

by  
Frederick C.  
Davis



## Fanged Fury

*Swiftly Professor Van Dyk swung the door shut. Too late! Through the opening swished a glittering green dart of light. The deadly flying snake had escaped!*

### CHAPTER I WINGED POISON

NICHOLS glimpsed the name on the stone gate-post just as his car went dead. The headlamps blinked out; the engine whirred off; a vicious sputtering sounded beneath the seat. Nichols swung to the side of the road, applied the

brakes, and stopped in darkness blacker than the depths of oblivion.

He slid out, shifted the seat cushion, and struck a match. The storage battery was a smoking, odorous wreck. The cable had shorted. Nothing could help but a new battery. The match went out and darkness closed around Nichols again.

It was open, sand-hill country, miles out of

Los Angeles. The road was unpaved, the section undeveloped, lonely. Nix Nichols hadn't seen a house for a long stretch, but there was one directly ahead. He groped toward the stone gate-post, struck another match, and read the name on the board:

Prof. Peter Van Dyk

"I almost made it, anyway," he thought

He strode through the gate, along the driveway, toward the house which sat on the barren crest of the hill. Some of its windows were gleaming. Finding that the driveway circled far around, Nichols left it to cut straight toward the house. Presently he passed a gnarled, black tree.

He heard a startled gasp.

He stopped short, and looked around. In the darkness under the tree something was moving. Nichols turned toward it, took two quick steps. Suddenly there was a rustling of leaves, and the figure darted away, swiftly.

It ran like a girl.

"Wait a minute!" Nichols called. "It's all right!"

The girl stopped, looking back. Nichols walked toward her quickly. The glow of the windows fell on her face, lighting her eyes. Her hair was wind-blown, her face pale, her lips and cheeks high-colored. She peered at Nichols intently.

"Who are you?" she asked in a rush of breath.

"Nixon Nichols, from the *Register*."

"A reporter?"

"Yes."

The girl seemed uncertain. "You frightened me. People usually drive in. You came along so quietly—"

"Apologies," Nichols said. "My car broke down right outside."

Then weird sounds came out of the still night. There was a braying, a chirping, and something that sounded like a snore, all mixed into a cacophonous chorus.

"If you don't mind my asking," Nichols commented, "what the devil is that?"

The girl smiled faintly. "Don't be alarmed. Those are only the specimens. They're caged and quite harmless. Were—were you sent for?"

She began moving toward the door. The stronger light showed Nichols that she was even prettier than he had thought—and about twenty. And she was still studying him curiously.

"Professor Van Dyk phoned the *Register* and asked that a reporter be sent out," Nichols answered. "I'm it."

"I'll tell father you're here."

The braying, snorting and squealing reached a high pitch of discord. Nichols peered into the depths of the night around the house, but he could see nothing. Something sent a tingle down his spine—an apprehensive warning.

**S**UDDENLY the front door of the house opened, releasing a shaft of light which sprang across Nichols. A tall, gaunt man stood silhouetted on the sill. He called sharply:

"Evelyn! Is that you? What's making the—who's that?"

"Mr. Nichols," Evelyn Van Dyk answered, "from the *Register*. You asked him to come out, father."

Peter Van Dyk seemed reassured. "Come in, sir!" he called to Nichols.

The house, Nichols saw, was a rambling one-story structure of Spanish tendencies. He stepped aside to allow the girl to enter first, then followed. He walked into a long, quiet, cool room filled with Spanish antiques. There was a strange odor about the place, an odd atmosphere of bustling in spite of the quiet.

Evelyn Van Dyk, with a quick glance at Nichols, disappeared through a door as the professor signaled Nichols to a chair.

The professor strode back and forth across the heavy carpet, a lank, sun-burned man, with

dancing black eyes. He thoughtfully stroked his goatee as he spoke.

"I tell you frankly, Mr. Nichols, that I sent for you because I want publicity. I hope that some publicity will arouse interest in the new expedition I have planned. I want to raise funds, if possible. Not that I want to make a direct appeal—far from it—but I think a good feature story about the new expedition will bring the desired results."

Nichols drew a pencil and a pad of copy paper from his pocket. "Fair enough. I've handled stories about you before, professor. You take an expedition into the tropics every year, don't you? Whatever happened to that weird beast you brought back from, your last trip?"

The professor stopped his pacing and fixed Nichols with a glittering eye, "You mean the flying snake."

"The flying snake, yes."

"It's precisely that oddity which I want you to feature in the story," the professor exclaimed. "It will catch the fancy of the newspaper public as nothing else will. The purpose of the expedition this time is chiefly to find another specimen of the flying snake. They are extremely rare, you know."

"I understand it's the first specimen ever caught and brought out of the jungle. Is it still alive?" Nichols asked.

"Very much so. Come—I'll show it to you."

The professor walked through a doorway into the rear of the house. As Nichols followed, a door opened, and a man stepped into the professor's path. He was stocky, bull-necked, and breathed heavily.

"Seamon," said Professor Van Dyk, "this is Nichols, of the *Register*. Seamon is my secretary, Nichols. This way."

Seamon squeezed Nichols' hand and mumbled something. The professor opened another door, into another corridor, and then another. The room Nichols entered was suffocatingly hot—steam pipes on the ceiling

were sizzling. Professor Van Dyk led Nichols to a large wire-mesh cage in a corner.

"There," he said, "is the flying snake."

Nichols felt his flesh crawl. He peered through the mesh at something which peered back at him—peered unblinkingly, with beady, black, lidless eyes. It was a snake, its slimy scales glistening in the light; but it was a reptile such as Nichols had never seen before.

Lying against its shining sides were four wrinkled things that might be wings—two on each side, a pair near the head, another pair nearer the tail. It was a poisonous green color; its head was blunt. As it stared at Nichols, it opened its jaws, and a single in-curved fang shone white.

"A snake without any doubt," the professor said softly, "and yet it has wings. It flies like a bird. Nothing like it has ever been seen before. More than any other variety of snake it resembles the snakes of the suborder *Ophidii Colubriiformes*, family *Atractspididae*, found in Africa. Yet it comes from the Matto Grasso region of South America.

"Like all snakes, it is carnivorous. Also, it is poisonous—extremely deadly. You notice its one fang, in the center of the upper jaw, is hinged, and swings into striking position as the jaws open. Its fang is grooved and when it strikes it squirts venom into the puncture it makes. Death is almost instantaneous."

"Very pretty, I'm sure," said Nichols with a shudder.

