupted the other with scant ceremony.

"Can that!" he snarled. "It don't go! That stagehand of yours ain't got the goods—you got 'em. We're wise to your game. We know you, Birdie and me, and you know we know it. How long you been cultivating the old Dutchman, and waiting for something worth while like to-night to break loose? Pinochle and a violin! Pretty nifty, that violin stunt! It helped a lot—we got in the same as that boob of yours did—while you was making enough noise fiddling to let an army in without being heard. Sure, you got a tricky nut on your shoulders, all right! It's too bad, though, you don't know enough not to stack up against a better crowd! And the guy turned out the gas to help him in his get-away, did he? Yes, he did—like hell! That's where he slipped you the sparklers, old bucko! Well, we've got your number, ain't we? We hung around after that to give you a chance to finish out the play. We're with you there! Nothing suits us better than to have the police chasing some guy they don't know, and that ain't got the white ones anyhow! Come on now, come across!"

Billy Kane, like a man bewildered, mentally stunned, stood there motionless. A singsong refrain repeated itself crazily over and over again in his brain: "Savnak was the Mole! Savnak was the Mole!" He lifted his hand and swept it across his eyes. Savnak's face in there in that room was working in a sort of livid fury. Yes, of course—Savnak was the Mole. It was quite clear now, quite plain—and the Mole was not lacking quite so much after all in craft and cunning! So Red Vallon had been in Vetter's, too, had he? There came a sudden, grim set to Billy Kane's lips. Well, at least, the diamonds were *here* now!

Savnak was speaking again.

"Who put you wise to this?" he demanded sullenly.

"I dunno!" said the gangster indifferently. "I got orders, that's all. Mabbe some of our crowd piped you off making your play with Dutchy during the last month, and figured two and two made twenty-three—for you; or mabbe one of your own bunch whispered out loud. I dunno! Are you coming across without getting hurt, or aren't you?"

Billy Kane was moving softly toward the inner door. Savnak had apparently regained his composure. He looked from one to another of his captors, and forced a smile.

"Look here," he said ingratiatingly, "we're all in this. Suppose we play fair. I'm willing to split."

"D'ye hear that, Birdie?" jeered Red Vallon, with a nasty laugh. "He wants a split! Well, give him one—mabbe it'll help him to get a move on! Twist his pipes a little more—that's the sort of split he won't argue over!"

Birdie Rose's two hands closed with a quick, ugly jerk on Savnak's throat. There was a gurgling cry.

"Wait!" Savnak choked out. "Wait! It's—it's all right, boys." He rubbed his throat, as Birdie Rose released him. "I know when I'm beaten." He shrugged his shoulders in a sort of philosophically fatalistic way, and, reaching into his inside coat pocket, threw Vetter's chamois pocketbook down on the table.

"That's the stuff!" grunted Red Vallon maliciously. "But seeing it's you, we'll just take a look at it to make sure you're *honest!*" He picked up the pocketbook, opened it, nodded and chuckled over the gleaming array of diamonds, and closed the pocketbook again. "Well, I guess that'll be all for to-night, *Mister Savnak*, and——" His words ended in a sudden gasp.

Billy Kane was standing in the doorway, his automatic covering the men.

"Don't move, please, any of you!" Billy Kane's voice, gruffly unrecognizable, was facetiously debonair.

Birdie Rose's face had gone a pasty white; Savnak, hunched in his chair, stared helplessly; Red Vallon, his jaw dropped, still holding the pocketbook, found his voice.

"The man in the mask!" he mumbled.

"I was a little late for the tombola myself at Vetter's to-night," said Billy Kane coolly. "I understand you were all there. I only got as far as the back yard when the gathering broke up, and I was a little disappointed because I had a hunch that I held the winning number. However, if you, there, with the pocketbook, whatever your name is, will just toss the prize over here, I'm willing to overlook any slight irregularity there might have been in the drawing."

Red Vallon did not answer.

The muzzle of Billy Kane's automatic lifted to a level with the gangster's eyes.

"Did you hear me?" The facetiousness was gone from Billy Kane now. His voice rasped suddenly. "*Toss it over!*"

With an oath, Red Vallon flung the pocketbook over the table.

Billy Kane caught it deftly with his left hand.

"Thank you!" said Billy Kane politely. He tucked the chamois case into his pocket, and reached out for the doorknob. "I think that is all—gentlemen," he said softly; "except to wish you—good-night!"

In a flash he had shut the door upon them, and, turning, was running across the outer room. But Red Vallon, too, was quick. Before Billy Kane reached the door leading into the hall, he heard the window of the front room flung up—and Red Vallon's voice:

"Quick, boys, come in! The man in the mask! Head him off! Jump for it! He's going downstairs!"

Billy Kane's jaws clamped hard, as he swung through the door to the head of the stairs. It was true! He remembered that Red Vallon had said he had some of his gang with him. He could hear them now. They were running into the lower hall; and, though he was taking the stairs three and four at a time, they would meet on the lower staircase, if he kept on. His escape was cut off. There was only one chance—Peters' door—it was unlocked—Peters' door, before Red Vallon above opened the door of Savnak's flat and saw him.

It had been a matter of seconds, no more; but seconds that had seemed of interminable duration. He was at the foot of the stairs now. Came the pound of approaching feet from below. Red Vallon, whether because he had not had time, or because he was wary of a trap, had not opened the door into the hall above yet. Billy Kane, cautious of any sound, slipped through the door into Peters' flat, half drew back in sudden dismay—then grimly closed the door behind him softly, and, working with desperate haste now, and still silently, took out his skeleton keys and locked it. He turned, then, with his automatic flung out in front of him—and faced toward the door that opened on his left. He knew it, of course! But it had been too late to turn back. He was doubly trapped! His lips, thinned, curved in a bitter smile. If there was any murder to be done here in this flat to-night, it was likely now to be his own—not Peters'! *There was a light in that room!* Peters must have come in while he, Billy Kane, was upstairs. He was between two fires. A cry, any alarm given by Peters, would bring Red Vallon and his blood-fanged pack bursting through that door behind him. Was Peters deaf? True, he, Billy Kane, had slipped as silently through the door as he could, and had locked it as silently as he could, but he must have made some noise!

Feet raced by in the hall, and went thumping up the stairs. It was strange that Peters had not heard him! It was stranger still that Peters did not hear the commotion now that Red Vallon's pack was making!

Billy Kane moved forward stealthily until he could see into the lighted room—and stood suddenly still. He felt the blood leave his face. He lifted his hand to his eyes in a queer, jerky, horrified motion; and then, with a low cry, he ran forward into the other room. The place was in confusion. It was a bedroom, and bureau drawers had been wrenched out and thrown around; every possible receptacle that might have concealed the smallest object had been ransacked and looted, and the contents strewn in wild disorder everywhere about—and on the floor a man lay sprawled, dead, murdered, a brutal wound in the side of his head from a blow that had apparently fractured the skull.

He knelt for a moment over the man. It was Peters. He rose, then, and stood there, fighting to rouse his brain from blunted torpor, to force it to resume its normal functions. Peters had been lying here dead, all the time that he, Billy Kane, had been waiting outside there in the hall! It must have taken quite a little while to have accomplished this murder and ransack the room. Peters, therefore, must have left the Ellsworth house earlier than usual, since the murderer, allowing for the length of time he would have required for his work, must have completed it and made his escape before he, Billy Kane, had arrived here at nine o'clock. It was very strange, horribly strange—to *find* Peters murdered! Who was it, who had done it? Who was it, other than himself, who could have had any motive? What did it mean? What was it that Peters had had here, that had been the object of such a frantic search? Billy Kane drew his breath in suddenly, sharply. What could it be save *one* thing! The Ellsworth rubies! That was it, wasn't it—*rubies!*

A sound from somewhere out in the hall brought surging back upon him a realization of his own imminent peril. There must be some way out, he must find a way. If he knew Red Vallon at all, he knew that he, Billy Kane, would never leave by the door! Well, a fire escape then, perhaps!

Quick now, every faculty alert, he ran noiselessly from room to room, and from window to

window. He returned a moment later to the hall door, his face a little harder set and strained. There was no escape by the windows. There was nothing, except an increasing sound of disturbance that seemed to be affecting all parts of the house. Nothing, save Red Vallon's voice just outside the door, talking, evidently, to some of his men:

"He *ain't* got out—and he ain't going to get out till we've searched every flat in the place! He's most likely on this floor, and Birdie and me'll tackle this door here first; but you go down there and tell those people below to shut up their row, and some of you look through their rooms. Beat it!"

Footsteps scurried away. The doorknob was tried. Billy Kane's lips were a thin line. There was no physical way of escape. Was there a way of wits? His wits against Red Vallon's! He stood there motionless, a queer, grim look creeping into his face, as the door now was shaken violently. And then, suddenly, he jerked his mask from his face, and thrust it into his pocket. Yes, there was a way, but a way that held a something of ghastly, abysmal irony in it. He could prove an alibi—he had a witness to it.

The door quivered, but held, under a crashing blow. Then Red Vallon's growling voice:

"Get out of the road, Birdie, and let me at it! I'll bust it in!"

And then Billy Kane spoke.

"Is that you, Red?" he demanded harshly.

There was a surprised gasp from the hall without, a second's tense silence, and then Red Vallon's voice again, heavy with perplexity and amazement:

"Who in hell are you?"

Billy Kane unlocked the door, flung it open, and stepped back. The hall had been lighted now, evidently to facilitate Red Vallon's search, and the light fell full upon Billy Kane through the doorway.

"The Rat!" The gangster's little red-rimmed eyes blinked helplessly—then suddenly narrowed. "What are you doing here?"

"You fool!" snarled Billy Kane angrily. "I thought I recognized your voice! You gave me a scare! What are you doing here? What's all this cursed noise about?"

"What's it about?" repeated Red Vallon mechanically. He spoke automatically, as though through force of habit at the Rat's command. "The Mole lives upstairs. He got those diamonds from Vetter; then Birdie and me took 'em from him, and not five minutes ago that blasted man in the mask turned the trick on us, and"—his voice changed with a jerk, and became suddenly truculent—"it's *damned* funny where he got to!"

"Come in here, both of you!" ordered Billy Kane peremptorily. "Come in here, and shut that door! Now"—as they obeyed him—"that's the story, is it, Red? Well, listen to mine!" His voice grew raucous, menacing, unpleasant. "This is the second time to-night you've run foul of my plans with your infernal diamonds and your piker hunts, and if trouble comes from this, look out for yourself! Five minutes ago, you said. Well, I wish he'd beaned you while he was at it! You've put an *hour's* work of mine to the bad! How long do you think this disturbance is going on, before the police butt in? Take a look in that room, there!"

The two men took a step forward, and shrank suddenly back. Birdie Rose's face had gone gray. He looked wildly at Billy Kane.

"My Gawd!" whispered Red Vallon.

"I said something to you to-night about needing an object lesson, so that it would sink into you that when I said the limit I meant it," said Billy Kane evenly. "Well, you've got it now! Do you know who that man is?"

Red Vallon shook his head. Birdie Rose was nervously plucking at a package of cigarette papers that he had drawn from his pocket.

"His name is Peters," said Billy Kane curtly. "Peters was the butler at Ellsworth's. Jackson's pal. Get me? I found this"—the ruby, from his vest pocket, was lying now in the open palm of Billy Kane's hand. "Do you understand what 'limit' means now, Red? I found this. He wouldn't talk, and so——" Billy Kane shrugged his shoulders coolly, and his hand jerked forward, pointing to the disordered room. "I hadn't found any more of them when you messed it up with your noise."

Red Vallon circled his lips with his tongue.

"Let's get out of here!" he said hoarsely.

"We'll have to now, thanks to you!" snapped Billy Kane shortly. "That's the only room that's been searched, and you've queered any chance of doing anything more now." He whirled impetuously on Red Vallon, and shook his fist in the gangster's face. "You see what you've done! Even if the police haven't got wise to the row, those people in the apartments downstairs will call

them in the minute they get a chance. Yes, we've got to beat it! You and your diamonds are likely to give us a ride by the juice route up in that little armchair in Sing Sing. If your man gets away it's a small matter now. Anybody that's caught here will have to stand for—*this*. You go first, Birdie, and call the crowd off, and *scatter* the minute you're outside the house. I don't want it published in the papers that I was with Peters in his expiring moments! Tumble? I can trust you two, because"—Billy Kane's smile was unhappy—"if anything leaks, I'll know *where* it leaked from! Get the idea? Now, beat it, Birdie! We'll give you a couple of minutes ahead of us."

The man went out. Billy Kane walked coolly to the door, took the skeleton key from the inside of the lock, and fitted it again to the outside.

"Come on, Red!" he said.

He locked the door, and put the bunch of keys in his pocket. It was comparatively quiet in the house now. A door of one of the lower apartments opened cautiously, but closed instantly again, as Billy Kane, with the gangster beside him, went down the stairs. In another moment they were out on the street, and had turned the first corner.

The gangster was muttering to himself:

"There's Birdie and me. But Savnak won't dare let a peep out of him, 'cause he was in on the diamond pinch himself. I'll get that guy with the mask yet, if I swing for it. Spilled every blasted bean in the bag—that's me!" His voice took on a sudden, half cringing, half deferential note. "It wasn't my fault, Bundy—honest! You know that! You ain't sore, are you, Bundy?"

Billy Kane pushed his hat to the back of his head. The night air was cool, even crisp, but his hatband was wringing wet. He brushed his damp hair back from his forehead. It was strange that he should have murdered Peters, after all!

He answered gruffly.

"Forget it!" said Billy Kane, alias the Rat.

XVI—TWENTY-FOUR HOURS LATER

From above, faintly, through the flooring, came the tap-tap, tap-tap of the old Italian cobbler's hammer. Billy Kane, from his hands and knees, straightened up, easing his body from the discomfort of his cramped position; and, as he listened, he toyed now with the steel jimmy, commandeered from Whitie Jack, that was in his hand. He had been even more assiduous in his own tapping, at least for the last hour or more, than was the old fellow above there. The old fellow seemed to work all day—and all night. It was night now—or, rather, evening. If there was any sound heard from the street it would be attributed to the old cobbler, of course, which was just as well.

The murky light from the single incandescent across the room threw the sparse furnishings of the Rat's den into uncouth shadows on the walls, and threw his own shadow into a grotesque, shapeless blotch upon the floor. From the street level, down through the cellar-like stairway to this underground abode, seeping in through the closed door, came the muffled roll of traffic, and a footstep now and then on the pavement like the echo of some sound that was detached, far distant.

He resumed his work, tapping with infinite pains with the butt of his steel jimmy on board after board of the flooring. And now this board or that seemed to give back a more resonant sound than its fellows, and he tapped it again, and still again, only to shake his head finally, and pass on to the next board.

There were other secrets in this crime hole besides that ingenious door and its tunnel to the shed and lane behind; secrets that *she* had plainly stated existed, and had as plainly stated were no secrets to her; secrets that she wielded in such a manner as to complicate a situation that was already one of extreme peril and desperate enough. They were the Rat's secrets; and for the moment he was the Rat, and self-preservation made the possession of those secrets vitally essential to him.

The net seemed to be drawing closer around him; at moments it seemed to be strangling him.

He had built so heavily on Peters. And Peters was dead. And he, Billy Kane, was still the Rat. It was difficult enough to carry out the rôle, as it was—but if the Rat should unexpectedly return! Where was the Rat? If he could glean a hint of when the Rat might probably return, or of the Rat's whereabouts! Surely those secrets hidden here somewhere would answer, in a measure at least, those questions. Or, if not, then the fuller and more intimate knowledge they must give him of the Rat would make his assumed rôle more secure, safer as long as he was forced to play it, since they would place in his hands the trumps that would enable him to preserve this character he had usurped as he came more and more into direct contact with that malignant Crime Trust of which the legitimate Rat was obviously one of the leading spirits. And she, that strange, mysterious being, whom he had come to call the Woman in Black, whose hatred, a hatred that was boundless, more bitter, more deliberate, more merciless than, it seemed, any human could hold for another, he had acquired through this abhorrent proxy that fate had thrust upon him—surely these things hidden here, if he could but find them, must too, in a measure at least, explain what lay between her and the devil in human guise whose part he, Billy Kane, was compelled to play.

He worked on, his ear attuned to the sound as the steel jimmy tapped the flooring, his mind feverishly, insistently active. He had counted on forcing the truth from Peters last night. Instead, he had found the old butler murdered, and had only managed to escape destruction himself at the hands of Red Vallon and the underworld through a spurious alibi that was in itself a ghastly thing. He, as the Rat, stood now the self-confessed murderer of Peters! Yes, the net seemed to be drawing its strands so tightly about him sometimes that they strangled him, and strangled his soul, and made his courage falter.

Peters was dead, murdered—and to have made the man talk he would have gone the limit himself. He had meant to wring the truth from Peters' lips at any cost. But a dead man couldn't talk!

It was not warm in the room, nor was he overheated by his exertions, but Billy Kane, with the back of his hand, swept away a bead of moisture that had oozed out upon his forehead. Who was it who had murdered Peters? And why? His brain had wrestled with that problem since last night. There seemed to be but one answer, one solution. Peters' connection with the Ellsworth murder, the search that had been made in Peters' bedroom, and carried no further than that single room, indicating that what had been sought had been found, seemed to be proof positive that the author of the crime was at least conversant with the details of David Ellsworth's murder, if he were not, indeed, as seemed even more likely, one of those who had actually participated in that murder himself. And with this as a premise the motive behind Peters' murder was apparently clear enough. Nearly fifteen thousand dollars and a fortune in rubies had been taken from the steel vault in the Ellsworth home. Peters might have been the temporary custodian, in whole or in part, of the proceeds of the robbery, or he might only have been in possession of his share. In either case it was enough to account for his having been double-crossed and murdered by one of his own accomplices, or else by some one sufficiently well informed about the Ellsworth murder to know that Peters had at least a tempting enough portion of the "goods" in his flat to make a visit there very much worth while.

Billy Kane smiled a little grimly now, as, moving forward, he pushed the bed to one side in order to continue his examination of the flooring. That had been his solution; but, strangely enough, the newspapers for once had had no solution to offer. The known presence of so many men—when Red Vallon's gang had invaded the house—indicated quite clearly, the papers said, that it was the work of an organized band; but, apart from that, they were frankly mystified. But because Peters had been the butler of David Ellsworth, and had been murdered just three nights after his master had been murdered, the morning papers had flung clamorous headlines across their front pages, and had filled their columns with every detail that had even the remotest bearing upon the affair. They, however, scarcely hinted at even a possible connection between the two crimes, for the very simple reason that Peters had obviously been attacked by a gang, whereas, in the case of David Ellsworth, they *knew* that the old millionaire had been done to death by his private secretary, Billy Kane!

He had read the papers, all of them. But out of the welter of words there had been only one thing that had possessed any value for him in the shape of information, and even that had been of a negative character. Some reporter had unearthed the fact that a stranger, whose description answered in a general way to Whitie Jack, had been seen loitering around the neighborhood of Peters' apartment during a good part of the previous day. The description was not accurate enough to identify Whitie Jack positively; but as Whitie Jack *had* been there, and there on his,

Billy Kane's instructions, he had immediately sent the man away that morning, and had told him to keep under cover until further orders.

The steel jimmy tapped with persistent inquisitiveness along another board. Billy Kane's lips were tight now. Peters' death had seemed at first to have robbed him of all he had been building upon; and during the hours alone here in this den last night, facing what looked like the ruin of the final chance and hope of establishing his own innocence, of clearing his own name, of bringing to justice the wantons who had struck down old David Ellsworth, he had known those bitterest of hours where the will weakens, and courage seems a useless thing and a mockery. But he had fought through those hours, and the morning had brought its reward. Peters' murder had broken the thread of evidence, but equally, it seemed, after all, it had knitted it together again—there was the Man with the Crutch.

His lips relaxed a little in an ironical smile. The papers had overlooked the Man with the Crutch! It was Red Vallon who, all unconsciously, had joined together the broken thread. The gangster had come here to the den that noon. There had been a marked increase of deference in the man's attitude and manner, a sort of unholy admiration, awe, respect and fear. The man, hardened though he was himself, was still visibly affected by the fact that he stood in the presence of the Rat, alias Bundy Morgan, who, as he believed, had coolly and imperturbably given gruesome evidence that, to gain his ends, he would neither hesitate nor stop at murder. Red Vallon had not forgotten, and was not likely to forget, his "object lesson!"

Red Vallon had told his story furtively, leaning across the table, talking in a guarded whisper. He had got it straight enough from one of his own men, who the police in turn believed was one of their own stool pigeons. Shortly before the confusion incident to the exit of Red Vallon's men on the previous night, the exact hour not positively established, a man with a crutch, and carrying a small hand bag, was known to have crept cautiously out of the apartment house where Peters had his flat. After that the man had disappeared. "The police have elected the cripple as the guy that waltzed off with the swag while the rest of the bunch made a noise to smear up his tracks," Red Vallon had said, with a malicious grin. "What's the matter with pushing a good thing along, Bundy? What's the matter with pushing out a few feelers, and trying to spot this crutch gazabo? The Pippin's the one that put me wise, and the Pippin can make good nosing him out if any one can."

There had come upon Billy Kane an overwhelming surge of relief. More than anything else on earth that he had suddenly wanted at that moment was—the Man with the Crutch.

"Yes!" he had answered gruffly, afraid almost to trust his voice.

"Sure!" Red Vallon had responded. "I thought you'd be strong for it! Mabbe it won't last long, 'cause the guy ought to be able to clear himself unless we can hitch it onto him for keeps, but there's nothing like heaving a little dirt in the eyes of the bulls, and shooting 'em off on the wrong lay. It'll keep 'em guessing for a while anyhow. You leave it to me, Bundy. I owe you something for queering your game last night, though I guess there wasn't any more of them rubies there besides the one you found, for the Pippin says the bulls didn't get anything, and I owe you something for the lemon I've handed you so far in falling down on spotting the ruby collection in any of the speak-easy joints; but I won't fall down here. You leave it to me! I'll pull some slick stuff this time!"

The steel jimmy tapped on. Billy Kane's face was set. The Man with the Crutch! Was there any doubt but that the Man with the Crutch was not only Peters' murderer, but, more vital still, one who, in Peters' stead now, embodied the clue to the hell-hatched plot that had cost David Ellsworth his life, and had craftily woven the evidence of murder around him, Billy Kane? The Man with the Crutch! If only Red Vallon and the Pippin did not fail, then— The steel jimmy, almost perfunctorily, tapped over the same board again; and then Billy Kane suddenly bent lower, his ear close to the floor. He tapped once more. There was no doubt of it! The sound was unquestionably and distinctly *hollow*. He felt his pulse quicken. Off and on during the day he had covered almost the entire flooring of the room. He had started with the flooring. Only the flooring and the walls could contain any hidden recess. He had not touched the walls yet, and it might not be necessary now!

He was examining the board critically. It was a short board, rough and uneven, about ten inches wide, that ran to the edge of the wall. There seemed to be no sign of any secret spring, either on the adjacent flooring or on the wall, nor did the board itself appear to be in any way loose or show any evidence of ever having been removed before. He frowned as he tapped it again and found that, quite as unmistakably as before, the hollow sound came back to him; and then, inserting the point of the jimmy in the joint at the end of the board, he gave the board a

sharp wrench. It came away readily, but with it came a weary smile to Billy Kane's lips. Nothing! The under flooring had rotted away, which accounted for the hollow sound, and he was rewarded with nothing more than a hole bounded both in depth and width by the floor joists which rested on the ground. Half angry, half ironically amused, he reached forward to replace the board—and, straightening up suddenly, listened.

Someone was coming down the steps from the street.

In an instant he had the board and bed back in place, and the steel jimmy in his pocket. And now a cigarette was drooping languidly from his lips, as, in answer to a low knock, he crossed the room, and halted in front of the door.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"It's de Cadger," a voice answered.

Billy Kane opened the door. The Cadger, unknown to him personally, was known to him by reputation. As one of those details vital to the preservation of the rôle he played, he had stored up in his memory during the past few days the name of every one connected with the Crime Trust that he had heard mentioned either by Red Vallon or others. The Cadger was one of the lesser breed; a stage hand, in the expressive vernacular of the underworld.

The Cadger, a shrivelled, unkempt figure, his coat collar turned up over a collarless shirt, an aggressively checkered peak cap pulled far down over his eyes, thrust an envelope unceremoniously into Billy Kane's hand.

"Dis is fer youse, Bundy," he said hurriedly, already turning and making his way up the steps to the street again. "See youse later! I gotta go to Gannet's joint fer his kit."

Billy Kane closed the door, and locked it. He had not heard from Red Vallon since noon, nothing in reference to the Pippin's quest for the Man with the Crutch. He tore the envelope open eagerly, the thought uppermost in his mind that this was a message from Red Vallon now; and then, staring at the sheet of paper which he had extracted from the envelope, he dropped, suddenly tight-lipped, into the chair by the table under the light.

It wasn't from Red Vallon. It was a message like the one Red Vallon had showed him the night before, a message in the Crime Trust's cipher. He turned instinctively in his chair, glancing toward the secret door at the rear of the room, as though he half expected to see it open, and see that slim little figure in black enter, as though he half expected to hear her cool, softly modulated voice that veiled, even as did the clear ripple in her laugh, menace and contempt. And then he laughed aloud in a short, hard way. A fool! Was he? Well, she had come in through that door before, hadn't she, when something was in the wind?

His eyes reverted to the sheet of paper. He knew what it was! The headquarters of the Crime Trust had been broken up, and some of the leaders had even taken to cover since the night Karlin had been arrested by the police; but all the cogs in that Machiavellian machinery had not stopped, and plans formulated and set in motion in the past were still to be carried to their ultimate conclusions as they matured day by day. There was not the slightest doubt but that this was one of their devil's schemes. Red Vallon—or was it the owner of those great, dark, steady eyes?—had said enough to make him understand that, when temporarily scattered, temporarily wary of the police, some unhallowed "managing director" carried on their work, and communicated with the different members of the gang by means of these cipher messages.

