

The Washington Night's

Stories of the U. S. Secret Service **Entertainment**

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No. 22 — *Written in Blood*

A Rapid-Fire Detective Story

““**T**HE smallest, least-considered trifle may lead to events which will change the entire plan and scheme of your life’—aw, applesauce!” Shreve tossed the advertisement across the office and smothered a yawn. “D’je ever hear such tommyrot?”

“Nope,” agreed Williams, who shared offices with Shreve, of the *Blade*, and Loomis, of the *Clarion-Call*, “those inspirational writers can spread more words and say less than—”

“Sure I have,” Loomis broke in, neatly extracting a packet of cigarettes from Shreve’s overcoat pocket. “Gimme a match.” He held an expectant hand toward Williams, and continued:

“I’ll tell the double-jointed universe that the ‘smallest, least-considered trifle’ can produce some important results. Change the plan and scheme of your life? Boy, it darn near flung my existence into the discard, and I don’t imply peradventure, either!”

“How come?” demanded Shreve.

“What was it, a blonde?” Williams wanted to know.

Loomis snapped the match alight with his thumbnail as he answered solemnly: “A hole in my pocket.”

“What?” his companions demanded in unison.

“A hole in my pocket. A small, unconsidered hole, but it packed a kick like a ton of TNT.”

IT was the fourteenth of last February, as mean a night as Washington could boast, and I was

so broke I was pulverized. My car was in the garage, and likely to stay there till I could bail it out, my pay check was three days distant, and my available assets wouldn’t have bought a *petit déjeuner* for a self-respecting canary bird. Behold our gay and sprightly young hero, then, all dressed up like the Queen of Sheba’s favorite brother-in-law, flinging a wicked pair of dogs all over the hardwood floors of the Broadhead’s mansion in Cleveland Park and wondering how in thunder he was going to get back to Washington.

The party broke up about one o’clock in a burst of carefree laughter and synthetic gin, and, being in luck, I managed to dodge all the unescorted Janes and slip unobtrusively over to Connecticut Avenue to catch an owl car.

I was as near frozen as a man can be and remain human before the headlights of the car showed against the snow, but the chill in my feet was a raging fever compared to the state of my spine when I unbuttoned my overcoat, reached into my trousers pocket and found—a hole.

Yes, sir, a bloomin’ hole, and nothing else but. My last and only car token had slipped out that hole and down my leg while I was ambling lightly through the mazes of a fox trot, and here I was, four miles from my rooms, with no more money than a gold fish has shock absorbers, paper-soled dancing pumps on my feet and five inches of half-frozen slush all over the ground. Gentlemen, I could feel the pneumonia germs warming up for a clubby little game of leap-frog on my chest right then!

"C'mon, Frank," I apostrophized myself as the car went by me like a pay-wagon passing a bum, "the faster you walk the less chance you'll have of wearing a wooden kimono. Shake it up!"

I swung down Connecticut Avenue, turned east into the zoo for a short cut, and commenced singing to keep my cadence up:

"Oh, we held you at the Marne,
And we licked you at the Aisne—"

"We gave you hell at Neuve Chapelle,
And here we are, and here we are again,"

a rich baritone voice took up the old marching song from the shadows behind me, continuing:

"The French held you at Verdun,
And we won't forget Ypres—"

"Holy Cuttlefish, Major!" I yelled, turning to the tall, erect figure in the big, caped overcoat striding toward me over the frozen snow. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"Hullo, Frank!" He waved his heavy walking stick in greeting. "I'm taking a little walk for my health. Don't sleep so well o' nights any more. The question is, what are *you* doing here, dressed up in that head waiter's outfit?"

"Who, me?" I fenced? "Why—uh—er—I'm taking a walk for my health, too."

"Yes, you are!" he mocked. "I'll bet five dollars you're broke as the Ten Commandments and walking to save car fare."

"You win," I acknowledged with a grin, "but you've come along like an angel of help to stake me—"

"Yep, I'll stake you to taxi fare and breakfast tomorrow morning if you'll walk as far as Columbia Road with me," he agreed. "Meantime—eh, what the devil's all this?" He pointed his stick toward a figure stumbling toward us through the snow.

I followed the direction of his pointed cane, and saw a woman, fur-swathed from neck to heels, bare-headed, and shod with French-heeled shoes, judging by her awkward gait, struggling with frantic haste over the rough hummocks of frozen slush. As she drew near us I realized she

was half moaning, half sobbing to herself as she ran.

"Pardon me, ma'am," Sturdevant touched the brim of his black slouch hat, "can we be of any service? You seem to be in trouble."

"Oh—" the girl gave a little scream of startled surprise at his voice—"oh, yes, yes! You can help me; you can, *you can!*" Her voice rose to a pitch half an octave below hysteria. "Yes, please, please help me, I'm—"

"Easy on, sister," Sturdevant cautioned. "No need of getting nervous about it. We'll see you through. What's the matter?"