"Of course, like a snake, it has no legs. Its wings are powerful enough to lift it off the ground and send it sailing through the—"

Suddenly the flying snake's wings spread out, glistening metallically like a giant butterfly's. Both pairs tightened into membranous air-foils as the snake's jaws opened wider and its single fang lifted. Suddenly, like a flash of iridescent light, it sprang into the air—flung itself straight at Nichols!

Nichols cried out hoarsely, flung himself back. The snake struck the mesh, beat its

wings against it, then dropped to the floor of the cage with wings again folded, jaws still parted, fang still bared.... Nichols took a deep, long breath as the professor chuckled and Seamon smiled.

"A pleasant little pet!" Nichols gasped.

There is nothing to fear," Professor Van Dyk assured Nichols. "The gate of the cage is securely latched. You agree with me, don't you, Nichols, that it is a most interesting little animal?"

"So interesting," said Nichols grimly, "it makes me sick to look at it!"

WITH another chuckle, the professor led him from the room. Seamon followed Nichols. When they reached the huge living-room, Evelyn Van Dyk was there. Her fingers were straying softly over the keyboard of a grand piano, but she stopped when the three men entered.

"Usually, you know, Nichols," the professor resumed, "interested parties supply me with funds necessary to make my expeditions. My most generous patron has been Clifford Kendall. You know Kendall? He's made millions in oil. But this year Mr. Kendall finds it impossible to supply—"

"Do you think those details are necessary, professor?" Vincent Seamon interrupted.

"Why not?" the professor asked. "I am frankly making an appeal to the public for funds, much as I regret the necessity of it. I was saying, Nichols, that Mr. Kendall isn't able this year to supply me with as generous a contribution as in the past, and therefore—"

A knock sounded at the outer door. Evelyn Van Dyk crossed the room, and answered the summons. In a moment she returned, followed by a young man wearing a gray sack suit. His face was full and ruddy, his eyes a faded blue.

"Hello, Hubbard," the professor greeted him. "Mr. Nichols, Mr. Hubbard. Hubbard is Mr. Kendall's secretary, Nichols. We work together on planning our expeditions."

Nichols took Hubbard's hand briefly. Hubbard asked the professor:

"Mr. Kendall isn't here yet?"

"No, but I'm expecting him presently."

Hubbard nodded. "He told me he would be here by this time—it's a little past nine. I had a call to make in Hollywood, and came directly from there. I thought he'd be here,"

Hubbard took a chair. Nichols' eyes strayed to the girl, who had returned to the piano. She was watching him curiously. As his eyes met hers, her glance dropped and her cheeks grew crimson. Nix Nichols settled comfortably in his chair. The professor could talk all night, he decided, so long as this young lady remained in sight.

"I can furnish you with excellent photographs for the purposes of illustration, Nichols," the professor was saying. "I am particularly anxious about this, because I feel that my work has reached a stage of the highest importance. Birds and snakes, you know, are biologically related in the tree of evolution. The flying snake bridges the gap between them. It is a survivor of early archeological eras and—"

The professor broke off, listening. From the hallway came a dull thump, a faint rustling sound.... After a moment of puzzled silence, Professor Van Dyk resumed.

"Scientifically, it is of startling significance. Nothing of its kind has ever—"

As another, louder thump came from the hallway, the professor paused again. His eyebrows drew together. Abruptly he strode into the hallway. Nichols rose, followed him swiftly. The hallway was dark, but several of the rooms beyond were lighted. At the door of the hot room, in which Nichols had viewed the repulsive flying snake, the professor paused.

Something thumped against the panel inside. In the air sounded a soft whir, a swish—and then silence.

The professor turned the knob of the door, inched it open. The room beyond was dark now; Seamon had snapped out the light when

leaving it after the inspection of the winged snake. The professor listened through the crack, into silence; then he threw open the door and stepped inside, reaching for the light-switch.

Instantly a loud *swish* sounded, and something fluttered through the darkness.

“Good God!” the professor’s awed voice came in a gasp. “It’s got out of its cage! The flying snake!”

The dark was full of the swift fluttering now. It swept close, past the door, swerved into the depths of the room again.

“Keep out of the way!” the professor called hysterically. “If it sees you, it’ll attack you!”

From behind Nichols came a sharp, terrorized cry: “Father! *Father!*”

Nichols whirled, saw Evelyn Van Dyk staring in horror. Behind her was Seamon, shocked rigid. Nichols snapped at them crazily:

“Get out of here, for God’s sake!”

His words echoed into quietness. Still, the air throbbed with the beating of diaphanous wings as the flying snake circled in the room.

“Stay away, all of you!” the professor’s agonized cry came. “It may fly back into the cage! Get back—I’m coming! I’m going to close the door!”

A quick footfall sounded. The sound brought a response; the thing flashed through the air with faster-moving wings! Suddenly Professor Van Dyk, crouching, darted into the hallway. Grasping the knob, he swung the door shut.

Too late!

A glittering, green dart of light came out the door the instant before it slammed! The flying snake streaked into the gloom of the hallway! It circled swiftly, jaws open, fang exposed, wings invisible with the swiftness of their movements save for their ghastly metallic shine!

Professor Van Dyk stared up at it, stricken. Nichols recoiled. Evelyn stood transfixed.

Seamon stared. Hubbard trembled.

The flying snake circled swiftly above their heads. Then, swift as a lightning flash, it winged through another door, into one of the lighted rooms.

Swiftly the professor sprang after it. Nichols followed. In the doorway they jerked to a stop.

The flying snake flashed straight toward a window—an open window. There was one last glint of its iridescent wings, and then it was gone.

Escaped into the night!

## CHAPTER II THE HOVERING HORROR

**P**ROFESSOR Van Dyk sped across the room. He grasped the open window, slammed it shut, jerked down the blind.

He spun about, facing those in the doorway, his eyes rimmed in white.

“Draw all the blinds!” he exclaimed. “Turn out every light we don’t need. Instantly!”

He sidled past Nichols, and flung open the door of the steam room. The lights snapped on, blinding bright. In the glare Nichols, peering past the professor, saw the door of the flying snake’s cage standing wide open.

Nichols stepped aside and watched, conscious of hurrying movements behind him. The professor quickly drew the shades of all the windows save the center one, which he pulled halfway down. He grasped the mesh cage and dragged it around so that its open gate faced the window. Next he raised the sash, and shoved the cage close against the wall. The opening in the mesh was flush with the open window now.

Still moving quickly, the professor picked up a table lamp, and placed it directly behind the cage. Its light shone through the mesh, into the open night beyond.