And now as he stared at the missive in his hand, angry flush rose slowly to his cheeks, and he half made as though to tear the paper into shreds. God knew, he had enough to do to keep his own life in his own body without this; there was scarcely a moment of the day or night when he was not battling with all the wits he possessed to save himself from discovery—from the police as Billy Kane, from the underworld as the spurious Rat—and his brain was already sick and tormented beyond endurance with the struggle. Why, then, should he decipher this? If he did, he could not sit idly by and, in the possession of the details of some purposed crime, permit that crime to be enacted! It was the moral obligation flung in his face again, just as it had been on the night he had trapped Karlin, just as it had been last night when he had snatched Vetter's diamonds from Red Vallon's maw, and not through any threat of *hers* held over his head, as she so thoroughly believed! She wasn't here now—was she?

He laid the paper down upon the table, and smoothed it out. Tear it up! His short laugh was a jeer flung at himself. Certainly, he could tear it up, and he would know nothing about it, except that he had shirked and turned his back like a coward upon the responsibility that was already his! He *could* read the cipher, if he wanted to; he had seen her work one out the night before.

"I thought I'd settled this sort of thing with myself before!" he muttered grimly, and taking a pencil from his pocket he began to work out the cipher.

It took some time, perhaps twenty minutes; and then he was studying a second sheet of paper upon which he had written the decoded message:

The Cadger and Gannet will report to you at nine o'clock. The Ninth Street house will be empty. Dayler and servants out this evening. Secure sealed manila envelope in wall safe, left of mantel, in library. Combination: Two right, eighteen; one left, eight; one right, twenty-eight. Police on trail tomorrow.

The Cadger's "see youse later," then, was to be taken literally, and not, as he had supposed, as simply a common and slang expression of adieu! Billy Kane looked at his watch. It was not quite eight o'clock. There was an hour, then, before the Cadger and this Gannet, another of the Cadger's ilk, would report here ready to follow his leadership in a burglarious raid. Billy Kane stood up; and, in a sort of mechanical and reassuring inventory, his hands felt over the outside of his pockets, over the skeleton keys they contained, the steel jimmy, the flashlight, the automatic, and the soft, slight bulge made by the neatly folded mask—and, too, over another bulge that was made by a certain chamois pocketbook. This latter brought a frown. He had not found a way yet to return Vetter's diamonds. It wasn't so easy a thing to do when, if the Rat's hand showed in the matter, it was certain destruction for the Rat, alias Bundy Morgan, and, for the moment, alias Billy Kane! But Vetter and Vetter's diamonds were extraneous things just now, weren't they?

He extinguished the light, crossed to the door, unlocked it, stepped out, locked the door behind him, made his way up the steps, and started briskly off along the street. He did not know what the contents of that "manila envelope" were, nor who Dayler was, nor the Crime Trust's motive—he was *supposed* to know all that—he knew only that there was some devil's scheme on foot that would be worthy of the Crime Trust in its scope and proportions. And the Crime Trust did not interest itself in *little* things!

XVII—THE MAN WITH THE CRUTCH

Billy Kane smiled with grim irony, as he walked rapidly down the block. She was not here to-night with her cool, contemptuous voice bidding him to do this thing. It was evident, therefore, that she was not quite as infallible as she apparently believed herself to be! For once, she was not acquainted beforehand with the Crime Trust's movements, it seemed! Perhaps it was because, for once, the Rat might not have had anything to do with originating the plan that was afoot to-night, for she had certainly always appeared to be thoroughly informed where the Rat was concerned!

He shrugged his shoulders suddenly, dismissing her from his thoughts. He would better concentrate his mind on the work in hand! The secret lay in the manila envelope. That the envelope contained something of great value, or was of great value to someone, was obvious; to Dayler, probably, since it was in Dayler's carefully guarded possession. He shrugged his shoulders again. He could tell better about that in the course of another hour—when the envelope was in his pocket instead of Dayler's safe! To balk this organized gang of super-criminals was sufficient for the moment! Once more his shoulders lifted. He perhaps was not even entitled to any great credit to-night in fulfilling his "moral obligations!" For once, there appeared to be neither any great danger, nor any great difficulty. The house was empty; it was not very far away; he had an hour in which to work undisturbed; and at the expiration of that time he should be back in his room, and ready to set out with the Cadger and Gannet to rob an *empty* safe. If he with the two men then entered the house, and, for their pains, found the manila envelope already gone, certainly there could be no suspicion to rest upon him!

Billy Kane had reached the Bowery now. He went in through the side entrance of a corner saloon. Here, a minute's search in the telephone directory supplied him with the number of Dayler's house on Ninth Street. After that, he made his way over to Washington Square, crossed

the Square, gained the lower end of Fifth Avenue, practically deserted now at this hour, and, a moment later, turning into Ninth Street, headed down the block in the direction of Sixth Avenue.

It was one of the old aristocratic neighborhoods of New York, but changed now a great deal with the changing years. What had once been classed as mansions had in many cases been metamorphosed into lodging and boarding houses; but the "mansions" were still here, big, substantial, commodious stone dwellings. Nor had the boarding houses entirely ousted a certain unobtrusive type of wealth and means from their midst, and it argued not at all that this Dayler, for instance, because he had his residence here, was not well to do, even exceedingly well to do.

The street was quiet. Billy Kane located the house he sought. He passed by it, noting that it had a basement entrance, a flight of stone steps to the front door, that it was entirely in darkness, and, returning, he mounted the steps quietly and without any attempt at concealment, found the outer vestibule door unlocked, opened it—after making pretense of ringing the doorbell for the benefit of anyone on the street who might have paid him any notice—stepped inside, and closed the door behind him. The inner door was locked. His skeleton keys came into play. Still far from an adept in their use, he was several minutes at this work. Then he stepped forward into the hall of the house itself.

His flashlight stabbed a lane of light through the darkness. The stairs leading to the upper floors of the house were ahead of him and on his right; on his left, opening off the hall, which seemed to run almost the depth of the house, were several doors, all of which were closed. The house was empty, the cipher message had assured him of that, but nevertheless he moved now with extreme caution to the first door on his left. He knew nothing of the plan of the house, but it was at least logical to assume that the library was on this floor, and the library was the objective of his search.

He opened the door slightly, quietly, then drew sharply back, and stood tense and motionless, listening. There was a dull, faint glow of light in there, not as though the room itself were illuminated, but as though the light came from, perhaps, another room beyond. But there was no sound. A minute passed, and still he stood there, alert, his ears strained to catch the slightest noise. And then, reassured, he pushed the door wider open, and stepped over the threshold. That a light might have been left burning, either intentionally or inadvertently, presented in itself nothing of the unusual, or—

He was drawing his hand across his eyes like a man dazed from a blow. The light had gone in the winking of an eye. It was pitch black. He was still involuntarily staring, through darkness now, toward the front end of the room. The light had not come from that direction, it had come through a portière archway in quite the opposite direction, but for the moment his mind was chaotic, out of control. The room was a drawing-room, a large, stately sort of a drawing-room, and there had been a huge pier glass, gilt-framed, between the heavily curtained front windows. What he had seen could not have been a fantasy, nor due to disordered imagination. His eyes, the instant he had entered the room, had gone straight to that glass because it reflected the light from the other room. The surface of the glass had been blank as his eyes had first fallen upon it, and then, like a flash, enduring for but the minutest fraction of a second, the reflection of a figure, a man's figure, a man's figure *with a crutch*, had swept across it—and the light in the other room had gone out.

And now Billy Kane acted quickly. The time that he had stood there, inert, mentally stunned, had been but a matter of seconds exaggerated into seemingly interminable, measureless hours. Swiftly, silently, he reached the archway, and, sheltering himself behind the folds of the portières, but in a position to command the other room with his automatic, which he had whipped from his pocket, he stood still and listened. There was only the quick, fierce pounding in his own eardrums, in tempo with the mad race of blood through his veins. The Man with the Crutch!

How or why the man came to be here, or what the other had to do with what was afoot to-night, scarcely entered his mind. It did not matter! Nothing mattered—save to get the Man with the Crutch. Everything else paled into insignificance. It was the *same* man that had murdered Peters; there would not be *two* men with crutches who prowled stealthily at night in other people's houses! But that it was Peters' murderer was significant now only because it identified the man as one who held the secret of David Ellsworth's murder; the man who, if he, Billy Kane, could but get to grips with him, would tell what he knew to the last word, or one or the other of them would never leave this house alive. It was the man who could end this hideous masquerade that he, Billy Kane, was forced to assume; the man who could clear his name of the foul blot that had cost him friends, the companionship of honest men, and that was like at any instant to cost him his life.

There was no sound.

And then Billy Kane's voice rang suddenly, imperatively through the silence:

"Hands up!"

His flashlight bored through the darkness, circling the room in front of him. The room—it was the library beyond doubt—was empty. His jaws locked. He had taken a chance. It had failed. But now his glance fell upon the door, diagonally across the library from him, that, from its position, obviously opened on the hall. He could have sworn that the doors opening on the hall were all closed when he had entered the house. This one was ajar now!

He crossed the library with a bound, swung the door wide, and peered out into the hall. He could see nothing; but now, from somewhere below, he caught a sound as of a boot heel thudding on a bare floor—or, perhaps, the tap of a crutch!

Along at the rear of the hall his flashlight focused on the head of a basement stairway. He ran for this now; and then, with more caution, wary of offering himself as a target for a shot that would put an end to any hope of getting within reach of the other, his flashlight out, he began to pick his way downstairs. Halfway down, he caught another sound. From the front of the house, softly and cautiously though it was done, there came the unmistakable opening and closing of the basement door.

Billy Kane took the remaining stairs in a leap, and, his flashlight pointing the way, dashed along the hallway below. He reached the door, and pulled at it. Then, with an angry, muttered exclamation, he stood there for an instant hesitant. The man had managed to lock the door behind him! Mechanically his hand went toward his pocket for his skeleton keys, but stopped halfway as, turning suddenly, he raced back upstairs. It would take too long to try out key after key. There was a better way. There was the front door. He had left that unlocked when he came in. He gained this now, jerked it open, lunged through the little vestibule, snatched at the knob of the outer door—and wrenched at it viciously like a madman in mingled rage and chagrin. It was locked! It had not been locked even when he had come in!

Calmer in an instant, he took his keys from his pocket and worked with feverish haste at the lock. It would possibly take less time to run into the drawing-room, get a window open, and jump to the ground, but he did not dare do that. He had to come back here with the Cadger and Gannet in a little while, and he dared not risk anything that would imperil his rôle in the eyes of the underworld. Even a number of people coming and going from the house, if they acted naturally, entering by the door as though they had a right to enter, would never attract the slightest notice from either neighbors or passers-by. That was what doors were for! But a man leaping out through one of the front windows would invite certain attention, suspicion, and instant investigation.

Another key! Would he never get one that would fit! This wasn't the door he had opened before. A minute, perhaps two, perhaps even three, must have gone by! God, how clumsy his fingers were! The man must have had amazing agility for a cripple, and the craft and cunning of a devil to come up here instantly on leaving the basement and lock this door! Would he never get the—yes, he had it now! He swung the door open, and from the top step his glance swept the street in both directions. And then there came a sort of bitter philosophical acceptance of a situation that he had already more than half expected. The Man with the Crutch had had too much time. There was no sign of him now.

But there was still a chance! Billy Kane closed the door behind him, went quietly down the steps to the pavement—there was still the inviolability of the house to be preserved—walked along without undue haste until far enough away to preclude the chance of any connection being established between himself and the house he had just left, and then broke into a run. There was still a chance. But it was a slim one. He knew that. The man must have gone toward either Sixth Avenue or Fifth Avenue. It was more likely Sixth Avenue; there would be more people there, more traffic, more opportunity to "lose himself." It was the logical thing to do. Lower Fifth Avenue at night was almost as deserted as a tomb; the man could have been seen there blocks away.

Perhaps fifteen minutes passed. At the expiration of that period Billy Kane returned to the Dayler residence, and for the second time that night coolly and quite casually mounted the steps, and again entered the house. His search had been futile. He had circuited the blocks in the neighborhood, and hunted up and down the adjacent section of Sixth Avenue; and the more he had hunted the more he had realized the futility of what he was doing, though, at that, he had even, as a last hope, returned by Fifth Avenue. And now he was back in the house again, and quite conscious that this, too, was likely now to prove as barren of results as his search had been.

The man had got away, and with the man in all likelihood had gone, too, the manila envelope from the wall safe in the library! What else had the other been in the library for?

Billy Kane shrugged his shoulders, as, using his flashlight again, he stepped from the hall into the drawing-room, and from there through the archway into the library. There was the one possibility that he had come upon the Man with the Crutch and interrupted the other in his work *before* the envelope had been secured. That was the one possibility that remained, and that was the one possibility that had prompted him to come back.

He stood for a moment now beside the table that occupied the center of the room, his flashlight creeping in a slow, inquisitive circle around the walls. And now the round white ray, arrested, held on the mantel opposite the archway. On either side of the mantel, shoulder high, and projecting out a little from the wall, were what appeared to be bric-a-brac, or, perhaps, liqueur cupboards, with leaded glass doors. "Wall safe, left of mantel," the message had said. He smiled a little grimly in appreciation and understanding, as he moved over and halted before the left-hand cupboard. It was a rather neat ambush for a wall safe, this idea of Dayler's—whoever Dayler might be!

The leaded glass door opened readily. The ray of the flashlight flooded the interior. Billy Kane's smile was gone. He was quite sure now that he was too late. The cupboard was used for liqueurs, but the liqueurs in turn were evidently used for the purpose of veiling the little nickel dial of a safe that protruded from the wall at the rear of the cupboard, for the bottles were all pushed now to one side, and the dial, with a sort of diabolical mockery, it seemed, winked back reflected rays from the glare of the flashlight. It was blatantly apparent now that this had been the object of the other's visit to the house, and it was almost as equally apparent that the man had got what he had come for. And yet—

"Two right, eighteen; one left"—almost perfunctorily, muttering the combination, Billy Kane had reached in and was twirling the knob of the dial—"eight; one right, twenty-eight."

The little steel door swung noiselessly open. Billy Kane stared into the miniature safe, bewildered. And then he laughed a little. A minute before and he would not have given a penny for his chances! The other had got only so far as to move the bottles to one side. He had beaten the Man with the Crutch by the very narrow margin of time it would have taken to manipulate the combination! Perhaps, though, the other hadn't known the combination, and was just about to set to work to force the safe! Well, it didn't matter! The manila envelope lay there, sealed, intact.

He took the envelope from the safe, closed the door, and locked it—and whirled suddenly around from his position in front of the mantel. His flashlight, jerked upward, played full upon the archway. A cool, disdainful laugh rippled low through the room—a woman's laugh. Billy Kane did not move. The chill that had clutched at his heart, the fear of discovery, was gone almost as quickly as it had come. He had nothing to dread on that score from—the Woman in Black! And it was not the first time she had come upon him unexpectedly! And it was she who stood there now; and she still stood full in the glare of his flashlight, a bewitching, entrancing, mysterious little figure, whose great dark eyes were fixed on him, half in a deliberate, speculative way, and half in a sort of contemptuous mockery.

It was she who broke the silence.

"I wonder if it's true, Bundy?" she said softly.

He felt the blood surge hot into his cheeks. He knew a sudden bitter rebellion at the contempt in those steady eyes, the same bitter rebellion he had known last night in her presence, a rebellion against the fate that caused him, through reason of being the counterpart of some incarnate fiend, to stand in her eyes as that actual fiend himself, as the one who in some way had done her, or hers, irreparable wrong, as the embodiment of all that was loathsome and hideous to her. He was the Rat to her, as to everybody else. The envelope crackled in his fingers, as he clenched his hand. Would he always have to play the Rat—to her! What would that perfect oval face, beautiful even now in its fearless contempt, look like in softer mood?

"Is what true?" he demanded gruffly.

She came toward him across the room.

"That you are really playing the game," she said slowly. "It's not much credit to you, of course, since you are doing it through fear, but still——" She shrugged her shoulders daintily, as she stood beside him. "Do you know, Bundy, that lately you seem to have changed somehow. I do not know just how, and I cannot account for it. It puzzles me."

"Forget it!" growled Billy Kane, alias the Rat. "And I don't know what game you're talking about, either!"

"Oh, yes, you do!" she answered. "I told you that I would hold you responsible for any crime committed by your accomplices that it lay within your power to circumvent. That was the chance I gave you, and you seem to be taking it. I thought I would test you out to-night when you might imagine that I was ignorant of what was going on, and that you might, therefore, count on escaping the consequences as far as I was concerned. You were to come here with the Cadger and Gannet at nine o'clock to rob that safe. You are here alone long before that hour, and you have robbed the safe. I presume, at least I am going to give you credit for it, that it is because you are playing the game I referred to, and are checkmating your partners, and preventing the crime from being carried any further."

There was silence for a moment.

"I think you had better put out that flashlight," she said.

He must play the Rat. His soul jeered at him ironically. He snapped off the light.

"How did you get wise to this?" he flung out.

"About to-night? Why, it was one of your own pet schemes, wasn't it, Bundy—all worked out quite a while ago? That's how I knew! Well, am I right about the reason for you being here alone? And, if so, how did you propose to square yourself with your cronies of the underworld?"

"By coming back here with the Cadger and Gannet, of course," he replied curtly, "and letting them fall for the idea that someone had beaten us all to it."

"Yes," she said calmly. "Well, I quite approve, Bundy. And I'll take that envelope now, please! You won't have any further use for it, and I'll attend to the rest of this affair."

He handed her the envelope. He asked nothing better than that she should assume any further responsibility that might be connected with its contents. As far as he was concerned there were matters of far greater moment now. There was the Man with the Crutch! And that was a matter in which he had very cogent reasons for desiring to play a lone hand. His lips tightened. It was fairly evident that she had not been in the house the first time he had entered but he wanted to be sure.

"When did you get in here?" he snapped. "Followed me, I suppose!"

"About five minutes ago," she said quietly. "And you left the door unlocked—though I had a key. No, I didn't follow you! Why should I? I knew that you would be here at nine o'clock anyway, and I simply came a little ahead of time. I really hoped, you see, that you would do the same—and for more reasons than the one I have just mentioned."

"What do you mean?" he grunted.

"I haven't seen you since last night, you know," she said deliberately. "What about the diamonds that were stolen from Vetter?"

"I've got them," he answered shortly.

"*Vetter* hasn't!" There was a cold, unpleasant inflection in her voice.

"Well, what do you expect!" He forced a raucous note into his voice. He was not sure that it sounded genuine. It was not easy to play the Rat with her! "Think it over! It's not so soft a job to get them back to him without leaving a trail behind that might trip me up! See?"

She appeared to consider this for a moment.

"That is true," she said at last. "Well, have you got them here?"

"Yes." He reached into his pocket and took out the chamois pocketbook. He laughed brusquely, as he held it out to her. "If you can handle that envelope, maybe you can handle the sparklers, too!"

"I can—and I will," she said simply, as she took the pocketbook from him. "That's only fair. I told you once that I would put no difficulties in the way of your keeping yourself solid—if you could!—with your fellow yeggs. And that applies equally to to-night. You may bring the Cadger back here. You will find the house empty."

"Thanks!" he said grimly. "I'll move along then; I've got just about enough time left. And would you mind *locking* the front door when you go out? I'd like the Cadger to get all the run that's coming to him for his money."

He stepped forward to pass her, but she laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Wait!" she said tersely. "I agreed to look after this envelope, but even so you are not through yet to-night, Bundy. I know where Mr. Dayler is this evening, and I am going to bring him back here to his own house myself. But I will give you time first to play out your little farce with your two thugs, and send them about their business. Say, ten o'clock. Mr. Dayler and myself will be here at that time—and so will you."

"Will I?" inquired Billy Kane insolently. "Whats the lay? A trap?"

"No—an experiment," she said evenly. "I would like to find out if there is really anything

human, if there is a shred of decency left in you. I want you to see your crime for once from your victim's standpoint. It may help you, if you *are* human, to keep on 'playing the game'; and that will help you, if you can keep out of the clutches of the underworld, to keep out of the electric chair at Sing Sing. You quite understand, Bundy? At ten o'clock! And I should not even mind if you are found here in this room—in the dark—when Mr. Dayler and myself enter the house—at ten o'clock. And now I think you had better hurry, Bundy."

There was a twisted smile on Billy Kane's lips. He was the Rat, and the Rat would be here, or anywhere else at ten o'clock—if she said so. There was no comment to make. The Rat had no choice.

"All right!" he said gruffly, and moved past her to the door, and out to the hall; and a moment later, reaching the street, he swung into a hurried stride, heading back for the Rat's den.

XVIII—MIRRORED YEARS

It was quite dark here in Dayler's library, yet he had sat so long in this chair that his eyes seemed to have accommodated themselves to the darkness, and it seemed as though he could distinguish every object in the room. Surely, interminably as the minutes dragged themselves out, the quarter-hour that had stood between ten o'clock and the time he had sent the Cadger and Gannet away was up now! His flashlight winked through the blackness, played on the dial of his watch, and the blackness fell again. It still lacked five minutes of the hour.

Strange how his mind worked! There was no speculation as to precisely why she had demanded his presence here, there was only intolerant, angry impatience because she had done so. If it had not been for her, he could have been making vital use of every one of these minutes! There was nothing else to have hindered him! It had been almost childishly easy to pull the wool over Gannet's and the Cadger's eyes. He had let the Cadger and Gannet take all the initiative—apparently. The two men had forced the basement door, and then, going upstairs, had opened the front door for him, which he, strolling down the street a few minutes later, had entered as casually as he had already done before on two occasions that night. After that, the three of them, clustered around the mantel, the Cadger manipulating the dial of the safe while Gannet held the flashlight, had made the discovery in *common* that the safe had been already looted. He had joined in the dismay, chagrin and fury of his companions; he had joined in the frantic search of desks and drawers, which he had inaugurated, and which he had permitted to endure for a full half hour. At the expiration of that time he had coded a terse cipher report, and had handed it to the Cadger and Gannet for delivery. They were to leave the house, himself last, a few minutes apart in order to avoid arousing any attention; and the Cadger and Gannet, obediently and unsuspectingly, had gone. And he had remained!

It had been very simple. And there remained no trace of the search that had been made. His eyes now, so strangely accustomed to the darkness, reassured him on that score. He had warned the men not to leave any traces behind them!

He stirred uneasily in his chair. All this had been essential, necessary, vital, in order to preserve his rôle of the Rat from suspicion, and himself from subsequent and quick disaster at the hands of the underworld; but the minutes that were slipping away from him now, as he sat here impotent, were priceless. Red Vallon and the Pippin at any moment might run the Man with the Crutch to earth, and his hands were tied. He had no concern with the effect that the loss of the envelope might have had on this Dayler; he was utterly indifferent to either the contents of that envelope, or Dayler's connection with it. It seemed to plumb the very depths of irony that she appeared to labor under the impression she might somehow, in this way, arouse his better nature and touch some softer human chord within him! He was concerned more with the connection between that envelope and the Man with the Crutch; and very much more with the contents of that handbag the Man with the Crutch had carried away from Peters' flat the night before; and still more again with the Man with the Crutch himself! The man had tricked him here tonight, slipped through his fingers this time, but—

The front door was being opened. Billy Kane stood up, shrugging his shoulders. He was in a truculent mood now, impatient to be gone, prompted even now to go, restrained only by the cooler counsel of common sense. She had the whip-hand over him. A word from her, and he would be in exactly the same case as if he had failed in the play he had just made with the Cadger and Gannet. Voices reached him; hers, quiet and controlled; a man's, gruff, irritated, sharply antagonistic.

And then the door from the hall opened, and the lights in the library went on. Billy Kane's eyes, passing swiftly over the trim little figure in black across the room, met and held those of a man who, startled now, stepped hastily back, only to discover that his companion had quietly and swiftly closed the door behind them.

The man's lips were suddenly compressed and hard, though the color had ebbed a little from his face.

"Please sit down over there at the table, Mr. Dayler," she requested softly.

"No!" exclaimed the man angrily. "I'll do nothing of the kind! What's the meaning of this? You inveigled me back here by hinting at some kind of story, and you run me, in my own house, into the presence of a thug!"

She shook her head.

"It is true that I asked this—gentleman"—she hesitated over the choice of the word, while her eyes in a sort of mocking humor inventoried Billy Kane's none too reputable appearance and attire—"to come here; but it is equally true that I have 'some kind of a story' that I think will interest you. Bundy, you might try and *persuade* Mr. Dayler to sit down!"

A grim smile came to Billy Kane's lips. He was a pawn too, like this Dayler; a pawn to be moved about at will by this outrageously courageous, imperturbable, and, yes, in spite of his own irritation, adorable little personage. He turned his attention now to Dayler. The other could have been no more than forty-five, yet his hair was not merely prematurely gray, it was white, as a very old man's is white; his face, clean shaven, was kindly, though drawn now in tense lines about the lips and forehead.

"Sit down!" Billy Kane ordered curtly. He was fingering his automatic, playing up to the cue she had given him.

Dayler hesitated; and then abruptly stepped forward and flung himself into a chair at the table, his back to the mantel.

"Well?" he challenged. "You got me out of my club on the pretext of having something to say about a man named Keats whom I once knew; but from the look of things it appears to be much more likely that, with my own house affording you protection, I am to be coolly robbed of my watch, money, and such other valuables as you may be able to lay your hands on!"

The slim little figure had slipped gracefully into a chair, facing Dayler on the opposite side of the table. She smiled curiously.

