

The Invisible Millionaire

Leslie Charteris

IT IS ALMOST impossible to measure the success of Leslie Charteris's famous creation, Simon Templar, better known as the Saint.

The Saint is anything but. He is an adventurer, a romantic hero who works outside the law and has grand fun doing it. Like so many crooks in literature, he is imbued with the spirit of Robin Hood, which suggests that it is perfectly all right to steal, so long as it is from someone with wealth. Most of the more than forty books about the Saint are collections of short stories or novellas, and in the majority of tales he also functions as a detective. Unconstricted by being an official policeman, he steps outside the law to retrieve money or treasure that may not have been procured in an honorable fashion, either to restore it to its proper owner or to enrich himself.

"Maybe I am a crook," Templar once says, "but in between times I'm something more. In my simple way I am a kind of justice."

In addition to the many books about the Saint, there were ten films about him, mainly starring George Sanders or Louis Hayward; a comic strip; a radio series that ran for much of the 1940s; and a television series starring Roger Moore, an international success with 118 episodes.

Leslie Charteris (1907-1993), born in Singapore, became an American citizen in 1946.

"The Invisible Millionaire" was first published in the June 1938 issue of *Black Mask*.

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The girl's eyes caught Simon Templar as he entered the room, ducking his head instinctively to pass under the low lintel of the door; and they followed him steadily across to the bar. They were blue eyes with long lashes, and the face to which they belonged was pretty without any distinctive feature, crowned with curly yellow hair. And besides anything else, the eyes held an indefinable hint of strain.

Simon knew all this without looking directly at her. But he had singled her out at once from the double handful of riverside weekenders who crowded the small barroom as the most probable writer of the letter which he still carried in his pocket—the letter which had brought him out to the Bell that Sunday evening on what anyone with a less incorrigibly optimistic flair for adventure would have branded from the start as a fool's errand. She was the only girl in the place who seemed to be unattached: there was no positive reason why the writer of that letter should have been unattached, but it seemed likely that she would be. Also she was the best looking in a by no means repulsive crowd; and that was simply no clue at all except to Simon Templar's own unshakable faith in his guardian angel, who had never thrown any other kind of damsel in distress into his buccaneering path.

But she was still looking at him. And even though he couldn't help knowing that women often looked at him with more than ordinary interest, it was not usually done quite

so fixedly. His hopes rose a notch, tentatively; but it was her turn to make the next move. He had done all that had been asked of him when he walked in there punctually on the stroke of eight.

He leaned on the counter, with his wide shoulders seeming to take up half the length of the bar, and ordered a pint of beer for himself and a bottle of Vat 69 for Hoppy Uniartz, who trailed up thirstily at his heels. With the tankard in his hands, he waited for one of those inevitable moments when all the customers had paused for breath at the same time.

"Anyone leave a message for me?" he asked.

His voice was quiet and casual, but just clear enough for everyone in the room to hear. Whoever had sent for him, unless it was merely some pointless practical joker, should need no more confirmation than that. He hoped it would be the girl with the blue troubled eyes. He had a weakness for girls with eyes of that shade, the same color as his own.

The barman shook his head.

"No, sir. I haven't had any messages."

Simon went on gazing at him reflectively, and the barman misinterpreted his expression. His mouth broadened and said: "That's all right, sir. I'd know if there was anything for you."

Simon's fine brows lifted a little puzzledly.

"I haven't seen you before," he said.

"I've seen your picture often enough, sir. I suppose you could call me one of your fans. You're the Saint, aren't you?"

The Saint smiled slowly.

"You don't look frightened."

"I never had the chance to be a rich racketeer, like the people you're always getting after. Gosh, though, I've had a kick out of some of the things you've done to 'em! And the way you're always putting it over on the police—I'll bet they'd give anything for an excuse to lock you up..."

Simon was aware that the general buzz of conversation, after starting to pick up again, had died a second time and was staying dead. His spine itched with the feel of stares fastening on his back. And at the same time the barman became feverishly conscious of the audience which had been captured by his runaway enthusiasm. He began to stammer, turned red and plunged confusedly away to obliterate himself in some unnecessary fussing over the shelves of bottles behind him.

The Saint grinned with his eyes only, and turned tranquilly round to lean his back against the bar and face the room.

The collected stares hastily unpinned themselves and the voices got going again; but Simon was as oblivious of those events as he would have been if the rubber-necking had continued. At that moment his mind was capable of absorbing only one fearful and calamitous realisation. He had turned to see whether the girl with the fair curly hair and the blue eyes had also been listening, and whether she needed any more encouragement to announce herself. And the girl was gone.

She must have got up and gone out even in the short time that the barman had been talking. The Saint's glance swept on to identify the other faces in the room—faces that he had noted and automatically catalogued as he came in. They were all the same, but her face was not one of them. There was an empty glass beside her chair, and the chair itself was already being taken by a dark slender girl who had just entered.

Interest lighted the Saint's eyes again as he saw her, awakened instantly as he appreciated the subtle perfection of the sculptured cascade of her brown hair, crystallised as he approved the contours of her slim yet mature figure revealed by a simple flowered cotton dress. Then he saw her face for the first time, and held his tankard a shade tighter. Here, indeed, was something to call beautiful, something on which the word could be used without hesitation even under his most dispassionate scrutiny. She was like— "Peaches in autumn," he said to himself, seeing the fresh bloom of her cheeks against the russet shades of her hair. She raised her head with a smile, and his blood sang carillons. Perhaps after all...

And then he saw that she was smiling and speaking to an ordinarily good-looking young man in a striped blazer who stood possessively over her; and inward laughter overtook him before he could feel the sourness of disappointment.

He loosened one elbow from the bar to run a hand through his dark hair, and his eyes twinkled at Mr. Uniatz.

"Oh well, Hoppy," he said. "It looks as if we can still be taken for a ride, even at our age."

Mr. Uniatz blinked at him. Even in isolation, the face that nature had planted on top of Mr. Uniatz' bull neck could never have been mistaken for that of a matinee idol with an inclination toward intellectual pursuits and the

cultivation of the soul; but when viewed in exaggerating contrast with the tanned piratical chiselling of the Saint's features it had a grotesqueness that was sometimes completely shattering to those who beheld it for the first time. To compare it with the face of a gorilla which had been in violent contact with a variety of blunt instruments during its formative years would be risking the justifiable resentment of any gorilla which had been in violent contact with a variety of blunt instruments during its formative years. The best that can be said of it is that it contained in mauled and primitive form all the usual organs of sight, smell, hearing and ingestion, and prayerfully let it go at that. And yet it must also be said that Simon Templar had come to regard it with a fondness which even its mother could scarcely have shared. He watched it with good-humoured patience, waiting for it to answer.

"I dunno, boss," said Mr. Uniatz.

He had not thought over the point very deeply. Simon knew this, because when Mr. Uniatz was thinking his face screwed itself into even more frightful contortions than were stamped on it in repose. Thinking of any kind was an activity which caused Mr. Uniatz excruciating pain. On this occasion he had clearly escaped much suffering because his mind—if such a word can be used without blasphemy in connection with any of Mr. Uniatz' cerebral processes—had been elsewhere.

"Something is bothering you, Hoppy," said the Saint. "Don't keep it to yourself, or your head will start aching."

"Boss," said Mr. Uniatz gratefully, "do I have to drink dis wit' de paper on?"

He held up the parcel he was nursing.

Simon looked at him blankly for a moment, and then felt weak in the middle.

"Of course not," he said. "They only wrapped it up because they thought we were going to take it home. They haven't got to know you yet, that's all."

An expression of sublime relief spread over Mr. Uniatz' homely countenance as he pawed off the wrapping paper from the bottle of Vat 69. He pulled out the cork, placed the neck of the bottle in his mouth and tilted his head back. The soothing fluid flowed in a cooling stream down his asbestos gullet. All his anxieties were at rest.

For the Saint, consolation was not quite so easy. He finished his tankard and pushed it across the bar for a refill. While he was waiting for it to come back, he pulled out of his pocket and read over again the note that had brought him there. It was on a plain sheet of good note paper, with no address.

Dear Saint,

I'm not going to write a long letter, because if you aren't going to believe me it won't make any difference how many pages I write.

I'm only writing to you at all because I'm utterly desperate. How can I put it in the baldest possible way? I'm being forced into making myself an accomplice in one of the most gigantic frauds that can ever have been attempted, and I can't go to the police for the same reason that I'm being forced to help.

There you are. It's no use writing any more. If you can be at the Bell at Hurley at eight o'clock on Sunday evening I'll see you and tell you everything. If I can only talk to you for half an hour, I know I can make you believe me.

Please, for God's sake, at least let me talk to you.

My name is

Nora Prescott

Nothing there to encourage too many hopes in the imagination of anyone whose mail was as regularly cluttered with crank letters as the Saint's; and yet the handwriting looked neat and sensible, and the brief blunt phrasing had somehow carried more conviction than a ream of protestations. All the rest had been hunch—that supernatural affinity for the dark trails of ungodliness which had pitchforked him into the middle of more brews of mischief than any four other freebooters of his day.

And for once the hunch had been wrong. If only it hadn't been for that humdrumly handsome excrescence in the striped blazer...

Simon looked up again for another tantalizing eyeful of the dark slender girl.

He was just in time to get a parting glimpse of her back as she made her way to the door, with the striped blazer hovering over her like a motherly hen. Then she was gone; and everyone else in the bar suddenly looked nondescript and obnoxious.

The Saint sighed.

He took a deep draught of his beer and turned back to Hoppy Uniatz. The neck of the bottle was still firmly clamped in Hoppy's mouth, and there was no evidence to show that it had ever been detached therefrom since it was first inserted. His Adam's apple throbbed up and down with the regularity of a slow pulse. The angle of the bottle indicated that at least a pint of its contents had already reached his interior.

Simon gazed at him with reverence.

"You know, Hoppy," he remarked, "when you die we shan't even have to embalm you. We'll just put you straight into a glass case, and you'll keep for years."

The other customers had finally returned to their own business, except for a few who were innocently watching for Mr. Uniatz to stiffen and fall backwards; and the talkative young barman edged up again with a show of wiping off the bar.

"Nothing much here to interest you tonight, sir, is there?" he began chattily.

"There was," said the Saint ruefully, "but she went home."

"You mean the dark young lady, sir?"

"Who else?"

The man nodded knowingly.

"You ought to come here more often, sir. I've often seen her in here alone. Miss Rosemary Chase, that is. Her father's Mr. Marvin Chase, the millionaire. He just took the New Manor for the season. Had a nasty motor accident only a week ago..."

Simon let him go on talking, without paying much attention. The dark girl's name wasn't Nora Prescott, anyhow. That seemed to be the only important item of information—and with it went the last of his hopes. The clock over the bar crept on to twenty minutes past eight. If the girl who had written to him had been as desperate as she said, she wouldn't come as late as that—she'd have been waiting there when he arrived. The girl with the strained blue eyes had probably been suffering from nothing worse than biliousness or thwarted love. Rosemary Chase had happened merely by accident. The real writer of the letter was almost certainly some fat and frowsy female among those he had passed over without a second thought, who was doubtless still gloating over him from some obscure corner, gorging herself with the spectacle of her inhibition's hero in the flesh.

A hand grasped his elbow, turning him round, and a lightly accented voice said: "Why, Mr. Templar, what are you looking so sad about?"

The Saint's smile kindled as he turned.

"Giulio," he said, "if I could be sure that keeping a pub would make anyone as cheerful as you, I'd go right out and buy a pub."

Giulio Trapani beamed at him teasingly.

"Why should you need anything to make you cheerful? You are young, strong, handsome, rich— and famous. Or perhaps you are only waiting for a new romance?"

"Giulio," said the Saint, "that's a very sore point, at the moment."

"Ah! Perhaps you are waiting for a love letter which has not arrived?"

The Saint straightened up with a jerk. All at once he laughed. Half-incredulous sunshine smashed through his despondency, lighted up his face. He extended his palm.

"You old son of a gun! Give!"

The landlord brought his left hand from behind his back, holding an envelope. Simon grabbed it and ripped it open. He recognized the handwriting at a glance. The note was on a sheet of hotel paper.

Thank God you came. But I daren't be seen speaking to you after the barman recognised you.

Go down to the lock and walk up the tow-path. Not very far along on the left there's a hoathouse with green doors. I'll wait for you there. Hurry.

The Saint raised his eyes, and sapphires danced in them.

"Who gave you this, Giulio?"

"Nobody. It was lying on the floor outside when I came through. You saw the envelope— 'Deliver at once to Mr. Templar in the bar.' So that's what I do. Is it what you were waiting for?"

Simon stuffed the note into his pocket, and nodded. He drained his tankard.

"This is the romance you were talking about—maybe," he said. "I'll tell you about it later. Save some dinner for me. I'll be back." He clapped Trapani on the shoulder and swung round, newly awakened, joyously alive again. Perhaps, in spite of everything, there was still adventure to come... "Let's go, Hoppy!"

He took hold of Mr. Uniatz' bottle and pulled it down. Hoppy came upright after it with a plaintive gasp.

"Chees, boss—"

"Have you no soul?" demanded the Saint sternly as he herded him out of the door. "We have a date with a damsel in distress. The moon will be mirrored in her beautiful eyes, and she will pant out a story while we fan the gnats away from her snowy brow. Sinister eggs are being hatched behind the scenes. There will be villains and mayhem and perhaps even moider..."

He went on talking lyrical nonsense as he set a brisk pace down the lane toward the river; but when they reached the towpath even he had dried up. Mr. Uniatz was an unresponsive audience, and Simon found that some of the things he was saying in jest were oddly close to the truth that he believed. After all, such fantastic things had happened to him before.