"I—" she gulped sobbingly for breath—"I want to get to a street car—a taxi—any way to get home in a hurry, please. I—"

"H'm," Sturdevant nodded thoughtfully. "There's no car line nearer than Columbia Road, my dear, or taxi-cab either. We're going that way. If you'll walk along with us we'll find you a conveyance as near the Harvard Street entrance as possible. It's too bad you have to walk all that way in those slippers, but there's no help for it, I'm afraid."

"Oh, no, no," the girl declined fiercely, "not that way. I'm afraid. Please don't take me back that way. *He's* back there!"

"Eh?" Sturdevant shot back sharply. "'He? Who's 'he'?"

"That—that man," she panted nervously, half turning to resume her flight. "Oh, sir, whoever you are, please don't make me go back. I'm—I'm afraid. Please!" Her teeth began chattering with mingled cold and fright.

"Here, by George!" The Major's booming voice drowned her frightened falsetto. "This won't do at all, you know. What's the trouble, and why are you afraid to go back with us? Is there any one back there that two healthy, able-bodied men can't protect you from?"

"I—" the girl began again, then deemed to take a sudden resolute grip on her nerves—"No, I'm not afraid while you're with me, sir; I'll go with you." She swung round, catching step between us.

"**I** WAS going home from a party at a friend's house," she began, speaking hurriedly, "my—my young man had to catch the midnight

train for Philadelphia, and couldn't see me home, so I was waiting on the corner alone for a car when a man drove by in an automobile and asked me if I'd like a lift—and—like a fool!—I said, 'yes.' He—he took me in and asked where I wanted to go, and I told him to let me down at Fourteenth and Meridian Place, but he turned into the zoo park, and when he got down at the bottom of the hill he—he—Oh, I was so frightened! I jumped out and began to run, and—and—and I'm afraid, sir; I'm terribly afraid of him!"

"You were a very foolish girl," Sturdevant interrupted, "and the young man was a—"

"Oh—" the girl clenched her arms with sudden, fear-strengthened fingers, "—there are the lights of his car. He's waiting for me. Oh, I'm afraid!"

"Nonsense!" the Major took her trembling hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "There's nothing to fear, child. Mr. Loomis and I will deal with this reptile."

"See here," he addressed the motor's occupant. "What do you mean by such goings on, you scoundrel? How dare you do such a thing? By George, sir, I've a mind to give you a thrashing you won't forget in a hurry." He flourished his walking stick belligerently. "Who are you, sir? What's your name? Speak up! Here, let's have a look at you—" he placed one foot on the roadster's step and raised his head to a level with the face of the man seated at the steering wheel—"come out of that, I want to see what a beast of your kind looks like!" He leaned suddenly forward, glaring through the darkness into the fellow's face. Then:

"Won't answer, eh? Think you can brazen it out? We'll see about that!"

There was a rustle of garments as he plunged his hand into his overcoat pocket, then a sudden beam of sharp white light shot from his pocket electric torch and centered on the unknown man's countenance.

"Good God!" he recoiled a step, and the lamp's beam wavered. "Frank!"

"Sir?"

"Look here, and keep tight hold of the woman!"

I grasped the girl's wrist and leaned forward as the flash from his light pierced the darkness

again, then stepped back, my fingers involuntarily tightening on her arm.

Seated bolt-upright in the long, yellow roadster, his gloved hands still grasping the wheel, was a heavy-set, blond young man, bareheaded, and with the collar of his 'coonskin ulster open from his throat. His light-blue eyes, probably always prominent, were wide open in a fixed, idiotic stare and fairly popping from his head. His mouth was open with a hang-jawed, imbecile expression, the tongue protruding slightly over the lower teeth and the chin resting on the fur of his turned-back collar. Across his forehead ran a series of irregular scratches, as though a briar-branch had been dragged over the skin.

"Oh, oh," the girl beside me let out a shrill, thin, squealing scream, "he's dead—he's *dead!*"

"I'll say he's dead," Sturdevant agreed grimly. "Dead as a last year's oyster, and not dead by any natural means, either. Look here—"

Placing his hand on the man's sleek, fair hair, he moved his arm gently with a rotary motion. The head beneath his hand followed its pressure as though fastened to the shoulders by a loose-tensioned spring. "Neck broken," Sturdevant announced laconically. "Been dead as a herring for half an hour or more."

HE turned to the girl: "Was this why you were afraid to come back, young lady?" he demanded.

"Oh, I didn't do it—I didn't do it; truly, I didn't," she answered in a thick-tongued voice. "He was alive—alive and laughing—when I ran away. Truly, he was!"

"H'm," the Major shut off his flashlight and climbed down from the car step, "probably you didn't do it, but you'll have some explaining to do before you're clear of this mess. We'd best be on our way and find a policeman."

"A—a policeman—oh, I didn't do it—I don't know anything about it!" the girl cried chokingly, and slumped suddenly against me, then slid to the snow at my feet, unconscious.

"Pick her up, Frank," Sturdevant ordered as he proceeded to make a note of the car's number in his pocketbook. "Here—so," he restored the book to his pocket, grasped my wrists in his hands, forming a "chair" for the unconscious girl,

"we'll be able to carry her easier this way; she's a frail little thing, anyhow."

"That's why I think she's telling the truth when she says she didn't do it," I answered as we trudged toward the Harvard Street exit with our burden. "She couldn't any more have killed that fat slob back there than I could kick the ribs out of a hippopotamus."