Quickly he turned—apparently having forgotten Nichols—and raced along the

corridor. Following him, Nichols heard the breathless voices of the professor and Seamon in the living-room.

"All the shades are drawn? No other lights shining outside? Good! It may—come back!"

Nichols shuddered as he remembered those fluttering wings sweeping close to his face in the darkness of the hall.

"Look here!" he snapped. "You said that thing is poisonous—that it attacks people. Is that true?"

"Yes!"

"Then it might strike at people on the street. It's apt to kill anybody it—"

"I know—I know! It's horrible!" the professor gasped. "As long as it's at large, it's—it's a menace. If it does strike any one, it will mean that person's death, but—but we can only hope that it will be drawn back."

"'Drawn back'?" Nichols repeated. "What will bring it back?"

"The flying snake is lithotrophic," the professor explained quickly. "It is attracted by light—like moths. There is no light around here now except the one behind the cage in front of the open window. The light may draw it back into the cage."

"And if it doesn't?"

The professor shot Nichols a horrified glance. For a moment every one was silent. Clifford Hubbard, staring from one face to another, broke the silence.

"Mr. Kendall is coming up here. The thing may be drawn to his car by the headlights. Good God—what if it attacks him?"

And again—silence. Nichols, scowling, glanced about. He was looking for a telephone.

"Can it fly far?" he asked breathlessly.

"For miles—many miles!"

"Then everybody's got to be warned against it—as many people as possible!" Nichols blurted. "The police can get all the radio stations to broadcast a warning. God knows, everything possible has got to be done to prevent that snake's killing some one!"

HE glimpsed the telephone in an antique cabinet in the corner. Striding to it, he snatched it up, clattered it. His scowl deepened as he waited. The line did not sing, as a live line does. No operator answered.

"This phone is out of order!" Nichols exclaimed. "Where's the next house? People have got to be warned—"

"'Out of order'?" the professor repeated in amazement. "It was in perfect order a short time ago. That's strange—very strange. The next house is over a mile away, Nichols."

"Then," said Nichols swiftly, "I'm going to that phone!"

"Wait!"

The professor snapped the word. Nichols, on his way to the door, paused.

"It may not be necessary, Nichols. Broadcasting that warning would spread terror. And it wouldn't do much good. Think of the thousands at the beaches, on the roads, away from all radios. I think there is a better way."

"What?" Nichols demanded.

"I told you the flying snake is lithotrophic. It will fly toward a bright light. This is unsettled country, and there are no other lights within a mile. I'm confident that the snake will be attracted back into the cage within a few minutes, perhaps by the time you could reach the phone, Nichols—then the warning would frighten people needlessly."

"It's a damned big risk to take," Nichols reminded him.

"I know, but—there is no more we can do. If news of this got about, I'd never—never be able to raise funds by popular subscription. I beg of you, Nichols, wait a few minutes?"

The professor turned and hurried down the hallway. In the steam room the light was still burning behind the mesh cage against the open window—but the cage was still empty.

"I—I can't understand it!" the professor said breathlessly. "The cage was latched tight. It couldn't have become unlatched of its own

accord You see, Nichols—the catch had to be lifted, brought forward, before the door could be opened.”

“I see that,” Nichols agreed, bending over the cage.

“It looks as though the cage were deliberately opened—the flying snake deliberately set free,” the professor went on, his eyes widening with the horror of the thought, “But the room was empty. No one could have come in here.”

“Why the devil should any one deliberately free that vile thing, anyway?” Nichols demanded. “Professor, look here. As long as that snake is at large, somebody’s going to be killed by it. I’m going to that telephone.”

“Wait—please wait!” The professor’s eyes shone anxiously. “We must make sure the snake is nowhere around here, that it has left this hill, before we broadcast the warning, Nichols. We must do that.”

“How can we?” Nichols demanded.

“We can go outside—look for it. We will be reasonably safe. As long-as we stay in the dark, the snake will not attack us, since it is drawn only by light things. We can station ourselves around the grounds and look for it. Then, if it is gone—”

Again the professor hurried past Nichols, into the living-room. Evelyn, Seaman and Hubbard were still there. The professor said rapidly:

“I’m going out immediately. Seamon, you know it’s reasonably safe—will you come? And you, Hubbard? Nichols, I won’t ask you to do that, and Evelyn—of course, you’ll stay here, inside.”

Seaman and Hubbard quickly assented. Nichols smiled and remarked:

“If it’s safe for you, it’s safe for me. I’ll go with you.”

Professor Van Dyk did not argue the point. He hurried into the hall and came back carrying two canes, and two umbrellas. He solemnly passed them out, saying warningly:

“If it is out there, and comes close, these will help you to protect yourselves. You can beat it off. Are you ready? Seamon, go out by the cages. You go to the rear of the house, Hubbard, and I’ll take the front. Nichols, you take the opposite side.”

They nodded grimly, and moved toward the door.

“Turn off the light, Evelyn, before we open the door,” the professor warned as he grasped the knob.

Promptly the lights snapped out, flooding the big room with intense darkness.

Cautiously the professor slipped outside. Nichols, Seamon and Hubbard followed him. The door closed tightly behind them, and they began to separate. Nichols watched while the three other men scurried off through the black night.

Quickly he shifted around to the side of the house, on the bare slope of the sand-hill, and stationed himself.

No light shone except that near the professor’s stand, the light behind the open window and the cage. All around there was ringing silence. Nichols hunched low, gripping his ridiculous umbrella tightly, ready to use it if necessary. He watched the sky, alert for the first nicker of any flying thing.

Long, empty moments passed....

Suddenly a shrill scream came—muffled.

Evelyn Van Dyk’s voice called, “There’s something in the house! Something in the house!”

**N**ICHOLS bounded up, raced toward the front door. As he reached it, two other black figures rushed out of the night—the professor and Seaman. They slammed into the big dark room. As the door thumped shut again, the professor snapped on the light.

Evelyn Van Dyk Was crouched in a chair, hands to her throat, pale as death.

“I heard something—in the rear of the house!” she gasped. “Something moving!”

Swiftly Professor Van Dyk turned to the light-switch. It clicked again; darkness again filled the room.

"It may have come back!" the professor declared huskily.

Nichols felt him grope past, toward the hallway door. He felt his way after the professor, along the wall, until at last they reached the entrance to the steam room.

"I left no other window open," came the professor's strained voice. "It must be in the cage."