He didn't fully understand the change in himself as he turned off along the riverbank

beside the dark shimmering sleekness of the water. The ingrained flippancy was still with him—he could feel it like a translucent film over his mind—but underneath it he was all open and expectant, a receptive void in which anything might take shape. And something was beginning to take shape there—something still so nebulous and formless that it eluded any conscious survey, and yet something as inescapably real as a promise of thunder in the air. It was as if the hunch that had brought him out to the Bell in the first place had leapt up from a whisper to a great shout; and yet everything was silent. Far away, to his sensitive ears, there was the ghostly hum of cars on the Maidenhead road; close by, the sibilant lap of the river, the lisp of leaves, the stertorous breathing and elephantine footfalls of Mr. Uniatz; but those things were only phases of the stillness that was everywhere. Everything in the world was quiet, even his own nerves, and they were almost too quiet. And ahead of him, presently, loomed the shape of a building like a boathouse. His pencil flashlight stabbed out for a second and caught the front of it. It had green doors.

Quietly he said: “Nora.”

There was no answer, no hint of movement anywhere. And he didn’t know why, but in the same quiet way his right hand slid up to his shoulder rig and loosened the automatic in the spring clip under his arm.

He covered the last two yards in absolute silence, put his hand to the handle of the door and drew it back quickly as his fingers slid on a sticky dampness. It was queer, he thought even then, even as his left hand angled the flashlight down, that it should have happened just like that, when everything in him was tuned and waiting for it, without knowing what it was waiting for. Blood—on the door.

Simon stood for a moment, and his nerves seemed to grow even calmer and colder under an edge of sharp bitterness.

Then he grasped the door handle again, turned it and went in. The inside of the building was pitch dark. His torch needled the blackness with a thin jet of light that splashed dim reflections from the glossy varnish on a couple of punts and an electric canoe. Somehow he was quite sure what he would find, so sure that the certainty chilled off any rise of emotion. He knew what it must be; the only question was, who? Perhaps even that was not such a question. He was never quite sure about that. A hunch that had almost missed its mark had become stark reality with a suddenness that disjointed the normal co-ordinates of time and space: it was as if, instead of discovering things, he was trying to remember things he had known before and had forgotten. But he saw her at last, almost tucked under the shadow of the electric canoe, lying on her side as if she were asleep.

He stepped over and bent his light steadily on her face, and knew then that he had been right. It was the girl with the troubled blue eyes. Her eyes were open now, only they were not troubled any more. The Saint stood and looked down at her. He had been almost sure when he saw the curly yellow hair. But she had been wearing a white blouse when he saw her last, and now there was a splotchy crimson pattern on the front of it. The pattern glistened as he looked at it.

Beside him, there was a noise like an asthmatic foghorn loosening up for a burst of song.

“Boss,” began Mr. Uniatz.

“Shut up.”

The Saint's voice was hardly more than a whisper, but it cut like a razor blade. It cut Floppy's introduction cleanly off from whatever he had been going to say; and at the same moment as he spoke Simon switched off his torch, so that it was as if the same tenuous whisper had sliced off even the ray of light, leaving nothing around them but blackness and silence.

Motionless in the dark, the Saint quested for any betraying breath or sound. To his tautened eardrums, sensitive as a wild animal's, the hushed murmurs of the night outside were still an audible background against which the slightest stealthy movement even at a considerable distance would have stood out like a bugle call. But he heard nothing then, though he waited for several seconds in uncanny stillness.

He switched on the torch again.

"Okay, Hoppy," he said. "Sorry to interrupt you, but that blood was so fresh that I wondered if someone mightn't still be around."

"Boss," said Mr. Uniatz aggrievedly, "I was doin' fine when ya stopped me."

"Never mind," said the Saint consolingly. "You can go ahead now. Take a deep breath and start again."

He was still partly listening for something else, wondering if even then the murderer might still be within range.

"It ain't no use now," said Mr. Uniatz dolefully.

"Are you going to get temperamental on me?" Simon demanded sufferingly. "Because if so—"

Mr. Uniatz shook his head.

"It ain't dat, boss. But you gotta start wit' a full bottle."

Simon focused him through a kind of fog. In an obscure and apparently irrelevant sort of way, he became aware that Hoppy was still clinging to the bottle of Vat 69 with which he had been irrigating his tonsils at the Bell, and that he was holding it up against the beam of the flashlight as though brooding over the level of the liquid left in it. The Saint clutched at the buttresses of his mind.

"What in the name of Adam's grandfather," he said, "are you talking about?"

"Well, boss, dis is an idea I get out of a book. De guys walks in a saloon, he buys a bottle of scotch, he pulls de cork, an' he drinks de whole bottle straight down wit'out stopping. So I was tryin' de same't'ing back in de pub, an' was doin' fine when ya stopped me. Lookit, I ain't left more 'n two-t'ree swallows. But it ain't no use goin' on now," explained Mr. Uniatz, working back to the core of his grievance. "You gotta start wit' a full bottle."

Nothing but years of training and self-discipline gave Simon Templar the strength to recover his sanity.

"Next time you'd better take the bottle away somewhere and lock yourself up with it," he said with terrific moderation. "Just for the moment, since we haven't got another bottle, is there any danger of your noticing that someone has been murdered around here?"

"Yeah," said Mr. Uniatz brightly. "De wren."

Having contributed his share of illumination, he relapsed into benevolent silence. This, his expectant self-effacement appeared to suggest, was not his affair. It appeared to be something which required thinking about; and Thinking was a job for which the Saint possessed an obviously supernatural

aptitude which Mr. Uniatz had come to lean upon with a childlike faith that was very much akin to worship.

The Saint was thinking. He was thinking with a level and passionless detachment that surprised even himself. The girl was dead. He had seen plenty of men killed before, sometimes horribly; but only one other woman. Yet that must not make any difference. Nora Prescott had never meant anything to him: he would never even have recognized her voice. Other women of whom he knew just as little were dying everywhere, in one way or another, every time he breathed; and he could think about it without the slightest feeling. Nora Prescott was just another name in the world's long roll of undistinguished dead.

But she was someone who had asked him for help, who had perhaps died because of what she had wanted to tell him. She hadn't been just another twittering fluffhead going into hysterics over a mouse. She really had known something—something that was dangerous enough for someone else to commit murder rather than have it revealed.

“... one of the most gigantic frauds that can ever have been attempted.”

The only phrase out of her letter which gave any information at all came into his head again, not as a merely provocative combination of words, but with some of the clean-cut clarity of a sober statement of fact. And yet the more he considered it, the closer it came to clarifying precisely nothing.

And he was still half listening for a noise that it seemed as if he ought to have heard. The expectation was a subtle nagging at the back of his mind, the fidget for attention of a thought that still hadn't found conscious shape.

His torch panned once more round the interior of the building. It was a plain wooden

structure, hardly more than three walls and a pair of double doors which formed the fourth, just comfortably roomy for the three boats which it contained. There was a small window on each side, so neglected as to be almost opaque. Overhead, his light went straight up to the bare rafters which supported the shingle roof. There was no place in it for anybody to hide except under one of the boats; and his light probed along the floor and eliminated that possibility.

The knife lay on the floor near the girl's knees—an ordinary cheap kitchen knife, but pointed and sharp enough for what it had had to do. There was a smear of blood on the handle; and some of it must have gone on the killer's hand, or more probably on his glove, and in that way been left on the doorknob. From the stains and rents on the front of the girl's dress, the murderer must have struck two or three times; but if he was strong he could have held her throat while he did it, and there need have been no noise.

“Efficient enough,” the Saint summed it up aloud, “for a rush job.”

He was thinking: “It must have been a rush job, because he couldn't have known she was going to meet me here until after she'd written that note at the Bell. Probably she didn't even know it herself until then. Did he see the note? Doesn't seem possible. He could have followed her. Then he must have had the knife on him already. Not an ordinary sort of knife to carry about with you. Then he must have known he was going to use it before he started out. Unless it was here in the boathouse and he just grabbed it up. No reason why a knife like that should be lying about in a place like this. Bit too convenient. Well, so he knew she'd got in touch with me, and he'd made up his mind to kill her. Then why not kill her before she even got to the Bell? She might have talked to me there, and he couldn't have stopped her—could he? Was he betting that she wouldn't risk

talking to me in public? He could have been. Good psychology, but the hell of a nerve to bet on it. Did he find out she'd written to me? Then I'd probably still have the letter. If I found her murdered, he'd expect me to go to the police with it. Dangerous. And he knew I'd find her. Then why—"

The Saint felt something like an inward explosion as he realised what his thoughts were leading to. He knew then why half of his brain had never ceased to listen—searching for what intuition had scented faster than reason.

Goose pimples crawled up his spine onto the back of his neck.

And at that same moment he heard the sound.

It was nothing that any other man might have heard at all. Only the gritting of a few tiny specks of gravel between a stealthy shoe sole and the board stage outside. But it was what every nerve in his body had unwittingly been keyed for ever since he had seen the dead girl at his feet. It was what he inevitably had to hear, after everything else that had happened. It spun him round like a jerk on the string wound round a top.

He was in the act of turning when the gun spoke.

Its bark was curt and flat and left an impression of having been curiously thin, though his ears rang with it afterwards. The bullet zipped past his ear like a hungry mosquito; and from the hard fierce note that it hummed he knew that if he had not been starting to turn at the very instant when it was fired it would have struck him squarely in the head. Pieces of shattered glass rattled on the floor.

Lights smashed into his eyes as he whirled at the door, and a clear clipped voice

snapped at him: "Drop that gun! You haven't got a chance!"

The light beat on him with blinding intensity from the lens of a pocket searchlight that completely swallowed up the slim ray of his own torch. He knew that he hadn't a chance. He could have thrown bullets by guesswork; but to the man behind the glare he was a target on which patterns could be punched out.

Slowly his fingers opened off the big Luger, and it plonked on the boards at his feet.

His hand swept across and bent down the barrel of the automatic which Mr. Uniatz had whipped out like lightning when the first shot crashed between them.

"You too, Hoppy," he said resignedly. "All that scotch will run away if they make a hole in you now."

"Back away," came the next order.

Simon obeyed.

The voice said: "Go on, Rosemary—pick up the guns. I'll keep 'em covered."

A girl came forward into the light. It was the dark slender girl whose quiet loveliness had un-steadied Simon's breath at the Bell.

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She bent over and collected the two guns by the butts, holding them aimed at Simon and Hoppy, not timidly, but with a certain stiffness which told the Saint's expert eye that the feel of them was unfamiliar. She moved backwards and disappeared again behind the light.

"Do you mind," asked the Saint ceremoniously, "if I smoke?"

“I don’t care.” The clipped voice, he realised now, could only have belonged to the young man in the striped blazer. “But don’t try to start anything, or I’ll let you have it. Go on back in there.”

The Saint didn’t move at once. He took out his cigarette case first, opened it and selected a cigarette. The case came from his breast pocket, but he put it back in the pocket at his hip, slowly and deliberately and holding it lightly, so that his hand was never completely out of sight and a nervous man would have no cause to be alarmed at the movement. He had another gun in that pocket, a light but beautifully balanced Walther; but for the time being he left it there, sliding the cigarette case in behind it and bringing his hand back empty to get out his lighter.

“I’m afraid we weren’t expecting to be held up in a place like this,” he remarked apologetically. “So we left the family jools at home. If you’d only let us know—”

“Don’t be funny. If you don’t want to be turned over to the police, you’d better let *me* know what you’re doing here.”

The Saint’s brows shifted a fraction of an inch.

“I don’t see what difference it makes to you, brother,” he said slowly. “But if you’re really interested, we were just taking a stroll in the moonlight to work up an appetite for dinner, and we happened to see the door of this place open—”

“So that’s why you both had to pull out guns when you heard us.”

“My dear bloke,” Simon argued reasonably, “what do you expect anyone to do when you creep up behind them and start sending bullets whistling round their heads?”

There was a moment’s silence.

The girl gasped.

The man spluttered: “Good God, you’ve got a nerve! After you blazed away at us like that— why, you might have killed one of us!”

The Saint’s eyes strained uselessly to pierce beyond the light. There was an odd hollow feeling inside him, making his frown unnaturally rigid. Something was going wrong. Something was going as immortally cockeyed as it was possible to go. It was taking him a perceptible space of time to grope for a bearing in the reeling void. Somewhere the scenario had gone as paralysingly off the rails as if a Wagnerian soprano had bounced into a hotcha dance routine in the middle of *Tristan*.

“Look,” he said. “Let’s be quite clear about this. Is your story going to be that you thought I took a shot at you?”

“I don’t have to think,” retorted the other. “I heard the bullet whizz past my head. Go on—get back in that boathouse.”

Simon dawdled back.

His brain felt as if it was steaming. The voice behind the light, now that he was analysing its undertones, had a tense unsophistication that didn’t belong in the script at all. And the answers it gave were all wrong. Simon had had it all figured out one ghostly instant before it began to happen. The murderer hadn’t just killed Nora Prescott and faded away, of course. He had killed her and waited outside, knowing that Simon Templar must find her in a few minutes, knowing that that would be his best chance to kill the Saint as well and silence whatever the Saint knew already and recover the letter. That much was so obvious that he must have been asleep not to have seen it from the moment when his eyes fell on the dead girl. Well, he had seen it now. And yet it wasn’t clicking. The dialogue was all

there, and yet every syllable was striking a false note.

And he was back inside the boathouse, as far as he could go, with the square bow of a punt against his calves and Hoppy beside him.

