

The Third Murderer

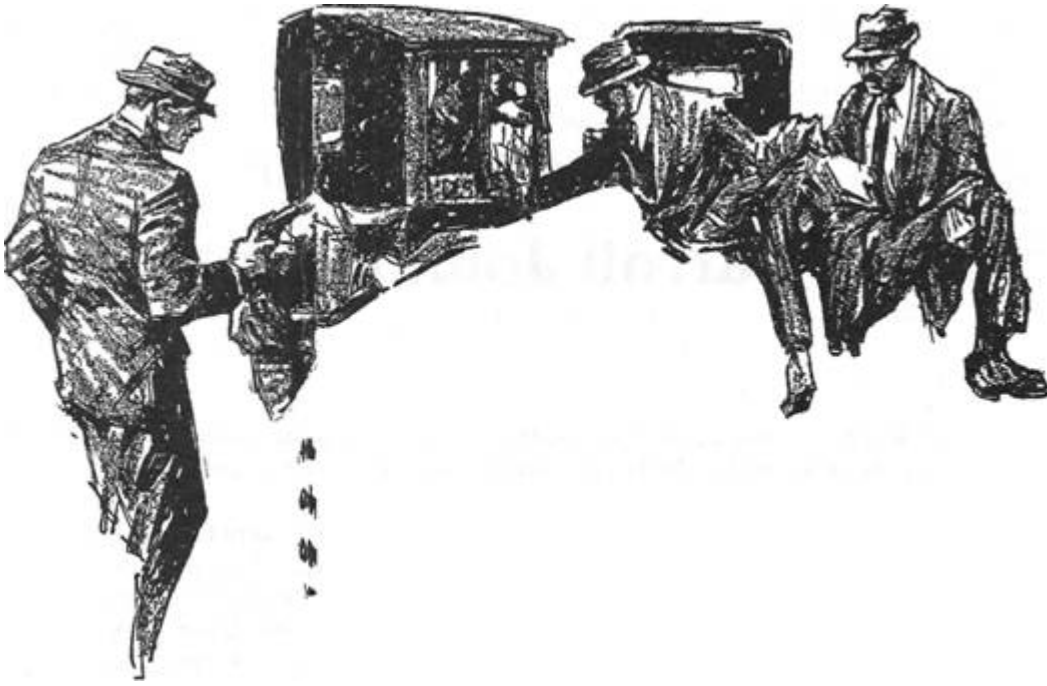
Carroll John Daly

IT DOESN'T TAKE a genius to recognize that there are better airplanes than the ones flown by the Wright Brothers, but they were there first, assuring themselves an important place in history.

The same holds true for Carroll John Daly (1889-1958). There have been many practitioners of the hard-boiled private eye story who are far superior to Daly, but he was the first, inventing the form nearly three-quarters of a century ago with a story titled "Three Gun Terry" featuring private investigator Terry Mack. The story appeared in *Black Mask* in the issue of May 15, 1923, and served as the prototype for all the tough, wise-cracking private dicks who followed.

The first story featuring Race Williams, his most famous character, soon followed with the publication of "Knights of the Open Palm" in *Black Mask* on June 1, 1923. When he followed with another Race Williams story, "Three Thousand to the Good," in the July 15, 1923, issue, Daly had created the first hard-boiled private eye series in fiction.

While in no way a distinguished literary performer, the relentless narrative drive of Daly's fiction made him one of the highest paid pulp writers for a quarter of a century, so popular that it was widely reported that his name on the cover automatically increased sales of the issue by 15%. *The Third Murderer* was originally serialized in *Black Mask* (June-August 1931) as "*The Flame*" and *Race Williams*.



The Third Murderer

Carroll John Daly

CHAPTER I

A THREAT TO KILL



DIDN'T LIKE his face and I told him so.

He was handsome enough in a conceited, sinister sort of way. And the curve to the corner of his mouth was natural too— but more pronounced now by the involuntary twitching of his upper lip; a warning that a lad is carrying too much liquor and is getting to the stage where he'll slop over. Which is his own business, of course, and not mine— except when that lad decides to slop over on me. "You don't like my face, eh?" Pale blue eyes narrowed. The skin on his forehead contracted and formed little ridges up close to

the heavy blackness of his hair. The quivering lips turned into a sneer. Maybe you couldn't call that leering, threatening face natural—but you couldn't exactly call it acting either. Perhaps it would be best to say that it had started with acting years back and was more a habit now than either a natural contortion or a voluntary set-up. Something that came with long practice.