He thrust open the door. The blinding light struck their eyes sharply. Blinking, Nichols hurried forward with Van Dyk, toward the cage, with Seamon pressing close behind him. They stopped, peered at each other wonderingly.

The cage was empty.

"That's strange," the professor said, turning away. "Very strange. If it had entered the cage, the light would have held it there."

Quick footfalls sounded in the hall. The professor strode to the door as Evelyn came into the light. She was still pale, frightened.

"It wasn't in here, father," she said breathlessly. "I'm sure it wasn't. I thought the noise came from the laboratory."

"The laboratory!"

Professor Van Dyk stepped out of the steam room, hurried farther back along the hall. At another door he paused, hand on the knob, listening. Nichols strained his ears to bear any slight sound that might come through the panels; but there was only silence.

"It couldn't have got in here," The professor said in an odd tone. "There is no way—"

He opened the door, stepped through. A switch clicked again. In the flat ceiling light the strange contraptions of the laboratory glittered. Retorts, beakers, test tubes, flasks, seemingly without number, mingled with bottles of reagents on the shelves and tables. Van Dyk paused, peering at a window on the opposite side of the room.

It was wide open.

"I left it closed!" he blurted.

He strode to it, slipped it shut. Nichols moved toward a door standing open in the side wall, disclosing a deep closet behind. A few drawers inside it had been jerked open; a pair of rubber boots lay on the floor, as if thrown aside; a cloth hat, stained brown, and a wicker creel rested beside them.

"What's that?" the professor asked sharply. "Seamon, you didn't leave your fishing tackle in that mess, did you?"

"Certainly not!" Seamon answered, startled. "It was all put away in order—but some one's been into it."

Nichols asked quickly, "Anything else touched? Some one didn't come in here to break into a lot of fishing tackle."

Professor Van Dyk and Seamon moved about the laboratory quickly, inspecting the shelves, opening cabinets, peering into drawers. Nichols watched them curiously, glancing now and then at Evelyn standing in the doorway. Presently the search ended.

"Offhand, I'd say nothing is missing," Van Dyk announced. "It's scarcely credible that some one would break into this house to get into your fishing tackle, Seamon. Did you see any one open that window?"

"I was watching the sky," Seamon answered, puzzled. "It was so dark I couldn't have seen any one at the window, anyway. But somebody certainly did sneak in here. There's nothing in those drawers, either, but my tackle, and—"

"Hubbard!"

**T**HE professor blurted the name, looking around. Surprise flooded Seamon's face. A new light of fright came into Evelyn's eyes. For the first time they realized that Hubbard was not with them.

"Where is Hubbard?" Van Dyk demanded.

"He didn't come in with us, professor," Nichols answered. "Just we three. Where did you station him?"

“Good heavens!” the professor breathed. “Perhaps something’s happened to him! Perhaps the flying snake—”

Quickly he strode to the switch, snapped it. As darkness filled the laboratory again, the professor threw up the window sash. With darkness shielding those in the room against an attack through the window by the flying snake, Van Dyk put his head out and called:

“Hubbard .... Hubbard!”

There was no answer.

The professor drew back. “Surely he would hear if—if nothing had happened to him.”

Seamon blurted, “It’s possible the snake attacked him. If it did—I don’t wonder he doesn’t answer!”

The professor quickly closed the window again. When the lights snapped on, the three men and the girl peered at each other with dread in their eyes.

“Did you see anything of the snake, Seamon?”

“No, professor. There was no sign—”

“You, Nichols?”

“No.”

The professor was trembling with anxiety. “We must look for Hubbard. Something has surely happened to him.”

He strode from the laboratory, and turned toward the rear of the house. He was scarcely across the sill when the low hum of a motor came into the house. Van Dyk turned, startled.

“It must be Kendall!”

“If the snake’s still near the house, the lights of the car will draw it!” Seamon exclaimed.

Professor Van Dyk broke into an awkward run along the hallway. Nichols loped after him, chilled at the thought that death might swoop out of the night sky on the professor’s unsuspecting caller. As they reached the big living-room, the humming of the motor sounded directly outside.

Anxiously the professor jerked open the door. Light came in, shining from the

powerful headlamps of the car which had rolled to a stop. Before the professor could speak, a big man moved directly into the glare, looking toward the door.

“Professor!” came a brusque call. “What’s up? No lights—”

“Put out your headlights, Kendall!” the professor answered in terror. “Put them out at once—or run in here!”

The big man paused, bewildered—still directly in the shafts of the strong lights. He was blinded by them, and unable to comprehend the urgency of the professor’s warning. He paused, and half turned back.

“Put out the lights? Why—”

Then something hissed through the air.

Kendall recoiled from something in the darkness. He flung up his arm, making a startled exclamation. Those in the doorway saw a brief flash in the light at the level of Kendall’s head. Instantly it disappeared.

Kendall tottered, made a guttural exclamation, clutched at the hood of his car—and fell.

“Merciful God!” Seamon blurted.

Professor Van Dyk sprang out of the doorway, toward the car. His hand groped for the headlight switch, turned it off. In the baffling darkness Nichols stooped, dragging the heavy form of Kendall into his arms. Seamon helped him; they carried their burden into the house.

They faltered in the dark room. The big door slammed; the lights snapped on. Professor Van Dyk hurried toward Kendall. Nichols and Seamon put him on the couch. The big man was writhing as if in torturous pain, staring with glazing eyes.

On his cheek was a bright trickle of blood, not an inch long, which had dripped from a single dark puncture in the skin.

Nichols, Van Dyk and Seamon, crowded close together, stared at it in horror. Kendall’s eyes were turned toward them, grotesquely wide. His lips were moving, as though he were striving to speak, to overcome a ghastly

paralysis that was seizing him.

His husky voice came: "Hundred — professor—it was—one hundred—thousand!"

The stiffness took his whole body. A rigid convulsion shook his frame, then ceased. Kendall's eyes remained open, staring. His jaw damped hard, his colorless lips pressed together.

"The snake!" Seamon gasped. "The snake got him!"

Nichols bent low, pressed his ear to Kendall's chest. He straightened again, breathing hard.

"Kendall," he said, "is dead."

### CHAPTER III DEATH GIVES AN ALIBI

**A** SOB came from the farther side of the room. Nichols turned to face Evelyn Van Dyk. She was staring at the couch, horrified, inarticulate.

Professor Van Dyk said huskily, "Evelyn—you'd better go to your room. You shouldn't see this!"