The man's voice said: "Turn a light on, Rosemary."

The girl came round and found a switch. Light broke out from a naked bulb that hung by a length of flex from one of the rafters, and the young man in the striped blazer flicked off his torch.

"Now," he started to say, "we'll—"

"Jim!"

The girl didn't quite scream, but her voice tightened and rose to within a semitone of it. She backed against the wall, one hand to her mouth, with her face white and her eyes dilated with horror. The man began to turn toward her, and then followed her wide and frozen stare. The muzzle of the gun he was holding swung slack from its aim on the Saint's chest as he did so—it was an error that in some situations would have cost him his life, but Simon let him live. The Saint's head was whirling with too many questions, just then, to have any interest in the opportunity. He was looking at the gun which the girl was still holding, and recognizing it as the property of Mr. Uniatz.

"It's Nora," she gasped. "She's—"

He saw her gather herself with an effort, force herself to go forward and kneel beside the body. Then he stopped watching her. His eyes went to the gun that was still wavering in the young man's hand.

"Jim," said the girl brokenly, "she's dead!"

The man took a half step toward the Saint.

"You swine!" he grunted. "You killed her—"

"Go on," said the Saint gently. "And then I took a pot at you. So you fired back in self-defence, and just happened to kill us. It'll make a swell story even if it isn't a very new one, and you'll find yourself quite a hero. But why all the play acting for our benefit? We know the gag."

There was complete blankness behind the anger in the other's eyes. And all at once the Saint's somersaulting cosmos stabilized itself with a jolt—upside down, but solid.

He was looking at the gun which was pointing at his chest, and realising that it was his own Luger.

And the girl had got Hoppy's gun. And there was no other artillery in sight.

The arithmetic of it smacked him between the eyes and made him dizzy. Of course there was an excuse for him, in the shape of the first shot and the bullet that had gone snarling past his ear. But even with all that, for him out of all people in the world, at his time of life...

"Run up to the house and call the police, Rosemary," said the striped blazer in a brittle bark.

"Wait a minute," said the Saint.

His brain was not fogged any longer. It was turning over as swiftly and smoothly as a hair-balanced flywheel, registering every item with the mechanical infallibility of an adding machine. His nerves were tingling.

His glance whipped from side to side. He was standing again approximately where he had been when the shot cracked out, but facing the

opposite way. On his right quarter was the window that had been broken, with the shards of glass scattered on the floor below it—he ought to have understood everything when he heard them hit the floor. Turning the other way, he saw that the line from the window to himself continued on through the open door.

He took a long drag on his cigarette.

“It kind of spoils the scene,” he said quietly, “but I’m afraid we’ve both been making the same mistake. You thought I fired at you—”

“I don’t have—”

“All right, you don’t have to think. You heard the bullet whizz past your head. You said that before. You’re certain I shot at you. Okay. Well, I was just as certain that you shot at me. But I know now I was wrong. You never had a gun until you got mine. It was that shot that let you bluff me. I’d heard the bullet go past *my* head, and so it never even occurred to me that you were bluffing. But we were both wrong. The shot came through that window—it just missed me, went on out through the door and just missed you. And somebody else fired it!”

The other’s face was stupid with stubborn incredulity.

“Who fired it?”

“The murderer.”

“That means you,” retorted the young man flatly. “Hell, I don’t want to listen to you. You see if you can make the police believe you. Go on and call them, Rosemary. I can take care of these two.”

The girl hesitated.

“But, Jim—”

“Don’t worry about me, darling. I’ll be all right. If either of these two washouts tries to get funny, I’ll give him plenty to think about.”

The Saint’s eyes were narrowing.

“You lace-pantie’d bladder of hot air,” he said in a cold even voice that seared like vitriol. “It isn’t your fault if God didn’t give you a brain, but he did give you eyes. Why don’t you use them? I say the shot was fired from outside, and you can see for yourself where the broken windowpane fell. Look at it. It’s all on the floor in here. If you can tell me how I could shoot at you in the doorway and break a window behind me, and make the broken glass fall inwards, I’ll pay for your next marcel wave. Look at it, nitwit.”

The young man looked.

He had been working closer to the Saint, with his free fist clenched and his face flushed with wrath, since the Saint’s first sizzling insult smoked under his skin. But he looked. Somehow, he had to do that. He was less than five feet away when his eyes shifted. And it was then that Simon jumped him.

The Saint’s lean body seemed to lengthen and swoop across the intervening space. His left hand grabbed the Luger, bent the wrist behind it agonisingly inwards, while the heel of his open right hand settled under the other’s chin. The gun came free; and the Saint’s right arm straightened jarringly and sent the young man staggering back.

Simon reversed the automatic with a deft flip and held it on him. Even while he was making his spring, out of the corner of his eye he had seen Hoppy Uniartz flash away from him with an electrifying acceleration that would have stunned anyone who had misguidedly judged Mr. Uniartz on the speed of his intellectual reactions; now he glanced briefly aside and saw that Hoppy was holding his gun

again and keeping the girl pinioned with one arm.

“Okay, Hoppy,” he said. “Keep your Betsy and let her go. She’s going to call the police for us.”

Hoppy released her, but the girl did not move. She stood against the wall, rubbing slim wrists that had been bruised by Mr. Uniatz’ untempered energy, looking from Simon to the striped blazer with scared, desperate eyes.

“Go ahead,” said the Saint impatiently. “I won’t damage little Jimmy unless he makes trouble. If this was one of my murdering evenings, you don’t think I’d bump him and let you get away, do you? Go on and fetch your policeman—and we’ll see whether the boy friend can make them believe *his* story!”

4

They had to wait for some time...

After a minute Simon turned the prisoner over to Hoppy and put his Luger away under his coat. He reached for his cigarette case again and thoughtfully helped himself to a smoke. With the cigarette curling blue drifts past his eyes, he traced again the course of the bullet that had so nearly stamped the finale on all his adventures. There was no question that it had been fired from outside the window—and that also explained the peculiarly flat sound of the shot which had faintly puzzled him. The cleavage lines on the few scraps of glass remaining in the frame supplied the last detail of incontrovertible proof. He devoutly hoped that the shining lights of the local constabulary would have enough scientific knowledge to appreciate it.

Mr. Uniatz, having brilliantly performed his share of physical activity, appeared to have

been snared again in the unfathomable quagmires of the Mind. The tortured grimace that had cramped itself into his countenance indicated that some frightful eruption was taking place in the small core of grey matter which formed a sort of glutinous marrow inside his skull. He cleared his throat, producing a noise like a piece of sheet iron getting between the blades of a lawn mower, and gave the fruit of his travail to the world.

“Boss,” he said, “I dunno how dese mugs’ t’ink dey can get away wit’ it.”

“How which mugs think they can get away with what?” asked the Saint somewhat vacantly.

“Dese mugs,” said Mr. Uniatz, “who are tryin’ to take us for a ride, like ya tell me in de pub.”

Simon had to stretch his memory backwards almost to breaking point to hook up again with Mr. Uniatz’ train of thought; and when he had finally done so he decided that it was wisest not to start any argument.

“Others have made the same mistake,” he said casually and hoped that would be the end of it.

Mr. Uniatz nodded sagely.

“Well, dey all get what’s comin’ to dem,” he said with philosophic complacency. “When do I give dis punk de woiks?”

“When do you—What?”

“Dis punk,” said Mr. Uniatz, waving his Betsy at the prisoner. “De mug who takes a shot at us.”

“You don’t,” said the Saint shortly.

The equivalent of what on anybody else’s face would have been a slight frown

carved its fearsome corrugations into Hoppy's brow.

"Ya don't mean he gets away wit' it after all?"

"We'll see about that."

"Dijja hear what he calls us?"

"What was that?"

"He calls us washouts."

"That's too bad."

"Yeah, dat's too bad." Mr. Uniatz glowered disparagingly at the captive. "Maybe I better go over him wit' a paddle foist. Just to make sure he don't go to sleep."

"Leave him alone," said the Saint soothingly. "He's young, but he'll grow up."

He was watching the striped blazer with more attention than a chance onlooker would have realised. The young man stood glaring at them defiantly—not without fear, but that was easy to explain if one wanted to. His knuckles tensed up involuntarily from time to time; but a perfectly understandable anger would account for that. Once or twice he glanced at the strangely unreal shape of the dead girl half hidden in the shadows, and it was at those moments that Simon was studying him most intently. He saw the almost conventionalised horror of death that takes the place of practical thinking with those who have seen little of it, and a bitter disgust that might have had an equally conventional basis. Beyond that, the sullen scowl which disfigured the other's face steadily refused him the betraying evidence that might have made everything so much simpler. Simon blew placid and meditative smoke rings to pass the time; but there was an irking bafflement behind the cool patience of his eyes.

It took fifteen minutes by his watch for the police to come, which was less than he had expected.

They arrived in the persons of a man with a waxed moustache in plain clothes, and two constables in uniform. After them, breathless when she saw the striped blazer still inhabited by an apparently undamaged owner, came Rosemary Chase. In the background hovered a man who even without his costume could never have been mistaken for anything but a butler.

Simon turned with a smile.

"Glad to see you, Inspector," he said easily.

"Just 'Sergeant,'" answered the plainclothes man in a voice that sounded as if it should have been "sergeant major."

He saw the automatic that Mr. Uniatz was still holding, and stepped forward with a rather hollow but courageous belligerence.

"Give me that gun!" he said loudly.

Hoppy ignored him and looked inquiringly at the only man whom he took orders from; but Simon nodded. He politely offered his own Luger as well. The sergeant took the two guns, squinted at them sapiently and stuffed them into his side pockets. He looked relieved, and rather clever.

"I suppose you've got licences for these firearms," he said temptingly.

"Of course," said the Saint in a voice of saccharine virtue.

He produced certificate and permit to carry from his pocket. Hoppy did the same. The sergeant pored over the documents with surly-suspicion for some time before he handed them to one of the constables to note down the

particulars. He looked so much less clever that Simon had difficulty in keeping a straight face. It was as if the Official Mind, jumping firmly to a foregone conclusion, had spent the journey there developing an elegantly graduated approach to the obvious climax, and therefore found the entire structure staggering when the first step caved in under its feet.

A certain awkwardness crowded itself into the scene.

With a businesslike briskness that was only a trifle too elaborate, the sergeant went over to the body and brooded over it with portentous solemnity. He went down on his hands and knees to peer at the knife, without touching it. He borrowed a flashlight from one of the constables to examine the floor around it. He roamed about the boathouse and frowned into dark corners. At intervals he cogitated. When he could think of nothing else to do, he came back and faced his audience with dogged valour.

“Well,” he said less aggressively, “while we’re waiting for the doctor I’d better take your statements.” He turned. “You’re Mr. Forrest, sir?”

The young man in the striped blazer nodded.

“Yes.”

“I’ve already heard the young lady’s story, but I’d like to hear your version.”

Forrest glanced quickly at the girl and almost hesitated. He said: “I was taking Miss Chase home, and we saw a light moving in here. We crept up to find out what it was, and one of these men fired a shot at us. I turned my torch on them and pretended I had a gun too, and they surrendered. We took their guns away; and then this man started arguing and trying to make out that somebody else had fired the

shot, and he managed to distract my attention and get his gun back.”

“Did you hear any noise as you were walking along? The sort of noise this—er—deceased might have made as she was being attacked?”

“No.”

“I—did—not—hear—the—noise—of—the —deceased—being—attacked,” repeated one of the constables with a notebook and pencil, laboriously writing it down.

The sergeant waited for him to finish and turned to the Saint.

“Now, Mr. Templar,” he said ominously. “Do you wish to make a statement? It is my duty to warn you—”

“Why?” asked the Saint blandly.

The sergeant did not seem to know the answer to that.

He said gruffly: “What statement do you wish to make?”

“Just what I told Comrade Forrest when we were arguing. Mr. Uniatz and I were ambling around to work up a thirst, and we saw this door open. Being rather inquisitive and not having anything better to do, we just nosed in, and we saw the body. We were just taking it in when somebody fired at us; and then Comrade Forrest turned on the spotlight and yelled ‘Hands up!’ or words to that effect, so to be on the safe side we handed up, thinking he’d fired the first shot. Still, he looked kind of nervous when he had hold of my gun, so I took it away from him in case it went off. Then I told Miss Chase to go ahead and fetch you. Incidentally, as I tried to tell Comrade Forrest, I’ve discovered that we were both wrong about that shooting. Somebody else did it from outside the

window. You can see for yourself if you take a look at the glass.”

The Saint’s voice and manner were masterpieces of matter-of-fact veracity. It is often easy to tell the plain truth, and be disbelieved; but Simon’s pleasant imperturbability left the sergeant visibly nonplused. He went and inspected the broken glass at some length, and then he came back and scratched his head.

“Well,” he admitted grudgingly, “there doesn’t seem to be much doubt about that.”

“If you want any more proof,” said the Saint nonchalantly, “you can take our guns apart. Comrade Forrest will tell you that we haven’t done anything to them. You’ll find the magazines full and the barrels clean.”

The sergeant adopted the suggestion with morbid eagerness, but he shrugged resignedly over the result.

“That seems to be right,” he said with stoic finality. “It looks as if both you gentlemen were mistaken.” He went on scrutinising the Saint grimly. “But it still doesn’t explain why you were in here with the deceased.”

“Because I found her,” answered the Saint reasonably. “Somebody had to.”