"No-o," he agreed, easing the girl's dark head back against his shoulder, "I don't believe she did—for a number of reasons; but *somebody* committed a cold-blooded murder less than an hour ago, and murder is still a cardinal crime. The Eighteenth Amendment to the contrary notwithstanding. It's our duty to help the police all we can, son."

FRAIL or not, the girl's weight seemed to increase in geometrical progression with each step we took, and my arms were nearly pulled from their sockets by the time we struggled up to Columbia Road and hailed a taxi.

"Don't be afraid to cut corners, son," Sturdevant told the chauffeur as he slammed the vehicle's door, "we're in a hurry."

"Gotcha," the driver responded as he headed his car southward.

"Quick, Jerry," the Major ordered as we carried the still unconscious girl into his house. "Get me some sherry and some aromatic spirits of ammonia, and make haste!"

"Yas, suh," the old colored man replied, shuffling reluctantly away. Habituated as he was to the Major's strange callers, the bringing of unconscious young females into the house during the small hours of the morning was something outside his ordinary experience, and, with the Negro's inborn curiosity, he longed to remain in the study to await developments.

"Get the District Building on the wire, Frank," Sturdevant commanded, laying the girl on the deep, old-fashioned couch; "see if Inspector McClellan is there. Ask him to come here, toot sweet, if he is."

I got my connection and asked for the Chief Inspector.

"Yes, this is McClellan speaking," a bass voice rumbled back over the wire; "what's on your mind, Loomis?"

"Can't say exactly, sir," I replied, "but Major Sturdevant wants to know if you'll pop up here for a moment."

"What is it?" he asked somewhat testily. "Government business?"

"No, sir, I reckon it's more in your line," I told him. "The Major and I just ran into a tidy little murder out in the zoo park—"

"Oh, for God's sake!" he broke in; "another murder? Loomis, I'll go ravin' bugs if this sort o' thing keeps up. That's the fourth murder reported so far tonight, and I'm gettin' the Willies every time I hear the 'phone ring for fear it'll be another one. How'd this bird o' yours get bumped off?" He paused, and I could almost hear expectancy radiating from him as he awaited my answer.

"I can't say for sure, sir," I replied, "but I think his neck was broken—"

"You *think* his neck was broken!" he shouted. "You know dam' well it was! All their necks were broken, every dam' one of 'em. Everybody's neck's broken. I wish to heaven my neck was broken; then I couldn't be sittin' here talkin' to you. All right, tell Sturdevant I'll be up there in three minutes. Three minutes, get me? God A'mighty! Is this a police department or a bloody madhouse I'm workin' in?" and he hung up the receiver with a bang which shocked my eardrum.

"He's coming right up, sir," I reported, turning to Sturdevant.

"So I gathered," he answered with a sardonic grin.

"Why, could you hear him—" I began, but he cut me short with a laugh.

"How could I help hearing him?" he countered. "He was shouting himself hoarse. If he'd just flung up the window and stuck his head out we shouldn't have needed a telephone at all." He paused, measuring a dose of ammonia into a glass of water with the accuracy of a pharmacist.

"I take it the Inspector has lost his goat," he finished, as he lifted the girl's chin, and placed the rim of the glass against her lips.

"Here, my dear," he ordered, "drink this and try to pull yourself together. There's a nice, fat dose of real Spanish sherry waiting for you when you can sit up."

The girl drank the rich, heady wine greedily

and looked around her in bewilderment. "Where am I?" she demanded. "This isn't the police station, is it? Oh—" the hysteria she had exhibited when we first met her began to return—"don't have me arrested, sir, please. I haven't done anything wrong. Please, please, let me go home—my mother will be terribly worried."

"That's all right, daughter," the Major soothed. "You won't be arrested, and we'll fix everything with Mother, too; but there's a gentleman coming here in a few minutes, and I want you to tell him all you know."

"Who—who is it?" she began tremulously, but an announcement from Jerry answered her half-formed question as though he had been an actor waiting his cue.

"Spectuh McClellan. ter see Majuh Sturdevant," he pronounced from the study doorway, standing aside to let the irate detective stride into the room.

"WHAT'N 'ell's it all about, Marc?" McClellan demanded as he stormed in; then, as he caught sight of the girl: "Beg your pardon, ma'am, didn't see you here." Again he turned to the Major:

"What the devil does all this murderin' mean?" he demanded. "Here's three bimbos killed as dead as the League o' Nations within ten minutes of each other, an' now you and Loomis go and lug another one in on me. Loomis tells me your man's neck was broken, too."

"Yes, someone saved me the trouble of breaking it," the Major answered acidly. "I was about to give him the beating of his life when I discovered he was dead—"

"Eh? The devil!" McClellan exploded. "What was the grand idea?"

"He was a human weasel," Sturdevant replied, "a sneaking, good-for-nothing—here, Miss—er—Miss What's-Your-Name—tell Inspector McClellan just what you told me when we met you in the park."

Speaking scarcely above a whisper, twisting her diminutive handkerchief to shreds between nervous fingers, the girl retold the story of her adventure, ending with our finding the dead man and her own lapse from consciousness.