"But, at least, I will keep my promise first, and tell you about this Keats," she said. "Buck Keats, wasn't it, Mr. Dayler? And, as your servants may be back in another half hour or so, we won't waste any time in getting to the story. It goes back about twenty years. At that time you were in the Yukon, and pretty well away from civilization, and you had been prospecting all summer with your partner, a man quite a little older than you were, a man named Laynton, Joe Laynton—Square Joe, they called him in that country, and you ought to know why. He was a big man—in his body and in his soul—a God's nobleman, wasn't he, Mr. Dayler?"

Dayler was leaning forward, staring at her in a strange, puzzled way.

"How do you know all this?" he demanded sharply.

She shook her head again.

"I may not be quite accurate in the little details," she went on. "You will overlook that. You and Laynton delayed your return to Dawson too long that fall. You were caught in bad weather. Your provisions ran low. Laynton met with a nasty accident with an axe. In reaching up above his head to cut some branches for fuel, the axe in some way glanced off and inflicted a very serious and a very ugly wound in his shoulder and chest. Things went from bad to worse. For days Laynton could do nothing but lie in his blood-soaked bunk. Provisions ran still lower. The winter was settling down hard. You had already delayed too long, and now Laynton couldn't go. And yet you woke up one morning to find his bunk empty."

She paused. Billy Kane's eyes, as he stood beside the table, passed from one to the other. Her small gloved hand, resting on the arm of her chair, had closed tightly; and into Dayler's face, grown haggard now, had come the look of a dumb beast in hurt.

"On a sheet of paper on the table"—her voice was lower now—"Laynton had left a message

for you, the kind a brave man would leave, explaining it all, and bidding you take the one chance you had and go without him. And piled on the table beside the sheet of paper was his money, quite a few hundred dollars. You went to the door of the shack, and you followed the tracks in the snow. And you found him, and you found his revolver beside him. You were already weak and half delirious yourself for lack of food, and I think this crazed you and unhinged your mind. You buried him in the snow, and picked up the revolver and put it in your pocket. You took the paper and the money and what food there was, and you ran, like the madman you then were, away from the shack. I do not know how long you wandered, nor how you existed, nor the number of miles you put between yourself and the man who had given his life for you; but eventually you were found by a trapper, and the trapper's name was Keats, Buck Keats, a man with a very unsavory record. You spent some time with Keats. You recovered your physical health, but your mind remained affected. What had taken place was temporarily a blank to you. Keats robbed you of Laynton's money and most of your own, and he stole that paper which later on was to mean so much to you. He preferred, if anything were ever known, that you, and not he, should be credited with having stolen Laynton's money, and he further helped out that suggestion by getting you, after some months, out of the country, by having you, in a word, disappear. I imagine you were like a child in his hands. I am sure you do not even know how you got there, but the spring found you, quite normal in all respects save a broken memory, working at anything you could get to do in Mexico, and living there under the name of Dayler. Your proper name is Forbes, John Forbes, isn't it?"

Dayler's head was forward on the table, and buried in his hands. And Billy Kane, meeting her glance, read through a sudden mist in the brown eyes, a bitter condemnation of himself that he did not quite fully understand. He was not the Rat, was he? He was only playing the Rat in a fight for his life, and to win back a name of his own! How should he understand!

"I am taking too long," she said hurriedly. "Your awakening came then. You read in a paper of the discovery of a brutal and revolting crime in the Yukon—the murder of Joe Laynton. The snow had melted, and a trooper of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police had found the body. If ever there was a *prima facie* case of murder it was there: The axe wound, presupposing a quarrel, the blood-soaked bunk, the final wound from a revolver shot, the absence of any weapon left in the possession of the dead man, the fact that he had apparently been stripped of his money, and, most damning of all, that *you* had disappeared. It all came back to you in a flash then; and, like the last straw, adding to this array of evidence already against you, you realized that you were now living under an *assumed* name. The letter, written and signed by Laynton, that would have saved you, was gone. You naturally did not know that it had been stolen from you; you believed that you had lost it. It would take a very brave man, and a man that was very sure of himself indeed, to judge you for what you did then. Without that paper, you, an innocent man, were already as good as hanged if you gave yourself up. You continued to live on as Dayler. Twenty years went by. You prospered. You lived in all quarters of the globe. No breath of suspicion ever associated John Dayler with John Forbes. But you knew, because you knew the record of the Royal Northwest Mounted, that the Men Who Never Sleep had not forgotten the case, nor given over the search—and that they never would. But at last, with the long lapse of years, you felt yourself secure; and finally, a few years ago, you came here and settled in New York."

Dayler's head came up. He passed his hand across his eyes.

"How do you know all these things?" he asked again.

"Does it matter?" she answered. "They are true, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are true." His voice was scarcely audible.

"It was Keats who found you, not the Royal Northwest Mounted," she continued. "Keats had long ago left the Yukon, and had settled in Chicago—a drunkard. He was an old man now, and down and out, living from hand to mouth. I do not know how he found you; I only know that after all these years he decided to make restitution, though counting no doubt on you giving him some money in return for the letter. However, be that as it may, two days ago a man brought you a sealed envelope, which he said a man named Keats, who had just died in Chicago, had confessed, as he was dying, to have stolen from you, and that Keats, as a last request, had asked that it be given back to you. You opened the envelope, and found that it contained Laynton's letter. With this in your possession at last you were absolutely secure, even in the very improbable event of anything ever being done by the police. Why then, after twenty years, should you voluntarily open the case and disrupt the associations you had formed, and your life as you had molded it in all that time? In any event, you would consider long and carefully before taking so vital and

momentous a step. I do not know what your final decision was, or even if you have come to one yet; but, pending such a decision, you—" She motioned suddenly across the table. "But first, will you please open the table drawer in front of you, Mr. Dayler."

He obeyed her, a sort of slow wonder in his movements. The drawer, open, disclosed, among other supplies of stationery, a pile of long, manila envelopes.

She motioned again—this time to the envelopes.

"You sealed the letter up again, in one of those envelopes and put it away. And that brings us to to-night. I would like to have you show that letter to"—she indicated Billy Kane with a curt nod of her head—"this man here."

For an instant Dayler did not move, then he stiffened back in his chair, his eyes narrowed.

"I begin to see!" His jaws snapped hard together. "So that's what you are after! You propose to steal that paper from me, and then blackmail me with it afterwards. It is the letter that you want!"

"And perhaps you will get it for us?" she suggested softly.

There was a grim sort of finality in Dayler's short, unpleasant laugh.

"No!" he said.

"Well then"—she still spoke softly—"suppose I were to tell you that the Men Who Never Sleep have been advised that Dayler and John Forbes are one, and that they are travelling down from the Canadian West now, and that to-morrow you will be arrested—and *that the letter is already gone.*"

"Gone!" It came in a startled cry. Dayler half rose from his chair, but dropped back again quite coolly, a sarcastic smile suddenly on his lips. "Clever!" he said ironically. "Quite a pretty little ruse to get me to indicate the whereabouts of that paper! Perhaps you will try something else now!"

"Bundy"—she turned calmly to Billy Kane—"open the door of that little cupboard on the left of the mantel."

Billy Kane stepped across the room in a sort of mechanical obedience, and opened the leaded glass door—just as Dayler, his self-assurance shaken now, jumped from his chair, and rushed to the mantel.

"Perhaps"—her voice came calmly again from the table—"Mr. Dayler prefers to look for himself, after all, Bundy!"

The man seemed to be fighting desperately for a grip upon himself, and again his jaws snapped hard together.

"No!" he cried. "It's another trick to get the combination of that safe, to get me to open it! Do you think I'm a fool to let that paper go now, even at the cost of my life, after you have so kindly warned me that I am to be arrested to-morrow? You would have done better not to have talked quite so much!"

"Open the safe, Bundy!" she instructed evenly. "Watch him, Mr. Dayler, and satisfy yourself."

The dial whirled deftly, swiftly, under Billy Kane's fingers. The steel door swung open.

"*Gone!* My God, it is gone!" Dayler's cry now was broken, almost inarticulate. His head half buried in the cupboard, he was staring into the empty safe. And then he reeled back to the table, and stood there clawing at its edge, gray to the lips, looking from one to the other.

"I have not quite finished my story," she said quietly. "It is quite true that Keats is dead; but he did not die two or three days ago, he has been dead well over a month. Nor did he die from natural causes. He was murdered. There is a gigantic Crime Ring in this country, whose headquarters are here in New York, that is as implacable and heinous as it is far-spread and powerful. Keats, far under the influence of liquor in a low dive one night and in maudlin self-admiration at the idea of making restitution to you, became drunkenly confidential, and his 'confidant,' as it happened, was an old broken-down yegg of about his own age, too old for active work at his sordid trade, a pensioner, a hanger-on, as it were, of this Crime Ring, who made himself as valuable as he could in any way that he could. He reported the story. Keats was promptly murdered—not so much for the sake of the paper, for that could easily have been taken from him without resorting to murder, but that there should be no Keats, with his change of heart, ready to take the witness stand in your behalf, and therefore render the paper of no value to them at all. The Crime Ring did not, however, act with the same haste as far as you were concerned. That is not their way! They watched you, they became thoroughly conversant, intimately acquainted with you, and your house, and your mode of living. It was necessary that they should do so before the next move could be decided upon. It was essential that you should know that the document was still in existence, and it was equally essential that you should know

Keats was dead and would therefore never be able to help you with his testimony. The actual delivery of the document into your hands was the really clever and finished play to make, for it not only accomplished those ends naturally, simply, and without possibility of alarming you, but your temporary possession of the letter would also psychologically enhance its value in your eyes and make the shock of its subsequent loss all the greater—and you all the more *generous!* But unless they could be sure of recovering it—if for instance you had a safe-deposit vault where you would likely place it—that plan would not do at all, and some other must be devised. They satisfied themselves on that score, however; and the discovery of that wall safe, and, incidentally, its combination, made it as certain as anything is humanly certain that they would know where to find the letter again when they wanted it. And, finally, there was the police, the men of the Royal Northwest Mounted, to be put upon your trail. It was only when you stood facing arrest for murder, and only when that paper was all that stood between you and the hangman's noose, that it was worth—well, perhaps you will say what it is worth? That is the situation to-night, Mr. Dayler."

The man was rocking on his feet, still clawing at the edge of the table for support. He seemed to have lost all self-control.

"Blackmail!" he said, through dry, twitching lips.

"And without any come-back!" She shrugged her shoulders. "You are rated at a quarter of a million. What will you give for that paper?"

Dayler did not answer at once. He reached out behind him, felt for the arm of his chair, and sat down heavily. He spoke at last, brushing his hand nervously across his forehead.

"I—I'll give—ten thousand dollars," he said hoarsely.

"You do not place a very complimentary value on your life," she said evenly.

"Twenty." His hand still nervously brushed at his forehead. "Twenty-five."

Her laugh rippled through the room. It was low and coolly disdainful, but it seemed to Billy Kane, standing by the mantel, tight-lipped, watching the scene, that it held, too, a queer, underlying, tremulous note.

Dayler wet his lips.

"Thirty-five."

"That paper is the only thing that will save you," she explained monotonously. "Is money any good to you—unless you live?"

It was Dayler who laughed now, but it was hysterically. His hands would not remain still. He had let his head alone now, and, instead, kept laying his hands on the table in front of him, by turns opening and clenching them, and they left damp prints on the top of the table.

"Fifty—I—I'll make it fifty thousand dollars," he whispered.

She shook her head.

"My God!" It was a helpless cry. Dayler stretched out his arms imploringly. "You don't understand! It's not easy for me to get even that amount. I'm not worth what you think I am. I—I've gone the limit."

Her voice was still monotonous.

"Are you *sure?*" she asked.

"Give me—give me time, and—and I might make it a little more." There was no doubt of the agonized sincerity in the man's voice. "Perhaps—sixty."

"No!" she said. She was on her feet now, her voice breaking a little. "I want more than that—what it will perhaps be harder for you to give than sixty thousand dollars. I want your forgiveness for what I have just made you suffer—for this scene here. I had reasons, reasons that I believed justified me." She glanced at Billy Kane. "I do not think you would understand, and I am afraid you would not see the justification in them even if I tried to explain, and so"—she had drawn the manila envelope from the bodice of her dress, and was holding it out to him—"I can only ask you to forgive me."

He took the envelope wonderingly, rising slowly to his feet. He was like a man dazed. Stupefaction, incredulity, a mighty relief, mingled their expressions in his face. He turned the envelope over and over; and then, opening it, extracted a folded piece of paper from within. And then for the second time his laugh rang through the room, but now it was a laugh like the laugh of a man that was insane, high-pitched, sustained.

"Go on!" he cried wildly. "Go on with your hellish tricks! What's next?"

Billy Kane had involuntarily stepped closer to the table. He drew in his breath sharply now, in an amazed, startled way. Dayler was holding a *blank* piece of paper in his hands!

And she, too, was leaning tensely forward. He glanced at her. She turned her head toward

him; and out of a face that was as white as death, her dark eyes burned full of fury and bitter condemnation, as they fixed upon him.

"I see it now!" Her lips were quivering with passion. She steadied her voice with an obvious effort. "I gave you credit for too much! I caught you at your work just a second too late. I thought you were taking an envelope out of the safe, whereas you were attempting to put one *in*! The one you took out was already in your pocket. You were checkmating your miserable accomplices unquestionably—but it was for your own ends! You were playing the traitor to them and to me at the same time. You meant, with your cold-blooded cunning, to use that paper against Mr. Dayler for your own private gain. You lied to me! It wasn't an empty safe to which you meant to introduce the Cadger and Gannet; there was a little more finesse, it clouded the issue a little more to put a dummy envelope there. And it was so easy! Just one of those envelopes taken from the drawer there, and a piece of paper slipped inside!" She paused an instant, surveying him with merciless eyes. "I hardly suppose that you would be fool enough not to have already put it in a safer place than your pocket, but if you still have it there—*hand it over!*"

Billy Kane did not move. Somehow he was not paying undivided attention to her. It was the Man with the Crutch who seemed to be standing there in her place, grinning at him—only he could not see the man's face. And then, with a mental jerk, he pulled himself together. He could not tell her that he had almost caught someone else in the act of stealing the paper, but that the "some one else" had got away. It would sound ridiculous! She would laugh in his face! He could not tell her that, like a thunderbolt falling upon him, there had just come the realization that the Man with the Crutch had stolen the paper after all. He could not explain the Man with the Crutch, Peters' murder, a hundred other things, so that she would believe him, without telling her that he was Billy Kane. And he could not tell her that he was Billy Kane! The old, hard, ironical, mirthless smile came to his lips. He was—the Rat!

"Maybe you'd like to search me!" he snarled insolently.

She turned to Dayler. The man had sunk into his chair again and was smiling now, but in a horribly apathetic sort of way.

"Mr. Dayler," she said quietly, "it does not matter in the least if he has got rid of it for the moment. I promise you that paper will be in your possession again by to-morrow morning." She swung on Billy Kane, and pointed to the door. "I think you heard what I said, Bundy"—her voice was ominously low now, strained with menace—"I will give you until to-morrow morning to produce that paper. The alternative is the electric chair."

She was still pointing to the door.

He shrugged his shoulders. What was the use! The net was closing tighter about him, tighter than ever before, and the strands now were like some devil's tentacles that would not let go. He swung on his heel abruptly, and without a word left the room.

XIX—A HOLE IN THE WALL

Once in the street, Billy Kane started hurriedly in the direction of the Bowery. He hastened on, his mind in a state of chaotic turmoil. Presently he turned into the cross street, a block away from the Rat's den. He had until morning. It was thoughtful of her to have given him that much time! The Man with the Crutch had the paper, of course. Red Vallon and the Pippin had had since noon to find the man. If the man were not found by morning the rôle of the Rat would be at an end. There was something damnably ironical in that! He had wanted the rôle of the Rat to end. And now he didn't want it to end on account of this Man with the Crutch, who was disastrously likely to bring that end about! He needed the rôle now more than ever in order to use it against this Man with the Crutch, because the other held the knowledge that would enable him, Billy Kane, to cast off the rôle forever; yet if he didn't find the man, and even before morning, the rôle, and quite as certainly forever, would be cast off for him!

He swept his hand across his eyes. His brain seemed to be working in some silly, sing-song cycle, and yet it was quite logical. And then his shoulders squared. For the night at least he was

still the Rat, and the underworld was at the Rat's beck and call. If Red Vallon and the Pippin could not find the Man with the Crutch, he would unleash the underworld to help them pick up the scent. First, however, he must get in touch with Red Vallon. But that should not be difficult, for Red Vallon, whether he had had any success or not, was certain to make a report before the night was very much older, and—

Billy Kane halted suddenly, and turned around, as a low voice hailed him. A man was hurrying along behind him. He smiled grimly. A little luck, at least, seemed to be breaking for him at the start. Here was Red Vallon now. Billy Kane, in apparent indifference, started on again in the direction of the den.

"Hello!" he said gruffly, as the gangster caught up with him and fell into step alongside.

Red Vallon chuckled low.

"We got him!" he said. There was hoarse elation in the gangster's voice.

A fierce uplift swept in an almost overmastering surge upon Billy Kane. His answer, however, was little more than a grunt of approval.

"You have—eh?" he said.

"You bet your life!" exclaimed the gangster jubilantly. "You know Marlot's saloon? Well, the guy lives next door in that old motheaten shack. Some place! The police have been leery of it for a long while. There's mostly a bunch of slick-fingers hang out there. Get me? He's got the back room—used to be the kitchen, I guess. He's a smooth one, all right! He's got a private entrance of his own when he doesn't want to go in or out by the front; the old back door opens right into his room from the yard. Savvy?"

Billy Kane nodded his head shortly in affirmation. He took a cigarette from his pocket, and lighted it nonchalantly.

"But, say"—the elation in the gangster's voice was growing still more pronounced—"that ain't all! The Pippin spotted his nibs through the window from the yard a few minutes ago. Say, what do you think, Bundy! The cripple hobbles across the room, and pulls the old washstand away from the wall, and lifts up an innocent-looking piece of the wall paper that you'd think was stuck down for fair. The Pippin had only a rip in the window shade to see through, and he couldn't see very well, but he could see a dinky little hole there in the wall, and a satchel inside, and the cripple takes something out of his pocket and slips it into the hole, and smooths the wall paper back again. The Pippin beat it out of there then, and found me, and he's just wised me up."

It was quite dark here on the street, but even so Billy Kane kept his face turned slightly away from the gangster. The blood was racing in one mad, ungovernable flood of feverish excitement through his veins. It seemed somehow as though a weight that had been unendurable, an actual physical burden beyond his strength to bear, had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders. The Man with the Crutch! From the prior events of the evening, from what Red Vallon had just said, there was no possibility that the Pippin had stumbled upon *another* man with a crutch. This was the one, without question, without room for a single shadow of a doubt. And he as good as had the man now! He flicked the ash from his cigarette with his forefinger, and nodded curtly again.

"Figure it out for yourself," said Red Vallon, a sort of eager self-complacency in his voice. "Of course, the man had nothing to do with that murder last night, but the police know he was around there lugging a satchel, and you add to that the crook dump where he lives, and a guy that has a nifty little hiding place in the wall with a satchel in it—and where does he get off? I ain't throwing any bouquets at myself, Bundy, but I told you I'd pull something good this trip, and I guess you got to hand it to me for delivering the goods. Pipe this, Bundy! The police think the Pippin's a stool-pigeon anyhow. Well, five minutes ago I sent the Pippin to tip off the police, while I beat it up here to put you wise. Get me? With all that stuff against the guy, he ain't got a hope. He goes up for that murder, and that lets you out, Bundy."

Billy Kane stood still. They had reached the cellarlike entrance to the Rat's den, but he made no move to descend the short, cavernous stairway. A little way up the block the street lamp seemed suddenly to be swirling around and around in swift, lightning-like irregular flashes. The blood that had rushed hotly, madly through his veins but an instant before was cold and sluggish now, as though some icy tourniquet were at work upon his heart, stilling its action.

"That lets you out, Bundy." The words mocked and jeered at him. Let him out! It was ruin, disaster, death—unless in some way he could forestall this move of Red Vallon. He fought desperately for control of himself. That envelope, her threat, his own desire to get at the man, were like issues fading into the background. He knew that the man *was* the murderer of Peters, and if the police, whether they caught the man or not, found what he believed they would find in that satchel—some at least of those rubies from the Ellsworth vault—then Red Vallon, this man

standing here, who with horrible callousness, but equally with the genuine motive of protecting the Rat, was ironically planning, while believing him innocent, to send the guilty man to his death, would know absolutely beyond question that the Rat had *not* killed Peters last night, that last night's alibi was a lie, and that he, Billy Kane, was the man in the mask, at whose throat Red Vallon and his gang asked nothing better than to hurl themselves like a pack of starving wolves!

To get rid of Red Vallon! Any excuse—anything! To get rid of the man—without an instant's delay!

He shoved out his hand to the gangster.

"I won't forget this, Red!" he said earnestly. "Take it from me, I won't forget it! But you beat it now, Red. That Dayler game went wrong to-night—the Cadger'll tell you about it, if you see him—and I haven't got a minute. See—Red?"

"Sure! All right!" agreed the gangster heartily. "Well, so long, Bundy!"

Billy Kane shook hands again—with a grip that was hard and eloquent.

"So long, Red!" he said.

The gangster turned away. Billy Kane dove down the stairs, opened the door of the den, locked it behind him, darted across the room in the darkness, and in another minute, crawling through the tunnel from the secret door, gained the shed and the street at the rear. He ran breathlessly now. What did it matter if any one saw him! Time alone was all that counted! If he could not beat the police in the race to that room he was as good as dead already!

His mind worked swiftly, incisively, as he ran. The Pippin had had, say, ten minutes' start, but it was only a few blocks to that house next door to Marlot's saloon, and it would take a little while at least for the police to make their preparations before acting on the Pippin's information. The chances lay with him, Billy Kane. The man might, or might not, be there. It did not matter in so far as the main issue was concerned. It was that handbag and its contents that were the vital factor now—and, yes, if he got that, the envelope too—they would both almost certainly be in the same hiding place—inasmuch as that hiding place was a crafty one. If the man *were* there, then it seemed as though irony would have piled itself on irony to-night, for he would automatically for the time being become the *ally* of the man with whom he asked only a deadly reckoning! He did not want the police to get the Man with the Crutch. Whatever the story the man might tell to account for his connection with Peters, it was certain that he would not be fool enough to tell the truth about the murder of David Ellsworth! And if the police had the Man with the Crutch in custody, then he, Billy Kane, was irrevocably barred from that reckoning which he meant to have.

He had been perhaps five minutes. He was trying the door now of a wretched, two-story frame building, that hugged, as its right-hand neighbor, a saloon that was almost as disreputable in appearance as itself. The door was unlocked. He stepped inside, and, feeling his way in the darkness, but still moving rapidly, passed down a narrow hall. By the sense of touch he was aware that there were rooms on only one side, the left-hand side, and that there were two of them. He brought up abruptly against a door now that made the end of the passage; the door of the rear room of the house obviously, and obviously, therefore, the "home" of the Man with the Crutch. It was silent everywhere in the house. He smiled a little grimly. He knew the place well enough by reputation to account for that silence. It was a crooks' nest, a crooks' lodging house, and, being night, the tenants had gone to work!

He slipped his mask over his face, and rapped on the door. There was no answer. He rapped again; and then his skeleton keys came into play. The man had obviously returned here from Dayler's to get rid of that envelope, though probably not at once, for it must have been then that the Pippin had seen him; but now apparently he had gone out again.

The door yielded upon the trial of the third key. Billy Kane flung it open, stepped inside, and his flashlight played through the blackness. As he had expected, the room was empty. He locked the door again, and crossed quickly to the rear door. This he found opened inward. He looked out. This took a few seconds, but an accurate knowledge of his surroundings was worth even more than that should he be caught here. The door opened on practically a level with the ground; and it had an old-fashioned latch, with heavy iron handles, loop-shaped, below the thumb-pieces. He closed the door, and bolted it, smiling appreciatively as he noted that the bolt moved both readily and silently, as though in carefully oiled grooves.

His flashlight played around the room again now. The window shade was drawn. He located the washstand—and frowned suddenly in perplexity. A crutch leaned against the washstand. His face cleared the next instant. Why shouldn't the man have an extra one? Perhaps he had to buy them in pairs, though he used only one at a time.

Billy Kane stepped swiftly to the washstand, and, preparatory to pulling it away from the

wall, lifted up the crutch—and the next instant was examining the latter critically. It was extremely heavy. He whistled low under his breath. It was not only a crutch, it was a murderous weapon! The shaft of the thing, though painted a wood color, was solid iron! He set it down and pulled out the washstand; then, picking up the crutch again, he slashed it along the line of the wall where the washstand had been. A large piece of the wall paper came away, disclosing a neatly constructed little hiding place, some two feet long by a foot in depth. A queer, twisted smile was on Billy Kane's lips. In there lay only two articles—but they were a manila envelope, and a small handbag.

He snatched up the envelope, and tore it open. A glance at the faded writing was enough; it was Joe Laynton's letter of twenty years ago. He stuffed it into his pocket; and, almost more eagerly than before, reached into the aperture again, and took out the handbag. But now his fingers seemed to have gone clumsy with excitement as he fumbled with the catches. No, it was locked. Well, his steel jimmy would soon settle that! He pried the bag open, and stood staring at its contents. And the contents were not rubies! And then he laughed a little, as he lifted out and examined a package of banknotes. It did not matter, did it—the rubies or the money! It linked the Man with the Crutch with the Ellsworth murder just the same. This was the money, and apparently intact, that had been in the Ellsworth vault; the paper bands pinned around the packages, and marked in red ink with the amount in each package, had been pinned there and marked by himself!

It was strange, very strange! He restored the steel jimmy to his pocket, and attempted to fasten the bag with its end catches, but the frame had been bent in prying the bag open, and the catches would not work easily. It was very strange! How had this Man with the Crutch, so intimately connected with Peters' and David Ellsworth's murders, come also to be so intimately conversant with the Crime Trust's game with Dayler?