The sergeant took another glum look around. He did not audibly acknowledge that all his castles in the air had settled soggy back to earth, but the morose admission was implicit in the majestic stolidity with which he tried to keep anything that might have been interpreted as a confession out of his face. He took refuge in an air of busy inscrutability, as if he had just a little more up his sleeve than he was prepared to share with anyone else for the time being; but there was at least one member of his audience who was not deceived, and who breathed a sigh of relief at the lifting of what might have been a dangerous suspicion.

“Better take down some more details,” he said gruffly to the constable with the notebook, and turned to Rosemary Chase. “The deceased’s name is Nora Prescott—is that right, miss?”

“Yes.”

“You knew her quite well?”

“Of course. She was one of my father’s personal secretaries,” said the dark girl; and the Saint suddenly felt as if the last knot in the tangle had been untied.

5

He listened with tingling detachment while Rosemary Chase talked and answered questions. The dead girl’s father was a man who had known and helped Marvin Chase when they were both young, but who had long ago been left far behind by Marvin Chase’s sensational rise in the financial world. When Prescott’s own business was failing, Chase had willingly lent him large sums of money, but the failure had still not been averted. Illness had finally brought Prescott’s misfortunes to the point where he was not even able to meet the interest on the loan, and when he refused further charity Chase had sent him to Switzerland to act as an entirely superfluous “representative” in Zurich and had given Nora Prescott a job himself. She had lived more as one of the family than as an employee. No, she had given no hint of having any private troubles or being afraid of anyone. Only she had not seemed to be quite herself since Marvin Chase’s motor accident...

The bare supplementary facts clicked into place in the framework that was already there as if into accurately fitted sockets, filling in sections of the outline without making much of it more recognizable. They filed themselves

away in the Saint's memory with mechanical precision; and yet the closeness which he felt to the mystery that hid behind them was more intuitive than methodical, a weird sensitivity that sent electric shivers coursing up his spine.

A grey-haired ruddy-cheeked doctor arrived and made his matter-of-fact examination and report.

"Three stab wounds in the chest—I'll be able to tell you more about them after I've made the post-mortem, but I should think any one of them might have been fatal. Slight contusions on the throat. She hasn't been dead much more than an hour."

He stood glancing curiously over the other faces.

"Where's the ambulance?" said the sergeant grumpily.

"They've probably gone to the house," said the girl. "I'll send them down if I see them—you don't want us getting in your way any more, do you?"

"No, miss. This isn't very pleasant for you, I suppose. If I want any more information I'll come up and see you in the morning. Will Mr. Forrest be there if we want to see him?"

Forrest took a half step forward.

"Wait a minute," he blurted. "You haven't—"

"They aren't suspicious of you, Jim," said the girl with a quiet firmness. "They might just want to ask some more questions."

"But you haven't said anything about Templar's—"

"Of course." The girl's interruption was even firmer. Her voice was still quiet and natural, but the undercurrent of determined

warning in it was as plain as a siren to the Saint's ears. "I know we owe Mr. Templar an apology, but we don't have to waste Sergeant Jesser's time with it. Perhaps he'd like to come up to the house with us and have a drink—that is, if you don't need him any more, Sergeant."

Her glance only released the young man's eye after it had pinned him to perplexed and scowling silence. And once again Simon felt that premonitory crisping of his nerves.

"All this excitement certainly does dry out the tonsils," he remarked easily. "But if Sergeant Jesser wants me to stay..."

"No sir." The reply was calm and ponderous. "I've made a note of your address, and I don't think you could run away. Are you going home tonight?"

"You might try the Bell first, in case we decide to stop over."

Simon buttoned his coat and strolled toward the door with the others; but as they reached it he stopped and turned back.

"By the way," he said blandly, "do you mind if we take our lawful artillery?"

The sergeant gazed at him and dug the guns slowly out of his pocket. Simon handed one of them to Mr. Uniatz and leisurely fitted his own automatic back into the spring holster under his arm. His smile was very slight.

"Since there still seems to be a murderer at large in the neighborhood," he said, "I'd like to be ready for him."

As he followed Rosemary Chase and Jim Forrest up a narrow footpath away from the river, with Hoppy Uniatz beside him and the butler bringing up the rear, he grinned inwardly over that delicately pointed line and wondered whether it had gone home where he intended it to go. Since his back had been turned to the real

audience, he had been unable to observe their reaction; and now their backs were turned to him in an equally uninformative reversal. Neither of them said a word on the way, and Simon placidly left the silence to get tired of itself. But his thoughts were very busy as he sauntered after them along the winding path and saw the lighted windows of a house looming up through the thinning trees that had hidden it from the river-bank. This, he realised with a jolt, must be the New-Manor, and therefore the boathouse where Nora Prescott had been murdered was presumably a part of Marvin Chase's property. It made no difference to the facts, but the web of riddles seemed to draw-tighter around him...

They crossed a lawn and mounted some steps to a flagged terrace. Rosemary Chase led them through open french windows into an inoffensively furnished drawing room, and the butler closed the windows behind him as he followed. Forrest threw himself sulkily into an armchair, but the girl had regained a composure that was just a fraction too detailed to be natural.

"What kind of drinks would you like?" she asked.

"Beer for me," said the Saint with the same studied urbanity. "Scotch for Hoppy. I'm afraid I should have warned you about him—he likes to have his own bottle. We're trying to wean him, but it isn't going very well."

The butler bowed and oozed out.

The girl took a cigarette from an antique lacquer box, and Simon stepped forward politely with his lighter. He had an absurd feeling of unreality about this new atmosphere that made it a little difficult to hide his sense of humour, but all his senses were vigilant. She was even lovelier than he had thought at first sight, he admitted to himself as he watched her face over the flame—it was hard to believe that

she might be an accomplice to wilful and messy and apparently mercenary murder. But she and Forrest had certainly chosen a very dramatic moment to arrive...

"It's nice of you to have us here," he murmured, "after the way we've behaved."

"My father told me to bring you up," she said. "He seems to be quite an admirer of yours, and he was sure you couldn't have had anything to do with—with the murder."

"I noticed—down in the boathouse—you knew my name," said the Saint thoughtfully.

"Yes—the sergeant used it."

Simon looked at the ceiling.

"Bright lads, these policemen, aren't they? I wonder how *he* knew?"

"From—your gun licence, I suppose."

Simon nodded.

"Oh yes. But before that. I mean, I suppose he must have told your father who I was. Nobody else could have done it, could they?"

The girl reddened and lost her voice; but Forrest found his. He jerked himself angrily out of his chair.

"What's the use of all this beating about the bush, Rosemary?" he demanded impatiently. "Why don't you tell him we know all about that letter that Nora wrote him?"

The door opened, and the butler came back with a tray of bottles and glasses and toured the room with them. There was a strained silence until he had gone again. Hoppy Uniatz stared at the newly opened bottle of whiskey which had been put down in front of

him, with a rapt and menacing expression which indicated that his grey matter was in the throes of another paroxysm of Thought.

Simon raised his glass and gazed appreciatively at the sparkling brown clearness within it.

“All right,” he said. “If you want it that way. So you knew Nora Prescott had written to me. You came to the Bell to see what happened. Probably you watched through the windows first; then when she went out, you came in to watch me. You followed one of us to the boathouse—”

“And we ought to have told the police—”

“Of course.” The Saint’s voice was mild and friendly. “You ought to have told them about the letter. I’m sure you could have quoted what was in it. Something about how she was being forced to help in putting over a gigantic fraud, and how she wanted me to help her. Sergeant Jesser would have been wild with excitement about that. Naturally he’d’ve seen at once that that provided an obvious motive for me to murder her, and none at all for the guy whose fraud was going to be given away. It really was pretty noble of you both to take so much trouble to keep me out of suspicion, and I appreciate it a lot. And now that we’re all pals together, and there aren’t any policemen in the audience, why don’t you save me a lot of headaches and tell me what the swindle is?”

The girl stared at him.

“Do you know what you’re saying?”

“I usually have a rough idea,” said the Saint coolly and deliberately. “I’ll make it even plainer, if that’s too subtle for you. Your father’s a millionaire, they tell me. And when there are any gigantic frauds in the wind, I never expect to find the Big Shot sitting in a garret toasting kippers over a candle.”

Forrest started toward him.

“Look here, Templar, we’ve stood about enough from you—”

“And I’ve stood plenty from you,” said the Saint without moving. “Let’s call it quits. We were both misunderstanding each other at the beginning, but we don’t have to go on doing it. I can’t do anything for you if you don’t put your cards on the table. Let’s straighten it out now. Which of you two cooled off Nora Prescott?”

He didn’t seem to change his voice, but the question came with a sharp stinging clarity like the flick of a whip. Rosemary Chase and the young man gaped at him frozenly, and he waited for an answer without a shift of his lazily negligent eyes. But he didn’t get it.

The rattle of the door handle made everyone turn, almost in relief at the interruption. A tall cadaverous man, severely dressed in a dark suit and high old-fashioned collar, his chin bordered with a rim of black beard, pince-nez on a loop of black ribbon in his hand, came into the room and paused hesitantly.

Rosemary Chase came slowly out of her trance.

“Oh, Doctor Quintus,” she said in a quiet forced voice. “This is Mr. Templar and... er...”

“Hoppy Uniatz,” Simon supplied.

Dr. Quintus bowed; and his black sunken eyes clung for a moment to the Saint’s face.

“Delighted,” he said in a deep burring bass; and turned back to the girl. “Miss Chase, I’m afraid the shock has upset your father a little. Nothing at all serious, I assure you, but I think it would be unwise for him to have any more excitement just yet. However, he asked

me to invite Mr. Templar to stay for dinner. Perhaps later..."

Simon took another sip at his beer, and his glance swung idly over to the girl with the first glint of a frosty sparkle in its depths.

"We'd be delighted," he said deprecatingly. "If Miss Chase doesn't object..."

"Why, of course not." Her voice was only the minutest shred of a decibel out of key. "We'd love to have you stay."

The Saint smiled his courteous acceptance, ignoring the wrathful half movement that made Forrest's attitude rudely obvious. He would have stayed anyway, whoever had objected. It was just dawning on him that out of the whole fishy setup, Marvin Chase was the one man he had still to meet.

6

"Boss," said Mr. Uniatz, rising to his feet with an air of firm decision, "should I go to de terlet?"

It was not possible for Simon to pretend that he didn't know him; nor could he take refuge in temporary deafness. Mr. Uniatz' penetrating accents were too peremptory for that to have been convincing. Simon swallowed, and took hold of himself with the strength of despair.

"I don't know, Hoppy," he said bravely. "How-do you feel?"

"I feel fine, boss. I just't'ought it might be a good place."

"It might be," Simon conceded feverishly.

"Dat was a swell idea of yours, boss," said Mr. Uniatz, hitching up his bottle.

Simon took hold of the back of a chair for support.

"Oh, not at all," he said faintly. "It's nothing to do with me."

Hoppy looked puzzled.

"Sure, you't'ought of it foist, boss," he insisted generously. "Ya said to me, de nex time I should take de bottle away someplace an' lock myself up wit' it. So I't'ought I might take dis one in de terlet. I just't'ought it might be a good place," said Mr. Uniatz, rounding off the resume of his train of thought.

"Sit down!" said the Saint with paralysing ferocity.

Mr. Uniatz lowered himself back onto his hams with an expression of pained mystification, and Simon turned to the others.

"Excuse us, won't you?" he said brightly. "Hoppy's made a sort of bet with himself about something, and he has a rather one-track mind."

Forrest glared at him coldly. Rosemary half put on a gracious smile, and took it off again. Dr. Quintus almost bowed, with his mouth open. There was a lot of silence, in which Simon could feel the air prickling with pardonable speculations on his sanity. Every other reaction that he had been deliberately building up to provoke had had time to disperse itself under cover of the two consecutive interruptions. The spell was shattered, and he was back again where he began. He knew it, and resignedly slid into small talk that might yet lead to another opening.

"I heard that your father had a nasty motor accident, Miss Chase," he said.

“Yes.”

The brief monosyllable offered nothing but the baldest affirmation; but her eyes were fixed on him with an expression that he tried unavailingly to read.

“I hope he wasn’t badly hurt.”

“Quite badly burned,” rumbled the doctor. “The car caught fire, you know. But fortunately his life isn’t in danger. In fact, he would probably have escaped with nothing worse than a few bruises if he hadn’t made such heroic efforts to save his secretary, who was trapped in the wreckage.”

“I read something about it,” lied the Saint. “He was burned to death, wasn’t he? What was his name, now?”

“Bertrand Tamblin.”

“Oh yes. Of course.”

Simon took a cigarette from his case and lighted it. He looked at the girl. His brain was still working at fighting pitch; but his manner was quite casual and disarming now—the unruffled conversational manner of an accepted friend discussing a minor matter of mutual interest.

“I just remembered something you said to the sergeant a little while ago, Miss Chase—about your having noticed that Nora Prescott seemed to be rather under a strain since Tamblin was killed.”

She looked back at him steadily, neither denying it nor encouraging him.

He said in the same sensible and persuasive way: “I was wondering whether you’d noticed them being particularly friendly before the accident—as if there was any kind of attachment between them.”

He saw that the eyes of both Forrest and Dr. Quintus turned toward the girl, as if they both had an unexpectedly intense interest in her answer. But she looked at neither of them.

“I can’t be sure,” she answered, as though choosing her words carefully. “Their work brought them together all the time, of course. Mr. Tamblin was really Father’s private secretary? and almost his other self, and when Nora came to us she worked for Mr. Tamblin nearly as much as Father. I thought sometimes that Mr. Tamblin was—well, quite keen on her—but I don’t know whether she responded. Of course I didn’t ask her.”