"What was the number o' that car?" the

Inspector snapped as she concluded her recital.

"Y-4236-722," Sturdevant answered, consulting his memorandum book, "and Jim,—" as McClellan reached for the telephone—"before you call the license bureau, let me have the names of the other three dead men, please. I've an idea these crimes may run in series."

"All right," the Inspector barked, extracting a slip of paper from his pocket and tossing it on the desk, "here they are."

"Gimme Main 6000," he called through the 'phone.

"H'm," the Major studied the list of names attentively a moment, then took a thick, red-bound volume from the revolving bookcase beside his desk and began thumbing through its thin, closely-printed leaves. "H'm, h'm; I shouldn't be surprised. I—shouldn't—be—surprised," he repeated musingly to himself, running his keen old eyes over the pages.

"That's right," I heard McClellan answer at the telephone. "Y-4236-722. What's the name?"

A pause, then: "Atwater, Percival G.? The devil! All right; thanks."

He turned to the Major, but Sturdevant was already speaking. "Atwater, Percival G.," he read from the volume open in his lap, "born Peoria, Illinois, June 6, 1897, son Dr. George D. and Sophia A.; educated private schools and Harvard College; moved to New York 1914; served in French Foreign Legion 1914 to 1917, A. E. F. 1917 to 1918; traveled in Africa, Europe and Asia 1919-22. Clubs, Cherry Blossom, Explorers', Union League, University. Address: Lotus Club, Washington, D. C."

"Yeah, I know all about that," McClellan replied shortly. "He's one o' those rich Willie boys with nothin' to do but get in trouble. Been pinched for speedin' so many times he ought to be black an' blue all over. Nearly ran down one of our traffic squad night before last. I'm not weepin' any to think he's gone—it's a dam' good riddance, if you ask me—but who killed him? *Who in hell killed him?*"

THE network of tiny humor-wrinkles about Sturdevant's wise old eyes deepened as he regarded the Inspector.

"Pour yourself a drink of that sherry, Jim,"

he advised, "it's good for your nerves. Ah, that's better. Now try to be calm a moment. It appears that our precious Atwater's blurb in *Who's Who* is almost identical with those of the other three murdered men. Leland, Cleaton and Holmes were all, apparently, wealthy idlers, like Atwater, and all four of them were approximately the same age, went to the same schools—classmates, most likely—belonged to the same clubs, and *traveled in Asia at the same time, probably in company.*"

"What do I care when they traveled in Asia?" McClellan almost shouted. "What do I care if they traveled in Greenland and Tierra del Fuego with a street carnival company? What I want to know is: Who killed 'em—an' why?"

"Precisely," Sturdevant concurred as he placed his long, white fingers tip to tip, "precisely, Jim. Who did kill them—and why? You say all three of the others died from broken necks?"

"Yes."

"Ah!"

"Ah, the devil!" the Inspector retorted. "What's there for you to be 'ahing' about? I might just as well be on my way if you can't say anything more intelligent than 'Ah'."

"So you might," Sturdevant agreed mildly, "and Loomis and I might just as well go with you. Have you examined the bodies personally?"

"No, time enough to do that before the autopsy tomorrow."

"Not if you want to solve the mystery in a hurry," the Major retorted.

"But there ain't any clues on the bodies," McClellan protested. "One of these guys was found dead in the Lotus Club shower room, another is discovered dead as a door nail in a bed at the Montgomery Turkish Baths, the other is killed in the hallway of his apartment house, an' you flush up another in the zoo park."

"All right," the Major agreed, "just as you say, Jim; but I think we'd better take a run down to the morgue, just the same."

"Meantime," he smiled at the girl, who had listened in round-eyed amazement to the conversation, "I think we'd better get you home, my dear. I'll have Jerry call you a taxi, and if your folks ask what detained you, tell them the driver had engine trouble."

"Come on, boys," he included the Inspector

and me in his glance, "get your coats on and we'll take a look at the *corpus delicti.*"

THE little, churchlike structure which houses the officially-detained dead of the Nation's capital seemed gloomier and more eerie in the frozen light of the predawn than I'd ever seen it before when Sturdevant, Inspector McClellan and I drove up to its weather-stained door a few minutes later.

"Hullo!" McClellan greeted the sleepy attendant as we tramped into the little front office; "we want to look at Leland, Cleaton and Holmes—those fellows with the broken necks."

"A'right," the assistant agreed, leaving his seat beside the glowing cannon stove and drawing on a pea jacket, "we've got 'em back here, Inspector." He led the way to the refrigeration room, and pulled out three galvanized iron trays from the tall ice box as he announced laconically, "Here y'are."

"Gosh!" McClellan ejaculated as he viewed the unlovely, frozen death masks, and turned away with a gesture of disgust, "what d'ye want to be pokin' around here for, Major? We can't learn anything lookin' at these poor fellers."

"H'm, h'm," the Major plucked thoughtfully at the tip of his white imperial as he viewed each frost-gray face in turn with a long, stocktaking glance. "That's where you're wrong, Mac. Not only can we learn something here; we've already learned it. See here—" he took the policeman's arm and turned him toward each of the dead men in turn, "don't you notice anything in common in those faces—something similar?"