The girl's eyes went to her father's, then to Nichols'. She made an effort to control herself. "I'm all right," she said. "I'm not a child. I—"

Her voice trailed off.

Seamon, with a shudder, turned away from the couch. He strode from the room and, a moment later, returned, carrying a folded blanket. He spread it over the stiff form on the cushions, and faced Professor Van Dyk grimly.

"We've got to capture that snake, professor. We've got to do everything possible to snare it."

"Yes!"

Nichols crossed the room to the telephone, took it up, and rattled the hook. It was still dead. He put the instrument down, thoughtfully.

"There's nothing else to do now," he declared. "A warning has got to be broadcast.

The police have got to be notified."

The professor scarcely heard. He was gazing with unbounded concern at his daughter. Evelyn, in spite of herself, was trembling; she seemed about to faint.

"You must go to your room!" the professor said sternly.

"I—I will," she answered in a voice scarcely audible.

Nichols, eyeing the professor, took a moment for a bit of thinking. He was, first and last, a reporter. He wanted every available particle of information he could get before the broadcast warning brought other reporters to the scene. He moved toward Van Dyk quietly.

"I—I'll telephone the police myself," the professor said quickly. "I—I should do that—yes."

As Van Dyk started for the door, Nichols' hand on his arm stopped him.

"One moment, professor. Kendall was trying to say something when he died. It must have been important. He used his last strength to blurt out something about 'one hundred thousand dollars.' What did he mean?"

"I—I don't know."

"You were expecting him here tonight. Why?"

"He—he phoned. He said he wanted to talk with me."

"About what?"

"About financing the new expedition. I'd written him a letter. He wanted to talk to me about that."

"Was one hundred thousand dollars the amount he was donating toward the expenses of the expedition?" Nichols asked flatly.

"No—no, it wasn't. That's what I don't understand, Nichols. That was the amount he usually donated—for six years he's given that amount every year—but this year, because of economies he had to put into effect, he could give me only twenty-five thousand."

"That's quite a drop, professor," Nichols commented. "I hadn't heard that Kendall was running in hard luck, either. But why did he

blurt out—when he was dying—‘it was one hundred thousand’?”

“It—it’s very bewildering. I can’t explain it.”

Seamon declared, “The man was poisoned, Nichols. He was in frightful pain. It’s very probable that he didn’t even know what he was saying.”

“On the other hand,” Nichols answered, casting a speculative eye on Seamon, “probably he did.” He turned to the professor. “Have you a copy of the letter you sent Kendall? I’d like to see it.”

“Yes—I typed it myself,” the professor answered. “I’ll get it for you.”

“Look here!” Seamon snapped. “Nichols, you’re taking advantage of a stricken man. Professor Van Dyk is scarcely himself, and you have no business pressing him. You’re not a police officer, you know.”

Nichols frowned and confronted Seamon squarely. “What’s the idea, Seamon? Is there any reason why you don’t want me to see that letter?”

“Certainly not,” Seamon answered indignantly. “But I won’t stand for your—”

“It’s all right, Seamon,” the professor interrupted vaguely. “I’ll get Nichols my carbon of the letter.”

**T**HE professor hurried from the room. Nichols, turning, saw that Evelyn had not yet gone. She went as they waited. Seamon lighted a cigarette nervously; Nichols eyed him curiously. In a moment Van Dyk was back, bringing a sheet of yellow paper.

“There it is, Nichols. I—I’m going now to telephone. Seamon, I want you to go into the steam room and watch the cage while I’m gone. If the snake returns to the cage, shut the door instantly—do you hear? Instantly!”

Nichols suggested, “If you don’t mind, professor, I’ll take a look outside. Hubbard hasn’t shown up yet, you know. Something must have happened to him, too.

“Yes, I entreat you to, Nichols. Hubbard went to the rear of the house. I—I’ll be back immediately.”

The professor hurried out the front door, closing it quickly. His heels gritted in the gravel walk as he hastened away. Seamon, with an acid glance at Nichols, went into the hallway. Nichols saw him step into the steam room. In a moment the sound of a car came around the house. The professor was driving off—without lights.

Alone in the library, Nichols glanced about quickly. He jerked the blanket off Kendall’s face, bent close, inspected the tiny wound. It was, as he had seen before, a single puncture in the skin of the cheek.

Straightening, he replaced the blanket, and read the carbon of the professor’s letter:

September 10

My dear Kendall,

I have just learned from Seamon that your contribution this year is smaller than usual, and I hasten to assure you that I accept it as gratefully as though it were of its usual generous proportions. Seamon tried to keep it from me, preferring that I not concern myself with finances; he has been soliciting contributions elsewhere in order to make up the difference; but I want you to know that I fully understand, and that my thanks to you are as sincere as always. The \$25,000 will go a long way toward paying the expenses of the expedition.

Yours very truly,  
PETER VAN DYK.

“But Kendall said,” mused Nichols, “ ‘It was one hundred thousand dollars.’ ”

He slipped the carbon into his pocket, went to the door, and sidled outside. Keeping cautiously close to the side of the house, glancing warily into the sky to catch any warning of fluttering wings, he hurried to the grounds in the rear. On the sloping hillside, only a few scrub oaks grew; otherwise it was

open.

Nichols moved back and forth quickly, searching the ground. He walked from tree to tree, peering into the shadows; but he saw no sign of Hubbard. He went far down the slope and back again; he made sure Hubbard was nowhere behind the house.

His movements aroused a repetition of the chattering noises as he went toward rows of cages built on the hillside. He saw through the bars the dark movements of strange beasts, brought back from the tropics by the professor's expeditions. He gave them only a glance, and concentrated on the ground.

When he returned to the front door of the rambling house, he had found no trace of Hubbard.

He slipped inside, quickly, closed the door, and paused. He crossed to the couch, and once more drew the blankets off the dead man.

With a sudden resolution, he flipped open Kendall's coat and probed into the pockets. He found nothing unusual until his fingers touched a folded envelope in a side-pocket. It was brown, and bore the return card of a Los Angeles bank; it was addressed to Kendall. Nichols opened it.

From it he drew a conventional bank statement, a few checks folded inside it. As he fingered through them, an exclamation passed Nichols' lips. Peering at the final check, he saw that it had been issued to the order of the Van Dyk Expedition Fund to the amount of \$100,000.

Nichols turned it over, studied the endorsement. It was a rubber-stamp, bearing the written initials: VS. Vincent Seamon.

A sudden burst of voices spun Nichols on his heel. From the hallway, far away, he heard a man shout angrily. Then a girl's voice, high-pitched, answered.