“You don’t happen to have a picture of Tamblin, do you?”

“I think there’s a snapshot somewhere...”

She stood up and went over to an inlaid writing table and rummaged in the drawer. It might have seemed fantastic that she should do that, obeying the Saint’s suggestion as if he had hypnotized her; but Simon knew just how deftly he had gathered up the threads of his broken dominance and woven them into a new pattern. If the scene had to be played in that key, it suited him as well as any other. And with that key established, such an ordinary and natural request as he had made could not be refused. But he noticed that Dr. Quintus followed her with his hollow black eyes all the way across the room.

“Here”

She gave Simon a commonplace Kodak print that showed two men standing on the steps of a house. One of them was apparently of medium height, a little flabby, grey-haired in the small areas of his head where he was not bald. The other was a trifle shorter and leaner, with thick smooth black hair and metal-rimmed glasses.

The Saint touched his forefinger on the picture of the older man.

“Your father?”

“Yes.”

It was a face without any outstanding features, creased in a tolerant if somewhat calculating smile. But Simon knew how deceptive a face could be, particularly in that kind of reproduction.

And the first thought that was thrusting itself forward in his mind was that there were two people dead, not only one—two people who had held similar and closely associated jobs, who from the very nature of their employment must have shared a good deal of Marvin Chase’s confidence and known practically everything about his affairs, two people who must have known more about the intricate details of his business life than anyone else around him. One question clanged in the Saint’s head like a deep jarring bell: Was Nora Prescott’s killing the first murder to which that unknown swindle had led, or the second?

All through dinner his brain echoed the complex repercussions of that explosive idea, under the screen of superficial conversation which lasted through the meal. It gave that part of the evening a macabre spookiness. Hoppy Uniatz, hurt and frustrated, toyed halfheartedly with his food, which is to say that he did not ask for more than two helpings of any one dish. From time to time he washed down a mouthful with a gulp from the bottle which he had brought in with him, and put it down again to leer at it malevolently, as if it had personally welshed on him; Simon watched him anxiously when he seemed to lean perilously close to the candles which lighted the table, thinking that it would not take much to cause his breath to ignite and burn with a blue flame. Forrest had given up his efforts to protest at the whole procedure. He ate most of the time in sulky

silence, and when he spoke at all he made a point of turning as much of his back to the Saint as his place at the table allowed: plainly he had made up his mind that Simon Templar was a cad on whom good manners would be wasted. Rosemary Chase talked very little, but she spoke to the Saint when she spoke at all, and she was watching him all the time with enigmatic intentness. Dr. Quintus was the only one who helped to shoulder the burden of maintaining an exchange of urbane trivialities. His reverberant basso bumbled obligingly into every conversational opening, and said nothing that was worth remembering. His eyes were like pools of basalt at the bottom of dry caverns, never altering their expression, and yet always moving, slowly, in a way that seemed to keep everyone under ceaseless surveillance.

Simon chatted genially and emptily, with faintly mocking calm. He had shown his claws once, and now it was up to the other side to take up the challenge in their own way. The one thing they could not possibly do was ignore it, and he was ready to wait with timeless patience for their lead. Under his pose of idle carelessness he was like an arrow on a drawn bow with ghostly fingers balancing the string.

Forrest excused himself as they left the dining room. Quintus came as far as the drawing room but didn’t sit down. He pulled out a large gold watch and consulted it with impressive deliberation.

“I’d better have another look at the patient,” he said. “He may have settled down again by now.”

The door closed behind him.

Simon leaned himself against the mantelpiece. Except for the presence of Mr. Uniatz, who in those circumstances was no more obtrusive than a piece of primitive furniture, he was alone with Rosemary Chase for the first time since so many things had

begun to happen. And he knew that she was also aware of it.

She kept her face averted from his tranquil gaze, taking out a cigarette and lighting it for herself with impersonal unapproachability, while he waited. And then suddenly she turned on him as if her own restraint had defeated itself.

“Well?” she said with self-consciously harsh defiance. “What are you thinking, after all this time?”

The Saint looked her in the eyes. His own voice was contrastingly even and unaggressive.

“Thinking,” he said, “that you’re either a very dangerous crook or just a plain damn fool. But hoping you’re just the plain damn fool. And hoping that if that’s the answer, it won’t be much longer before your brain starts working again.”

“You hate crooks, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve heard about you,” she said. “You don’t care what you do to anyone you think is a crook. You’ve even—killed them.”

“I’ve killed rats,” he said. “And I’ll probably do it again. It’s the only treatment that’s any good for what they’ve got.”

“Always?”

Simon shrugged.

“Listen,” he said, not unkindly. “If you want to talk theories we can have a lot of fun, but we shan’t get very far. If you want me to admit that there are exceptions to my idea of justice, you can take it as admitted; but we can’t go on from there without getting down to cases. I can tell you this, though. I’ve heard that there’s something crooked being put over here,

and from what’s happened since, it seems to be true. I’m going to find out what the swindle is and break it up if it takes fifty years. Only it won’t take me nearly as long as that. Now if you know something that you’re afraid to tell me because of what it might make me do to you or somebody else who matters to you, all I can say is that it’ll probably be a lot worse if I have to dig it out for myself. Is that any use?”

She moved closer toward him, her brown eyes searching his face.

“I wish—”

It was all she had time to say. The rush of sounds that cut her off hit both of them at the same time, muffled by distance and the closed door of the room, and yet horribly distinct, stiffening them both together as though they had been clutched by invisible clammy tentacles. A shrill incoherent yell, hysterical with terror but unmistakably masculine. A heavy thud. A wild shout of “*Help!*” in the doctor’s deep thundery voice. And then a ghastly inhuman wailing gurgle that choked off into deathly silence.

7

Balanced on a knife edge of uncanny self-control, the Saint stood motionless, watching the girl’s expression for a full long second before she turned away with a gasp and rushed at the door. Hoppy Uniatz flung himself after her like a wild bull awakened from slumber: he could have remained comatose through eons of verbal fencing, but this was a call to action, clear and unsullied, and such simple clarions had never found him unresponsive. Simon started the thin edge of an instant later than either of them; but it was his hand that reached the doorknob first.

He threw the door wide and stepped out with a smooth combination of movements that brought him through the opening with a gun in his hand and his eyes streaking over the entire scene outside in one whirling survey. But the hall was empty. At the left and across from him, the front door was closed; at the opposite end a door which obviously communicated with the service wing of the house was thrown open to disclose the portly emerging figure of the butler with the white frightened faces of other servants peering from behind him.

The Saint's glance swept on upwards. The noises that had brought him out had come from upstairs, he was certain: that was also the most likely place for them to have come from, and it was only habitual caution that had made him pause to scan the hall as he reached it. He caught the girl's arm as she came by him.

"Let me go up first," he said. He blocked Hoppy's path on his other side, and shot a question across at the butler without raising his voice. "Are there any other stairs, Jeeves?"

"Y—yes sir—"

"All right. You stay here with Miss Chase. Hoppy, you find these back stairs and cover them."

He raced on up the main stairway.

As he took the treads three at a time, on his toes, he was trying to find a niche for one fact of remarkable interest. Unless Rosemary Chase was the greatest natural actress that a generation of talent scouts had overlooked, or unless his own judgment had gone completely cockeyed, the interruption had hit her with the same chilling shock as it had given him. It was to learn that that he had stayed to study her face before he moved: he was sure that he would have caught any shadow of deception, and yet if there had really been no shadow there to catch it meant that something had happened for

which she was totally unprepared. And that in its turn might mean that all his suspicions of her were without foundation. It gave a jolt to the theories he had begun to put together that threw them into new and fascinating outlines, and he reached the top of the stairs with a glint of purely speculative delight shifting from the grim alertness of his eyes.

From the head of the staircase the landing opened off in the shape of a squat long-armed T. All the doors that he saw at first were closed; he strode lightly to the junction of the two arms, and heard a faint movement down the left-hand corridor. Simon took a breath and jumped out on a quick slant that would have been highly disconcerting to any marksman who might have been waiting for him round the corner. But there was no marksman.

The figures of two men were piled together on the floor, in the middle of a sickening mess; and only one of them moved.

The one who moved was Dr. Quintus, who was groggily trying to scramble up to his feet as the Saint reached him. The one who lay still was Jim Forrest; and Simon did not need to look at him twice to see that his stillness was permanent. The mess was blood—pools and gouts and splashes of blood, in hideous quantity, puddling on the floor, dripping down the walls, soddening the striped blazer and mottling the doctor's clothes. The gaping slash that split Forrest's throat from ear to ear had almost decapitated him.

The Saint's stomach turned over once. Then he was grasping the doctor's arm and helping him up. There was so much blood on him that Simon couldn't tell what his injuries might be.

"Where are you hurt?" he snapped.

The other shook his head muzzily. His weight was leaden on Simon's supporting grip.

"Not me," he mumbled hoarsely. "All right. Only hit me—on the head. Forrest—"

"Who did it?"

"Dunno. Probably same as—Nora. Heard Forrest... yell..."

"Where did he go?"

Quintus seemed to be in a daze through which outside promptings only reached him in the same form as outside noises reach the brain of a sleepwalker. He seemed to be making a tremendous effort to retain some sort of consciousness, but his eyes were half closed and his words were thick and rambling, as if he were dead drunk.

"Suppose Forrest was—going to his room— for something... Caught murderer—sneaking about... Murderer—stabbed him... I heard him yell... Rushed out... Got hit with—something... Be all right—soon. Catch him—"

"Well, where did he go?"

Simon shook him, roughly slapped up the sagging head. The doctor's chest heaved as though it were taking part in his terrific struggle to achieve coherence. He got his eyes wide open.

"Don't worry about me," he whispered with painful clarity. "Look after—Mr. Chase."

His eyelids fluttered again.

Simon let him go against the wall, and he slid down almost to a sitting position, clasping his head in his hands.

The Saint balanced his Luger in his hand, and his eyes were narrowed to chips of sapphire hardness. He glanced up and down the corridor. From where he stood he could see the length of both passages which formed the arms of the T-plan of the landing. The arm on his right finished

with a glimpse of the banisters of a staircase leading down—obviously the back stairs whose existence the butler had admitted, at the foot of which Hoppy Uniatz must already have taken up his post. But there had been no sound of disturbance from that direction. Nor had there been any sound from the front hall where he had left Rosemary Chase with the butler. And there was no other normal way out for anyone who was upstairs. The left-hand corridor, where he stood, ended in a blank wall; and only one door along it was open.

Simon stepped past the doctor and over Forrest's body, and went silently to the open door.

He came to it without any of the precautions that he had taken before exposing himself a few moments before. He had a presentiment amounting to conviction that they were unnecessary now. He remembered with curious distinctness that the drawing-room curtains had not been drawn since he entered the house. Therefore anyone who wanted to could have shot at him from outside long ago. No one had shot at him. Therefore...

He was looking into a large white-painted airy bedroom. The big double bed was empty, but the covers were thrown open and rumpled. The table beside it was loaded with medicine bottles. He opened the doors in the two side walls. One belonged to a spacious built-in cupboard filled with clothing; the other was a bathroom. The wall opposite the entrance door was broken by long casement windows, most of them wide open. He crossed over to one of them and looked out. Directly beneath him was the flat roof of a porch.

The Saint put his gun back in its holster and felt an unearthly cold dry calm sinking through him. Then he climbed out over the sill onto the porch roof below, which almost formed a kind of blind balcony under the window. He stood there recklessly, knowing

that he was silhouetted against the light behind, and lighted a cigarette with leisured, tremorless hands. He sent a cloud of blue vapor drifting toward the stars; and then with the same leisured passivity he sauntered to the edge of the balustrade, sat on it and swung his legs over. From there it was an easy drop onto the parapet which bordered the terrace along the front of the house, and an even easier drop from the top of the parapet to the ground. To an active man the return journey would not present much more difficulty.

He paused long enough to draw another lungful of night air and tobacco smoke, and then strolled on along the terrace. It was an eerie experience, to know that he was an easy target every time he passed a lighted window, to remember that the killer might be watching him from a few yards away, and still to hold his steps down to the same steady pace; but the Saint's nerves were hardened to an icy quietness, and all his senses were working together in taut-strung vigilance.

He walked three quarters of the way round the building and arrived at the back door. It was unlocked when he tried it; and he pushed it open and looked down the barrel of Mr. Uniatz' Betsy.

"I bet you'll shoot somebody one of these days, Hoppy," he remarked; and Mr. Uniatz lowered the gun with a faint tinge of disappointment.

"What ya find, boss?"

"Quite a few jolly and interesting things." The Saint was only smiling with his lips. "Hold the fort a bit longer, and I'll tell you."

He found his way through the kitchen, where the other servants were clustered together in dumb and terrified silence, back to the front hall where Rosemary Chase and the butler were standing together at the foot of the

stairs. They jumped as if a gun had been fired when they heard his footsteps; and then the girl ran toward him and caught him by the lapels of his coat.

"What is it?" she pleaded frantically. "What happened?"

"I'm sorry," he said as gently as he could.

She stared at him. He meant her to read his face for everything except the fact that he was still watching her like a spectator on the dark side of the footlights.

"Where's Jim?"

He didn't answer.

She caught her breath suddenly with a kind of sob, and turned toward the stairs. He grabbed her elbows and turned her back and held her.

"I wouldn't go up," he said evenly. "It wouldn't do any good."

"Tell me, then. For God's sake, tell me! Is he"—she choked on the word—"dead?"

"Jim, yes."

Her face was whiter than chalk, but she kept her feet. Her eyes dragged at his knowledge through a brightness of unheeded tears.