"You're dam' tootin' I do," McClellan replied. "I see a good, big case of the jumps in each of 'em, for me. Say—" his voice rose wrathfully, "what's the idea, makin' me look at 'em like this? I don't like it, Major!"

Sturdevant's lips tightened in the ghost of a grim smile under his waxed white mustache. Inured to the sight of violent death in all the guises it wears in war or peace by half a century's service in the field and intelligence services, these ghastly relics of mortality were no more than integral parts of an interesting case to him, but his tremendous breadth of understanding enabled him to sympathize with, and appreciate, the average

man's horror of death in its stark reality. "Look at their foreheads, Jim," he urged almost gently; "don't you see the similarity of the scars on them?"

"No, ye—yes, by gosh, you're right, Major!" McClellan admitted as he forced his reluctant eyes to rest on first one dead face, then another. "Why, it looks almost like shorthand!"

"U'm?" Sturdevant commented. "What do you think, Frank?"

I glanced over his shoulder at the irregular scratches he had pointed out to the Inspector. "Why, sir," I answered, "they look almost exactly like the scratches I noticed on Atwater's forehead when we found him in the zoo—as near as I recall the scars on Atwater's face, that is."

"Good boy," he applauded. "And do they remind you of anything?"

"Yes, sir; they look something like Gregg shorthand; but I can't read them."

"Good enough," he slapped me jovially on the shoulder. "I saw an American girl make the same mistake in Cairo, once. She thought an Arabic sign was shorthand and wasted half an hour trying to read it. Come on, Jim, Loomis; there's nothing more here for us."

"**T**HANK the Lord, that's over," McClellan muttered piously as we trooped back to the morgue's office and huddled round the stove to drive some of the bitter chill of the ice-box room from our bones. "If I'd stayed there ten minutes more," he asserted, "they'd 'a' had me in one of those boxes, too."

"Well," the Major muffled his greatcoat collar about his chin, "if you're thawed out, let's get going. We've got something to do."

"What's next?" McClellan demanded as we bundled the motor robes about our knees. "Was that really shorthand on those guys' faces, or—"

"Not shorthand—Arabic," the Major corrected. "I thought I could distinguish the letters on Atwater's brow when we found him, but the blood had run from the fresh wounds to such an extent that the outlines were blurred. They were clear enough on the other poor fellows' faces, though."

"Well?" McClellan and I chorused.

"Well," he repeated as he deftly lighted a

match against the wind and set one of his long, black cigars going, "the sentence is one with which every Mohammedan is familiar. It's an Arabic proverb, and not by any means an empty saying. In English it runs '*See Mecca and see no more!*'"

"Well, who the devil's writing Arabic proverbs on dead men's foreheads?" McClellan demanded testily.

"That's just what you want to know," Sturdevant replied.

"Just what I want to know—"

"Precisely. When you've found that out you'll know who the murderer is. You remember what I read about the dead men in *Who's Who?*"

"About their clubs?"

"Certainly not," Sturdevant answered shortly. "About their travels. Every one of those boys was described as having traveled for a year or more in Africa and Asia."

"But—"

"But where is Arabia?"

"In Africa."

"Nonsense! Loomis, where's Arabia?"

"I think it's in Southwest Asia, sir," I returned, none too sure of myself.

"And what's in Arabia?"

"Why—er—"

"Why—er—nothing!" he shot back. "Mecca's there, and you know it. Now, if four young men travel in Africa and Asia, both strongholds of Mohammedanism, and are later found dead by violence, with '*See Mecca and see no more,*' cut on their foreheads, and you stop to remember that it's death for any unbeliever to penetrate the Mohammedan Holy City, what are we to think?"

"Huh! It's easy to guess some o' the heathens bumped 'em off," McClellan admitted, "but how are we going to catch 'em?"

"That's the next move," the Major conceded. "Suppose we run up to the Lotus Club and see if we can find any classmates of the dead boys. There is a possibility that we may find some youngster who made the trip to Mecca with them, and—"

"And what, Major?" I prompted as he paused, puffing thoughtfully on his cigar.

"*Quien sabe?*" he answered with a laugh.

"It's safest to hatch your eggs before you count your chicks."

THE green-liveried hallman drowsing on a red-upholstered bench behind the plate glass double doors of the Lotus Club rose to a sleepy attention as we mounted the brown sandstone steps between the imposing pillars of red granite and the Major rapped authoritatively for admittance on the crystal panels of the storm door.

"Members of the club, sir?" the porter demanded, swinging the door open a scant three inches.

"No," Sturdevant replied, "but we're coming right in, just the same." He opened his hand, displaying the official shield neatly concealed in his palm; then, as the man gave us dubious admittance: "Where's the head steward?"

"E's in bed, sir," the flunky returned, "but the night steward's 'ere."

"All right; let us talk with him, please. We're in a hurry."

When the night custodian arrived, somewhat flustered by the news that Federal Agents had entered the club's eminently respectable domain, the Major wasted no time in stating our business.