**N**ICHOLS hurried through the hallway, toward the voices. They grew louder, then suddenly ceased. At the very end

of the hall, past the steam room, a light was shining from an open door. Hurrying past, Nichols saw Seamon was not in the steam room.

He raced to the rear door. On the sill he brought himself to a short stop. Evelyn Van Dyk and Seamon were struggling; his arms were wrapped about the girl's body; she was straining breathlessly to break from his grasp. One of her arms was extended, the hand crumpling a bit of stiff yellow paper.

Nichols sprang in. He grasped Seamon's collar, dragged the man back. Seamon, loosening Evelyn, whirled on Nichols. In a rage he struck out. Nichols ducked under, let go an uppercut. His knuckles clicked squarely to the point of Seamon's chin.

Seamon staggered back, fell on the bed, groped dizzily to get up.

Evelyn Van Dyk stared, at Nichols, still clutching the yellow paper. He took her hand, removed the paper from it; she was too startled to resist. His eyebrows crawled up when he found that it was a bank statement similar to the one he had taken from Kendall's pocket.

It had been issued by another bank; only two checks were enclosed. Rapidly, Nichols saw that the account had showed a balance of \$100,000. One of the checks, drawn to the order of Peter Van Dyk, was for the amount of \$25,000. The other for \$75,000 had been drawn to the order of a third bank; and both were signed by Seamon.

Seamon was dragging himself up. Nichols faced him, smiling broadly.

"Take it easy," he warned.

"She—she had no right coming into my room and getting into my private papers!" Seamon exploded. "I found her here—rifling my desk—like a common thief—" Then, he saw the bank statement in Nichols' hand, and broke off, appalled.

"'Thief' isn't an appropriate word coming from you, Seamon," Nichols answered. "Not when you've done a bit of thieving yourself,

to the extent of seventy-five thousand.”

“Then—it’s true!” Evelyn exclaimed. “I was sure of it. I’ve never trusted him. He did steal—”

“He certainly did steal,” Nichols declared. “A little fancy juggling of different accounts, and he took seventy-five out of the hundred thousand that Kendall donated, and passed on twenty-five to the professor. Big stakes, Seamon! Right?”

Seamon blurted, “You—you can’t prove—”

“I can prove plenty. I not only have these checks you wrote, but the one Kendall wrote, for a hundred grand to the expedition fund.”

“He could do it easily!” the girl declared. “He handled all the finances for the expeditions—received the contributions, paid all expenses—relieved father of all that detail. By juggling a few checking accounts, he could almost cover himself and—”

“Almost but not quite!” Nichols interrupted.

“When Kendall said—‘it was one hundred thousand’—I knew something was wrong,” the girl rushed on. “Seamon was the only one who could have managed it. I came to his room deliberately—hoping to find some proof of it—and I did!”

“You certainly did!” Nichols said admiringly. “You, young lady, have got nerve. Seamon, the professor’s going to be very interested in this. I’m going to keep an eye—”

Seamon jerked up suddenly. His right hand swung from his hip-pocket, and an automatic glinted in the light. Evelyn gave a little cry and backed away. Nichols’ smile faded as he eyed the leveled weapon.

“Give me those statements, Nichols!”

Nichols promptly folded the statements and tucked them into his trousers pocket.

“You’ll have to take ’em from me, Seamon. Don’t be a damned fool, man. You’re caught. You can’t cover yourself now. I know about it—Evelyn knows about it—and you’re stuck with it, unless you’re willing to commit a couple of murders on the spot. And

you couldn’t get away with that, either.”

Seamon blinked, his eyes glittering as metallically as the gun in his hand. Nichols saw realization come into them, a grasping of the truth. Seamon eased up, began moving toward the door.

“All right, you’ve found out!” he rasped. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to jail for it. Be careful, Nichols. I’m getting out of here. If you try to stop me, it’ll be the last thing you’ll ever do.”

Nichols’ lips were curving wryly. “Well,” he said. “Have a pleasant trip—if you can make it.”

Seamon backed into the hallway. He eased to the rear door, threw the bolt, twisted the knob, pulled the door open. Backing out, he said:

“Stay away from me, Nichols. I’m getting into a car and leaving here. If you try—”

Suddenly he screamed.

Something flicked past his face—something that came like lightning, and disappeared. At the same instant a spot of red appeared on Seamon’s chin—a spot that grew into a trickle.

“The snake!” Evelyn cried.

**N**ICHOLS sprang to the door, peering up. Now the air was clear, the darting thing gone. Seamon was sagging; his weakening knees were giving way. Swiftly Nichols caught him, dragged him toward the door, and through it. Kicking the door shut, he carried Seamon bodily into the bedroom, and lowered him to the bed.

Seamon was quaking; his eyes were popping. His fingers rose trembling to his chin and he stared at the blood that stained them.

“Seamon!” Nichols exclaimed. “It got you! You saw what happened to Kendall. You can’t get out of it now. Have the decency to clear it up—tell the truth.”

Seamon mouthed, “God! That vile—snake—!”

“Seamon! You did it—got seventy-five of

the hundred thousand that Kendall paid to the fund—didn't you? Seamon!"

Seamon was gasping. The powerful poison in his blood was stiffening him. His lips worked.

"Yes—I took the money. But not alone.... Hubbard was in it with me. He planned it all out. We were going to split—the seventy-five."

"Hubbard!" Nichols exclaimed.

"He—planned it. We could've—gotten away with it—if the professor—hadn't written that note to Kendall. He did it—without my knowing it. That—exposed the whole—deal."

Nichols' eyes were blazing. Evelyn was bending over Seamon, listening tensely to each gasping word.

"Hubbard—common crook—" Seamon's words were coming with tremendous effort now. "Stop at—nothing. He must've—opened the cage—tried to cover it up—by kill—"

Then the last tremor shook Seamon's frame. His lips stopped moving.

Nichols turned away, drawing Evelyn with him. He stepped from the room quickly, closed the door.

"Did you hear that?" he said rapidly. "Seamon thought Hubbard opened the cage of the flying snake—trying to kill the professor that way and cover himself up. He could've done it—opened a window from the outside and unlatched the cage gate. I remember now—I didn't hear Hubbard's car come up the drive before he came in—did you?"

"No." Evelyn's eyes were frightened, but dry. "Is Seamon—"

"Dead—yes. Killed by the same thing that killed Kendall. God, it's horrible!"

He drew the girl away from the door, toward the front of the house.