His mind kept striking off at tangents, as he struggled with the bag. He could not carry a bag that would gape open! Once he got it to the den, that hole in the flooring, that he had thought so futile a reward for his search, would not be so futile after all. The bag would fit very nicely, and very securely, in there! Iron crutches weren't usually made in *pairs*. That was queer, too! Was it an iron crutch that was the blunt instrument that had caused Peters' death—and David Ellsworth's? Why had the man used that dummy envelope to-night, and—

His flashlight was out. Footsteps were creeping cautiously along the hall outside. The police! The bag would have to do as it was now; but at least one catch was partially fastened. He tucked it under his arm, and for the fraction of a second, while he thrust the flashlight back into his pocket, he stood still; and then, a sudden, curious smile on his lips, he reached out and picked up the crutch again, and stole silently over to the rear door. The smile was lost as his lips thinned into a straight line. Yes, they were already here too! Well, the crutch might perhaps still serve the same purpose!

His ear to the panel, a whisper reached him:

"Put your shoulder to it, Jerry, and push with me, when I get the bar in the crack of the door."

"All right," another voice whispered. "The others will have been around at the front long ago. Are you ready?"

The door creaked under a sudden pressure; and as suddenly from the wall at the edge of the door, Billy Kane reached out and released the bolt. The door swung violently open, and two figures, their balance lost, sprawled and staggered into the room. And in a flash Billy Kane, as he leaped through the doorway, snatched at the door, slammed it shut, jabbed the crutch, as a lock-bar, through the iron loop of the door handle, its end extending well over the frame of the doorway—and sprinted across the yard.

There was a yell, and a battering thud on the door behind him, as he reached a fence at the end of the yard, swung himself to the top and dropped to the lane beyond. And then, as he ran, there came a crash of broken glass. They had evidently forsaken the door for the window!

For a hundred yards Billy Kane ran at top speed along the lane; and then, removing his mask, the bag concealed under his coat, he emerged into the intersecting street, and dropped into a casual and quiet stride.

He smiled queerly.

They would be looking for a cripple who, having sacrificed his crutch to save his life, could at best but limp and hobble painfully along!

XX—THE CAT'S-PAW

It was black with a blackness that seemed to possess tangible substance, as though it wrapped itself around and enveloped the body with a pall whose very texture could be felt. It was unknown ground, and the foot reached out uncertainly, wary of where next it might find lodgment, and the hands stretched out, as a blind man's hands stretch out, feeling for hidden things through space. It was dank and musty, and in the nostrils was an earthy, cavernous smell; and there was a silence that seemed guarded by the very bowels of the earth itself. And in the silence and the darkness peril lurked—a peril that merged courage into foolhardiness for one who would invite it, and set the nerves on edge, and kept the muscles taut like tight-strung bow strings, and stimulated the senses into abnormal activity until the eyes peopled the darkness with phantoms that were not there, and the ears created sounds that did not exist.

Billy Kane's face, under the mask, was drawn in hard, strained lines; he raised his right hand, that gripped his automatic, and drew the back of his hand across his forehead. Foolhardiness! Yes, that was it! He was a fool to come here, to take the risk! He knew Wong Yen's by reputation as one of the most infamous Chinese underground dives in the Bad Lands; he remembered it concretely from that incident of a few nights ago when Laverto had had young Clancy drugged here. Was that only a few nights ago? He shook his head. Since those few nights ago he no longer measured the passing of time by normal standards; he had lived all his life since those few nights ago!

He moved forward through the blackness, cautiously, silently. Where was the next wall? Or was there any wall at all? His hands, reaching out as far as they could stretch, touched nothing. This was below the ordinary cellar level; it was a sub-cellar, a chain of sub-cellars. How many men had entered here, yes, and women too—and disappeared? A murder hole! And up above him somewhere was New York—millions of people, taxicabs, crowded sidewalks, theatres, and, yes, churches, places where people worshipped. Incredible!

He had heard of places like this, and so had the public; and the public smiled in self-sufficient tolerant amusement. Well, why not, where even the police were ignorant! Everybody admitted that the Chinese quarter was full of ridiculously imitated catacombs perhaps; but what did it matter if in a block of houses the inmates burrowed from cellar to cellar like rats, and built mysterious doors and passageways, and threw about everything the disguise of wicked and shuddering things—when it was only disguise! It was good for business. The gape-wagons and the slumming conductors profited and so did the Celestials; and the slummers, satiated with thrills, the women drawing their skirts closely around their silk-clad ankles, the men surreptitiously feeling in their pockets to assure themselves that their watches and valuables were still in their possession, got their money's worth. Everybody was satisfied, and the public smiled.

Billy Kane's fingers tightened on the butt of his automatic. Back somewhere behind him in the darkness a Chinaman still guarded a door that neither slummer nor police had ever entered; but the guard was a gagged and huddled thing on the floor now, still senseless probably from the blow on the head from this same pistol butt. There had been no other way. The man was not far behind—just at the entrance so skilfully disguised by an ordinary coal bin. Was there still another guard in front of him? More than one? If he only dared to use his flashlight for a second! A fool to come here where, if caught, he would not have a chance of escape, was he? Well, perhaps—only there was a man's life at stake.

Perhaps he was already too late! Red Vallon had said, though, that there wasn't any hurry about "bumping off" the Wop, that they had him safe in here "with his bean tapped to keep him quiet until they finished the rest of the game." It was less than an hour ago that Red Vallon had said that, and it was only eight o'clock now, and the "rest of the game," to give it every chance of success, would not be played out for still another hour yet, not before old Barloff had closed up for the night. He wasn't too late, he couldn't be too late—there was a man's life at stake: only an ex-convict's, a man out from Sing Sing but a few hours ago. Just a prison bird! But the Wop was innocent this time and—

Was that a sound there from somewhere in front of him? Billy Kane stood still. Nothing! No; a dozen sounds that were not really sounds at all. His ears were full of uncanny noises.

The back cellar entrance beneath a Chinese tea-shop, and after that the rear of the coal bin! Billy Kane was laughing to himself, but the laugh was void of mirth. There was a grim, horrible

sort of irony about it all. Believing him, Billy Kane, to be the Rat, Red Vallon had *reported* the accomplishment of the first stage in the execution of the plan with gusto. After that, deft questioning had elicited from the gangster the secret of this entrance to Wong Yen's, and then luck, and then the guard taken unawares. The guard could hardly be blamed. The guard naturally enough, had little reason to suspect the approach to that coal bin of any one who had not the "open sesame" to what was beyond, and he had been lurking there where the boards of the bin ingeniously slid apart, and had shown not the slightest uneasiness at his, Billy Kane's, presence until it was too late. Then there had been a steep, narrow passage downward, and then—*this*. Beyond, near or far, he did not know which, these sub-cellars hid the real thing that the so-called underground Chinatown above counterfeited, hid debauchery and vice, and cradled crime, and here the poppy reigned, and the dregs of humanity skulked fearful of the sunlight.

"They had flung the Wop into a corner and left him until they got around to finishing the job," Red Vallon had explained callously. The Wop, therefore, must be somewhere near at hand. But he, Billy Kane, could see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing.

His physical faculties strained and alert, subconsciously Billy Kane's mind was milling over that conversation with the gangster of an hour ago, and upon him, in spite of his own present peril, there came a cold and merciless fury. It was more to-night than the ordinary moral obligation, more than the mere responsibility to render abortive the crimes that came to his knowledge through his tenure of this rôle of the Rat, that was actuating him now; it was the callous, damnable brutality of the scheme that, linked with its hellish ingenuity, seemed to outrage every instinct of manhood he possessed, and fired him with an overmastering desire, not only to frustrate the crime itself, but to take toll in a personal, physical way, if he could, from those who were enacting it.

It was one of those plans, conceived by the Rat, that waited patiently for its hour of maturity to arrive, and then was executed and carried through to its fulfilment by the minions of that Directorate of crime of which the Rat appeared to be the most versatile and vicious member, but without the Rat, necessarily, taking any further active part in it. And he, Billy Kane, who fate had seen fit to mold with features that were evidently a counterpart of that master rogue's, who was for the moment accepted and obeyed as the Rat, and was supposed to be the originator of the plan itself, could not very well ask Red Vallon, for instance, for details! Therefore he did not know all the details, but he knew enough!

He had wormed quite a little out of Red Vallon without the gangster suspecting anything more than that he, Billy Kane as the Rat, was taking particular pains to see that the stage was properly set, and that the possibility of failure was reduced to its absolute minimum. It was very simple. It required simply a man's life—the murder of the Wop.

He knew something of the Wop, for the Wop's story was common property. The Wop, in the old days, five years ago, before he had gone "up the river" for a "job" in the line which was his particular specialty, was known both as a tough customer and as one of the cleverest "box-workers" in the safe-cracking profession. The testimony of one Ivan Barloff had been mainly responsible for the Wop's capture and conviction, and the Wop had travelled to Sing Sing with a thirst for vengeance gnawing at his soul, and with the threat quivering on his twisted lips that he would get even with the other when he got out again. Nor had the five years of prison hell seemed to assuage any of the Wop's desire to square accounts! He had repeated his threat many times in prison, and he had been indifferent as to who heard him. The feud was no secret to the police. That was the gist of it.

As for Ivan Barloff, Billy Kane was somewhat more precisely informed, both because the time he, Billy Kane, had spent on the East Side in carrying out David Ellsworth's philanthropies could hardly have been passed without at least a hearsay acquaintanceship with so well-known a character in that quarter as Ivan Barloff, and because, too, Red Vallon, in that last interview, had seemed to take a malicious delight in exploiting his own vastly more intimate knowledge of the little old Russian of many parts. On his own account he knew, naturally, only what the public knew and believed about the man: Barloff was a sort of father to the flock, a very numerous flock, of Poles and Russians of the uneducated and illiterate class. He was all things to them. He was counselor and confidant, he was money lender, he was entrusted with what money they had as savings for investment, he wrote their letters, he collected their rents, being a kind of owners' sub-agent, and he lived amongst them, alone, in a little old frame house that was sandwiched in among the ramshackle tenements that housed so many of his compatriots in that section. In appearance he was a very dirty and unkempt old man, and ostensibly he was as honest as he was dirty—and he was accepted as such by public, police and compatriots alike.

Red Vallon, however, had thrown quite a different light on the other's character. The man possessed the craft and cunning of a devil, and a devil's inhumanity. He had fed like a leech on the guileless trust of his ignorant clientele. He had made money—a great deal of money. Thousands were stored away in his rickety old safe, that was so rickety it disarmed suspicion; and, preserving his secret, he patronized no bank, but covered his constantly increasing fortune with the guise of squalor and poverty, which he kept on a level scarcely, if any, above that of those he filched.

The man was a miser of the most sordid and cold-blooded sort. A nickel was not too mean a thing to scheme for, if by any means he could lay his hands upon it. Also, the man had other remunerative relationships, very carefully selected relationships, with others than those with whom he openly associated. To a select few of the underworld he acted at times as "fence," receiving such stolen goods as he could readily dispose of among his compatriots, who, innocent of any guilty knowledge, bought the articles eagerly at a greatly reduced figure, imagining, if they stopped to imagine at all, that the articles represented unredeemed pledges on money loaned here and there by Barloff.

Billy Kane's lips twisted in a thin smile there in the darkness. It was a deal such as that, so he had gleaned from Red Vallon, that had originated the feud between Ivan Barloff and the Wop. The Wop had brought some of the proceeds of one of his predatory safe-breaking raids to Barloff, and a bargain was concluded between them; but in some way that night Barloff became aware that the police had followed the Wop to his, Barloff's, house. Barloff was taking no chances. He promptly cleared his own skirts at the expense of five years in Sing Sing for the Wop. He scurried to the nearest police station with the stolen articles, and with unctuous righteousness explained that he was suspicious as to how the Wop had come by them, but had bought them to pull the wool over the Wop's eyes so as to enable him, Barloff, to communicate with the police, and give the police a chance to make an investigation. Barloff got away with it, and the Wop got his ride "up the river." It was perhaps not unnatural that the Wop had sworn revenge, and had made no secret of it!

Billy Kane's twisted smile deepened. It was all very simple. It involved simply the taking of a man's life—the Wop's—which was a very small matter in the eyes of that Crime Trust which was running rampant now through the underworld. Also, the Rat was a man of large vision. He builded ahead and waited patiently. Barloff was known by the Rat to have a great deal of money in ready cash. It would not have been a very difficult matter perhaps to have robbed the old Russian at any time, but there was always the certainty of an investigation as an aftermath, and investigations sometimes had a tendency to lead in awkward directions. Much better, therefore, and much safer, that the trend of the investigation, and its limits, should be fixed in advance—by the Rat. And so they had waited for the Wop to regain his freedom.

They had not waited five years, however, for the scheme probably had not occurred to the Rat until perhaps a few months ago. But now the Wop being free at last, the Wop's first act of freedom was to be made to appear that of putting his oft-repeated threat into execution. Barloff was to be lured out of his house on some specious pretext, the house would then be entered, and a forged note in the Wop's scrawl, carefully prepared beforehand, jeering in its tone and to the effect that the Wop would have got Barloff as well as Barloff's cash if the latter had not been fortunate enough to have been out of the house at the time, would be left pinned, say, to the wall. There would not be much room for investigation! The Wop, being dead, would not make any defense. The Wop would never be found; and as the natural thing for the Wop to do was to disappear after leaving his defiant message behind him, who was to imagine that such disappearance was not of the Wop's own free will and design? The Wop was the cat's-paw!

The blackness was absolute. Billy Kane was feeling out again with both hands. He seemed to have lost in a measure even his sense of direction. He was either in a very much wider passage than that through which he had entered, or else the excavation around him was actually itself one of the sub-cellars. If he could but get the touch of a wall again to guide him! Yes, here it was! It swerved sharply, almost at right angles, to the left. He followed it, moving slowly, scarcely more than a few inches at a time.

It was strange how his brain worked on ceaselessly, seemingly oblivious to his immediate surroundings, seemingly concerned with things extraneous to his present danger! And yet that was not altogether true. One thing had a bearing on another; and one thing led to another. It was like the cogs of wheels fitting into each other as they turned around and around. This tenure of the Rat's rôle, that was no less dangerous, was apposite. Where was the Rat? While he, Billy Kane, fought to free himself from the stigma of David Ellsworth's murder, while he fought for his

own good name and his own life on that score, this rôle of the Rat, while it afforded temporary sanctuary from the police, forced him into perils that—

His lips compressed tightly. He had stumbled over something soft and yielding. His outstretched hand, though it saved him, slipped along the wall and came up against another wall, again at right angles, but this time where, obviously, the walls made a corner. He stooped down, and felt over the obstruction that his foot had encountered. It was a man's body. It moved now, and writhed a little at his touch. It was the Wop almost certainly, the Wop "flung into a corner" out of the way like a sack of meal. But the man was still alive. Thank God for that! He had been afraid that the initiatory stage of the work might have been only too well accomplished.

His hands felt upward along the bound body, and touched the other's face, and felt the cloth gag twisted and knotted around the man's mouth. His hands felt still a little higher up—to the close-cropped prison hair. It was the Wop beyond question. He took a knife from his pocket.

"Don't make a sound!" he breathed, as he removed the gag, and cut away the cords from around the other's feet and hands. "You're the Wop, aren't you?"

The man's affirmation was almost inarticulate. Billy Kane slipped his arm around the other's shoulders and lifted the man into a sitting posture. He had a flask of brandy in his pocket, brought purposely for the Wop's benefit, and he held the flask now to the other's lips. The stimulant seemed to inject new life and strength into the man.

"Who—who are you?" the Wop asked weakly.

"Don't talk!" Billy Kane cautioned. "The one thing to do is to get out of here now. Do you think you can walk at all?"

"Yes," the man answered. "I—I'm not as bad as all that."

"Try, then," said Billy Kane.

The progress was slow, pitifully slow. The Wop, despite his own assertion, was both weak and cramped, and at first he was almost a dead weight, as he clung with an arm flung around Billy Kane's shoulders; but gradually he appeared to get back his strength. They stopped every two or three yards both to rest and listen. Again Billy Kane held the flask to the other's lips. Again they went on.

"My Gawd, it's—it's black in here!" the Wop mumbled, and shivered a little.

Billy Kane made no answer. He was taking care now not to lose touch with the walls. The ground under foot was beginning to rise steeply. He caught his foot and almost fell over a huddled thing on the earth—the Chinese guard. A certain murk seemed to be penetrating the blackness. He stopped again, felt out in front of him, and listened intently for a moment, and then he placed his lips to the Wop's ear.

"There's an opening here into a coal bin," he whispered. "Get down on your hands and knees and crawl through. Straight across from the coal bin there's a short flight of steps up to a door that opens on the alley. We'll make a break for it now. Keep close to me. And don't make a noise. There's a cellar stairway to the room above, and the room above isn't likely to be empty! Understand?"

"Yes," said the Wop.

"Come on, then," said Billy Kane.

He crawled through the opening with the Wop at his heels, and rose to his feet, then gripping at the Wop's arm, he stole across the cellar, gained the steps and, an instant later, stepped out into a dark and narrow alleyway. He did not pause here; he hurried the Wop down the alleyway, and halted only when within a few yards of the first intersecting street: just far enough back in the alleyway to keep well beyond the radius of light from the adjoining thoroughfare.

Neither man spoke for a moment. After the silence of that death trap behind them, the roar of an elevated train from Chatham Square near by seemed to Billy Kane a din infernal, and greater only by a little than the rattle of wheels, the clatter of horses' hoofs, and the multitudinous noises of ordinary traffic. He could just make out the Wop's features. One side of the man's face was streaked with clotted blood stains; but apart from that the Wop now showed little outward evidence of the attack that had been made upon him. He stood there now, quite steady on his feet, his eyes studying Billy Kane's mask in a puzzled way.

"Say," said the Wop, a sudden huskiness in his voice. "I owe you something. What's your name?"

Billy Kane shook his head.

"Never mind about that," he said quietly. "There's something else that's of vastly greater importance so far as you are concerned. Do you know why they got after you to-night, or who it was that got you in that trap?"

"No," said the Wop.

"I'll tell you, then," said Billy Kane. "It was because you threatened to get even with Ivan Barloff."

"Barloff!" The Wop's fists clenched, and he stepped closer to Billy Kane. "So it was Barloff, was it? He must have had the fear of God in him, then, to make him spend any money—even to hire thugs! Barloff, eh? Well, I'm going to see Barloff pretty soon!"

"No, you're not!" said Billy Kane crisply. "That's exactly why I am telling you this. It isn't Barloff. It's a crowd that knew of your threat, and *they're* getting after Barloff, and framing you up for the job. They're planting a little evidence against you in Barloff's place in exchange for Barloff's cash, and with you finished off via the murder route, they expect the police to throw up their hands after a while and admit you've made a clean get-away—with the swag."

The Wop's face was close to Billy Kane's, and the Wop's face was suddenly pinched and white. He touched his lips with his tongue. And then, as suddenly, the blood flushed back, and he thrust out his under jaw truculently.

"They would, eh—the dirty swabs!" he snarled. "Who are they? I'll make 'em crawl for this!"

Billy Kane smiled grimly.

"No, I guess not!" he said softly. "You're very much better out of it. But I promise you they'll not get away with it if you'll do what you are told now."

The Wop knuckled his forehead in a perplexed way.

"What do you want me to do?" There was a lingering sullen note in the Wop's voice.

"Just this," said Billy Kane quietly. "I want you to get out from under. You're not looking for another five years in Sing Sing, are you?"

The Wop flinched. He drew his knuckles again across his eyes.

"No," he said hoarsely.

Billy Kane nodded.

"Quite so!" he said calmly. "Well, then, it is simply a question of establishing an alibi for you that will be absolutely hole-proof from now until, say, midnight. Where can you go?"

"I know Gus Moray, that runs the Silver King saloon," said the Wop. "He'd swear to it, all right."

"Yes; whether you were there or not!" said Billy Kane dryly. "That's not good enough! If anything breaks wrong to-night you've got to have something better than an alibi in a dive like that to stack up against what will look like open-and-shut evidence against you. You've got to get on a higher plane than that."

The Wop shook his head.

"I ain't been a very regular church attendant," he said, with a sickly grin, "and——" He stopped short, and suddenly leaned toward Billy Kane. "Say, would a minister do?"

"It would be an improvement," admitted Billy Kane, with a smile.

"Well, I got it, then!" announced the Wop. His hesitancy had vanished. He seemed eager, almost anxious now. The iron of five years of prison was evidently far too poignant a memory to risk it being turned into reality again. "I got it! There's a guy named Mister Claflin that ran one of them mission joints down around where I uster hang out before I went up. He's all right! He's the only soul on God's earth came near me when I was doing my spaces. Twice he came up to Sing Sing to see me. He didn't hold no prayer meeting with me neither, but he's got a grip in his hand that makes a fellow feel he ain't all dirt. He's white, he is!"

"Do you know where he lives?" inquired Billy Kane crisply.

"No," said the Wop, and was suddenly downcast. "And he ain't at the mission any more, 'cause he told me he'd got a regular layout uptown somewhere."

"No matter!" said Billy Kane cheerfully. "Any drug store has a directory. You can find the address there. Got any money?"

The Wop felt through his pockets, and the red flared into his face again.

"Frisked!" he flung out savagely.

Billy Kane handed the other a banknote.

"Spend this on the first taxi you can grab," he said. "You've got to get there as soon as you can, and you've got to keep under cover getting there. If Mr. Claflin is not at home, wait in his house for him. Don't let them sidetrack you. And make it a point of establishing the hour you get there, either with the minister himself, or whoever happens to be at home. And stay there until midnight anyhow. Understand?"

"Yes," said the Wop.

"Well, then," said Billy Kane, "beat it!"

The Wop hesitated.

"Say, ain't I going to know who you are?" he blurted out. "Say, I ain't anything but a crook, just a damned crook with a prison record, but—but I'd like to pay what I owe. Ain't you going to give me the chance?"

"You've got it now." Billy Kane's hand went to the other's shoulder. "It's a rotten road to Sing Sing. You're out of it now—stay out of it." He gave the Wop a friendly push toward the street. "We've no more time to lose. Beat it!" he said, and without giving the Wop time to reply, he turned abruptly, and ran back along the alleyway.

XXI—WITHOUT MERCY

Billy Kane went on to the intersecting street at the other end of the alleyway, removed his mask, and stepped out on the sidewalk. He looked at his watch under a street lamp, and smiled whimsically in surprise. It was still only half-past eight. All told, he could not have been in Wong Yen's more than fifteen minutes, hardly that, in fact, and it seemed as though he had been there half the night!

Well, it was Barloff's now! Barloff's was a little farther uptown, a little deeper over in the East Side. Billy Kane's smile, from whimsical, became tinged a little with weariness, became a little wan, as he walked along. He was the victim of a plot himself, that was aimed at his life, that sought to throw the guilt of a crime upon his shoulders, just as the Wop was. And circumstances not only permitted, but seemed to force him constantly into these byways to save others, while he himself stood condemned in the eyes of the public as a murderer and a thief; and there was bitter irony in the thought that he could not clear his own name, that he seemed powerless to help himself, while the mantle of one of the underworld's archcriminals, which temporarily afforded him sanctuary from the police, supplied him with almost unlimited information and the means of helping others!

His brows knitted suddenly into a puzzled frown. Was that altogether true?

There seemed to be a most strange coincidence in these excursions, forced or voluntary, of his into the byways of criminal things, a coincidence that always seemed in some way to link up his own plight with these other criminal schemes in which he became involved. There was the night that Peters had been murdered, for instance, which had led him to the knowledge that the Man With The Crutch was at least a co-murderer of David Ellsworth. And then the attempt at blackmail of two nights ago had again disclosed the hand of the Man With The Crutch, and, more significant still, had enabled him, Billy Kane, to recover the cash stolen from the library vault on the night of the Ellsworth murder. Who was this Man With The Crutch—this man with a crutch whose shaft was stained to resemble grained wood and so disguise the murderous iron of which it actually consisted, and which, he was sure now, was the weapon that had brought both David Ellsworth and Peters to their deaths?

Billy Kane shook his head. It was a curious chain of coincidence, but it could be only coincidence. And there was a limit to that. To-night, for instance, it would put a pretty severe strain upon the imagination to conceive of any connection between the Wop and the Man With The Crutch! And yet—

He shrugged his shoulders. He would have said the same thing two nights ago, wouldn't he? It was very strange! It was all strange! He seemed to be existing in a sphere of unreality. There was the Man With The Crutch, whom neither police nor underworld could find since that raid on the man's room; there was the constant, ominous swirl and eddy of hidden and unseen things on every hand; there was the Rat—and there was the Woman in Black!

His face softened suddenly. He had not seen *her* since yesterday morning when she had entered the Rat's den through the secret door, and he had returned to her Dayler's letter. She had not been in a pleasant mood at what she believed had been his trickery; and, failing to have restored that letter to her, she would have turned him, whom she, like every one else, believed to be the Rat, incontinently over to the police. What was the hold she had upon the Rat? Where was

she to-night? How was it that her hand had not already showed in this attempt upon the Wop, since she seemed to have always in her possession the details of the Rat's schemes?

He shrugged his shoulders again. What was the use! To-night, at least, she could harbor no delusion that he was acting under any spur of hers! No, that wasn't it—that wasn't what was troubling him. What troubled him was that she should think him what he was, or, rather, all that he was not! Strange that her opinion of him, even when his back was against the wall and his life was literally in jeopardy at every turn, should make any difference! Strange that the loathing and contempt in those brown eyes, that were fearless and deep and steady, should haunt him, and add to his own abhorrence of the rôle he played because he must let her think him the Rat! Well, what did it matter? What was she to him? What was she becoming to him? He laughed a little uncertainly. There was no need to answer that question, was there—even if he could? What did anything matter unless he could clear his own name, which was now mired deeper than the Rat's!