"Four of your members have been murdered tonight, son," he began with brutal sententiousness, "and we've reason to fear others may be killed. Now, we want to know if Cleaton, Holmes, Atwater and Leland traveled together in a clique, and, if they did, whether there were any other members of their crowd. Speak up, if you know; this is serious business."

The young man wrinkled his brow in thought a moment, then: "Yes, sir; the gentlemen you mention were nearly always together when they were at the club, and Mr. Geissel and Mr. Collier were in their crowd, too. They usually dined together and played billiards together, and—"

"That's enough," Sturdevant interrupted. "Where can we find these other two boys?"

"They both live at the club, sir; but I don't know whether they're in."

"Call their rooms, then, please, and let me have a copy of *Who's Who* while we're waiting. Needn't bother to announce us, just ascertain if they're in, and hurry, please."

While the steward 'phoned the upper floor

the Major turned the book's pages quickly. "Right-o," he announced, placing the volume on the table. "These two boys' write-ups are as much like the dead chaps' as if they'd been carbon copies. We've picked up the spoor, Mac."

"Both Mr. Geissel and Mr. Collier are in, sir," the steward announced, "but they're in bed, and I don't know—"

"I do," Sturdevant cut in, "we'll go right up to their rooms. Have the boy show us, please."

We followed the page into the automatic elevator leading to the club's dormitories, turned down the thickly carpeted passageway on the fourth floor and rapped at a white enameled door.

No answer coming to our hail, Sturdevant turned the handle and walked unceremoniously into the room. "Here, young man," he called, seizing the shoulder of the bed's occupant and shaking it vigorously, "wake up! Wake up, or you're apt to go to sleep for good."

"Eh, what's that?" demanded the sleeper, rising indignantly at the Major's summons.

"I'm Major Sturdevant, of the Secret Service, and this is Inspector McClellan of the District Police," Sturdevant explained. "Four of your pals, Cleaton, Holmes, Atwater and Leland, were murdered tonight, and you and Geissel are apt to go next. We've come to warn you and—"

"Murdered?" the young man repeated in sleepy non-comprehension. "Murdered? Why? Who would—"

"Didn't you travel in Asia after the War?" Sturdevant demanded, "and didn't you and your friends disguise yourselves as pilgrims and enter Mecca—even get as far the *Ka' bah*?" he hurried on, before his listener could reply.

"Uh—" the other began, but Sturdevant continued:

"Don't you know it's death for an unbeliever to look on the *Ka' bah*, or even enter the city of Mecca without permission? Son, Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace was an ice-box beside the sort o' fire you played with, when you did that fool's trick."

"But—"

"But nothing. Listen: You must have learned something of Moslem lore before you attempted to penetrate the forbidden city. Does it mean anything to you when I tell you that the sentence,

'*See Mecca and see no more*,' was scratched on the foreheads of each of your chums when they were found dead tonight?"

"My God!" the boy on the bed wailed. "They've found us! Atwater must have boasted about it. He declared he would when we were in Paris, but we thought we'd managed to shut him up. The big-mouthed fool must have got full of booze and pilled the beans where some Mohammedan heard it. Quick—we must warn Geissel!"

He leaped from the bed, and, without donning either slippers or robe, rushed pellmell down the hall, pausing before a door at the turn of the corridor and hammering on the panels with frantic fists.

"Geissel, Geissel!" he called imploringly; "wake up, Geissel! The Turks have found us. They got Clay and Lee and Holmsie, and Atwater, too. Wake up, Geissel!"

But his companion in danger evidently cared little enough about the night's tragedies, for no answer came to Collier's wild alarm.

"Here," he turned a ghastly face to the Major, "well have to break in the door, sir; when he gets to sleeping there's nothing'll wake him short of a kick. Now, then, all together!"

The white door crashed inward under the impact of our shoulders, and Collier snapped on the electric light.

"**H**A!" Sturdevant shot the exclamation between his teeth as the bulb's glow illuminated the room.

Propped upright in bed with pillows, his eyes wide open and fairly starting from his face, his mouth open in a hang-jawed, imbecile expression, the tongue protruding slightly over his lower teeth, and his chin resting on the open collar of his pajama jacket, was the man we came to warn. Across his forehead ran a series of irregular scratches, as though a brier-branch had recently been dragged over the skin.

"See—" cried Collier in a cracked, high-pitched voice as he pointed a shaking finger at the dead man's forehead—"see *Mecca and see no more*!" He ended with a peal of nightmare laughter more terrible than any shriek.

"Stop that; be quiet! Shut that door!"

Sturdevant barked the orders in quick succession.

"See here, Mac—" he strode toward the open window—"what do you make of—ah, *look!*" Stooping quickly, he picked some object from the floor, stepping to the center of the room and exhibiting his find.

A length of closely-plaited silken cord, about the thickness of a window rope and decorated at each end with a tassel, swung from his hand.

"Curtain-cord," McClellan pronounced after a cursory glance.

"Curtain-cord is right," the Major agreed. "It's the cord which rang down the curtain of this poor boy's life, and maybe the other four men's, as well. Do you know what it really is?"

"Nope, not if it ain't a curtain-cord."