"If the professor had been killed by the flying snake, Seamon could have lied out of it—could have told Kendall that it was a mistake. If Kendall had investigated, they could have got the rest of the donation back in time for a check-up. Hubbard's idea, was it?

Where the devil did Hubbard go to—if the snake hasn't got him, too?"

As they reached the living room, the hum of a motor again came from outside. Gazing through the partly opened door, Nichols saw it was a car without lights—the professor, returning. The car stopped; the professor slipped from the wheel, and hurried to the door.

"I've notified the police," Van Dyk said breathlessly, closing the door behind him. "Has it returned—come back to the cage? Until it is captured there will be a reign of terror."

He broke off. Another car was coming up the drive, its gears grinding—and its headlights on. The professor, alarmed anew, jerked open the door and cried a warning; but the car came on, blazing. Van Dyk stared out, too terrified to move. Nichols hastily moved him aside, turned to hurry out.

The driver of the car was already walking toward the door. He was holding something in his hands.

"Good evening, professor," the man said, "Say, does this ghastly thing happen to belong to you? I was driving out of my garage an hour or so ago, when this thing threw itself against one of my headlights. I thought it was a bat, and didn't get out to see. But when I came back, just a few minutes ago, I saw it lying in the driveway, and picked it up. What the devil is it, professor?"

The professor looked haggardly into the face of his nearest neighbor. His eyes dropped to the thing in the man's hands—a thing resting on a folded sheet of newspaper, glistening green and limp.

It was the flying snake—and it was dead.

Automatically the professor took it. "Yes—yes, it belongs here. Thank you, Adams—thank you."

Nichols was staring at the hideous thing. "Listen!" he snapped at Adams. "When did you say this happened? When did you find it dead?"

“Just now—but I must have run over it, going out,” the neighbor said. “It must have got killed—oh, more than an hour ago.”

Nichols nodded slowly. He dimly heard a brief, further exchange of words between Adams and the professor; he watched the car roll away. The professor turned back into the living-room, carrying the dead snake, and Nichols followed. Suddenly he exclaimed:

“An hour ago. It was killed an hour ago! That was *before* Kendall came!”

It could mean only one thing—*it was not the flying make which had killed Kendall and Seamon!*

#### CHAPTER IV THE LASH OF DEATH

PROFESSOR Van Dyk gazed at the dead green thing with mingled relief and regret. He turned dazedly, and walked into the corridor. Nichols’ eyes went to Evelyn’s.

His mind was working fast, fitting together the bits of information like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. He crossed the rug and back, nervously. The professor returned to the room. He stroked his goatee and sank exhaustedly into a chair.

“Where is Seamon?” he asked dazedly.

“Professor.” Nichols told him, “prepare yourself for a shock. Seamon is in his room. And he is dead.”

“Dead!”

“Killed in exactly the same manner Kendall was killed. Do you understand that, professor? The snake didn’t kill them. The snake couldn’t have killed them. Something else did.”

The professor stared, speechless.

“They were murdered,” Nichols declared.

Van Dyk sprang to his feet. “What are you saying! Murdered! Here? In my home? How—how is it possible?”

Nichols snapped his fingers impatiently. “Listen—the police are coming, aren’t they? In a little while this place will be overrun with

them. We’ve got to get this thing straightened out. Professor, Seamon has been robbing you—”

Rapidly Nichols disclosed to Professor Van Dyk Seamon’s trickery with the checking accounts established for the purpose of stealing money donated to the expedition fund. The professor listened aghast.

“Seamon declared that Hubbard must have released the flying snake from the cage. Hubbard could have opened a window of the steam room from the outside, released the catch, and closed the window again. After that he came in—you remember. Professor, his idea must have been to let that snake kill you.”

“Kill—me!”

“Keep hold of yourself, damn it! Don’t you see, Hubbard was desperate. He was working with Seamon, robbing you of the seventy-five thousand. They’d planned it all out—”

Evelyn interrupted. “They had plenty of opportunity to do that, father. I never trusted Seamon—and Hubbard was Kendall’s secretary during the past year. I didn’t trust him, either. You know that Hubbard and Seamon went into the Sierras not so long ago on a fishing trip. They probably planned it out then—”

“Fishing trip?” Nichols echoed. “The two of them? That means something. Whoever it was that broke into the laboratory got into Seamon’s fishing tackle. Listen, professor. You usually dictated your letters to Seamon, didn’t you?”

“Yes—yes.”

“But when you learned that Kendall was giving you a smaller donation this year, you wrote him yourself, didn’t you? You didn’t dictate that letter to Seamon?”

“No—I didn’t.”

“That’s what wrecked their plan, then. If you had dictated the Kendall letter to Seamon, as you usually did, Seamon would have altered the figures and covered up their crooked operations. But your letter to Kendall

let the cat out of the bag. Seamon and Hubbard knew there was trouble ahead. When Hubbard let the snake loose, professor, his only idea was to cover himself."

"By—"

"By killing you, yes. With you out of the way, Seamon could have explained it away—produced evidence to show you had received a hundred thousand from Kendall, and not twenty-five. They were desperate—playing for a stake of seventy-five thousand. But the snake failed to strike at you, professor—and it escaped. Hubbard's plan to get from under failed to work.

"Then Kendall died. That, too, would cover it all up, wouldn't it? You didn't know you'd been robbed, professor. Kendall suspected it. Getting him out of the way meant safety for Seamon and Hubbard. Kendall was murdered, I tell you! But Seamon didn't have anything to do with it. Seamon was here, in this room, when that thing—whatever it was—struck Kendall in the face."

"Then it must have been Hubbard!" Evelyn Van Dyk exclaimed.

"Yes, it must have been Hubbard," Nichols answered swiftly. "But—how was it done? Where did Hubbard disappear to? Damned if I know!"

"The—police will find him," the professor said weakly.

"I'm not so sure of that" Nichols paced back and forth across the room. "If Hubbard killed Kendall, he killed Seamon, too. He killed Seamon either to shut the man up, or to get the whole seventy-five grand for himself, or both."

**A**BRUPTLY he turned, picked up the telephone again, and clattered the hook. The instrument was as dead as before. A new gleam came into Nichols' eyes as he turned away.

"The cops'll be here any minute now," he said. "Stay here, both of you, please. I've got a hunch—"

He opened the door, stepped out quickly. Slipping along the side of the house, he searched for the lead-in of the telephone line. He saw the black strand against the sky and followed it to the stucco wall of the house. He trailed it down to the ground-box, fingering the wires.