He turned a corner, walked on the length of a block, and on the next corner, drawing back into a doorway out of the radius of the street lamp, paused a moment to get his bearings. He smiled a little grimly. If the affair ever came to her knowledge, would she give the Rat credit this time for a spontaneous change of heart in saving the Wop's life, and saving Ivan Barloff's cash? He scowled suddenly. The latter proposition did not altogether please him. Barloff was not far removed in guilt from those who proposed to victimize Barloff! There would be a certain ironical justice in robbing from Barloff the cash that Barloff had all too patiently, a great portion of it at least, robbed from others! But Red Vallon and his pack were not to get it, were they? It was the lesser evil to warn Barloff, that was all. In the main, therefore, the night's work was over, since the Wop was safe, for five minutes' conversation with Barloff would end the whole affair now, so far as he, Billy Kane, was concerned.

He glanced down the street. Just a little ahead, on the opposite side, huddled in between two six-story tenements, was Barloff's squat, dingy, little house. There was a faint glow of light, as though it came from somewhere far in the interior, showing through the single front window on the ground floor. Billy Kane considered this thoughtfully for a few seconds. Barloff was at home evidently, but the probability was that one, at least, of Red Vallon's men was on watch in front of the house. In fact, it wasn't probability; it was a certainty. Barloff, according to Red Vallon, was to receive a fake telephone message that would lure him out of the house, and someone undoubtedly would be waiting to report the old Russian's exit. It therefore, to say the least of it, would be—Billy Kane's smile was mirthless—unwise for the Rat to walk up to Barloff's front door under the existing conditions!

He might have telephoned. He shook his head, as he crossed the road, and, keeping in the shadows, stepped into the cross street. He preferred to interview Barloff via Barloff's back yard. He was still obsessed with the desire to take personal toll from all concerned in the miserable night's work, but he realized that impulse and sane action did not always go hand in glove. He could not afford to play fast and loose with this rôle of the Rat, or take any unnecessary risks, but he could satisfy himself to the extent, at least, of a personal interview with Barloff, who was perhaps after all the most despicable of the lot, and put into the puny, shrivelled soul of the man a fear that would make for some degree of future righteousness!

A lane, as he had expected, ran in the rear of the tenements and Barloff's house. Billy Kane slipped into this, located Barloff's house, low-lying against the sky line between the taller buildings, swung himself over the fence, dropped noiselessly to the ground, and for a moment stood there motionless.

The yard was very small, and, but a few feet in front of him, a light from the open and uncurtained window of Barloff's rear room streamed out across the intervening space. Voices reached him, but he could not distinguish the words; neither, from where he stood, could he see anyone in the room, though the window was quite low, little more than breast high from the ground.

And then a form inside the room passed across the window space, a woman's form; and again a voice reached him, a woman's voice, and Billy Kane drew in his breath sharply. He still could not distinguish the words, but he had recognized the voice.

Once again he had jumped too hastily to conclusions in so far as she was concerned—it was the Woman in Black. There was no question as to why she was there; it was obvious that she had simply forestalled him in warning the old Russian; but—a perplexed frown furrowed Billy Kane's forehead—her hand would have showed a little late in the game to have saved the Wop!

He stole forward, keeping in the shadows of the side fence, reached the rear wall of the

house, edged across to the side of the window where he could both see and hear, and crouched there. His eyes swept the interior in a swift, comprehensive survey. It was a sordid, ill-furnished, bare-floored room, and very dirty. A seedy old morris chair in the center of the room supplied the only suggestion of comfort or luxury, and that an incongruous one, that the place possessed. Apart from that, there was a huge and aged safe, a relic of the days when such things were locked with keys, which was backed up against one wall; and near an open door, which apparently led into the front room, there was a battered desk with an equally battered swivel chair—and that was all, unless the telephone that stood upon the desk might be included in the furnishings. There was, however, another door, also open, which faced the safe, and which apparently gave on a passageway that in turn opened on the back yard. Billy Kane glanced around him. Yes, there was a rear door here, just a little to his right.

His eyes reverted to the interior of the room. *She* was still pacing up and down its length from the desk to the window and back again. Perhaps it was the effect of the green-shaded incandescent bulb that dangled over the desk, but, as she turned facing the window, he saw that her face, drawn in sharp, pinched lines, was very white, and that in the dark brown eyes, all softness gone from them now, there was a hard and bitter light. And at the desk, the old Russian, a gray-bearded and threadbare figure in dirty and grease-spotted clothes, huddled deep down in his chair, and wrung his hands together, and with little, black, shifty eyes, that peered over the rims of steel-bowed spectacles, followed her about in a fascinated sort of way, and the while he kept circling his lips with his tongue.

"The Wop! The Wop!" he shrilled out suddenly, and seemed to cower lower in his chair. "Yes, yes, I am afraid! My God, I am afraid! He is strong. He would have no pity on an old man. He has sworn it. I know! I have been afraid of this day. Why did they let him out? They know, too! And I was only honest—everybody knows that. He was a thief. What else could an honest man do except what I did? He—he will kill me, and——"

"The Wop is dead." Her voice was low, bitter, hard, and yet, too, it seemed to hold impatience and irritation directed against the Russian. "I have told you that. It is not the Wop you have to fear now. The Wop is dead."

"But you are not sure, not positive, not absolutely positive of it!" Barloff was wringing his hands the harder; and his tones, rather than being assertive, seemed to be pleading for a denial.

"I am positive enough of it," she answered evenly, "to see that the one who is responsible pays for it to-night! It is my fault"—her voice caught a little, but hardened instantly—"I trusted where I was a fool to trust, and I have paid for it with another's life. But that has nothing to do with you. You know now that the telephone message you received a little while ago was simply to lure you out of the house at half past nine in order that they might have a clear field in which, without contradiction, to make it appear that the robbery they are planning was the Wop's work. It is scarcely nine o'clock yet. You have plenty of time in which to act. You can appeal to the police, or——"

Billy Kane was no longer paying any attention to her words. Tense, strained, he stood there. He seemed to be trying to lash his brain into virility, into activity. He seemed to be groping out in an ineffectual mental way for some means to avert a disaster that he realized was closing down upon him. She believed the Wop was dead. She naturally held the Rat responsible—and he was the Rat, so far as she was concerned. She had warned him, without mincing words, that if any crime in which the Rat was involved was carried through to its fulfilment she would hold him responsible and hand him over to the police. She had reason to believe that he had already tried to double cross her once; she now believed that to-night he had tried to do it again. She would leave here, and go straight to the police. The police, then, would not only be looking for Billy Kane, they would be looking for the Rat—and they would get Billy Kane! And that would be the end of it all!

The end of it—when he already knew who the murderer of David Ellsworth was; when, apart from the collection of rubies, he had already recovered the proceeds of the Ellsworth vault robbery; when, if he could only cling for a few days more to this rôle he played, he might hope to clear his own name, to stand foursquare with the world again, and to bring to justice those who had taken old David Ellsworth's life. Somehow, in some way, he must prevent her from carrying out what was now her obvious intention of unmasking the Rat. But he dared not show himself in front of the house to intercept her when she went out—he dared not show himself as the Rat out there. To bring the underworld down upon him was only to invite a swifter destruction from another source.

He gnawed in perplexity at his lips, staring into the room. She kept pacing up and down.

Barloff had risen from his seat, and in a curious, cringing way, standing now by the rickety old safe, was fondling it and patting it with his hands.

"Yes, yes!" Barloff was crooning. "I thank you—I thank you! I do not know who you are, but I thank you! I have not much, very little, very, very little, but I am an old man, and what would become of me if I lost my little? The police, yes, the police——"

The old Russian, his back now to the window, was still talking, more to himself than to her. She came close to the window this time and Billy Kane suddenly showed himself. She was very clever, very self-centered, very sure of herself. If she was startled, she gave no sign of it. She came still closer until she leaned for a moment against the sill.

"Out here—the lane—when you leave!" he whispered quickly.

She nodded her head, but her lips had tightened in a forbidding little smile as she turned away again,

Billy Kane drew back from the window. There was a sense of relief upon him; but also a vague, disquieting, and very much stronger sense of something else that he could not quite define; only that between them there always seemed to stand that barrier of a forbidding smile, and that cool, contemptuous light in the brown eyes that very often changed from contempt to loathing and abhorrence. He shrugged his shoulders suddenly. He was a fool—that was all!

Her voice drifted out to him, dying away as he neared the fence:

"I am going now, Mr. Barloff, and I should advise you not to waste any time in taking whatever precautions you intend to take. You had better communicate at once with the police, and——"

Billy Kane swung himself over the fence, and stood there waiting in the lane. A minute, two, three passed, and then he caught the sound of a light step, and she stood before him in the darkness.

"Well?" she said curtly. "I am here, Bundy. What do you want?"

He was the Rat, alias Bundy Morgan, in her eyes, and it was the Rat who spoke.

"I heard you in there," he said gruffly. "You're going to beat it for the police, and wise them up about me. Well, you want to can that stunt, because I've got a little explanation to make. See?"

"You do not need to make any explanation," she answered evenly. "My stupidity is at an end! That enigmatic little memo of yours was a better safeguard in itself than the hiding place in which you had secreted it, for I did not understand it until I saw a few lines in the paper this evening giving a short résumé of the Wop's somewhat unedifying career, and stating that he had been released from prison. I was too late to save the Wop himself, but was not too late to prevent you from climbing in through that window, and carrying out the rest of your abominable scheme."

"I went there to warn Barloff myself," said Billy Kane.

She laughed icily.

"Do you expect me to believe that, after you have murdered a man so that you could put the onus of another crime upon him! This is the end to-night! I was mad to trust you at all. I was madder still to give you another chance, when I caught you playing a double game both with your own criminal associates and with me when you stole that letter from Dayler two nights ago!" She came a little closer to him. Both hands were tightly clenched. Her lips quivered a little; her voice choked. "I did not know what it was like to feel guilty of murder, to feel that one had taken another's life. I know now. My folly in giving you a moment's freedom has made me as guilty as you. But the end has come. Do you understand? You might put me out of the road, too, here in this lane, but that would not change the result any. You know that. You know in that case that the police would be after you anyway—that I have taken care of that. On the other hand, you may run for it now, and you may make it a question of hours, or a question of days, but as soon as the police lay hands on you your career is finished."

There was a strange stirring within Billy Kane's soul. She was very close to him, so close that he could see the pinched, haggard look in her face, and see the lips quiver again, and see the clenched hands rise to her eyes as though to shut out the abhorrent sight of him from her, and to shut out perhaps, too, the pictured sight of a man murdered, and for whose life she not illogically held herself accountable.

His hands gripped hard—hard as the mental grip in which he held himself. A sudden yearning, an almost uncontrollable impulse was upon him to reach out and sweep this lithe, fearless little figure that had become so mysteriously a part of his life, a greater part than he had ever realized before, into his arms. She would struggle like a wild cat, and fight with every ounce

of strength, yes, and hatred, that was in her, but he could hold her because he was the stronger, and tell her that he was not the Rat, and—— He swallowed hard. And then what? Tell her that he was Billy Kane? A wan smile came to his lips. She would perhaps prefer the Rat! The Rat, publicly at least, was known as the less infamous of the two! He laughed a little harshly.

"Forget it!" he said roughly. "I've played straight with you, and before you go spilling any beans to the police you'd better get onto yourself. You don't know what you're talking about!"

"I know that the Wop was murdered to-night in Wong Yen's by you, or your orders," she said passionately. "I know that the Wop is dead—that is enough!"

"Nix!" said Billy Kane, alias Bundy Morgan, alias the Rat. "The Wop isn't dead, and he isn't in Wong Yen's either. I pulled him out of there."

She stared at him, coming still closer in the darkness until he could feel her breath upon his face. It was a long minute before she spoke.

"I do not believe you!" she said in a dead voice.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I did not expect you to!" The Rat's tones were insolent now. "But you can prove it, can't you? The Wop's safe. He's at a minister's house. The minister's name is Claflin. I don't know the address, but you can easily find it. It wouldn't do me any good to lie to you, would it? You can't drag me to the police by force, and whether you squealed to them in the next ten minutes, or half an hour later after finding out I was lying, I'd be just as bad off, wouldn't I?"

She drew back—but her eyes were still fixed steadily upon him.

"Yes," she said.

"Well?" demanded Billy Kane.

"I can find this minister's house in that half hour, I think," she said in a low voice. "And the Wop—if he is there." Her voice hardened. "You are quite right, Bundy, it will have done you no good to have lied. I promise you that! If I do not find the Wop, the police will find—*you!*"

She was gone.

XXII—THE FIGHT

Billy Kane stood in the lane for a moment, staring after her through the darkness and his lips puckered in a sort of impotent little smile. She would find the Wop, of course, and thereafter the old relationship between them would be reestablished, and——.

He whirled suddenly, and in an instant was astride the top of the fence, his face set and hard, as there came, low but unmistakably from the interior of Barloff's house, the sound of blows and the rending of wood, as though a door were being violently forced. A glance showed him that the window had been closed and the shade drawn down. Barloff had evidently got that far in safeguarding himself, only Red Vallon's Apachés had struck, perhaps suspicious of *her* visit, without waiting for the old Russian to go out! What else could those blows mean but an attack on Barloff? Certainly, Barloff must still be in there, for Barloff, warned, wasn't going out; he was going to appeal, by telephone presumably, to the police.

Billy Kane's mind was racing, as he whipped his mask from his pocket, adjusted it over his face, dropped to the ground, and ran across the yard. The night's work obviously now, was far from over yet! He had still to play, after all, that other rôle of his in the underworld—the man in the mask! Red Vallon had said that the Pigeon, French Marr and the Cadger were to carry out the robbery inside the house. That made three to one! His one chance then was to take them by surprise.

He was working now with Whitie Jack's skeleton keys at the rear door. The Cadger was an expert safeworker, just as the Wop was, and that was part of the game to make it appear to be the Wop's work. The Wop was safe now, of course, but—he bit at his lips, cursing his clumsiness with the keys—old Barloff certainly wasn't! They had intended to get Barloff out of the house, but if, without waiting for that, they struck with Barloff there, they would not stand on any more ceremony with the old man than they had with the Wop, since the Wop was to stand for it

anyway. It was strange, ominously strange, that there was no outcry from Barloff, that even the sound of blows and splintering wood had ceased!

The door gave under his hand. He pushed it open cautiously, a bare half inch at a time. In front of him was a small room, obviously the kitchen, that connected with the rest of the house only by the side door of Barloff's rear room from which the light now filtered in across the kitchen floor. He stole silently forward in the direction of the lighted doorway and halted, as, a little back from the edge of the door jamb, he stared in amazement into the room beyond.

The door near Barloff's desk that led into the front room hung shattered on its hinges, its panels broken and splintered, but the only occupant of the room was Barloff himself. The man was standing there, a hatchet in his hand, surveying the wreckage, and mumbling inaudibly to himself.

And then suddenly there came a twisted smile of comprehension to Billy Kane's lips. Old Barloff laid the hatchet down on the desk, and, rubbing his hands together in a sort of fiendish exaltation, a malicious grin on his cunning and crafty face, ran over to the safe and knelt before it. His mumble became quite audible now:

"The Wop! The Wop! Dead—eh? And all these little rentals, these nice little rentals, just in! And, if they are stolen—eh? I am a poor man—eh? I could not replace them. And so they would be mine—mine. She's sure he is dead. She said so—that they murdered him. But she did not see it with her own eyes. If she comes back and tells the police that, I will say that the Wop must have escaped the trap they set for him, for with my own eyes I saw him, and since he is dead he will not be able to deny that. Yes, yes, Barloff, your old brain is still your best friend! And the others—ha, ha! They have planted it on the Wop—ha, ha! It would be a pity to disappoint them—and lose the rentals. Yes, yes, Barloff, that is so, is it not? Certainly, the Wop has robbed you, and tried to get revenge on you, too, because you were honest enough to go to the police five years ago!"

The man had the safe open now, and was snatching books and papers from the interior, and throwing them in a litter upon the floor. And now he had an old tin cash box in his hands. He laid this on the floor and opened it, and in a sort of hideous rapacity seemed to gloat over it. He dipped in his hands and lifted out banknotes, and let them filter through his fingers, and rubbed his hands together, and buried them again in the money; while behind the steel-bowed spectacles his little black eyes glittered with feverish exaltation again, and his whole body seemed to quiver in unholy, greedy worship.

Billy Kane's jaw locked hard. The man's whole life was a damnable hypocrisy—a rogue's alias. Thousands the man had somewhere, and, by comparison, the paltry hundreds in the cash box, if hundreds even there were, seemed to hold up as to a mirror the man's soul, stripped bare, until it stood out in all its naked, shrivelled miserliness, its godless grovelling to the only god it knew!

"The rentals—all the rentals!" mumbled Barloff again. "I am a poor man—how can I pay them over to-morrow when they have been stolen from me to-night, and I have nothing left? Yes, yes, Barloff, you are getting old, but you are not yet a fool!"

The man was suddenly all haste. He snatched up the cash box, and ran to the piece of furniture which had struck Billy Kane as so incongruous an adjunct to the furnishings of the room—the old morris chair. He turned this over on its back, there was a faint click of a hidden spring, and the bottom underneath the seat gaped outward on what were evidently ingeniously concealed hinges. Billy Kane's eyes, behind his mask, narrowed in grim humor, as he caught a glimpse of piles of neatly stacked banknotes in the hollow bottom of the chair, that was a sort of spacious, boxlike compartment—and then the old miser had thrust in the cash box, closed the seat again, and righted the chair. Old Barloff, after all, did not place all his faith in a presumptive burglar's chivalry for the obvious helplessness of the rickety old safe!

Barloff was rubbing his hands together unctuously once more, as he hurried back now to the desk. The desk was close to the already splintered door that led to the front of the house, and Barloff, catching up the hatchet in one hand, pulled the portable telephone instrument toward him with the other, and snatched the receiver from its hook.

"The police—quick—quick!" he called into the transmitter, his voice pitched in a well-simulated scream of terror, and brought the hatchet down with a crash on the splintered panels.

Billy Kane made no movement save that his lips twitched a little. The low, cunning trickery of the man produced a sort of nauseating disgust, and, too, a sort of merciless anger; but, given enough rope now, Barloff was in a fair way to hang himself, and it would afford him, Billy Kane, a very genuine pleasure to adjust, as he now proposed to do, the noose that would accomplish that hanging!

Barloff was still raining his hatchet blows on the door; and then suddenly, evidently having

got his connection, he was screaming again, between blows, into the mouthpiece of the telephone:

“Is that the police?—Yes, yes!—Quick—This is Ivan Barloff—Barloff, Barloff, Barloff—yes, Barloff—Quick—Help!—For God’s sake, help!—It is the Wop!—Do you hear?—The Wop!”

Barloff slammed the receiver back on the hook, and flung the hatchet down on the floor. It was quiet in the room now except that the old man was talking again to himself, in a sort of triumphant glee:

“Ha, ha—got to escape from the Wop now—got to escape—yes, yes, Barloff, you have done well, very well—but you must hurry now—yes, hurry.”

Billy Kane drew silently back into the darkness at the far side of the kitchen. There was still a little more rope left to give Barloff for Barloff’s undoing! He, Billy Kane, had no intention of interfering with the hypocritical old scoundrel’s self-styled escape, nor of preventing Barloff now from rushing, for instance, to the police to amplify his tale; but Barloff, to “escape” and carry out his ruse successfully, could not rush out through the door supposed to be barred by the Wop and so reach the street that way! Barloff then, if Barloff were logical, had a choice of the kitchen and back door, or the window.

The light in Barloff’s room went out. Billy Kane smiled in satisfaction. With the kitchen in complete darkness now there was no chance of his being seen if Barloff came that way, and—no, it was the window! The sash creaked as the window was opened. There was a low thud as the man dropped to the ground, and then the sound of the other’s footsteps running across the yard toward the fence.

Billy Kane laughed a little, grimly under his breath, as he stepped instantly forward and entered the room old Barloff had just vacated. It was his turn now at the telephone! A hint to the police as to where the money was, and, with the Wop’s alibi thoroughly established, Barloff would be condemned by his own story. It would require only a moment to telephone, and then he would make his own get-away; also, it would be ten minutes at least before the police from the nearest station could answer Barloff’s call, but if, in the meanwhile, the Cadger and his pack arrived, they would not only get nothing, but would run a very excellent chance of being trapped by the police, and—.

Billy Kane with his hand groping out through the darkness for the telephone, stood suddenly tense and still; and then, as suddenly, actuated partly by some intuitive sense of danger, and partly because some indefinable sound of movement caught his ear, he swerved, throwing his body sharply to one side. There was a swish like the ugly sweep of some weapon cutting through the air from a ferocious, full-arm swing, a queer numbness from a glancing blow on the side of his head, a crash upon the desk, a metallic clatter on the floor—and then he lunged forward, and his hands, pawing out, touched and closed on a man’s form in front of him.

Billy Kane’s head was dizzy and swirling. He was conscious that arms which were like bands of steel were around him, and that his own arms, to keep from being torn apart and his hold on the other loosened, were straining until they hurt in their sockets. It seemed as though in the pitch blackness they were reeling around the room in the crazy, jerky, unbalanced dance of some mad orgy! A voice was snarling in his ear, snarling vicious oaths, snarling in a fury that seemed ungovernable, beyond all license, that seemed to have taken possession of the other, body and soul, and made the other’s strength demoniacal. That was it! It could not be anything else. That was what made the man so strong. The man was mad—a madman! He tried to think, as he gasped and panted for his breath. It wasn’t the Cadger, or French Marr, or the Pigeon, for then there would have been three of them. Who was it? His brain was sick and swimming, and refused its functions. He could not think very well. He must fight—that was all—fight!

It seemed to Billy Kane as though hours were passing. It seemed as though gradually, very gradually, his strength was oozing away, and that his hands were slipping from around the man’s back. He clenched his teeth together. He remembered suddenly that murderous swish through the air. It seemed to steady him, to bring to him, too, a sudden fury in place of that unnerving giddiness. He wanted to strike; to strike, as murderously as he had been struck, at this thing whose hot, tainted breath was on his cheek, at this thing that snarled like a beast as it struggled and fought. He wanted to strike, only the giddiness from the blow on his head was back again, and—.

The other had wrenched himself free. Billy Kane flung his weight forward to retain his hold, and with the impact both men reeled, tripped on the littered floor, lost their balance, and, locked together, crashed to the ground.

They rolled over once, and then the other's snarl became a vicious laugh. The giddiness was coming in quick flashes over Billy Kane now, and he felt his hands wrenched and torn away from the other, and he felt the other's body upon him now like some crushing, insupportable weight. He reached out in the darkness in a desperate, frantic effort to close again, to protect himself from the short-arm jabs that were raining into his face. His fingers touched the man's bare, collarless throat, slipped on the throat—and suddenly held. There was a string, or a cord, or something around the man's neck. It was very curious! But his fingers had hooked in between the cord and the flesh, and he clung there tenaciously. If he could only twist it, and twist it hard enough, he could choke the other! He wasn't strong enough to do anything else—just twist at the cord—and choke the other—and—

There was a sound that seemed to come from the front of the house, like the opening of a door, and then voices—unmistakably voices. But the other had heard it too. The man was struggling now to get away, not to strike any more blows, just to wrench and tear himself loose from that cord that Billy Kane had twined around his hands and fingers. And then the cord gave with a sudden snap, the man sprang to his feet, and, without a sound, like a shadowy form just visible in the darkness, flung himself out through the window.

The cord was still twined around Billy Kane's fingers as he lay, half-dazed, his head swimming weakly, flat on his back on the floor. He shook it free from his hand and raised himself up into a sitting posture, as he smiled in a queer, bitter way. There was a light in the front room now, and he was too exhausted to reach the window as his late antagonist had done, unless he stumbled and lurched there, and then he would be heard in the front room.

It was the end of the Rat, alias Bundy Morgan—and it was the end of Billy Kane. It was probably the Cadger and his crowd out there, but, at least, they would not take him alive. His hand dove into his pocket for his automatic and encountered the brandy flask that had already stood the Wop in such good stead. He snatched it from his pocket, and, his mask already awry on his face, carried the flask to his lips, and drank eagerly.

The stimulant whipped through his veins in a fiery tide. It cleared his brain. No, it wasn't the Cadger out there—the Cadger and his crowd would be scared off for good now—there were two men—he could see them coming through the doorway—and he heard old Barloff's voice.

He drank again greedily, shifting the flask to his left hand, while his right dove once more into his pocket, and this time secured his automatic. He drew his mask back over his face. The light over the desk went on, and, sitting there on the floor, Billy Kane blinked in the sudden glare at old Barloff and a police officer.

"Don't move, please, either of you, except to put your hands up!" said Billy Kane in a low voice.

There was a startled exclamation from the officer, as his hands went up above his head; while a gray, blank look spread over the old miser's face, as he, too, obeyed with equal celerity.

It was very curious! Billy Kane frowned in a puzzled way. It was very curious—not so much that he should be sitting there on the littered floor, with the side of his head trickling a warm flow of blood down under the neck of his shirt, and holding a brandy flask in one hand, and holding up two men at the point of his automatic with the other; it wasn't so much that, it was an object on the floor near the desk that looked like a round piece of grained wood, about an inch in diameter and three feet in length.

He thrust the flask into his pocket, and, over his mask, rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes. It wasn't a vagary of his sick brain, was it? Well, he would know in a minute as soon as he lifted it and felt its weight. No, that wasn't necessary, he remembered that *metallic* clatter upon the floor. He knew what the thing was. It was the iron shaft of the crutch that he had seen two nights ago—a detachable shaft probably—the weapon that he was satisfied had already murdered David Ellsworth, and murdered Peters.

His mind was clear now and working in lightning flashes. His assailant had been the one man in the world upon whose throat he had prayed to get his fingers—the Man with the Crutch! Well, his fingers had been there, only he had been, at a disadvantage, weak and dizzy from the blow from that thing there, and—yes, this was curious too! He was watching the two men, his automatic covered them unswervingly; but out of the corner of his eye he could not help but see that red patch on the floor beside him, that looked like an ordinary flannel chest protector, and to which the cord that he had torn from his antagonist's neck was still attached. He reached for it and thrust it into his pocket, as he rose slowly, and a little unsteadily, to his feet.