"Why do you say it like that? What else is there?"

"Your father seems to have disappeared," he said, and held her as she went limp in his arms.

8

Simon carried her into the drawing room and laid her down on a sofa. He stood gazing at her introspectively for a moment; then he bent over her again quickly and stabbed her in the solar plexus with a stiff forefinger. She didn't stir a muscle.

The monotonous *cheep-cheep* of a telephone bell ringing somewhere outside reached his ears, and he saw the butler starting to move mechanically toward the door. Simon passed him and saw the instrument half hidden by a curtain on the other side of the hall. He took the receiver off the hook and said: "Hullo."

"May I speak to Mr. Templar, please?"

The Saint put a hand on the wall to save himself from falling over.

"Who wants him?"

"Mr. Trapani."

"Giulio!" Simon exclaimed. The voice was familiar now, but its complete unexpectedness had prevented him from recognizing it before. "It seems to be about sixteen years since I saw you—and I never came back for dinner."

"That's quite all right, Mr. Templar. I didn't expect you, when I knew what had happened. I only called up now because it's getting late and I didn't know if you would want a room for tonight."

The Saint's brows drew together.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded slowly. "Have you taken up crystal gazing or something?"

Giulio Trapani chuckled.

"No, I am not any good at that. The police sergeant stopped here on his way back, and he told me. He said you had got mixed up with a murder, and Miss Chase had taken you home with her. So of course I knew you would be very busy. Has she asked you to stay?"

"Let me call you back in a few minutes, Giulio," said the Saint. "Things have been happening, and I've got to get hold of the police again." He paused, and a thought struck him. "Look, is Sergeant Jesser still there, by any chance?"

There was no answer.

Simon barked: "Hullo."

Silence. He jiggled the hook. The movements produced no corresponding clicks in his ear. He waited a moment longer, while he realized that the stillness of the receiver was not the stillness of a broken connection, but a complete inanimate muteness that stood for something less easily remedied than that.

He hung the receiver up and traced the course of the wiring with his eyes. It ran along the edge of the wainscoting to the frame of the front door and disappeared into a hole bored at the edge of the wood. Simon turned right round with another abrupt realization. He was alone in the hall—the butler was no longer in sight.

He slipped his pencil flashlight out of his breast pocket with his left hand and let himself out of the front door. The telephone wires ran up outside along the margin of the door frame and continued up over the exterior wall. The beam of his torch followed them up, past a lighted window over the porch from which he had climbed down a few minutes ago, to where they were attached to a pair of porcelain insulators under the eaves. Where the wires leading on from the insulators might once have gone was difficult to decide: they dangled

slackly downwards now, straddling the balcony and trailing away into the darkness of the drive.

The Saint switched off his light and stood motionless. Then he flitted across the terrace, crossed the drive and merged himself into the shadow of a big clump of laurels on the edge of the lawn. Again he froze into breathless immobility. The blackness ahead of him was stygian, impenetrable, even to his noctambulant eyes, but hearing would serve his temporary purpose almost as well as sight. The night had fallen so still that he could even hear the rustle of the distant river; and he waited for minutes that seemed like hours to him, and must have seemed like weeks to a guilty prowler who could not have travelled very far after the wires were broken. And while he waited, he was trying to decide at exactly what point in his last speech the break had occurred. It could easily have happened at a place where Trapani would think he had finished and rung off... But he heard nothing while he stood there—not a snap of a twig or the rustle of a leaf.

He went back to the drawing room and found the butler standing there, wringing his hands in a helpless sort of way.

“Where have you been?” he inquired coldly.

The man’s loose bloodhound jowls wobbled.

“I went to fetch my wife, sir.” He indicated the stout red-faced woman who was kneeling beside the couch, chafing the girl’s nerveless wrists. “To see if she could help Miss Chase.”

Simon’s glance flickered over the room like a rapier blade and settled pricklingly on an open french window.

“Did you have to fetch her in from the garden?” he asked sympathetically.

“I—I don’t understand, sir.”

“Don’t you? Neither do I. But that window was closed when I saw it last.”

“I opened it just now, sir, to give Miss Chase some fresh air.”

The Saint held his eyes ruthlessly, but the butler did not try to look away.

“All right,” he said at length. “We’ll check up on that presently. Just for the moment, you can both go back to the kitchen.”

The stout woman got to her feet with the laboured motions of a rheumatic camel.

“Oo do you think you are,” she demanded indignantly, “to be bossing everybody about in his ‘ouse?”

“I am the Grand Gugnune of Waziristan,” answered the Saint pleasantly. “And I said—get back to the kitchen.”

He followed them back himself and went on through to find Hoppy Uniatz. The other door of the kitchen conveniently opened into the small rear hall into which the back stairs came down and from which the back door also opened. Simon locked and bolted the back door and drew Hoppy into the kitchen doorway and propped him up against the jamb.

“If you stand here,” he said, “you’ll be able to cover the back stairs and this gang in the kitchen at the same time. And that’s what I want you to do. None of them is to move out of your sight— not even to get somebody else some fresh air.”

“Okay, boss,” said Mr. Uniatz dimly. “If I only had a drink—”

“Tell Jeeves to buy you one.”

The Saint was on his way out again when the butler stopped him.

“Please, sir, I’m sure I could be of some use—”

“You are being useful,” said the Saint and closed the door on him.

Rosemary Chase was sitting up when he returned to the drawing room.

“I’m sorry,” she said weakly. “I’m afraid I fainted.”

“I’m afraid you did,” said the Saint. “I poked you in the tummy to make sure it was real, and it was. It looks as if I’ve been wrong about you all the evening. I’ve got a lot of apologies to make, and you’ll have to imagine most of them. Would you like a drink?”

She nodded; and he turned to the table and operated with a bottle and siphon. While he was doing it, he said with matter-of-fact naturalness: “How many servants do you keep here?”

“The butler and his wife, a housemaid and a parlourmaid.”

“Then they’re all rounded up and accounted for. How long have you known them?”

“Only about three weeks—since we’ve been here.”

“So that means nothing. I should have had them corralled before, but I didn’t think fast enough.” He brought the drink over and gave it to her. “Anyway, they’re corralled now, under Hoppy’s thirsty eye, so if anything else happens we’ll know they didn’t have anything to do with it. If that’s any help... Which leaves only us— and Quintus.”

“What happened to him?”

“He said he got whacked on the head by our roving bogeyman.”

“Hadn’t you better look after him?”

“Sure. In a minute.”

Simon crossed the room and closed the open window and drew the curtains. He came back and stood by the table to light a cigarette. There had been so much essential activity during the past few minutes that he had had no time to do any constructive thinking; but now he had to get every possible blank filled in before the next move was made. He put his lighter away and studied her with cool and friendly encouragement, as if they had a couple of years to spare in which to straighten out misunderstandings.

She sipped her drink and looked up at him with dark stricken eyes from which, he knew, all pretence and concealment had now been wiped away. They were eyes that he would have liked to see without the grief in them; and the pallor of her face made him remember its loveliness as he had first seen it. Her red lips formed bitter words without flinching.

“I’m the one who ought to have been killed. If I hadn’t been such a fool this might never have happened. I ought to be thrown in the river with a weight round my neck. Why don’t you say so?”

“That wouldn’t be any use now,” he said. “I’d rather you made up for it. Give me the story.”

She brushed the hair off her forehead with a weary gesture.

“The trouble is—I can’t. There isn’t any story that’s worth telling. Just that I was—trying to be clever. It all began when I read a letter that I hadn’t any right to read. It was in this

room. I'd been out. I came in through the french windows, and I sat down at the desk because I'd just remembered something I had to make a note of. The letter was on the blotter in front of me—the letter you got. Nora must have just finished it, and then left the room for a moment, just before I came in, not thinking anyone else would be around. I saw your name on it. I'd heard of you, of course. It startled me so much that I was reading on before I knew what I was doing. And then I couldn't stop. I read it all. Then I heard Nora coming back. I lost my head and slipped out through the window again without her seeing me."

"And you never spoke to her about it?"

"I couldn't—later. After all that, I couldn't sort of come out and confess that I'd read it. Oh, I know I was a damn fool. But I was scared. It seemed as if she must know something dreadful that my father was involved in. I didn't know anything about his affairs. But I loved him. If he was doing something crooked, whatever it was, I'd have been hurt to death; but still I wanted to try and protect him. I couldn't talk about it to anybody but Jim. We decided the only thing was to find out what it was all about. That's why we followed Nora to the Bell, and then followed you to the boathouse."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

She shrugged hopelessly.

"Because I was afraid to. You remember I asked you about how much you hated crooks? I was afraid that if my father was mixed up in—anything wrong—you'd be even more merciless than the police. I wanted to save him. But I didn't think—all this would happen. It was hard enough not to say anything when we found Nora dead. Now that Jim's been killed, I can't go on with it any more."

The Saint was silent for a moment, weighing her with his eyes; and then he said: "What do you know about this guy Quintus?"

9

"Hardly anything," she said. "He happened to be living close to where the accident happened, and Father was taken to his house. Father took such a fancy to him that when they brought him home he insisted on bringing Doctor Quintus along to look after him—at least, that's what I was told. I know what you're thinking." She looked at him steadily. "You think there's something funny about him."

"'Phony' is the way I pronounce it," answered the Saint bluntly.

She nodded.

"I wondered about him too—after I read that letter. But how could I say anything?"

"Can you think of anything that might have given him a hold over your father?"

She moved her hands desperately.

"How could I know? Father never talked business at home. I never heard anything—discreditable about him. But how could I know?"

"You've seen your father since he was brought home?"

"Of course. Lots of times."

"Did he seem to have anything on his mind?"

"I can't tell—"

“Did he seem to be worried or frightened?”

“It’s so *hard*” she said. “I don’t know what I really saw and what I’m making myself imagine. He was badly hurt, you know, and he was still trying to keep some of his business affairs going, so that took a lot out of him, and Doctor Quintus never let me stay with him very long at a time. And then he didn’t feel like talking much. Of course he seemed shaky, and not a bit like himself; but after an accident like that you wouldn’t expect anything else... I don’t know what to think about anything. I thought he always liked Jim, and now— Oh, God, what a mess I’ve made!”

The Saint smoothed the end of his cigarette in an ash tray, and there was an odd kind of final contentment in his eyes. All the threads were in his hands now, all the questions answered— except for the one answer that would cover all the others. Being as he was, he could understand Rosemary Chase’s story, forgetting the way it had ended. Others might have found it harder to forgive; but to him it was just the old tale of amateur adventuring leading to tragic disaster. And even though his own amateur adventures had never led there, they were still close enough for him to realise the hairbreadth margin by which they had escaped it... And the story she told him gathered up many loose ends.

He sat down beside her and put his hand on her arm.

“Don’t blame yourself too much about Jim,” he said steadily. “He made some of the mess himself. If he hadn’t thrown me off the track by the way he behaved, things might have been a lot different. Why the hell did he have to do that?”

“He’d made up his mind that you’d only come into this for what you could get out of it—that if you found out what Nora knew, you’d

use it to blackmail Father, or something like that. He wasn’t terribly clever. I suppose he thought you’d killed her to keep the information to yourself—”

The Saint shrugged wryly.

“And I thought one of you had killed her to keep her mouth shut. None of us has been very clever—yet.”

“What are we going to do?” she said.

Simon thought. And he may have been about to answer when his ears caught a sound that stopped him. His fingers tightened on the girl’s wrist for an instant, while his eyes rested on her like bright steel; and then he got up.

“Give me another chance,” he said in a soft voice that could not even have been heard across the room.

And then he was walking across to greet the doctor as the footsteps that had stopped him arrived at the door and Quintus came in.

“Doctor Quintus!” The Saint’s air was sympathetic, his face full of concern. He took the doctor’s arm. “You shouldn’t have come down alone. I was just coming back for you, but there’ve been so many other things—”

“I know. And they were probably more valuable than anything you could have done for me.”

The blurry resonance of the other’s voice was nearly normal again. He moved firmly over to the table on which the tray of drinks stood.

“I’m going to prescribe myself a whiskey and soda,” he said.

Simon fixed it for him. Quintus took the glass and sat down gratefully on the edge of a chair. He rubbed a hand over his dishevelled

head as though trying to clear away the lingering remnants of fog. He had washed his face and hands, but the darkening patches of red stain on his clothing were still gruesome reminders of the man who had not come down.

"I'm sorry I was so useless, Mr. Templar," he said heavily. "Did you find anything?"

"Not a thing." The Saint's straightforwardness sounded completely ingenuous. "Mr. Chase must have been taken out of the window—I climbed down from there myself, and it was quite easy. I walked most of the way round the house, and nothing happened. I didn't hear a sound, and it was too dark to see anything."

Quintus looked across at the girl.

"There isn't anything I can say, Miss Chase. I can only tell you that I would have given my own right hand to prevent this."

"But *why*?" she said brokenly. "Why are all these things happening? What is it all about? First Nora, and then—Jim... And now my father. What's happened to him? What have they done with him?"

The doctor's lips tightened.

"Kidnapped, I suppose," he said wretchedly. "I suppose everything has been leading up to that. Your father's a rich man. They'd expect him to be worth a large ransom—large enough to run any risks for. Jim's death was—well, just a tragic accident. He happened to run into one of them in the corridor, so he was murdered. If that hadn't confused them, they'd probably have murdered me."

"They?" interposed the Saint quickly. "You saw them, then."