"It's a bowstring."

"Rats," McClellan scoffed. "No bow would have a string that thick. Why, that's a regular rope, Major."

"H'm," Sturdevant muttered, halfway between annoyance and humor, "'bowstring' is a technical word, Mac, meaning the executioner's cord among the Arabs and Turks, just as 'halter' means the hangman's noose with us. Those fellows can throw a hitch of this silk about a victim's throat as easily as a cowboy drops a lariat over a steer's horns, and break their man's neck with a single jerk. Death is almost as quick as though the condemned were dropped through the trapdoor of a gallows with a regulation noose about his neck."

"See here—" he put his hand on the dead man's cheek—"the body's still warm. The killer must have been in a devil of a hurry to leave his tools behind him. I shouldn't wonder if he went out the window almost as we came in the door."

"Huh, was he a bird?" the Inspector inquired with ponderous irony. "We're three flights up in the air, Marc—anybody who went out that window would need a parachute, or a pair o' wings, or something."

For answer the Major leaned across the sill and pointed to the heavy, cast-iron downspout which ran from the roof to earth at the angle of the building. "Nothing simpler," he announced. "Any ordinarily agile man could climb up that pipe as easily as he could mount a ladder. It's strong enough to bear several hundred pounds weight

and the braces which hold it to the wall make ascent and descent as easy as if they were ratlines in a set of shrouds."

"Well, I'll be—you're right, Marc"; McClellan agreed, "looks as if this gink had everything his own way, don't it?"

"Not quite," Sturdevant denied. "We know *what* he is, thanks to his leaving his monogram on his victims and his tools on the job. Now it's up to us to find *who* he is."

"Yeah, that'll be a cinch—like frying a snowball on a cake o' ice," McClellan conceded.

"Cinch or not, I believe it can be done," Sturdevant replied. "First off, young man," he addressed the shivering Collier, "you go back to bed and keep your door and windows tight shut. Report to me by 'phone tomorrow morning—I may have use for you."

"There's nothing more we can do here tonight, as far as I can see. Suppose we all go over to my place and snatch a couple of hours' sleep before daylight. We can make it if we step fast, and we'll all need some rest, for tomorrow looks like a busy day to me."

"LOOMIS, Loomis, get up; I've got a job for you!" the Major's voice roused me from a dream of bowstrings, mutilated dead men and mystic vengeance of the Orient.

"Eh?" I answered sleepily. "I just went to bed a few minutes ago, Major."

"Nevertheless, up you get," he replied inexorably. "Come on, shake a leg. Jump under the shower and get dressed in a hurry. I'll have Jerry fix you some breakfast while you're getting ready."

"Now," he told me as I stowed the second plate of pancakes and molasses under my waistcoat, "I want you to take a taxi and go up to the Lotus Club after Collier. I'm going to have him here all day, for safety's sake, and tonight—"

"Yes?" I prompted, as he paused, drumming thoughtfully on the tablecloth with long, nervous fingers.

"I may keep him here tonight, too. Now run along, and tell him to pack a suitcase full of clothes; he may have to camp here indefinitely."

Collier was nothing loath to quit the club where his chums had been done to death, and we

were soon bowling down Vermont Avenue in our taxicab, my companion nervously puffing at a cigarette, I trying vainly to recapture some of the sleep of which I had been robbed by the Major's early call.

The sudden halt of our vehicle, all brakes set and the engine thrown into momentary reverse, shot me forward from my seat, flattening my nose against the glass partition behind the driver's cab.

"What the devil?" our chauffeur complained, jumping from his seat and running to the motor's head. "You damfool wops must be crazy, tryin' to run acrost th' street in front of a car thataway!"

I peered through the front window to discover a dark-skinned little man in tatterdemalion corduroy clothes picking himself up from the icy roadway where he had sprawled full length in the path of our hurrying cab. He reached for a battered black felt hat as he addressed a torrent of unintelligible words to the angry chauffeur, who was already bending to crank his stalled motor.

"Darn fool," Collier agreed, leaning from the cab window, "it's a wonder we didn't run him down, the way—*ugh!*"

Something sinuous and serpentine, no thicker than a girl's little finger, glistening with a silken iridescence, suddenly coiled forward, apparently from nowhere, and twined itself about his throat.

Purely as a reflex act, without realizing what I did, I seized the cord's tasseled end and flung it backward in the direction whence it came, attempting to grasp it at the same time. But the plaited silk slipped through my fingers with a speed that almost blistered the skin, as a small, brunette man, almost the exact counterpart of the fellow whose fall had stopped our cab, jerked the string violently, turning to run as he did so.

Collier's face was almost purple with the sudden strangulation he had undergone, his eyes were protruding with mingled blood pressure and fright; but I had no time to apply restoratives.

"Hey," I yelled, leaping from the cab and rushing forward, "catch that fellow! Catch him!"

"Huh?" the chauffeur demanded, looking up from his crank.

"Huh, hell!" I responded. "Catch him!"

There was no time to be lost, and I lost none. Reaching down, I seized the crank with which the

chauffeur had been vainly endeavoring to start the engine, wrenched it from its pinion, and hurled it with all my might at the escaping Arabian.