He eyed the two men now for a long calculating second. Yes, his brain was quite clear now—exhilaratingly clear. And the mental exhilaration seemed to bring in its train a new physical

strength as well. In a flash he saw the way out now, and with it, too, the means of slipping Barloff's self-knotted noose around the miserly old Russian's throat. But he must work quickly. There was not an instant to spare. This officer could not have come in answer to Barloff's telephone call, for he realized that, long as it had seemed, his fight here in the room could not have lasted in reality more than two or three minutes, and it had begun almost on the instant that Barloff had run from the house. There would not, therefore, have been time for the telephone call to have been answered, for the nearest police station was too far away, and besides, in that event, there would have been more than one officer. Barloff had probably encountered the policeman out on the street, and, carrying out his devilishly inspired plan, had poured his story into the officer's ears, and rushed the other back to the house. But in that case, the men from the station would be on their way here now, and the leeway left him, Billy Kane, in which to act must, even now, be narrowed to the very perilous margin of but another four or five minutes—perhaps less!

"Move to the wall, face it, and keep your hands up!" ordered Billy Kane curtly.

The officer, with a chagrined scowl and a shrug of his shoulders, obeyed. Barloff, white and trembling, and thoroughly frightened, needed no urging.

"You've got the drop on me," snarled the officer. "But don't worry, my bucko, I know who you are! That mask ain't doing you any good! There's a free ride and board coming to you again!"

Billy Kane's automatic was pressed into the small of the officer's back. With his free hand he deftly relieved the other of a pair of handcuffs and a revolver.

"That's all right!" said Billy Kane coolly. "Now, Barloff, stick your right hand out behind you!" He slipped one of the steel cuffs over the Russian's wrist. "Now you, officer! No, your *right* hand! I know it's customary in making an arrest to leave your right hand free, but in the circumstances I am forced to inconvenience you a little in your movements." He snapped the other cuff shut. "Thank you! You may both turn around now!" He stepped back, hurled the officer's revolver out through the window, and picked up the weapon whose blow, luckily for him, he had partially evaded. He had in no way been mistaken. It was the iron shaft of the crutch, and it was ingeniously fashioned with a spring catch that obviously fitted into a socket in the now missing armpiece of the crutch. It served him now as a support. He leaned upon it, using it as a cane, as he swayed a little on his feet. "I can only spare a moment," he said engagingly to the officer; "but possibly I can make that moment well worth your while. We'll talk quickly, if you please. I imagine that you were on your beat out there on the street when Barloff here found you. Am I right?"

"Where else would I be?" said the officer gruffly.

"That's what I wanted to make sure of," returned Billy Kane pleasantly. "And that's why I want to get through here in a hurry—before your reinforcements arrive. What story did this man tell you?"

"Say," said the officer shortly, "you've got your nerve with you! But you can't get away with it! I tell you, I know you! You might as well take that mask off. You're the Wop."

"You're jumping at conclusions," said Billy Kane calmly, "because Barloff here has told you the Wop had broken in and robbed him. Well, ask Barloff, then!" He turned on Barloff. "I'm not the Wop, am I, Barloff?"

The old man shook his head.

"No, you're not." Barloff swallowed hard; he was evidently floundering in a perplexed mental maze. "But my money's gone, and the Wop was here. I saw him. I saw him. Maybe you're a pal of his."

"I am for to-night," said Billy Kane quietly. "When did you see the Wop? What did you tell this officer here?"

"Oh, you are, are you!" Barloff seemed suddenly relieved. He shook his free fist at Billy Kane. "So you're a pal of the Wop's, are you! Well, I don't know where you came from, but I saw the Wop just as plainly as I see you now." He edged around and addressed the officer eagerly. "I was sitting at the desk there, officer, just as I told you, and that door was open, and there was a light in that front room. The Wop must have got the front door open without my hearing him. I saw him stealing across that room out there. I rushed to the door, and shut it, and called for help. He began to smash it in and I grabbed up the telephone and called the police, and then ran for the window, and got out by the lane to the street where I found you. He would have killed me. He swore he would when he went to prison." His voice changed suddenly into a whining wail. "He's got my money! Look at the floor—look at the safe! He's got my money, and run with it when he heard us coming." He began to claw frantically at the officer's sleeve. "The Wop's got it! Look,

officer, this pal of his has been hurt! Look at the side of his head—that's why he didn't get away too—that's why we found him here on the floor!"

"You talk as though you'd been frisked of a million!" Billy Kane was tauntingly sarcastic now. "How much did you have, anyway?"

"How much! How much!" howled Barloff. "Enough to ruin me! All this month's rentals that I had just collected. Three hundred and eighty-seven dollars!"

"Three hundred and eighty-seven dollars!" Billy Kane mimicked the other admirably. "You don't mean to say you'd keep three hundred and eighty-seven dollars in that crazy old safe that's falling to pieces, do you?"

"Where else would I keep it?" Barloff was shaking his fist again. "Yes, I kept it there! And that's where it was to-night—and it's gone now—gone!"

"Is that all you had?" Billy Kane's sneer was irritatingly contemptuous.

"All!" shrieked Barloff. "All—yes, it is all! But it is enough! I am a poor man, and the money was not mine, and I cannot replace it, and——"

He choked suddenly, and shrank back, dragging the officer with him a step. Billy Kane had moved abruptly to the morris chair, and had toppled it over on the floor.

"You pitiful liar! You haven't seen the Wop in five years!" rasped Billy Kane, and the iron shaft in his hand crashed through the false bottom of the chair. A package of banknotes tumbled out on the floor, another, and yet another. A second blow dislodged the cash box, and a further rain of banknotes. "You thought the Wop was dead, and that you could make him stand for this, did you!" rasped Billy Kane again. "You yellow cur—so that you could steal those few miserable rentals yourself!"

"My God!" gasped the officer. Barloff was a grovelling thing at his side. He jerked the other toward him, and stared into the white, working features.

Billy Kane backed to the window, and there was an abrupt change in his voice as he addressed the officer.

"I'm going now," he said softly. "I am not quite sure of the technical charge against your prisoner, but I imagine it is just plain theft—of three hundred and eighty-seven dollars. And it might be interesting, too, to know where so poor a man got that small fortune there on the floor! Perhaps Barloff will tell you! As for the Wop, he has never been near this place, and you will find him at the Reverend Mr. Claflin's house, where he has been all evening. I think that's all, officer, except"—Billy Kane had straddled the window sill—"except that I apologize to you for anything in the shape of lèse majesty of which I may have been guilty, but as I have certain personal reasons that justify me in not desiring to appear publicly in the matter, I am sure you will admit I had no other——"

Billy Kane did not finish his sentence. He dropped hurriedly to the ground, and ran, or, rather, half ran, half stumbled his way to the fence and lane. Someone was at the front door again—obviously the police detail from the station.

He made his way along the lane, and from that lane into another. He was still weak and progress was slow, and for half an hour he kept under cover. When he finally emerged into the open he was blocks away from Barloff's house, and very much closer to a certain temporary sanctuary in the heart of the underworld!

Ten minutes later, behind locked doors, he was sitting at the dilapidated table under the single incandescent light, in the Rat's den. Before him lay a small red flannel sack, that might have passed for an ordinary chest protector, and which he had cut open with his knife. He raised his hand, and passed it across his eyes. The Wop and Barloff were extraneous considerations now. There was something far more vital to think about, but his brain was refusing its functions again. He was very tired—very tired and weak. There was the Man with the Crutch, the man who, he knew now, had killed Peters and David Ellsworth, the man who had looted David Ellsworth's vault of its money and its priceless rubies, the man for whose guilt he, Billy Kane, was held accountable, the man with whom he had fought to-night. In a numbed way, because his mind was in a sort of torpor, Billy Kane was dimly conscious that there was no more any mere coincidence in this repeated appearance of the Man with the Crutch. He knew now that Jackson, the footman, had only been an underling. It was curious, singular, sinister. Who was the man? What did it mean? The man wasn't even lame, was he? He remembered the extraordinary agility the other had showed two nights ago—and why was the shaft of the crutch detachable?—and the man hadn't fought like a crippled man to-night—and there had been no sign of the upper portion of the crutch, either!

Billy Kane's head sank forward a little on his shoulders. He raised himself with a jerk, and

stared at the red flannel sack in front of him. A score of magnificent rubies scintillated in fiery flashes under the light.

"They're not all here," mumbled Billy Kane, with a twisted smile. "They're not all here—not yet."

XXIII—THE RENDEZVOUS

It was night again in the underworld.

Billy Kane slipped suddenly into the dark shadows of a doorway. Fifty yards ahead of him, up the poorly lighted, narrow and miserable street, three men had paused on the sidewalk, and were engaged in what was apparently an animated discussion. Billy Kane's eyes narrowed in a puzzled, perturbed, and yet grim way, as he watched them. He had followed them for an hour now—from a saloon, where he had found them, to a disreputable pool room, and from there again to a saloon, and now here.

He did not understand. It was one of those strange portals, so extraneous to the aim of clearing his name of the murder of David Ellsworth, and yet, too, so essentially a corollary of the Rat's rôle that he played here in the underworld, at which he was knocking again. His lips curled in a queer smile. How long would it be before the end? And what would that end be? In his possession now, save for a portion of the rubies, perhaps half of them, was everything that the murderers of David Ellsworth had stolen from the old philanthropist's vault on that night which seemed now to belong to some past age and incarnation. He knew now that the Man with the Crutch was the actual murderer—but there he faced a blank wall. He had even fought with the man in the blackness of old Barloff's room last night, not knowing until too late who his assailant was, and the man had got away.

His hand at his side clenched. It could not endure very long—this impossible situation in which he found himself with that strange, unknown woman, who, believing him to be the Rat, held the threat of Sing Sing over his head. And there was the Rat himself whose name and personality and home, such as it was, he had usurped during the latter's absence, an absence that might terminate at any moment. And there were the police who dragged the city and the country from end to end for Billy Kane. From anyone of these three sources, swift as a lightning stroke, without an instant's warning, the end might come with that goal of life still unreached, and, greater than life, his honor, still unreclaimed. And it seemed to-night somehow that his chances were bitterly small, that somehow the odds seemed to be growing and accumulating against him. He was on another errand now, because he could not help himself. He was allowing precious moments that should have been devoted to the one chance he had, that of searching ceaselessly, pitilessly, remorselessly, for the Man with the Crutch, to be directed into other channels—because he could not help himself.

He stepped out from the shelter of the doorway, and started forward again along the street. The three men had turned from the sidewalk, and had disappeared inside a dingy, black and tumble-down tenement. Billy Kane's lips tightened a little. It was a hard neighborhood, nestling just off the Bowery—as hard almost as the three characters themselves who had just vanished from sight. There were a few pedestrians here on the side street, a few figures that skulked along in the semi-darkness, rather than walked, but not many; and for the most part, though it was still early, not more than nine o'clock, the buildings that flanked the street were dark and unlighted.

Billy Kane jerked his slouch hat farther down over his eyes as he walked along. He did not understand. Two hours ago he had been sitting in the Rat's den with Whitie Jack—who had ventured out of hiding again, safe now since the interest of the police in Peters', the butler's, murder had become definitely centered in the Man with the Crutch—and someone had knocked at the door. Whitie Jack had answered the knock, and had brought back the message that Bundy Morgan was wanted at the telephone in a little shop across the street. He, Billy Kane, in his rôle of the Rat, alias the said Bundy Morgan, had perforce answered, and, as he had picked up the receiver, he had instantly recognized the voice of the woman whom he knew by no other name

than the one he himself had given her—the Woman in Black. He was subconsciously rehearsing the rather one-sided conversation now, as he moved along.

“Is that you, Bundy?” she had asked. “And do you know who is speaking?”

“Yes,” he had answered.

“Listen, then!” Her voice had been quiet, deliberate, and yet pregnant with a curiously sharp, imperative command. “Find Clarkie Munn and Gypsy Joe at once, and shadow them to-night. Do not let them out of your sight. And see that you do not fail! Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he had replied mechanically; “but——”

That was all. She had hung up the receiver at the other end of the line.

He had heard of Clarkie Munn and Gypsy Joe in the days when he had frequented the Bad Lands on old David Ellsworth’s philanthropic missions, for the very simple reason that they were notorious and outstanding criminal characters even in the heart and center of the worst crime and vice in the city. They were both lags, both men with prison records, and marked by the police. Also they were versatile. They had in turn been apaches, gangsters, box-workers, poke-getters and second-story sneaks; and they were credited with measuring human life purely as a commercial commodity—worth merely what they could get for it.

He had heard of Clarkie Munn and Gypsy Joe—who hadn’t?—but as to their lair, or where they were to be found, he had not had the slightest inkling. Whitie Jack, however, had solved that problem for him. He had sent Whitie Jack out to run them down, and Whitie had returned within an hour with the report that they were in a certain far from reputable saloon, and that they had been joined by the Cherub. He, Billy Kane, had never heard of the Cherub, but an adroit leading question or two had set Whitie Jack’s glib tongue in motion. The Cherub had proved a topic that had aroused an unbounded enthusiasm in Whitie Jack.

“Dey ain’t got nothin’ on de Cherub—none of ‘em has,” Whitie Jack had asserted, switching his cigarette butt from one corner of his mouth to the other in order to permit of an admiring grin. “He’s de angel kid—he is! Youse’d think he spent his life handin’ around hymn books an’ leadin’ de singin’ down at de mission joints—only he don’t! If he got enough for it he’d pull a gun an’ blow yer bean off, an’ youse wouldn’t believe it was him even while he was doin’ it, he’d look dat innocent. Believe me, Bundy! He’s got ‘em all skinned, an’ he ain’t got no limit except de sky. Mabbe some day de police’ll get wise, but dey ain’t fallen to de sweet little face of him wid his baby eyes yet. But, aw, say, wot’s de use! Youse know him as well as I do. Youse’d think dey’d just lifted him out of a dinky little cradle an’ soused him all over wid Florida water—dat’s de Cherub. But de guy dat knows him ducks his nut—dat’s all.”

Billy Kane shook his head in a sort of savage perplexity. He had dismissed Whitie Jack then, picked up Clarkie Munn, Gypsy Joe and the Cherub, and had followed them here. He had come abreast of the tenement in which they had disappeared now, and he looked quickly around him. There was no one on the street close enough to pay any particular attention to his movements; and there was no doorbell to ring, for in that locality the formality of entering a tenement, where humans hived instead of lived, and where at all hours the occupants came and went as a matter of course, consisted in pushing the door open without further ceremony. His hand slipped into the side pocket of his coat, and his fingers closed in a reassuring touch upon his automatic. For what particular reason he was to watch Gypsy Joe and Clarkie Munn he was as much as ever in the dark; but one thing was clear—there was only one way to keep in touch with his quarry.

He stepped from the sidewalk, and, with well-simulated unconcern, pushed the tenement door open, entered, closed the door softly behind him, and stood still, listening intently. The place was gloomy and dark, and heavy with a musty, unsavory odor of garlic and rank, stale tobacco; but ahead of him, along what seemed like a narrow passage flanking the stairs, a faint glow of light struggled out into the blackness, as though from a partially opened door, and from this direction a murmur of men’s voices reached him.

He moved stealthily forward for a few steps; and then halted abruptly, and pressed back against the wall. Yes, here were the men he sought. In so far as locating them in the tenement was concerned, he was in luck. The hallway had widened out beyond the staircase, and from where he now stood, through a half-opened door, a door that was in poverty-stricken and disreputable repair, whose panels, smashed and broken probably in some fracas of former days, were patched with strips of cardboard that in turn, hanging by a tack or two, gaped blatantly, he could make out Clarkie Munn’s dark, scowling, unshaven features, as the man sat sprawled out on a chair in the centre of the room; also, Clarkie Munn was swearing viciously:

“Well, where’s Shaky Liz—eh? Where’s Shaky Liz? Who’s right now about comin’ back here? Her tongue’s been hangin’ out fer a drink now fer two weeks, an’ she’s bust loose. Dat’s wot

she's done—yes, an' probably queered de whole lay too! I told youse so! I told youse youse'd have to show me about Shaky Liz before I'd go de limit. See! I ain't fer any juice chair up de river—not yet! Savvy?"

"Aw, shut up!" The words were clipped off; the voice was almost a boyish treble. "Can yer croakin', Clarkie, youse give me a pain! Youse came back here because I said so—dat's why! I had to steer clear of Shaky Liz while she put de stunt across, an' we got to know now if de girl fell fer it all right."

"Yes," growled Clarkie Munn, "an' Shaky Liz has gone an' got drunk, an' spilled de beans! I know her!"

"If she has," purred the other, and there was something of finality made the more horrible by the boyish tones, "she gets hers—instead of de other, dat's all. An' anyway, youse have no kick comin'! Youse an' Gypsy here, an' me, an' Shaky Liz has all got a century apiece to start wid. We can't lose, can we?"

"Sure, we can!" complained Clarkie Munn. "We can lose de other two hundred dat's comin' when de job's done, can't we?"

Another voice spoke in a curiously meditative, raucous way:

"I never thought I'd be workin' fer him. He handed me one once dat I ain't fergot. But dere ain't no one dares to touch him now—he's too big. Youse'd get smeared off de map. He's got de coin, but he's no good anyway else, except dat he's sharper'n hell. D'ye remember de roll he coughs up when he peels us dem century notes dat night? Say, I guess he packs dat along wid him all de time. Say, I wish we had him wid de girl to-night—I guess we'd get our two hundred apiece, all right, all right."

Clarkie Munn sat suddenly bolt upright in his chair, staring across the room, obviously at the last speaker.

"I'd be wid youse, Gypsy!" he said eagerly. "Him an' me don't belong to de same lodge neither. We're all right, we are, fer dirty work, dat's where we stand; but where do we ever get a look-in when dere's anything juicy goin'! But youse'd have to know he had de roll on him. Youse wouldn't get anywhere unless youse did. I'd be wid youse, Gypsy. I wish something like dat'd break loose." He swung around in his chair. "Eh, Cherub?"

"Youse give me a pain!" murmured the boyish voice.

"When youse gets a chance to get dat guy, youse'll get a chance to hang yer hat in a bathroom suite in de swellest joint in town, an' use a limousine fer a gape wagon, an' wear white spats an' yellow gloves in summer time. Can de wish stuff!"

Billy Kane, hugging close against the wall, moved silently farther on toward the rear of the hall until he was beyond the radius of light from the doorway of the room. The street door had opened, and a footstep, hesitant, scuffling, was out there somewhere behind him. The step came nearer, and now he could make out a woman's form, that, either in reality or as an illusion due to the uncertain light, seemed to sway a little unsteadily as she walked. Opposite the door she stood still, and now in the fuller light Billy Kane could see her quite distinctly. Obviously, it was the woman they had referred to as Shaky Liz—an old, unkempt, hag-like creature, who blinked sore, red-rimmed eyes in apparent astonishment and consequent indecision at the partially open door and the light from within. And then she stepped forward into the room, and the next moment the door closed with a slam behind her, and with the slam her voice rose in a curious, gurgling cry that seemed to mingle terror and an unbridled fury.

In an instant, Billy Kane had retraced his steps, and was crouching against the closed door. He could see now even better than before. The gaping strip of cardboard that did duty for the smashed panel, dislodged still farther by the violent slam of the door, afforded him an almost unrestricted view of the interior. Clarkie Munn had not moved from his chair, and a little away from him, legs swinging from a dilapidated, rickety table, Gypsy Joe, black-visaged and swarthy, sucked indifferently at a cigarette; but over in the far corner of the room by the bed, the woman, her hat knocked to the floor, her tangled gray hair dragging about her eyes, was engaged in a violent struggle with a small boyish figure, who had her by the throat and was shaking her head savagely back and forth. Billy Kane drew in his breath. He remembered Whitie Jack's description of the Cherub in action—and it was literally true. The blue eyes were bland and round and seemed to smile, the young face was the face of a guileless youth in repose, and yet the boy—he couldn't be much more than a boy—was in a passion worthy of an incarnate fiend.

"Youse have been out hittin' de can, have youse?" snarled the Cherub. "I'll teach youse! Do youse think I've spent two weeks hangin' around dis dirty hole of yers, an' standin' fer youse being me sick, disabled grandmother wid me supposed to be doin' me best to keep bread in yer

mouth, an' playin' poor, an' having to listen to her tryin' to get me jobs, an' handin' me de soft, goody-goody talk—d'ye think I'm standin' fer dat just to have youse go out an' kick de stuffin' outer de whole lay! I'll teach youse!"

"It's a lie!" screamed Shaky Liz. She shook herself suddenly free, and with crooked fingers clawed like a wild cat at the Cherub's face. "I didn't crab no game! It's a lie! I got it all fixed before I went out. I guess I got a right to a drink now, ain't I?"

The Cherub warded off her attack with a vicious sweep of his fist.

"Yes!" he snarled again. "An' suppose she'd seen youse! Or suppose she'd come back here by any chance an' found de poor bedridden grandma gone out fer a drink—eh! Blast youse, couldn't youse wait a few hours more? De whole outfit 'ud be glad if youse had drunk yerself to death den!"

Shaky Liz dashed the hair out of her eyes, and swept her hands in a half angry, half expostulating gesture toward the others.

"I didn't queer no game!" she insisted truculently. "I guess I know wot I'm doin'; an' youse ain't comin' in here to pull no rough-house business neither!"

"Aw, let her alone, an' give her a chance to tell her story," drawled Gypsy Joe from the table. "We ain't got all night to stay here."

"Sure!" said the Cherub softly, and smiled beneficently, as he sat down on the edge of the bed and calmly lighted a cigarette. "Go on, Liz, spill it!"

The old hag stared at him for a moment in silence, as she dug again at her dishevelled locks.

"Youse dirty little runt!" She found her voice at last, and in spite of her scowl there was a grudging note of admiration in her tones. "Youse are pretty slick, ain't youse?"

"Sure!" admitted the Cherub imperturbably. "If I wasn't, youse wouldn't have a hundred dollars in yer kick now, an' two hundred more comin' to-morrow—if youse ain't queered it fer yerself. Go on, give us de dope!"

Shaky Liz preened herself. She adjusted the threadbare bodice of her dress that seemed to bulge and sag uncomfortably, picked up her hat, and smirked at her audience.

"It's all right!" She wagged her head secretively. "Youse don't any of youse need to worry. When de Cherub pipes me off this afternoon dat de stunt is to be pulled to-night, I sends fer her as soon as he gets out of de way, an' she comes on de run. She don't suspect nothing, 'cause wid two weeks' acquaintance she——"

"Can dat!" interrupted the Cherub politely. "We all knows dat fer two weeks youse an' me has been gettin' acquainted wid her, an' feedin' on her jellies, an' dat I'm de errin' child dat's taken a shine to her an' dat mabbe can be influenced fer good—if she tried hard enough. Wot did she say when she comes here dis evening?"

"Wot did she say?" repeated Shaky Liz, with a sudden and malicious grin. "Why, she falls fer it, of course! Wot d'ye expect? Me, I was lyin' dere on de bed when she blows in. She asks me how I was, an' I says I ain't no worse dan usual, but dat it's me young grandson dat's troublin' me, an' how I ain't got no one to tell it to except her, an' how I dunno as I durst tell even her. An' den she says I oughter know well enough dat I can trust her, an' dat she won't say nothin', an' den I gives her de spiel. I says I ain't slept all de last night thinkin' about it. I tells her it wouldn't do no good me talkin' to youse, 'cause I ain't got any influence wid youse an' she has, an' besides dat I was afraid of Gypsy an' Clarkie if dey got wise to me. An' I tells her wot a good boy youse are, too, Cherub, an' how though mabbe youse might be better it ain't all yer fault 'cause youse're easily led by bad company, but dat youse have stood by yer old grandmother. Savvy?"

"De one bright spot in me life," said the Cherub sweetly, "is dat me own grandmother is dead, an' don't know de raw deal I'm handin' her. She looked just like youse, too—not!"

Shaky Liz scowled.

"Youse close yer face!" she flung out. "I tells her dat me grandson has got pulled in by two of de toughest crooks in New York." Shaky Liz's scowl became a grin. "Dat's youse, Clarkie, an' youse, Gypsy. I tells her who youse are, an' dat last night youse three was here, an' dat youse all thought I was asleep, but dat I heard youse whisperin' together, an' dat Clarkie an' Gypsy was persuadin' me little boy to pull a trick down to Kegler's dock on de East River, 'cause dey didn't dare do it demselves on account of de police bein' leery about dem ever since dey comes down from Sing Sing de last time. I tells her how I hears youse two crooks explainin' dat Kegler's got a bunch of coin in his safe to pay off some sand barges dat he had expected yesterday, but dat had got held up down de Sound, an' dat instead of takin' de money back to de bank he was lettin' it rust in his box, knowin' dat de barges'd be along de day after to-morrow, an' dat youse had de combination of de safe, an' de key to de front door, an' dat dere wouldn't be nobody around dere,

an' dat, anyway, nobody'd suspect me little lad, an' dat he was to go down dere alone at ten o'clock to-night an' make de haul, an' den meet Clarkie an' Gypsy uptown somewhere fer de split."

Gypsy Joe, on the table, circled his lips approvingly with the tip of his tongue.

"Dat's de stuff, Shaky!" he commended. "Don't youse mind dese guys, dey ain't neither of dem got anything on youse. I'm fer youse, old gal!"

Shaky Liz grinned complacently.