"Only one man, the one who hit me. He was rather small, and he had a handkerchief

tied over his face. I didn't have a chance to notice much. I'm saying 'they' because I don't see how one man alone could have organized and done all this... It must be kidnapping. Possibly they were trying to force or bribe Nora to help them from the inside, and she was murdered because she threatened to give them away."

"And they tried to kill me in case she had told me about the plot."

"Exactly."

Simon put down the stub of his cigarette and searched for a fresh one.

"Why do you think they should think she might have told me anything?" he inquired.

Quintus hesitated expressionlessly. He drank slowly from his glass and brought his cavernous black eyes back to the Saint's face.

"With your reputation—if you will forgive me—finding you on the scene... I'm only theorising, of course—"

Simon nodded good-humouredly.

"Don't apologize," he murmured. "My reputation is a great asset. It's made plenty of clever crooks lose their heads before this."

"It *must* be kidnapping," Quintus repeated, turning to the girl. "If they'd wanted to harm your father, they could easily have done it in his bedroom when they had him at their mercy. They wouldn't have needed to take him away. You must be brave and think about that. The very fact that they took him away proves that they must want him alive."

The Saint finished chain-lighting the fresh cigarette and strolled over to the fireplace to flick away the butt of the old one. He stood there for a moment, and then turned thoughtfully back to the room.

“Talking of this taking away,” he said, “I did notice something screwy about it. I didn’t waste much time getting upstairs after I heard the commotion. And starting from the same commotion, our kidnapping guy or guys had to dash into the bedroom, grab Mr. Chase, shove him out of the window and lower him to the ground. All of which must have taken a certain amount of time.” He looked at the doctor. “Well, I wasted a certain amount of time myself in the corridor, finding out whether you were hurt, and so forth. So those times begin to cancel out. Then, when I got in the bedroom, I saw at once that the bed was empty. I looked in the cupboard and the bathroom, just making sure the old boy was really gone; but that can’t have taken more than a few seconds. Then I went straight to the window. And then, almost immediately, I climbed out of it and climbed down to the ground to see if I could see anything, because I knew Marvin Chase could only have gone out that way. Now you remember what I told you? *I didn’t hear a sound*. Not so much as the dropping of a pin.”

“What do you mean?” asked the girl.

“I mean this,” said the Saint. “Figure out our timetable for yourselves—the kidnappers’ and mine. They can’t have been more than a few seconds ahead of me. And from below the window they had to get your father to a car, shove him in and take him away—*if they took him away*. But I told you! I walked all round the house, slowly, listening, and I didn’t hear anything. When did they start making those completely noiseless cars?”

Quintus half rose from his chair.

“You mean—they might still be in the grounds? Then we’re sure to catch them! As soon as the police get here—you’ve sent for them, of course?”

Simon shook his head.

“Not yet. And that’s something else that makes me think I’m right. I haven’t called the police yet because I can’t. I can’t call them because the telephone wires have been cut. And they were cut *after* all this had happened—after I’d walked round the house and come back in and told Rosemary what had happened!”

The girl’s lips were parted, her wide eyes fastened on him with a mixture of fear and eagerness. She began to say: “But they might—”

The crash stopped her.

Her eyes switched to the left, and Simon saw blank horror leap into her face as he whirled toward the sound. It had come from one of the windows, and it sounded like smashing glass... It was the glass. He saw the stir of the curtains and the gloved hand that came between them under a shining gun barrel, and flung himself fiercely backwards.

10

He catapulted himself at the main electric-light switches beside the door—without conscious decision, but knowing that his instinct must be right. More slowly, while he was moving, his mind reasoned it out: the unknown man who had broken the window had already beaten him to the draw, and in an open gun battle with the lights on the unknown had a three-to-one edge in choice of targets... Then the Saint’s shoulder hit the wall, and his hand sliced up over the switches just as the invader’s revolver spoke once, deafeningly.

Blam!

Simon heard the spang of the bullet some distance from him, and more glass shattered. Quintus gasped deeply. The Saint’s

ears sang with the concussion, but through the buzzing he was trying to determine whether the gunman had come in.

He moved sideways, noiselessly, crouching, his Luger out in his hand. Nothing else seemed to move. His brain was working again in a cold fever of precision. Unless the pot-shot artist had hoped to settle everything with the first bullet, he would expect the Saint to rush the window. Therefore the Saint would not rush the window... The utter silence in the room was battering his brain with warnings.

His fingers touched the knob of the door, closed on it and turned it without a rattle until the latch disengaged. Gathering his muscles, he whipped it suddenly open, leapt through it out into the hall and slammed it behind him. In the one red-hot instant when he was clearly outlined against the lights of the hall, a second shot blasted out of the dark behind him and splintered the woodwork close to his shoulder; but his exposure was too swift and unexpected for the sniper's marksmanship. Without even looking back, Simon dived across the hall and let himself out the front door.

He raced around the side of the house and dropped to a crouch again as he reached the corner that would bring him in sight of the terrace outside the drawing-room windows. He slid an eye round the corner, prepared to yank it back on an instant's notice, and then left it there with the brow over it lowering in a frown.

It was dark on the terrace, but not too dark for him to see that there was no one standing there.

He scanned the darkness on his right, away from the house; but he could find nothing in it that resembled a lurking human shadow. And over the whole garden brooded the same eerie stillness, the same incredible absence of any hint of movement, that had sent feathery

fingers creeping up his spine when he was out there before...

The Saint eased himself along the terrace, flat against the wall of the house, his forefinger tight on the trigger and his eyes probing the blackness of the grounds. No more shots came at him. He reached the french windows with the broken pane, and stretched out a hand to test the handle.

They wouldn't open. They were still fastened on the inside—as he had fastened them.

He spoke close to the broken pane.

"All clear, souls. Don't put the lights on yet, but let me in."

Presently the window swung back. There were shutters outside, and he folded them across the opening and bolted them as he stepped in. Their hinges were stiff from long disuse. He did the same at the other window before he groped his way back to the door and relit the lights.

"We'll have this place looking like a fortress before we're through," he remarked cheerfully; and then the girl ran to him and caught his sleeve.

"Didn't you see anyone?"

He shook his head.

"Not a soul. The guy didn't even open the window—just stuck his gun through the broken glass and sighted from outside. I have an idea he was expecting me to charge through the window after him, and then he'd've had me cold. But I fooled him. I guess he heard me coming round the house, and took his feet off the ground." He smiled at her reassuringly. "Excuse me a minute while I peep at Hoppy—he might be worried."

He should have known better than to succumb to that delusion. In the kitchen a trio of white-faced women and one man who was not much more sanguine jumped round with panicky squeals and goggling eyes as he entered; but Mr. Uniatz removed the bottle which he was holding to his lips with dawdling reluctance.

“Hi, boss,” said Mr. Uniatz with as much phlegmatic cordiality as could be expected of a man who had been interrupted in the middle of some important business; and the Saint regarded him with new respect.

“Doesn’t anything ever worry you, Hoppy?” he inquired mildly.

Mr. Uniatz waved his bottle with liberal nonchalance.

“Sure, boss, I hear de firewoiks,” he said. “But I figure if anyone is getting’ hoit it’s some udder guy. How are’t’ings?”

“T’ings will be swell, so long as I know you’re on the job,” said the Saint reverently, and withdrew again.

He went back to the drawing room with his hands in his pockets, not hurrying; and in spite of what had happened he felt more composed than he had been all the evening. It was as if he sensed that the crescendo was coming to a climax beyond which it could go no further, while all the time his own unravellings were simplifying the tangled undercurrents toward one final resolving chord that would bind them all together. And the two must coincide and blend. All he wanted was a few more minutes, a few more answers... His smile was almost indecently carefree when he faced the girl again.

“All is well,” he reported, “and I’m afraid Hoppy is ruining your cellar.”

She came up to him, her eyes searching him anxiously.

“That shot when you ran out,” she said. “You aren’t hurt?”

“Not a bit. But it’s depressing to feel so unpopular.”

“What makes you think you’re the only one who’s unpopular?” asked the doctor dryly.

He was still sitting in the chair where Simon had left him, and Simon followed his glance as he screwed his neck round indicatively. Just over his left shoulder a picture on the wall had a dark-edged hole drilled in it, and the few scraps of glass that still clung to the frame formed a jagged circle around it.

The Saint gazed at the bullet scar, and for a number of seconds he said nothing. He had heard the impact, of course, and heard the tinkle of glass; but since the shot had missed him he hadn’t given it another thought. Now that its direction was pointed out to him, the whole sequence of riddles seemed to fall into focus.

The chain of alibis was complete.

Anyone might have murdered Nora Prescott—even Rosemary Chase and Forrest. Rosemary Chase herself could have fired the shot at the boathouse, an instant before Forrest switched on his torch, and then rejoined him. But Forrest wasn’t likely to have cut his own throat; and even if he had done that, he couldn’t have abducted Marvin Chase afterwards. And when Forrest was killed, the Saint himself was Rosemary Chase’s alibi. The butler might have done all these things; but after that he had been shut in the kitchen with Hoppy Uniatz to watch over him, so that the Saint’s own precaution acquitted him of having fired those last two shots a few minutes ago. Dr. Quintus might have done everything else, might never have been hit on the head upstairs at all;

but he certainly couldn't have fired those two shots either—and one of them had actually been aimed at him. Simon went back to his original position by the fireplace to make sure of it. The result didn't permit the faintest shadow of doubt. Even allowing for his dash to the doorway, if the first shot had been aimed at the Saint and had just missed Quintus instead, it must have been fired by someone who couldn't get within ten feet of the bull's-eye at ten yards range—an explanation that wasn't even worth considering.

And that left only one person who had never had an alibi—who had never been asked for one because he had never seemed to need one. The man around whom all the commotion was centred—and yet the one member of the cast, so far as the Saint was concerned, who had never yet appeared on the scene. Someone who, for all obvious purposes, might just as well have been nonexistent.

But if Marvin Chase himself had done all the wild things that had been done that night, it would mean that the story of his injuries must be entirely fictitious. And it was hardly plausible that any man would fabricate and elaborate such a story at a time when there was no conceivable advantage to be gained from it.

Simon thought about that, and everything in him seemed to be standing still.

The girl was saying: "These people wouldn't be doing all this if they just wanted to kidnap my father. Unless they were maniacs. They can't get any ransom if they kill off everyone who's ever had anything to do with him, and that's what they seem to be trying to do—"

"Except you," said the Saint, almost inattentively. "You haven't been hurt yet."

He was thinking: "The accident happened a week ago—days before Nora

Prescott wrote to me, before there was ever any reason to expect me on the scene. But all these things that a criminal might want an alibi for have happened *since* I came into the picture, and probably on my account. Marvin Chase might have been a swindler, and he might have rubbed out his secretary in a phony motor accident because he knew too much; but for all he could have known that would have been the end of it. He didn't need to pretend to be injured himself, and take the extra risk of ringing in a phony doctor to build up the atmosphere. Therefore he didn't invent his injuries. Therefore his alibi is as good as anyone else's. Therefore we're right back where we started."

Or did it mean that he was at the very end of the hunt? In a kind of trance he walked over to the broken window and examined the edges of the smashed pane. On the point of one of the jags of glass clung a couple of kinky white threads—such as might have been ripped out of a gauze bandage. Coming into the train of thought that his mind was following, the realization of what they meant gave him hardly any sense of shock. He already knew that he was never going to meet Marvin Chase.

Dr. Quintus was getting to his feet.

"I'm feeling better now," he said. "I'll go for the police."

"Just a minute," said the Saint quietly. "I think I can have someone ready for them to arrest when they get here."

11

He turned to the girl and took her shoulders in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Rosemary," he said. "You're going to be hurt now."

Then, without stopping to face the bewildered fear that came into her eyes, he went to the door and raised his voice.

“Send the butler along, Hoppy. See that the curtains are drawn where you are, and keep an eye on the windows. If anyone tries to rush you from any direction, give ‘em the heat first and ask questions afterwards.”

“Okay, boss,” replied Mr. Uniatz obediently.

The butler came down the hall as if he were walking on eggs. His impressively fleshy face was pallid and apprehensive, but he stood before the Saint with a certain ineradicable dignity.

“Yes sir?”

Simon beckoned him to the front door; and this time the Saint was very careful. He turned out all the hall lights before he opened the door, and then drew the butler quickly outside without fully closing it behind them. They stood where the shadow of the porch covered them in solid blackness.

“Jeeves,” he said, and in contrast with all that circumspection his voice was extraordinarily clear and carrying, “I want you to go to the nearest house and use their phone to call the police station. Ask for Sergeant Jesser. I want you to give him a special message.”

“Me, sir?”

Simon couldn’t see the other’s face, but he could imagine the expression on it from the tremulous tone of the reply. He smiled to himself, but his eyes were busy on the dark void of the garden.

“Yes, you. Are you scared?”

“N-no sir. But—”

“I know what you mean. It’s creepy, isn’t it? I’d feel the same way myself. But don’t let it get you down. Have you ever handled a gun?”

“I had a little experience during the war, sir.”

“Swell. Then here’s a present for you.” Simon felt for the butler’s flabby hand and pressed his own Luger into it. “It’s all loaded and ready to talk. If anything tries to happen, use it. And this is something else. I’ll be with you. You won’t hear me and you won’t see me, but I’ll be close by. If anyone tries to stop you or do anything to you, he’ll get a nasty surprise. So don’t worry. You’re going to get through.”

He could hear the butler swallow.

“Very good, sir. What was the message you wished me to take?”

“It’s for Sergeant Jesser,” Simon repeated with the same careful clarity. “Tell him about the murder of Mr. Forrest and the other things that have happened. Tell him I sent you. And tell him I’ve solved the mystery, so he needn’t bother to bring back his gang of coroners and photographers and fingerprint experts and what not. Tell him I’m getting a confession now, and I’ll have it all written out and signed for him by the time he gets here. Can you remember that?”