The heavy handlebar caught him neatly between the shoulder blades, flattening him to the pavement in good earnest, every bit of breath knocked from his lungs.

"Say, feller, you're rough," the chauffeur protested; but I waved him aside.

Running up to my quarry, I retrieved the motor crank, returned it to the driver, and unbuckling my belt, pinioned my prisoner's hands securely behind him.

"Come on, buddy, let's ride," I commanded, bundling the limp body of my victim into the cab beside the white-faced Collier.

The Major was as pleased with my prisoner as a youngster would have been with a new tin toy.

"Loomis," he told me, "there are times when I think you're not as big a moron as I know you are at others."

"**O**F COURSE, it's inconvenient," Sturdevant admitted, displaying the apparatus he had manufactured, at the dinner table that night, "but it's fairly good insurance against a broken neck. Try it on, Collier."

The device consisted of an oval of wire, bent to conform to the wearer's shoulders, so that it rested on breast and back at the base of the neck, like a collar or gorget. Rising vertically from this, and bent inward, to follow the lines of the neck, were six strands of eight-inch wire, two at the back and two on each side, these, in turn, being joined to a smaller oval of wire, which, wrapped in strips of flannel, were designed to rest on the crown of the head under the wearer's hat. When the thing was in place it formed a six-stranded cagelike protection for the wearer's throat and neck, the wire being bent close enough to the neck to be practically invisible a few feet away, especially in a dim light, yet far enough from the flesh to prevent any suddenly coiling cord from tightening about the windpipe or even coming in direct contact with the neck.

"Yes," the Major gloated over his product, "that's Sturdevant's Simplified Anti-Strangulation Device.

"Now see whether you can work those handcuffs the way I showed you this morning. Come on, let's have a dress rehearsal. Frank, you be the Arabian. One, two, three—Lights; camera; action!"

Collier put on his overcoat, turning the collar up to disguise the wire as much as possible, and drew his hat down over the head-piece. With hands in pockets, he slouched down the hall, as though sauntering along the street.

The Major thrust the bowstring we had found the previous night into my hand and ordered, "Do your stuff, Turk!"

Quickly I slipped up behind Collier, flung the coiled silk cord and drew back on it. In my inexpert hand the string failed to wrap about Collier's neck as it should have done, but he felt it flick his face and acted on the cue. Like a pole-axed ox he fell to the floor, jerked his feet convulsively, but keeping his hands hidden in his pockets.

"Bend over him, Frank," Sturdevant prompted; "bend forward as though you were going to cut the Arabic letters in his forehead."

I obeyed, and as my hands reached toward the supine man's face his hands suddenly leaped from his pockets, there was a flash, a *click*, and a pair of handcuffs were locked about my wrists.

"Fine, great, bully!" the Major applauded. "Gentlemen, we've a wonderful little surprise in store for the benighted followers of the False Prophet."

THREE blocks from Sturdevant's house the Major and I dropped behind, allowing Collier to gain several hundred feet lead before we took up our way.

Street after street we passed, Collier walking slowly, with bowed head, as though sunk in melancholy thought; but, nothing untoward occurred.

"H'm," Sturdevant muttered. "They're not rising to the bait."

"Well, Collier's safe for the night, anyhow," I replied, "there he goes into the club, now."

"We'll try again tomorrow," the Major promised, turning reluctantly in his tracks.

"Sure," I concurred, "they'll—hullo, what's doing up at the club?"

The plate glass doors had suddenly flown open as the green-liveried porter rushed pellmell into the street, shrieking, "Police, police! Help, murder, fire, police!"

"Yep, something's up," Sturdevant agreed, starting for the bellowing doorman on the double quick.

"Here, what's going on?" he demanded. _

"Murder, sir," the other panted, momentarily stopping his frantic calls for official assistance, "murder! Mr. Collier—"

"Good Lord, did they get him after all?"

"I'm tellin' you, sir," the doorman answered reproachfully, "Mr. Collier heard a man in his room, sir, just after 'e came in, and—"

"Oh, hell!" Sturdevant cut him short. "We can't listen to all this rigamarole. Come on, Frank; let's see for ourselves."

"Hi, there, Major!" Collier's voice rang out as we paused on the threshold. "I got him! Got him slick as a whistle."

"How—" Sturdevant began, but the excited

young man waited for no questions.

"He was hidin' under the bed, or somewhere, waitin' for me when I came in," he explained. "I'd taken off my hat and snapped on the light when bingo! he flung the loop over my head and started to squeeze the wind out o' me.

"Boy! Did I play my part? You should have seen me drop and start kickin'! He had his knife out, ready to carve his initials on my manly brow almost as soon as I hit the floor, and I slipped the darbies on him easier than I did on Mr. Loomis."

Sturdevant grinned appreciatively at the youngster's enthusiasm as he brushed forward to inspect the captive.

"Good enough!" he muttered, glancing shrewdly at the sullen Oriental. "I think we've rounded 'em all up, thanks to you boys. I'll call McClellan up and have him send the wagon for this bird. He'll be as welcome at Police Headquarters as a rich widow at a bond salesmen's convention."