"Me, I was cryin' good an' hard by dis time," she said, and grinned again, "an' she had a face dat white youse'd think she was goin' to pull de faint act. I says I ain't slept all de last night tryin' to think wot to do, an' dat's why I sent fer her. An' she asks me if I'm sure de boy was goin' to do it. An' I says I am. An' she asks me where he is, an' I says I don't know, an' dat I don't know where to find him; dat he went out just before I sent fer her, an' dat he says he won't be back till late to-night, an' dat's wot makes me sure he's goin' to do it. Sure, I was cryin' good an' hard den—savvy?"

"An' I says he's a good boy, an' if I tells de police dat'll finish him; an' I says I'm sick an' can't walk, an' can't go down dere myself, an' dat she's de only one I dares trust, an' besides dat she's got a lot of influence wid de boy, an' dat I knows she can persuade him not to fall fer it, an' den nobody'll know anything about it. An' she says: 'Yes, of course—I'll do anything. But where is he? Where can I find him?' An' I says dere ain't only one place I knows, an' dat's down to Kegler's, an' dat he'll be all alone dere, an' dat if she gets dere before ten o'clock she'll be in time to try an' stop him. An' she bends over me, an' pats me hands, she does, an' she says: 'Don't youse worry, Mrs. Cox,' she says. 'I'll go.' An' I says: 'An' youse won't tell nobody, nor take nobody down dere, so's anybody'd know about me little lad's disgrace?' An' she says: 'No, I'll go alone; an' I'm sure I can promise youse it'll be all right.' An' den she goes away. Dat's all!" Shaky Liz was fumbling with the bodice of her dress again, and suddenly pulled out a black, square-faced bottle. "Dat's all!" she announced with a cackle. "An' I guess I gotta right to dis if I wants it—ain't I?"

"Youse can bet yer life youse have!" agreed Gypsy Joe with fervent heartiness—and reached for the bottle.

In a flash the Cherub was up from the bed, and between them.

"Nix on dat, Gypsy!" he said sharply. "Shaky's end is all right, I guess; but *we* ain't through yet. Nix on dat—get me!" He stepped closer to both Clarkie Munn and Gypsy Joe. "Now, den," he said briskly, "since we're satisfied wid Shaky, we'll get down to tacks—eh? Everybody makes sure dey knows dere own play, an' we don't make no renigs. I goes down dere, an' youse two are trailin' out of sight behind, an' she buttonholes me, an' I gets her inside widout youse if I can, but anyway we gets her inside widout any noise, an' de trap-door where dey shoots de sweepings from de warehouse into de water under de dock does de trick. If dere's enough weight on her she'll be dere forever. An' dere's one thing more. Nix on de easy-fingered stuff wid any safe business, or anything loose lying around dat looks like meat! Savvy? To-morrow morning de place looks like it did when dey left it to-night. De girl's disappeared, dat's all—an' dere's nothing to show dat Kegler's dock had anything to do wid it. Get me? Dey'll never find her, an' dat's wot's wanted, an' why we're gettin' two hundred apiece more."

Gypsy Joe removed the cigarette from his mouth, watched the blue spiral of smoke from its tip curl upward for a moment, and pursed his lips in a ruminative pucker.

"I wonder wot de Rat had it in fer her fer as hard as dat?" he said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "She must have——"

The—*Rat!* She—the *girl* they were talking about! The room seemed suddenly to swirl before Billy Kane's eyes, the figures inside to become but blurred, jerky objects—and then it was black around him. Automatically he was stepping backward with a catlike tread; automatically he was feeling his way along the black hallway. And then the cool evening air fanned his face, and he was in the street.

Billy Kane put his hand to his forehead, and brought it away wringing wet with great drops of sweat. It had come like a blow without warning upon him, staggering him for an instant with horror—and then his brain had cleared as if by magic. It was cruelly clear now.

The girl that they meant to murder was—the Woman in Black. He had had no thought of that while they talked in there, not until Gypsy Joe had mentioned the Rat. And then it had seemed as though the pieces of a puzzle had been suddenly fitted together as by some unseen hand, and bare to his brain, naked, an ugly picture stood out in hideous perspective. He knew too well that the Rat had an incentive for getting rid of her. And he knew why. And it was *she* who had telephoned him, Billy Kane, to watch Gypsy Joe and Clarkie Munn to-night. Who else would know of anything afoot concerning those two except the “she” to whom Shaky Liz had told her damnable Judas story?

And he saw now why, and understood her instructions to him to watch Clarkie and Gypsy Joe. If she failed in her efforts through moral persuasion to prevent the Cherub from committing what she believed was to be a robbery, she still, through him, Billy Kane, could look for the recovery of the cash, and still keep the young hound, that she believed in and was trying to save, out of the hands of the police, and do it with a clear conscience since she would be in a position to return the proceeds of the theft. And then, too, perhaps, there had entered into her calculations the element of self-protection. She expected the Cherub to go alone, but if by any chance his pals went too, those pals were Clarkie Munn and Gypsy Joe—and he, Billy Kane, in that case, would be on their heels. And he understood, too, why she had not been more explicit over the telephone. She had not actually anticipated trouble, and she had respected her promise to the old hag to keep the Cherub’s name out of it.

He was running now, making across town in the direction of the East River. He did not know where Kegler’s dock or warehouse was, but Kegler was evidently a rather large dealer in sand, and any directory in the first drug store he passed would supply that information.

His mind worked on—curiously self-explanatory of his own actions. It had seemed pure impulse at the time that had prompted him to retreat so precipitately from the tenement; but he realized now that it was his brain subconsciously, but logically, at work. He, as the Rat, could not call in the police to raid that room where the inmates would denounce him as the author and instigator of the very crime for which he demanded their arrest; and to have gone into the room alone himself and have attempted to hold them up at the point of his pistol, while it might have been spectacular and dramatic, would have been little less than the act of a fool. It was not so easy for one man to hold up three others, to say nothing of a woman who was quite as abandoned, and certainly as full of trickery, and cunning, and resource as her male companions. There would have been, then, only one other alternative—to have gone in there coolly as the Rat, and call off the game that he was supposed to have started. But he had already learned that they had no love for the Rat, even though he was their employer in the present instance, and that secretly they were asking for nothing better than just such a favorable chance as that would be to “get” him, and to get, too, the large amount of cash that they credited him with having on his person.

His lips were tight, as he ran. He was conscious that he would not have hesitated to take the risk, to take any risk, if there had been no other way of saving her. But there was another way, a very much simpler, more common sense and natural a way; the way he was taking now. He had only to go to this Kegler’s dock where she would be waiting for the Cherub, and warn her. That was all. He had ample time if he hurried, since *they* had not started yet.

Time! Yes, he had time enough. Cool, deliberate reason reassured on that point, but the thought brought him a little panic-struck catch of breath. It might have been better, perhaps, if he had gone to the Bowery, or perhaps over into Lower Broadway, in the hope, say, of getting a taxi that would have saved him many minutes. He shook his head, and called himself a fool for allowing his mind to wander to inconsequent things. There were not many taxis hunting fares on the Bowery, and who ever heard of an empty taxi on Lower Broadway at this hour of night! And, besides, it was not half past nine yet, and she was not to be there until ten. And yet—time! He flirited the moisture from his forehead again, as, reaching a small drug store on a corner, he turned, and entered, and asked for the directory.

He was out again in scarcely a minute. He had found Kegler’s in the directory without difficulty, but not without certain new misgivings. Kegler’s was much farther along the East River than, somehow, and entirely without reason, he had imagined it would be. He began to run again, and again that twinge of panic seized him. True, he had a start on the others; true, they had just as far to go as he had, but with the distance that he knew now there was to cover, and the limit

that existed in the time in which to cover it, it became more than probable they would have arranged for some special means of conveyance, whereas he had none.

Billy Kane dropped suddenly from a run into a slow, even nonchalant walk. A short distance ahead of him, a small, and apparently, an old and second-hand car was coughing and chugging laboriously at the curb in front of the lighted window of a little grocery store. A few steps more, and he saw that the car was empty. Billy Kane's lips broadened in a hard smile. It might be reprehensible to steal a car for a few hours; but, as between a car and a human life that he knew depended on him alone, he experienced no pangs of conscience. It was the way out!

He edged over to the curb as he approached the machine, and, close to the car now, glanced around. In through the store window he could see a man, back turned, evidently the car's owner, leaning over the counter, talking to the proprietor of the store. Billy Kane, wary of attracting premature notice from the pedestrians here and there along the street, reached out calmly, opened the door without haste, and with a deliberate air of proprietorship slipped into the driver's seat—but in the next instant he had thrown in the gears, and the machine shot from the curb like a mad animal stung to frenzy.

A yell went up behind him; there came to him the glimpse of a man's figure rushing wildly out through the store door into the street; and then another yell, that was echoed from different directions along the street. The car took the first corner on little better than two wheels. The yells died away behind. At the next intersecting street Billy Kane turned again, and thereafter for a few blocks zigzagged his course, until, satisfied that he had thrown any immediate pursuers off his track, he headed again over toward the East River.

And now as he drove more quietly, confident that he need no longer fear the element of time, his mind harked back again to that scene in the old hag's room, and there came a puzzled frown furrowing his forehead, and a queer strained look into his face. It was not so clear after all! The picture in the large was there. The patient, cold-blooded winning of her confidence in order to lure her without suspicion or hesitation to her death was clear enough, as was also the hideous betrayal of that confidence, a betrayal that plumbed the depths of human infamy, and whose unscrupulous ingenuity and vile cunning was so typical of the Rat; but the details, examined more critically, seemed somehow foggy and obscured, and seemed to hint at something he did not quite understand. It was not that it was evidence of the Rat's return. That thought did not trouble him, for certainly he, of all others, who had so unceremoniously possessed himself of the Rat's den and all the Rat's belongings, should be the first to know of it if the other had put in an appearance again; and the fact that the plot had reached its consummation to-night he did not consider to have any bearing on that point either. Many of the Rat's plans, begun in the past, as he, Billy Kane, had only too good reason to know, had reached their climax since the Rat himself had been away. This was probably one of them. Certainly it had been begun more than two weeks ago, as both Shaky Liz and the Cherub had said, and that was before he, Billy Kane, had assumed the Rat's rôle, and, therefore, quite logically it seemed, before the Rat had gone away. It was not that—once started, the unholy quartet to whom the Rat had entrusted his dirty work was quite capable of carrying it through to its detestable conclusion—but it seemed strange that, adventurous as the Rat was and much as he undoubtedly desired to get the Woman in Black out of his way, he would have dared to do this. What she held over the Rat's head, he, Billy Kane, did not know; but he knew the Rat was well aware that, in event of her disappearance, certain evidence would be forthcoming against him within twenty-four hours. That had been her protection, a protection with which she had appeared to be thoroughly satisfied, and she had taken occasion more than once to give that warning to him, Billy Kane, in the belief that she was warning the Rat himself. There seemed to be only one answer then to this move on the Rat's part. In some way, unknown to her, he must have come into possession of that evidence, or in some way have rendered abortive the means by which, in event of her disappearance, it would be brought to light.

The car rattled and jangled along. It was a miserable contraption, seedy, and badly down at the heels, but so that its engine functioned he asked nothing better. He was near the river front now, and in the region of warehouses and buildings that, remote from the bridges and the regular trend of traffic, showed no lights at night, and where the streets were utterly deserted, and where occasionally he caught glimpses of the river itself like a silver thread under the moonlight. He ran still more slowly now, studying his location with all possible care. Kegler's dock, according to the directory, was still farther on, of course, but he realized that, well as he knew his New York, this was somewhat out of the ordinary radius, and that it would be all too easy to miss his way.

He shook his head a little in perplexity. There was another thing—one of the little details. Shaky Liz, Gypsy Joe, Clarkie Munn and the Cherub were not in the ranks of the Crime Trust as Red Vallon, and the Cadger, and Vannet, for instance, were, and where the Rat might naturally be expected to work upon a basis of mutual trust. It seemed strange that the Rat, in executing a plan like this, would give, not one, but four outsiders a hold on him, for if their tongues were ever loosened it meant the death house in Sing Sing for the Rat to a certainty. Nor did the fact that they themselves were accomplices wholly justify this seeming lapse from cunning on the Rat's part. Accomplices before now had been known to turn State's evidence! It was queer! The Rat probably had a very good reason—only it seemed a little queer!

Billy Kane shrugged his shoulders. Enough of that! He was peering out of the car now with growing anxiety, and with the realization forcing itself upon him that, if he had not actually lost his way, he at best had a very confused knowledge of his exact whereabouts. His lips tightened. It was growing late, too; it must be getting perilously near ten o'clock. He had had no doubt but that, from the address in the directory, he could easily find the place, and he was still sure it was farther on; but the quarter here was outrageously dark, and a plethora of turnings, that seemed to be nothing more than private trafficways for various wharfs and warehouses, made an exceedingly nasty complication. He nosed the machine along, his face growing more set and anxious every moment. It was black here—black—nothing but a cursed blackness. If there were only someone about—someone from whom he could ask directions! But there was nothing, no one, only the black, looming shapes of buildings, and even these were becoming more scattered now; and the only signs of life were the whistles and churnings of passing craft on the river.

The minutes passed. A sense of helplessness, of impotency, that brought a cold chill to his heart, was upon him now. Down here on the river front he was hopelessly lost. There was no light in the ramshackle car that he had appropriated—it wasn't equipped with anything that even approached a modern device. He stopped the car, lighted a match, and looked at his watch.

Ten minutes of ten!

Ten minutes! There were ten minutes left! He started the car again mechanically. There were ten minutes between her and a trap-door that opened into the silvery streak of water out there, whose shimmering now had lost its beauty and seemed like the hideous, insinuating, silky movement of some ghastly reptile. Ten minutes stood between her and that trap-door; and he, fool that he was, had lost his way! And yet he could hardly blame himself; the East River front at night was—but what did it matter whether he blamed himself or not!

A low cry of bitter hurt came from his compressed lips. It wasn't only the Woman in Black! Her deadly peril now, the almost certainty of her death, brought him, in an overwhelming surge of anguish and fear the consciousness that it was the woman he loved. He remembered the abhorrence and contempt she held for him in those steadfast, fearless brown eyes of hers, and he loved her for that abhorrence and contempt. It seemed to typify her, as somehow she seemed to typify a purity and a courage that was soul deep—for that contempt and abhorrence was for the man whom she believed to be the Rat, who in turn typified the dregs and lees of all that was vile. But he, Billy Kane, was not the Rat, and some day, as he was conscious now, he had hoped to stand before her in his own person, and with his own name cleared. His hands gripped on the steering wheel until it seemed as though the taut-drawn skin would burst over the knuckles. He remembered the poise of that dainty head, the curve of the full, white, rounded throat, and he saw her now in— No! He would not let his brain complete that thought. It would drive him mad. He was already in a state bordering on frenzy, almost out of self-control. Ten minutes! There could be very few of those ten minutes left now!

A cry came from him again, but this time one of sudden hope. To his right, from a large building at the head of one of those trafficways that led to the river bank itself, he caught sight of a lighted window. In an instant the machine was tearing forward in that direction; and in a minute more he had leaped out, and was pounding frantically with his fists at the door of the building. This wasn't Kegler's, he knew that; but here was some sign of life at last in the deserted neighborhood.

A step sounded from within. It seemed to drag. It seemed as though it were covering some interminable distance inside there. And then the door opened, and an old, decrepit man, who perhaps held down a sort of pensioned night watchman's job, a lantern in hand, stuck out his head.

"I've lost my way," said Billy Kane quickly. "Can you tell me where Kegler's place is?"

"You mean the sand docks?" inquired the other.

"Yes," said Billy Kane.

The man stepped out from the doorway, and pointed back along the river.

"That's it over there," he said. "The one beyond our wharf down here." He glanced at the car. "But you can't get through here with that car because this bit of road don't connect—see? You'll have to go back a bit the way you came."

Billy Kane held his watch under the lantern's light. There were neither the five, nor the four, nor the three minutes that he had dared hope might still remain. It was already after ten o'clock!

"Can I get down from here on foot—it's shorter this way, isn't it?" asked Billy Kane between closed teeth.

"Yes, sure, you can," said the man. "But you won't find no one there. They was expecting some barges in, but they haven't come yet, and——"

Billy Kane had already swung away from the other, and was making for the river.

"Thanks!" he called out over his shoulder, as he ran. "I'll leave the car here till I get back."

He heard some reply from the other, but he could not make out the words. Whatever they were, they were inconsequent now. He, Billy Kane, unless by some miracle, was too late to warn her—and too late perhaps even to save her. He knew fear now as he had never known it before, but it was not fear for himself. And he knew a passion that seemed to find its roots in the very soul of him. If he was too late—at least there would be a reckoning, come what might! His lips twitched in a queer, distorted smile. It was strange! This fear and this passion, though they were supreme within him, seemed curiously under control, and he was abnormally cool and calm now, and his brain, as though lashed into virility by some powerful stimulant, was working swiftly, incisively, leaping in flashes from premises to conclusions.

It was certain that they were already there, but there was still a chance that they had not yet had time to do her any harm. And it must be his wits, not blundering force, that would be its own undoing, that must turn that chance to account. He must play the Rat now in exactly the same way as, when back there in the tenement, the thought had flashed across his mind that he might have played it in the old hag's room. The chances of success, it was true, were a hundredfold slimmer now than they would have been then; but now it was forced upon him as the only way, and then it had seemed an unnecessary and uncalled-for risk to take. It was the one way now. It might fail, but it would gain him access inside that dark, looming building across the open stretch of brick-and-sand-strewn yard where he was running now; and once inside, if it were not already too late, there must be some way out for her. And if it were too late—well then, the Cherub, and Gypsy Joe, and Clarkie Munn would not have to press the Rat for payment for their work!

Again the distorted smile flickered on his lips. He had his bearings now, both literally and mentally. He ran without caution, making almost unnecessary noise, and reached the door of the building; a building that, he could discern now, made the shore end of a long dock, and which, according to the old watchman's directions, was obviously Kegler's place.

The building was in utter and complete darkness. He dismissed the possibility that she was still anywhere without, still waiting for the Cherub's arrival, as too improbable to warrant the waste of even a second, and making still more noise at the door now, he tried it, found it unlocked, pushed it open, stepped inside and closed it behind him. A quick, startled exclamation, from a long way off, it seemed, reached him, and then a sibilant whisper:

"Who's dat?"

"Clarkie—Gypsy!" Billy Kane called softly. "Are you there?"

"Gawd!" a voice ejaculated hoarsely.

A light went on somewhere over Billy Kane's head. He was in a short passage that was flanked on either side by what were evidently the business offices of the concern, and at the end of this passage now a door was suddenly swung open. Gypsy Joe was standing in the doorway.

"De Rat!" he exclaimed in heavy amazement, and mechanically fell back as Billy Kane advanced.

Billy Kane's eyes were apparently blinking in the abrupt transition from darkness to the glare of light; but with the knowledge that it might literally mean the difference between life and death to him—and her—no single detail of his surroundings was escaping him. The door ahead of him, a heavy, cumbersome affair, opened inwards toward him, and was now swung full back against the wall, but if the evidence of that iron loop on the door jamb could be trusted, the door was equipped with a massive bolt. Gypsy Joe was still to a large extent blocking the doorway, but he could see that the huge, lighted space beyond was a sort of storage warehouse, windowless, of course, or else he would have seen a light from outside. And the switches, the electric-light switches—the one for the bulb over his head in this passage here, and the one for the light in that room ahead of him! They were vital too! He could not see any in the position where he might naturally expect to find them—by the door where Gypsy Joe stood. He glanced back over his shoulder. Yes, there was one there at the side of the front door, a switch for the passage light undoubtedly; but Gypsy Joe had certainly not used that one, so there must be another then, as well, inside the storage room.

He had been perhaps the matter of a bare few seconds in traversing the length of the passage, and now as he stepped across the threshold into the warehouse itself, the Cherub and Clarkie Munn had joined Gypsy Joe, and were staring at him with scowling, startled, uncertain faces—but Billy Kane's eyes were not on the three men. The blood seemed to leap through his veins in a great surging tide, and upon him was the sense of a mighty uplift. It was not too late! It was not too late! His brain seemed to seize upon those words and reiterate them in a sing-song way. A woman's form lay upon the floor, and she was bound and gagged; but dark eyes met his, and in the eyes was a softer light than he had ever seen there before when they had been fixed on him. "For once," they seemed to say, "you have not failed. I told you to watch Gypsy Joe and Clarkie Munn, and you are just in time."

The Cherub laughed suddenly and a little noisily, as from unstrung nerves.

"Say, youse gave us a jolt!" he said. "Wot's de idea? I suppose youse came along to make sure dat we earned yer money, eh, an' dat dere wouldn't be no fluke about her bein' bumped off fer keeps? Well, if youse had been about a minute an' a half later youse'd have missed de trap-door scene, 'cause it'd have been all over."

Billy Kane's eyes had met the girl's again. The soft light in them had gone, and in its place had come a horror, and sudden accusation, and a bitter misery; and her face, already deathly white as she lay there, seemed now to tinge with gray.

Billy Kane shook his head in response to the Cherub, as he turned and faced the three men. They were edging a little closer to him. He caught a surreptitious nudge that passed between Gypsy Joe and Clarkie Munn. He moved back a step—but it was a step that brought him nearer to the girl. If he could hold them in a state of puzzled suspense with its consequent indecision for a moment, that was all he asked. And he was counting on a sort of frank audaciousness for that.

"Well?" prompted the Cherub, a sudden, curious silkiness in his tones. "Did I call de turn?"

"Maybe he's come down to pay us off," suggested Gypsy Joe smoothly. "Dere's nothin' slow about de Rat."

"I'll tell you," said Billy Kane quietly. He took his knife from his pocket, and coolly opened it; then nonchalantly, but with a swift, lithe movement, stooped and cut the cords that bound the girl's wrists. He pressed the knife into her hand—she needed no further hint that she could free her own ankles—and, as he straightened up again, his eyes swept the wall by the door. Yes, they were there—two electric-light switches. He faced the trio again.

"Well, wot do youse know about dat!" observed Clarkie Munn, with an unpleasant grin.

"I'll tell you, Clarkie," Billy Kane lied calmly. "I'm leery that somebody's split, and I'm afraid the police know too much. Understand? I'm not taking any chances, and the game's off—that's all."

The Cherub's bland, blue eyes seemed to shade a darker hue.

"Dat's all right, den," said the Cherub sweetly. "But wot about us? Mabbe youse can call de game off if youse likes, 'cause it's yer game, but where does we come in? 'Tain't our fault de job's crimped—dat's up to youse. Does we get paid or not?"

"Dat's de talk, Cherub!" applauded Clarkie Munn, an undisguised snarl in his voice.

Billy Kane shrugged his shoulders.

"Who said you wouldn't get paid?" he demanded roughly. "We'll attend to that when we get out of here. Do you want to hang around and get pinched?"

"No," said the Cherub, and smiled. "No, we don't want to get pinched—an' we ain't worryin' none about it either, not about gettin' pinched down here. It's a cinch youse wouldn't have risked

comin' here if de bulls had been followin' a yard behind. We knows youse too well fer dat, Bundy! Get me? An' youse ain't comin' across when youse gets out of here, youse are comin' across right now! An' youse"—he whirled suddenly on the girl, who had risen to her feet and was backing toward the door—"youse stand where youse are! I ain't sure we are through wid youse yet, no matter wot Bundy says—see?" He jerked his head at his two companions, though his eyes never for an instant left Billy Kane's face. "Wot about it, fellers? If she gets out of here she knows too much, an' we got to fade away outer New York anyway, whether de bulls are on now or not. An' dat takes de coin—all de coin we can get. Well, de Rat always carries a wad, but if we pinches it an' lets de Rat loose afterwards he's got a bunch behind him dat'll nose us out where de bulls couldn't, an' we'll get ours. Dat's de size of it. Do we play fer table stakes, or hedge de bets?"

It was coming now, as Billy Kane had known inevitably that it would come. There was no answer needed from either Clarkie Munn or Gypsy Joe. It was written in the ugly menace in their faces, and had been from the moment they had recovered their startled surprise at his entry into the place.

Billy Kane flung a quick glance around him. The girl was a little behind him, close to those electric-light switches, her way clear to the front door, save for the peril of that lighted passage down which she must run. In front of him, just out of arm's reach, the Cherub's bland eyes smiled into his with a sort of hideous serenity; while over the Cherub's shoulders, one on each side, showed the vicious faces of the other two—and, under cover of the Cherub's body, Clarkie Munn's hand seemed to be stealing in the direction of his hip pocket.

Billy Kane seemed suddenly to go to pieces and to lose his nerve. His tongue circled his lips with nervous repetition. He put out his hands in an imploring attitude, and stumbled a step forward toward the Cherub, and caught a glint of light on a revolver barrel in Clarkie Munn's hand, as it came stealing now from the latter's pocket.

"Wait—wait a minute, Cherub!" Billy Kane whispered thickly, and licked at his lips again, and stumbled forward another step. "Wait!" he whispered—and then, swift as the winking of an eye, Billy Kane flung his body forward with all his weight upon the Cherub, hurling the Cherub back upon Clarkie Munn, and whirling, whipped a lightning left full into Gypsy Joe's face on the other side. There was a flash, the deafening roar of a report, as the Cherub reeled into Clarkie Munn's revolver; then a scream of agony, and the Cherub, grasping at his leg with both hands, went to the floor.

"The switches there—beside you!" Billy Kane shouted at the girl. "Put out the lights—both switches! Quick! Run for it!"

Gypsy Joe, recovering his balance, and with a bellow like a maddened bull was charging forward; Clarkie Munn's hand had swung upward again—and then the place was in darkness. A second late, Clarkie Munn's revolver cut a vicious flame-tongue through the black, but Billy Kane had flattened himself out on the floor, and was wriggling rapidly backward toward the door and the now dark passageway.

There was a moan, then a shrill scream in the Cherub's voice, and coincidentally a torrent of blasphemy from Gypsy Joe, as the latter, quite obviously, in his rush and in the blackness now, had stumbled none too gently into the wounded man.