He felt a raw edge—a cut.

"Snipped the wires!" Nichols said half aloud. "Hubbard's work again. He needed time, wanted the police kept away as long as possible, so he and Seamon could cover themselves."

He rose, looking around. Suddenly a sound startled him—a sharp, crackling sound, as of wood splitting. It came from close at hand, from the other side of the house. Nichols sprang to the corner and peered around into the open—and at first saw nothing.

There was only silence now. He moved along the wall quietly. A breathy exclamation came from his throat as he saw something dark against the side of the wall. Coming close, he saw that it was a lattice-work trellis, about which a flowering vine was entwined.

One of the thin cross-pieces was freshly broken.

Nichols drew away from the wall, looking up. The trellis rose to the edge of the roof. It formed a fragile ladder by means of which a man could climb to the flat top of the house. And the broken cross-piece was not far below the cornice....

Nichols paused, his eyes glittering. His suspicion that some one had climbed up the trellis to the roof—that some one was on the roof even then—grew stronger when he saw that the latticework was affixed to the wall near the window of the laboratory.

He hesitated. He had no gun. Then he remembered—Seamon had had one. What had become of it? He peered at the edge of the roof, but could see nothing. Without making a sound, he skirted around the corner to the rear of the house. He was about to push open the

door when he saw something glint at his feet.

Seamon's gun. Seamon had dropped it when the death-dealing thing had stung his face, Nichols scooped it into his hand, turned back, ran again to the trellis.

No sound came from above. Nichols could see nothing beyond the edge of the roof save the black sky.

He gripped the gun tightly, put a foot into the lattice, and pulled himself up. It was a precarious support that sagged under his weight. Staring up, he lifted himself again. The laths creaked; the vine rustled; and Nichols cursed the noise he was making. Cautiously he lifted himself until his eyes were level with the cornice, and he could see across the flat roof. At first he could see nothing but blackness. But he sensed a presence—sensed that some one or something was watching him. Quickly he pulled himself up, crouched at the edge.

**S**UDDENLY a form reared out of the pool of blackness that covered the roof. It unfolded into the figure of a man, facing Nichols. Nichols jerked up his gun, leveled it. The black figure stood motionless, twenty feet from him, hunched forward in a menacing attitude. Then the figure's arm rose. In its black hand it was holding a long, slender pole which whipped under its own weight as it rose. Nichols crouched tensely, tightening his grip on the gun.

"Easy, Hubbard!" he warned.

A throaty exclamation answered. "This is your finish, Nichols. You can't stop me!"

Nichols was aiming carefully. "You're stopped now, Hubbard. I've got you on the bead . . ."

Hubbard uttered a crackling laugh. "You haven't got a chance, Nichols! You're going as Kendall and Seamon went. You'll die with a horrible poison running through your heart!"

Hubbard's arm was still rising, lifting the long, whip-like pole.

"You see what I'm doing, Nichols," came Hubbard's voice rasping. "This is a fly-casting rod I have in my hand. I'm an expert fly-caster, you know. I can put a fly anywhere I wish, within a circle of six inches—and your face makes a circle about that size."

Nichols watched tensely as the rod continued to rise.

"There's a needle on the end of this line, instead of a hook, Nichols. A sharp needle. Dipped in curare. You've heard of curare, Nichols—the deadly arrow poison. One flip of this rod, and the poisoned needle is going to fly into your face!"

"Raise that thing another inch and I'll put a bullet through you!" Nichols threatened.

The rod flipped back in Hubbard's hand.

Swiftly Nichols pulled the trigger of the gun. A hollow click answered him—nothing more! He stared down at it, dumfounded. Instantly he pulled the trigger again—and again! A gasp escaped him.

The gun was empty!

"Here it comes, Nichols!" Hubbard whispered.

The supple rod swished backward. Flying through the air, the slender line stretched out, a glittering steel needle at its end. A needle coated with horrible death.

Nichols sprang up. He snapped the gun back into his hand, hurled it. It spun through the air, straight at Hubbard. Hubbard was in the act of flicking the deadly needle forward when he saw the weapon spinning toward him. He cried out, leaped aside—and at the same instant the pole snapped forward.

Nichols leaped again, madly.

A sudden, gasping cry came from Hubbard. He raised to his tiptoes, rigid. He cried out again—and dropped the pole. He turned—then, crazily, began to run. He tottered to the edge—clawing at the air.

Suddenly, losing balance, he crashed over the cornice, spilled into empty darkness.

Nichols raised himself, peered over. Hubbard was lying on the black ground,

writhing. Nichols hurried to the trellis, lowered himself rapidly, and bent over Hubbard. He could feel Hubbard trembling. Quickly he struck a match, and the yellow glare fell over Hubbard's form.

Hubbard was sprawled face down. And Nichols saw, on the back of his neck, a little red spot from which blood had trickled.

Hubbard's leap aside, to escape the gun thrown by Nichols, had destroyed his aim with the casting-rod and line. The needle, dropping from behind, had stung through Hubbard's skin. And now Hubbard, like Kendall and Seamon, was dead.

**N**ICHOLS kept the professor and Evelyn in the living room.

"It's fairly easy to piece it together," he explained quickly. "When the flying snake failed to kill you, professor, Hubbard was forced to attack in a different way. He had to think fast—and he did. While we were all outside, watching for the flying snake, Hubbard got into the laboratory.

"He took Seamen's fly-rod from the closet, and a bottle of curare poison from the lab. Those things are still up on the roof. He planned to kill Kendall while making it appear that the flying snake had done it. Waiting on

the roof, he saw Kendall come to the door. He had the needle on the end of the light fishing-line, and had dipped it in the curare.

"He cast the needle out, and it snapped into Kendall's face. That's what we saw—not the snake. He did the same thing with Seamon. On the roof, he was probably able to hear everything that was said below. He must have seen a chance to grab the whole seventy-five grand for himself, and to silence Seamon. God!

"He was on the roof all the time. He was climbing down, trying to make a get-away, while I was outside. He was going to kill me in the same way—crazy and desperate as he was—but the needle got him instead."

Professor Van Dyk sat weakly in his chair. Evelyn was watching Nichols' face intently. He said:

"Listen—I'm a reporter. I've got to get this stuff to my paper before all the reporters in Los Angeles come trooping in here. May I use your car? I—I've got to beat it—"

His eyes were on Evelyn's....

"But I'm coming back," he added.

From outside came the snarl of a motor. A pair of headlights threw their shafts through the open door.

The police were arriving...