“Yes sir.”

“Okay, Jeeves. On your way.”

He slipped his other automatic out of his hip pocket and stood there while the butler crossed the drive and melted into the inky shadows beyond. He could hear the man’s softened footsteps even when he was out of sight, but they kept regularly on until they faded in the distance, and there was no disturbance.

When he felt as sure as he could hope to be that the butler was beyond the danger zone, he put the Walther away again and stepped soundlessly back into the darkened hall.

Rosemary Chase and the doctor stared blankly at him as he re-entered the drawing room; and he smiled blandly at their mystification.

"I know," he said. "You heard me tell Jeeves that I was going to follow him."

Quintus said: "But why—"

"For the benefit of the guy outside," answered the Saint calmly. "If there is a guy outside. The guy who's been giving us so much trouble. If he's hung around as long as this, he's still around. He hasn't finished his job yet. He missed the balloon pretty badly on the last try, and he daren't pull out and leave it missed. He's staying right on the spot, wondering like hell what kind of a fast play he can work to save his bacon. So he heard what I told the butler. I meant him to. And I think it worked. I scared him away from trying to head off Jeeves with another carving-knife performance. Instead of that, he decided to stay here and try to clean up before the police arrive. And that's also what I meant him to do."

The doctor's deep-set eyes blinked slowly.

"Then the message you sent was only another bluff?"

"Partly. I may have exaggerated a little. But I meant to tickle our friend's curiosity. I wanted to make sure that he'd be frantic to find out more about it. So he had to know what's going on in this room. I'll bet money that he's listening to every word I'm saying now."

The girl glanced at the broken window, beyond which the Venetian shutters hid them from outside but would not silence their voices,

and then glanced at the door; and she shivered. She said: "But then he knows you didn't go with the butler—"

"But he knows it's too late to catch him up. Besides, this is much more interesting now. He wants to find out how much I've really got up my sleeve. And I want to tell him."

"But you said you were only bluffing," she protested huskily. "You don't really know anything."

The Saint shook his head.

"I only said I was exaggerating a little. I haven't got a confession yet, but I'm hoping to get one. The rest of it is true. I know everything that's behind tonight's fun and games. I know why everything has been done, and who did it."

They didn't try to prompt him, but their wide-open eyes clung to him almost as if they had been hypnotized. It was as if an unreasoned fear of what he might be going to say made them shrink from pressing him, while at the same time they were spellbound by a fascination beyond their power to break.

The Saint made the most of his moment. He made them wait while he sauntered to a chair, and settled himself there, and lighted a cigarette, as if they were only enjoying an ordinary casual conversation. The theatrical pause was deliberate, aimed at the nerves of the one person whom he had to drive into self-betrayal.

"It's all so easy, really, when you sort it out," he said at length. "Our criminal is a clever guy, and he'd figured out a swindle that was so simple and audacious that it was practically foolproof— barring accidents. And to make up for the thousandth fraction of risk, it was bound to put millions into his hands. Only the accident happened; and one accident led to another."

He took smoke from his cigarette and returned it through musingly half-smiling lips.

“The accident was when Nora Prescott wrote to me. She had to be in on the swindle, of course; but he thought he could keep her quiet with the threat that if she exposed him her father would lose the sinecure that was practically keeping him alive. It wasn’t a very good threat, if she’d been a little more sensible, but it scared her enough to keep her away from the police. It didn’t scare her out of thinking that a guy like me might be able to wreck the scheme somehow and still save something out of it for her. So she wrote to me. Our villain found out about that but wasn’t able to stop the letter. So he followed her to the Bell tonight, planning to kill me as well, because he figured that once I’d received that letter I’d keep on prying until I found something. When Nora led off to the boathouse, it looked to be in the bag. He followed her, killed her and waited to add me to the collection. Only on account of another accident that happened then, he lost his nerve and quit.”

Again the Saint paused.

“Still our villain knew he had to hang on to me until I could be disposed of,” he went on with the same leisured confidence. “He arranged to bring me up here to be got rid of as soon as he knew how. He stalled along until after dinner, when he’d got a plan worked out. He’d just finished talking it over with his accomplice—”

“Accomplice?” repeated the doctor.

“Yes,” said the Saint flatly. “And just to make sure we understand each other, I’m referring to a phony medico who goes under the name of Quintus.”

The doctor’s face went white, and his hands whitened on the arms of his chair; but the Saint didn’t stir.

“I wouldn’t try it,” he said. “I wouldn’t try anything, brother, if I were you. Because if you do, I shall smash you into soup meat.”

Rosemary Chase stared from one to the other.

“But—you don’t mean—”

“I mean that that motor accident of your father’s was a lie from beginning to end.” Simon’s voice was gentle. “He needed a phony doctor to back up the story of those injuries. He couldn’t have kept it up with an honest one, and that would have wrecked everything. It took me a long time to see it, but that’s because we’re all ready to take too much for granted. You told me you’d seen your father since it happened, so I didn’t ask any more questions. Naturally you didn’t feel you had to tell me that when you saw him he was smothered in bandages like a mummy, and his voice was only a hoarse croak; but he needed Quintus to keep him that way.”

“You must be out of your mind!” Quintus roared hollowly.

The Saint smiled.

“No. But you’re out of a job. And it was an easy one. I said we all take too much for granted. You’re introduced as a doctor, and so everybody believes it. Now you’re going to have another easy job—signing the confession I promised Sergeant Jesser. You’ll do it to save your own skin. You’ll tell how Forrest wasn’t quite such a fool as he seemed; how he listened outside Marvin Chase’s room and heard you and your pal cooking up a scheme to have your pal bust this window here and take a shot at you, just for effect, and then kill me and Hoppy when we came dashing into the fight; how Forrest got caught there, and how he was murdered so he couldn’t spill the beans—”

“And what else?” said a new voice.

Simon turned his eyes toward the doorway and the man who stood there—a man incongruously clad in dark wine-colored silk pajamas and bedroom slippers, whose head was swathed in bandages so that only his eyes were visible, whose gloved right hand held a revolver aimed at the Saint's chest. The Saint heard Rosemary come to her feet with a stifled cry, and answered to her rather than to anyone else.

"I told you you were going to be hurt, Rosemary," he said. "Your father was killed a week ago. But you'll remember his secretary. This is Mr. Bertrand Tamblin."

12

"You're clever, aren't you?" Tamblin said viciously.

"Not very," said the Saint regretfully. "I ought to have tumbled to it long ago. But as I was saying, we all take too much for granted. Everyone spoke of you as Marvin Chase, and so I assumed that was who you were. I got thrown off the scent a bit further when Rosemary and Forrest crashed into the boathouse at an awkward moment, when you got up the wind and scrambled. I didn't get anywhere near the mark until I began to think of you as the invisible millionaire—the guy that all the fuss was about and yet who couldn't be seen. Then it all straightened out. You killed Marvin Chase, burnt his body in a fake auto crash and had yourself brought home by Quintus in his place. Nobody argued about it; you had Quintus to keep you covered; you knew enough about his affairs to keep your end up in any conversation—you could even fool his daughter on short interviews, with your face bandaged and talking in the sort of faint unrecognizable voice that a guy who'd been badly injured might talk in. And you were all set to get your hands on as much of Marvin Chase's dough as you

could squeeze out of banks and bonds before anyone got suspicious."

"Yes?"

"Oh yes... It was a grand idea until the accidents began to happen. Forrest was another accident. You got some of his blood on you—it's on you now—and you were afraid to jump back into bed when you heard me coming up the stairs. You lost your head again and plunged into a phony kidnapping. I don't believe that you skipped out of your window at all just then—you simply hopped into another room and hid there till the coast was clear. I wondered about that when I didn't hear any car driving off, and nobody took a shot at me when I walked round the house."

"Go on."

"Then you realized that someone would send for the police, and you had to delay that until you'd carried out your original plan of strengthening Quintus' alibi and killing Hoppy and me. You cut the phone wires. That was another error: an outside gang would have done that first and taken no chances, not run the risk of hanging around to do it after the job was pulled. Again you didn't shoot at me when I went out of doors the second time, because you wanted to make it look as if Quintus was also being shot at first. Then when you chose your moment, I was lucky enough to be too fast for you. When you heard me chasing round the outside of the house, you pushed off into the night for another think. I'd've had the hell of a time catching you out there in the dark, so I let you hear me talking to the butler because I knew it would fetch you in."

Tamblin nodded.

"You only made two mistakes," he said. "Forrest would have been killed anyway, only I should have chosen a better time for it. I heard Rosemary talking to him one night outside the

front door, directly under my window, when he was leaving—that is how I found out that Nora had written to you and where she was going to meet you.”

“And the other mistake?” Simon asked coolly.

“Was when you let your own cleverness run away with you. When you arranged your clever scheme to get me to walk in here to provide the climax for your dramatic revelations, and even left the front door ajar to make it easy for me. You conceited fool! You’ve got your confession; but did you think I’d let it do you any good? Your bluff only bothered me for a moment when I was afraid Quintus had ratted. As soon as I found he hadn’t, I was laughing at you. The only difference you’ve made is that now I shall have to kill Rosemary as well. Quintus had ideas about her, and we could have used her to build up the story—”

“Bertrand,” said the Saint gravely, “I’m afraid you are beginning to drivel.”

The revolver that was aimed on him did not waver.

“Tell me why,” Tamblin said interestedly.

Simon trickled smoke languidly through his nostrils. He was still leaning back in his chair, imperturbably relaxed, in the attitude in which he had stayed even when Tamblin entered the room.

“Because it’s your turn to be taking too much for granted. You thought my cleverness had run away with me, and so you stopped thinking. It doesn’t seem to have occurred to you that since I expected you to come in, I may have expected just how sociable your ideas would be when you got here. You heard me give Jeeves a gun, and so you’ve jumped to the conclusion that I’m unarmed. Now will you take a look at my left hand? You notice that it’s in my

coat pocket. I’ve got you covered with another gun, Bertrand, and I’m ready to bet I can shoot faster than you. If you don’t believe me, just start squeezing that trigger.”

Tamblin stood gazing motionlessly at him for a moment; and then his head tilted back and a cackle of hideous laughter came through the slit in the bandages over his mouth.

“Oh no, Mr. Templar,” he crowed. “You’re the one who took too much for granted. You decided that Quintus was a phony doctor, and so you didn’t stop to think that he might be a genuine pickpocket. When he was holding on to you in the corridor upstairs—you remember?—he took the magazines out of both your guns. You’ve got one shot in the chamber of the gun you’ve got left, and Quintus has got you covered as well now. You can’t get both of us with one bullet. You’ve been too clever for the last time.”

It was no bluff. Simon knew it with a gambler’s instinct, and knew that Tamblin had the last laugh.

“Take your hand out of your pocket,” Tamblin snarled. “Quintus is going to aim at Rosemary. If you use that gun, you’re killing her as surely as if—”

The Saint saw Tamblin’s forefinger twitch on the trigger, and waited for the sharp bite of death.

The crisp thunder of cordite splintered the unearthly stillness; but the Saint felt no shock, no pain. Staring incredulously, he saw Tamblin stagger as if a battering-ram had hit him in the back; saw him sway weakly, his right arm drooping until the revolver slipped through his fingers; saw his knees fold and his body pivot slantingly over them like a falling tree... And saw the cubist figure and pithecanthropoid visage of Hoppy Uniatz coming through the door with a smoking Betsy in its hairy hand.

He heard another thud on his right, and looked round. The thud was caused by Quintus' gun hitting the carpet. Quintus' hands waved wildly in the air as Hoppy turned toward him.

"Don't shoot!" he screamed. "I'll give you a confession. I haven't killed anyone. Tamblin did it all. Don't shoot me—"

"He doesn't want to be shot, Hoppy," said the Saint. "I think we'll let the police have him—just for a change. It may help to convince them of our virtue."

"Boss," said Mr. Uniatz, lowering his gun, "I done it."

The Saint nodded. He got up out of his chair. It felt rather strange to be alive and untouched.

"I know," he said. "Another half a second, and he'd've been the most famous gunman on earth."

Mr. Uniatz glanced cloudily at the body on the floor.

"Oh, him," he said vaguely. "Yeah... But listen, boss—I done it!"

"You don't have to worry about it," said the Saint. "You've done it before. And Comrade Quintus' squeal will let you out."

Rosemary Chase was coming toward him, pale but steady. It seemed to Simon

Templar that a long time had been wasted in which he had been too busy to remember how beautiful she was and how warm and red her lips were. She put out a hand to him; and because he was still the Saint and always would be, his arm went round her.

"I know it's tough," he said. "But we can't change it."

"It doesn't seem so bad now, somehow," she said. "To know that at least my father wasn't doing all this... I wish I knew how to thank you."

"Hoppy's the guy to thank," said the Saint, and looked at him. "I never suspected you of being a thought reader, Hoppy, but I'd give a lot to know what made you come out of the kitchen in the nick of time."

Mr. Uniatz blinked at him.

"Dat's what I mean, boss, when I say I done it," he explained, his brow furrowed with the effort of amplifying a statement which seemed to him to be already obvious enough. "When you call out de butler, he is just opening me anudder bottle of scotch. An' dis time I make de grade. I drink it down to de last drop wit'out stopping. So I come right out to tell ya." A broad beam of ineffable pride opened up a gold mine in the centre of Mr. Uniatz' face. "I done it, boss! Ain't dat sump'n?"