"Youse fool! Curse youse, youse fool!" shrieked the Cherub. "Ain't youse got a pocket torch? Ain't either of youse got a torch? Flash a torch on him, an'—"

Billy Kane was across the threshold now; and now, rising to his knees, he groped out for the edge of the door, found it, and, as he slammed it shut, it seemed to cut in two, as a knife might cut it, the sudden, white, piercing ray of a flashlight that leaped out from the interior of the warehouse. And then in another second he had shot the bolt home in its grooves, and, in the darkness, leaning heavily for an instant against the door to recover himself, he stared down the black passage for the girl, and could see nothing.

There came an abortive rush against the door; snarls and oaths came muffled from within. He moved a step forward along the passage. They were a negligible quantity in there now. The door would hold, and when they succeeded in getting out and making their way along the side of the dock perhaps, they would be more concerned in getting to cover themselves than anything else; and besides they would have a wounded man to hamper their movements. It was she now, the Woman in Black, that concerned him.

"Where are you?" he called quickly. "Where are you?"

A draft of air touched his face. The front door at the farther end of the passage was being opened.

"I am here, Bundy."

It was her voice, but there was something of cold, merciless forbidding in it. He halted instinctively. He did not quite understand.

"Bundy, are you listening?" came the level tones again. "This is the end, absolutely and finally the end to-night. You have saved my life, but I owe you no thanks for that. You saved it, after hiring thugs to take it, you thing of loathing, because you dared do nothing else, since you say you believe the police got wind enough of this thing tonight to scare you off. Very well, Bundy—but there is more, isn't there, that the police do not know? Well, they will know it, and certain secrets in that den of yours, the moment I can reach them. I have warned you often enough. I am through, Bundy, this is the end of the Rat to-night, nothing shall stop that—but I am still a fool. I am still giving you warning of what I mean to do now. I am still giving you a chance to save yourself if you can; the rather slim chance that the police will not be able to run the man who was known as the Rat to earth! And I am giving you that chance because—well because, even in spite of yourself, I am still alive."

"No!" he cried. "You do not understand. Wait!" He was groping down the black passage, as he heard the front door shut quickly, and heard a footstep running, receding, outside. "Wait!" he cried again. "For God's sake, wait!"

There was no answer. He knew there would be none. He had heard her running away out there, hadn't he? He reached the door, and looked out—and hung there hesitant—and called again—and there was no answer. He listened. He could not hear her footsteps any more. There was no sound from anywhere, not even from that warehouse door behind him. They weren't hammering on that any more.

And then Billy Kane laughed in a short, bitter, mirthless way, and started, running at top speed, in the direction in which he had left his purloined and dilapidated car. The end! The end of the Rat! He laughed again in the same bitter mirth, as he ran. It was the end of more than that! It was the end of hope—of her—of that love that had come to him upon the thresholds of these strange doors of the night. It was the end of Billy Kane! And whether as the Rat now, or as Billy Kane, the police would be equally hard upon his trail. He stood in far worse case now than on the night of David Ellsworth's murder, for now the underworld, that would be combed for the Rat, and where the Rat was too well known to have it offer the slightest hope of escaping detection, was closed to him as a refuge. He knew what she meant to do—to tell her story to the police, to expose all the criminal acts and affiliations of the bona fide Rat, and to lead them to the Rat's den, and expose the secrets that she had so often hinted were hidden there.

He clenched his hands as he ran. The end! No! Not yet! Not until they had him, and they had not got him yet! He did not know which way to turn; but while he still had his freedom there was still the hope of running down the murderer of David Ellsworth—and there were the proceeds of that robbery now, most of them, in the Rat's den. That was what seemed to stand out as immediately vital now—to get those things—that money and those rubies. He had staked everything on the hope that some day he could hand over to justice both the proceeds of that crime and the murderer as well—hand them over *together*, as a complete vindication of his own name—and even now, in this hour that seemed blackest of all, he still dared to cling to that hope. He knew who the murderer was, and he had already recovered a large share of what had been stolen. He still hoped to find the murderer, and he still hoped to find the remainder of those rubies, and so carry out his original plan. His jaws locked. His mind was made up. He would go! And, yes, he had far better than an even chance of getting there in time. She would take longer to reach the police and lead them to the den than it would take him to reach it—thanks to the car that, grim irony! he had stolen on her account. Afterward his position would be desperate enough; but now, without an instant's loss of time, he had to gain the den and get away again before they trapped him there.

He reached the car. The old night watchman had evidently retired inside the building again, for there was no sign of the man. He experienced a certain sense of relief at this, as he cranked the obsolete machine; and then he was in the driver's seat again, and the car was roaring along the road. He drove fast, with mad haste, with reckless disregard for the ill-lighted road. There could be no accident comparable in disaster to his failure to put the miles behind him swiftly enough to insure him the few minutes leeway he asked for in the den.

He bent over the wheel, tense, rigid, strained. The minutes sped away. A glimmer of hope came to him for that "afterward." He could use the car again; get out of the city again before the chase got too hot. He could certainly hide in that way during the night, and that would give him the night in which to think. He had not time to think now—only that as he drew in toward the centre of the city he must keep as much as possible to the unfrequented streets, both because he

must ignore such a thing as speed laws, and because he was driving a stolen car.

XXVI—THE LAST PORTAL

Billy Kane had no means of knowing how long he had been, when he finally leaped from the car at the corner of the lane on the street at the rear of the den. He knew only that, beyond any question of doubt or uncertainty, he had outdistanced her. With a quick glance around him to make sure that he was not observed, he slipped into the lane; and in an instant more, through the shed, and the underground tunnel, and the secret door that so craftily opened on the board joints of the rough panelling, he had gained the interior of the den. He ran across it, turned on the dangling incandescent over the rickety table, and running to the street door made sure that it was locked.

He turned then, pushed the bed aside, and pulled up the plank in the flooring that he had loosened once in his search for the secret hiding places of the room, and that had since served him in that capacity as a private depository of his own. From the aperture he lifted out the hand bag containing the banknotes stolen from the Ellsworth vault, and the red flannel sack containing the rubies, which he had torn from around the neck of the Man with the Crutch last night, replaced the plank, set the bed back in its original position, and carried the hand bag and sack to the table. He opened the bag, tossed in the red flannel sack—and stood for an instant eyeing the bag with a frown of distrust. He remembered that it did not close very well, that he had bent the catches with his steel jimmy that night when he had forced the bag open in the room of the Man with the Crutch, and that it was now quite liable to gape apart without warning—in which case, should the contents be seen by anyone, and they could not help but be seen if such an accident should occur in the presence of anyone within eyeshot, it would be likely to prove, not only awkward, but disastrous for the possessor of the bag. His frown cleared. There was still room in the bag for, say, a shirt; and, than a shirt there was nothing better to disguise the contents underneath.

He walked over to the old bureau, that was flanked on one side by the secret door to the den, and on the other by the cretonne hanging that, stretched diagonally across the corner of the room, served the Rat as a wardrobe. There was the shirt that he had worn on the night when he had first come here, the night he had been wounded by the police. Whitie Jack had washed the blood stains out, and had shoved it in the top bureau drawer.

He pulled the drawer open, bent over it, reached in for the shirt, straightened up—and the shirt dropped from his fingers. He did not move. Something cold, and round, and hard was pressed none too gently against the nape of his neck. His eyes had lifted to the mirror in front of him mechanically, and he stood there staring into it now like a man dazed and numbed. An arm was stretched out from behind the cretonne curtains, and a hand held a revolver against his head. It was like some uncanny moving picture that he was watching. For now the cretonne hanging moved; and now a figure moved out from behind the hanging, and stood behind him, Billy Kane, and stared, too, into the mirror, over his, Billy Kane's, shoulder. There were two faces in the glass now, two faces that in form and features seemed identical—or else it was some strange mirage that caused a double reflection of his own face. And then one of the faces smiled malevolently, leeringly. It wasn't his own face that smiled. He wasn't smiling—though his lips moved.

"The Rat!" he said, below his breath.

He felt a hand slip into his pocket, and remove his automatic. And then the other spoke:

"Remarkable resemblance, isn't it—Billy Kane? And the recognition appears to be mutual—Billy Kane! I've been waiting here quite a while for you this evening."

Billy Kane did not answer. The Rat! The Rat was back! It was the moment, arrived at last, that had haunted him from the moment he had taken upon himself the other's personality here in the underworld; but though he was more at the other's mercy with that revolver muzzle boring into his neck, more helpless than he had thought to be when this time should arrive, more

powerless where, instead, he had told himself a hundred times that at the worst it could be but a fight man to man, he found himself far more unmoved now than he had anticipated he would be. He found himself curiously composed. There seemed even a grim, sardonic humor stirring in his soul. What did it matter now? To-night he had no further use for the Rat's mantle—she had seen to that by now. To-night the whole house of cards had toppled anyway, and the ultimate worst had happened, save only that the police had not yet got their steel bracelets around his wrists. And yet there was a significance in the cold menace of the other's tone, and a still deeper significance, that he did not like, in the other's ostentatious repetition of his, Billy Kane's, name. It was obvious that Billy Kane was no stranger to the Rat!

"Get back to that table, and sit down there!" ordered the Rat curtly.

Billy Kane, because he had no choice, obeyed. It was like some weird, extravagant hallucination of the brain. He was looking up from his chair into what seemed to be his own face—only as he studied it now, fascinated by it, he saw what no mirror had ever shown him was a part of his own identity. The face was a little older, a little more drawn, and there was an expression in the eyes, a smoldering something, a devil's malignity that burned out through the half-closed lids, leaving the pupils like fever spots behind. And he remembered now that she had commented upon the freshness of his face on that first night when they had met.

"You fool!" sneered the Rat suddenly. "So you played the Rat, did you? And did you think I didn't know? Well, you seem to have liked it—Billy Kane—and so I guess you'd better finish out the act, and play it until the end. You can manage that, can't you—say, for another ten minutes—until the Rat is dead!"

Billy Kane's hands tightened on the table edge. It was not only the words, it was the eyes, and the face that were working now, that seemed to possess some deadly eloquence.

"What do you mean?" Billy Kane steadied his voice.

"It won't take long to tell you," said the Rat roughly. "You've been here long enough to know that apart from the old cobbler and his wife upstairs, who mind their own business and are always deaf when they don't want to hear, this place is sound-proof to revolver shots. Well, the game is up to-night. Your game—and my game! I've got one or two little things to do here, and then I'm going; but I'm going to leave the Rat behind—dead."

Billy Kane's fingers began to drum a light tattoo on the table. It was strange that he could force his fingers to do that with an air of such apparent unconcern. He was laboring under no delusions. He was fully conscious that there was no bluff in the other's words, that he was actually sitting there and facing death in the most literal sense of the term. The Rat's reputation was quite enough in itself to make it certain that the man would not hesitate in putting his threat into execution. And then, besides, there were strange stirrings in his mind now that were not comforting things. The Rat, cognizant of it all the time, had deliberately let him, Billy Kane, play the role—and the drama was to end with the Rat's death. It seemed horribly logical. It would let the Rat out of *her* clutches to-night, for instance, and leave only a dead Rat as prey for the police. He started involuntarily. Was that it? His fingers stopped their movements. Suppose he warned the Rat that the police were coming now? No! That would only cause the Rat to hurry—and to shoot the sooner. Well then, suppose the police found *two* Rats here? It would not save Billy Kane, but it would end the career of one of the most infamous scoundrels in the United States—and it would pay his debt to her! If he could only stave the man off a little, fence for time!

He could have laughed out wildly at the mocking irony of it. He was praying now for the police to come! She would lead them, or some of them, through that secret door, wouldn't she?—though they would guard both doors, take no chances, even while they would hardly expect to find anyone here. The Rat was standing with his back to the secret door, and Billy Kane's eyes swept past the other now in a well-simulated vacant, wavering way—and fell again upon the Rat.

The man was leaning a little farther over the table now, his lips parted in a vicious smile. It was as though, innate in the other, was an unholy joy to be derived from a victim's plight, a joy that he sought to augment by making his victim writhe the more if he could.

"And so you played the Rat, did you?" The Rat was sneering again. "Well, you found out a lot more than was good for you, didn't you? There was a woman, wasn't there? Maybe she didn't introduce herself because she thought you knew her well enough; but maybe you're entitled to know something about her, because she's one of the reasons why you're going to snuff out in a few minutes." His voice rose suddenly in a furious burst of blasphemy. "Blast her!" he snarled. "She went too far! She thought she could make me dance every time she cracked her little whip, did she? She'll wish now, if there's any wishing where she's gone, that she'd stayed up on the Avenue with the rest of the swells where she belongs, and left her infernal, nose-ying charities on the

East Side alone. Margaret Blaine—the banker’s daughter! Ha, ha! She had it in for me because a girl she was interested in down here went and jumped in the river. See? She swore she’d put me through one way or another for that. And then she stumbled on a pal of mine the night he croaked off, and found some papers on him that put me to the bad for fair. And that wised her up to a lot more. And then, curse her, she tumbled to the game here, and—well, I guess you know the hand she played.” He laughed raucously. “I guess you’d ought to! But you needn’t worry about it any more! She’s gone out—Billy Kane—understand? She went out—for keeps—at ten o’clock to-night.”

Billy Kane’s eyes stole to the secret door again. He remembered the fascination with which he had watched it slowly open on the night he had lain there on the bed, and Karlin, in the hands of the police now, had sat at the bedside, and Red Vallon had been here at the table. And it seemed now as though the door moved again as it had moved that night. But he could not be sure. Perhaps it was his imagination that was father to the wish—and he dared not look steadily, or too long in that direction.

He brushed his hand across his eyes. He understood well enough now why the Rat had been indifferent to what Shaky Liz, or the Cherub, or any of them, might hold over him—there would be no Rat, if he, Billy Kane, in the Rat’s stead, were murdered. And the Rat believed, of course, that she—her name was Margaret—Margaret Blaine—that she was dead. But he, Billy Kane, was playing for time, wasn’t he? And the Rat, in his hideous propensity for a cat-and-mouse game, seemed quite willing to talk.

“You killed her!” Billy Kane’s ejaculation was one of stunned incredulity. “But—but she threatened me, when she thought I was you, by saying that if anything happened to her the evidence against you would be produced just the same.”

“Sure, she did!” leered the Rat. “In twenty-four hours after her disappearance. And it’ll be twenty-four hours all right before they have any proof of that. It wasn’t pulled off where a howl would go up ten minutes after she snuffed out! Sure, in twenty-four hours! Well, I’m in no hurry, am I? In twenty-four *minutes* the Rat—that’s you—won’t need to care what busts loose! It’ll save *me* a lot of trouble if they find the Rat sprawled out on the floor with a bullet through him, won’t it?”

The door! Had it moved inward a bare fraction of an inch, as it had that other night? There would have been time by now, just time, for her and the police to have got here. Was that a widening crack along that panel there—or only a shadow flung with taunting malice by the murky light? No—it moved now! He was sure of it. It moved!

He forced himself to laugh in a short, nervous way.

“I don’t see how that lets you out,” he mumbled. “What’s to become of you if the Rat’s found dead?”

The Rat was moving back from the table to the side wall of the den.

“I’ll show you,” said the Rat, with an ugly grin. “And don’t move—you understand? I’m a dead shot, and I’m not risking anything by being a few feet farther away. You’d only go out a little sooner, and miss something that’ll maybe sweeten your last moments—see?” His revolver still covering Billy Kane, he raised his left hand and pressed against the wall. A small panel door swung outward. “There’s nothing in there!” mocked the Rat. “That’s the secret she was forever talking about having discovered, and that’s the place she looted all right, and where she got the dope about a lot of our plans, and kept me from wising up the crowd about it in order to save my own skin. But there’s a thing or two she didn’t know.” His hand crept farther along the wall, and pressed suddenly against it again, and now a full board-length of the panelling slid away. Something metallic fell with a thud to the floor—and then Billy Kane was on his feet, clinging with a fierce, unconscious grip to the table.

He had forgotten the police and that secret door at the far end of the room, forgotten the peril in which he stood, forgotten that ugly black muzzle of a revolver in the other’s hand. His mind and brain seemed to be reeling. Some inhuman devil’s trick was being played upon him. That was one of those iron crutch shafts, painted to resemble grained wood, that the Rat was picking up—yes, and fitting it now with deft, accustomed fingers to the armpiece! The Rat—the Man with the Crutch—the murderer of David Ellsworth—the man whose very rôle he had taken upon himself and played!

“You!” he cried, and swayed at the table. And then passion seized him. “You hound of hell!” he shouted hoarsely. “The Man with the Crutch—it was you who killed David Ellsworth!”

“Sit down!” The Rat’s lips were thinned, merciless; the revolver edged forward. “Well, what about it! Why don’t you say Peters, too? You stuck your nose pretty deep into that!”

Billy Kane mechanically sank back in his chair.

"So you've got it, have you?" jeered the Rat. "Sure, the Man with the Crutch was me! And you, you fool, through your cursed interference with Red Vallon, put the police on my trail for Peters' murder. Well, I'm going to let you be the Man with the Crutch too—as well as the Rat. That'll let me out on both counts!" He stood the crutch up against the wall, and from the opening drew forth some clothes and flung them down beside the crutch. "Get the idea? This is the costume that goes with the crutch—sort of reserve stock. Understand? It wasn't always convenient to come here as the Rat, or leave here as the Man with the Crutch—or the other way around, if you like. I'll leave the stuff there where it'll show up, and the police can put two and two together the same as you have. And that answers your question as to what is to become of me. I am a gentleman of several parts, and I can spare *two* of them. What's left is none of your business, and anyway I'm getting tired of this, and I'm pretty near ready to go. But there's one thing more—there were some rubies you were looking for, weren't there, besides the ones you've been taking charge of and so kindly placed in that bag there a few minutes ago without giving me the trouble of making you hand them over?" Again his left hand, thrust back of him, sought the interior of the opening, and came out with a number of small plush trays piled one on top of another, the topmost flashing and scintillating now with its score of fiery, blood-red stones. "You were looking for these, weren't you?" prodded the Rat, with a chuckle. "Well, you had 'em here with you all the time!"

Billy Kane was fighting desperately for self-control. Could they hear outside there? The man was condemning himself out of his own mouth! God, could they *hear* out there—did they understand that this man had murdered David Ellsworth, and that Billy Kane was clear! He met the Rat's eyes with deliberate defiance now. More! Everything! The man must be led into telling everything—he had not told enough yet to make it sure—and perhaps they had not heard it all.

"And Peters," he rasped out. "You killed Peters, too—Peters, who helped you kill David Ellsworth! Weren't you satisfied with your share, that you had to steal his?"

The Rat had advanced to the table, and, setting down the trays, always with his revolver covering Billy Kane, had begun to pour the contents of one tray at a time into the open hand bag. He stopped now, and stared at Billy Kane in a sort of contemptuous surprise.

"So that's the way you doped it out, is it?" he said, and laughed raucously. "And you're kind to Peters, aren't you? Peters, who wouldn't harm a fly! I killed Peters because his evidence at the inquest finished Billy Kane for fair, and I didn't want that evidence changed. It was *me* Peters saw coming down the back stairs and entering the library that night—only he thought it was you. Do you take me for a fool? I knew you'd see the report in the papers, and that, knowing there was something wrong about Peters' story, you'd hunt Peters out and have a show-down, and that between you there was a chance of you getting at more of the truth than I wanted, and that Peters would then retract his evidence. Get me?"

"I wasn't for letting you out. I'd been banking on you to do a lot for me. The only guy that was in with me on that deal was Jackson—and he's dead—just as the Rat is going to be. I spotted you long ago when you used to nose around here for that old fool who pitched his money away. I watched you quite a while before I was dead sure I could pass for you—and then I warmed up to Jackson. The rest was easy. We croaked old Ellsworth, and planted you. That gave me the coin I wanted to do what I was getting ready for—to pull out of this Rat's game forever. It was getting too fierce with that cursed woman on my heels. So before I pulled the Ellsworth trick, I set things going to get her too, and passed the word around that I was going away for a while, so's there'd be no chance of her tumbling to anything—and I stood pat as the Man with the Crutch. And then you acted like a Christmas tree shaking itself in my lap. There were a lot of things coming along with certain friends of mine, and with you playing the Rat and getting away with it, and with you there to stand for it if anything broke wrong, it looked like a cinch to nose them out at the tape on the little deals I'd started for them, and that would let me get away with the whole wad myself. See?"

The Rat was pouring the rubies from the trays into the hand bag again, his eyes glinting with a curious rapacious craftiness; and then, coming to one of the trays whose corner had been cut off, he laughed outright in a sort of self-complacent mirth.

"Do you remember this?" he taunted. "The night I croaked old Ellsworth I beat it for here on the quiet the minute I left the house, and I put the trays and half of the stones into that hiding place there, and then I changed my clothes and wore my crutch over to where I lived when I wasn't at home here, and hid the rest of the stuff there. You know that, all right! Blast you, you got it, and you nearly queered me! The Rat was supposed to be away then—see? Well, that night

when I was limping around with my crutch, I was told the Rat was back—and it didn't take me long to find out your game. It looked like a piece of luck that was too good to be true! It suited me—I was for it hard. The only thing I was afraid of was that you might quit, so I left that ruby and the piece of tray for you on the table. I thought I knew you. It would give you a start, all right—but it would look as though this was where you were going to get the clue you needed, and you'd stick for fair."

The Rat attempted to close the bag, and snarled at the bent catches. He finally fastened one of them partially, tossed the bag on the floor behind him, and, his face suddenly working again, flung his revolver arm out toward Billy Kane.

"If you've got anything to say before you go out—say it!" He was biting off his words. "Don't think that because I've been talking a lot to you that I'm bluffing. I wouldn't have opened up if I'd been bluffing, would I? And, besides, there's another count on which you're due to snuff out. The game's up all around. I stalled on ringing down the curtain on the girl and on you as long as I thought there was a chance of my getting something out of those schemes that you kept butting in on. But you queered that, too, away back on the night you put Karlin in bad, and the police got him. Karlin's begun to weaken and talk a little. That's the finish of the gang, and any more pickings for me. Sooner or later Karlin'll spill everything he knows, and he knows a lot, to save himself; and then they'll be looking for the Rat on several other counts. So I passed the word to put the game with the girl through for to-night—while I took care of you."

Billy Kane felt his face whiten. He knew that round, black muzzle would spit its tongue-flame in a moment. With the Rat's hand around it, it seemed curiously like the head of a snake that was coiled to strike. Had they heard out there? Here was the bag that contained everything, all that had been taken from David Ellsworth's vault, and here was the murderer, self-confessed. Had they heard? Had she heard? Would they remember, would *she* remember that Billy Kane's name was cleared? And if they were out there, why didn't they come in? Were they going to stand there and see him shot down—see another murder committed? No! He understood. The slightest sound from the direction of that secret door would be but the signal for the Rat to fire. It was up to him—somehow—some way—to give them a chance to act. It was up to him in some way to beat the Rat to that first shot, that would not be delayed many seconds now.

He eyed the Rat for a moment steadily; appraised again the cold-blooded, callous implacability in the other's face—and then Billy Kane squared his shoulders, and his hands on the table slid back a little until the thumbs extended over the edge, and he laughed coolly.

"It's the limit, is it, Bundy?" he said quietly. "Well, then, I'll take it standing up, you cur, if you don't mind."

The Rat nodded indifferently.

It seemed as though Billy Kane, for all his apparent coolness and composure, was not equal to his self-appointed task. He half rose to his feet, and sank back heavily in his chair again, and his hands, as though to steady himself, clutched with seemingly desperate energy farther over the table's edge—and then, in a flash, the table was in mid-air between the two men, and, as it hurtled forward, Billy Kane, crouched low, leaped for the other, as the Rat, with an oath, sprang to one side to avoid the table.

A red flame blinded Billy Kane's eyes, an acrid smell filled his nostrils, and seemed to stifle him, and make his head swim dizzily, and his left side seemed curiously numb and dead, but his hands had reached their mark, and had closed like steel vises around the Rat's throat. And he hung there, hung there because a fury and a seething passion gave him superhuman strength—hung there as cries resounded through the room, and there came the rush of feet—hung there as he crashed downward to the floor dragging the Rat with him—hung there as an utter blackness came and settled upon him.

It was strange and very curious. He opened his eyes. He was in bed, and someone was sitting there very quietly, with head bent over and resting on the back of his outstretched hand. He tried to remember. He should have been on the floor in the den, shouldn't he? And where was the Rat? Had they got the Rat? His eyes opened a little wider. That dark head there seemed strangely familiar. His side hurt him brutally. He remembered that shot now. A sort of grim humor came upon him. He was back where he had started from on that first night in the underworld—in bed with a pistol-shot wound. The Rat must have got him after all. But the Rat—the Rat! He started up in bed involuntarily.

There came a little cry. The dark head was raised. It was the Woman in Black. No, that wasn't her name. It was Margaret—Margaret Blaine. He wanted to call her that. He tried to speak. He was very weak.

"You mustn't try to move," she said softly. "You have been very badly hurt, though, thank God, not dangerously so. And it's all right—I know you want to know that. They've got the Rat—for the murder of David Ellsworth. We heard it all last night, and did not dare to move while he kept that revolver on you, and I was mad with fear."

"Yes," said Billy Kane weakly. "It's morning now, isn't it?"

Cool fingers closed his lips.

"Yes, but don't talk," she said, with a sudden attempt at severity—and, as suddenly, her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, I did not know last night—I did not understand—and you risked your life to save mine."

Her life! He was not so weak but that he could understand that. His hand groped out for hers. It seemed as though he had always loved her—only those strange doors of the night had stood between. But now—now there was something in her eyes, behind that film of tears and those wet lashes, that made him dare.

"Your life! Would you trust me with it again—for always?" he whispered.

Again the cool fingers closed his lips.

"Billy, you are to be absolutely quiet," she said. "Those are the very strictest orders."

But her head was nestling on the pillow against his cheek, and there was a great gladness in his heart.

THE END

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