I looked at the clock above the bar. It lacked ten minutes to the half hour and five minutes past the hour I was to meet Rudolph Myer, criminal lawyer and the best mouthpiece in the city of New York—that is, for my purpose. "Criminal lawyer" is right. Just "criminal" might fit him. But then, if he is most times only a half block ahead of the District Attorney's office, he holds that lead—and on three different occasions had made monkeys out of the bar associations when he was brought up on charges of "unethical practice." Which any one has to admit is hardly a malicious way of

classing jury fixing, wholesale perjury, and even extortion.

But I could use Myer at times, when some overzealous gunman got the idea that he could draw a little quicker than I, and later his relatives or friends found out that he couldn't. After such bits of shooting Rudolph Myer was the best man in the world to get me out of stir on a Habeas Corpus writ, and the best man also to keep me out. But back to the lad leaning against the bar in the Golden Dog Night Club, who was playing the game of "Who can Make the Funniest Faces?" and winning in a gallop.

Now, the time—and Myer's promise that he would put something interesting in my way—sort of toned down my childish impulse to play "ugly looks" with the youth who had missed his forte in life and should have been an impersonator instead of a racketeer.

So I moved down the bar, pretended that I didn't see him lift his glass and follow me, and also ignored the bartender's pantomime, which was to indicate to the youthful wisecracker that he was holding a roman candle in his hand, with the wrong end up. Which was sound advice—even if I didn't fancy the bartender butting into my affairs.

"You're a smart guy, ain't ya?" His elbow crooked on the bar and his cheek went into his open palm. "Race Williams—Private Investigator. Just a dirty dick, that's all you are. and you don't like my face. Well—a lot of people don't like to see it when they've got cause to fear it." He paused a moment, licked at his lips, smiled sort of pleasantly to himself—then opened his eyes a bit and fairly glared at me like an animal, his lips slipping back.

"You read the papers. Be careful you don't look a Gorgon in the face—and die."

"Well—it's ugly enough," I told him. "Why don't you take it down to Headquarters and use it to frighten policemen?"

"Yeah—yeah?" He wasn't the sort of a guy who went in for light banter—not him. He took himself very seriously. "Yeah?" he said again, and then, "Well—it's been down to Headquarters many times—see? And no dick dared to lay a fist on it. They didn't 'third degree' me, buddy—not me, a Gorgon."

"Been stealing milk cans?" I raised my voice, for his was fairly loud now and others were listening. Maybe I'm not so hot at the repartee, but talking around this lad was like talking around a clothing store dummy. I knew him, of course. Eddie Gorgon, who had more than once beaten the rap for murder.

"Milk cans!" he said. "Not me." And when some one laughed he lost his head slightly and cut loose. "The yellow dick, Williams," he raised his head for the few others to get the remark, "let's his moll hide out in a dirty dump. When she was making the grade and turning over the big shots he lived off her and—" My hand shot up and fastened on the lapels of his coat. I jerked him straight and gave him the office.

"If you don't want that face of yours mussed up for a change, why—" and as too many others were taking an interest I tried hard and got a smile over, though I was boiling. "Since I never trail with a woman I guess you've got your dates mixed or you're thinking of yourself," I finished. There was a chance for him to pull back, but he didn't take it.

"Face mussed up!" he repeated, in what he considered great sarcasm. He rather liked his twisted map, I guess. "Don't trail with women! You? No—not with women who can't pay their way—and your way. No women! Why, all the boys on the Avenue know about The Fla— Take your dirty hands off'a me." He jerked free, and

throwing open his coat let me see the gun beneath his armpit. "You'd like a name for her? You'd like to muss the face of Eddie Gorgon? You'd like to chuck the front that you have the guts to cross me—Joe Gorgon's brother?" A slight pause as he shoved his face out. "Well—the little moll was called The Flame—Florence Drummond. The Girl with the Criminal Mind. The—"

And I pasted him. Maybe I lost my head. Maybe I didn't. Certainly though, there was nothing definite in my mind when I let him have it. Maybe I should have provoked him into drawing a gun. Maybe it would have saved a lot of later unpleasantness. But it's not what you should have done that counts in life. It's what you do. And truth is truth. I had nothing in my mind but his glaring eyes and protruding chin and quivering lips. If I had any desire at all, it was to shut his lying, foul mouth—and perhaps that's even stretching the truth a little. The desire, after all, was just to sock him.

Now I won't say that he was "out" before he hit the floor, though I like to think that he was. No, he wasn't dead—just out. To put it simply: I landed flush on his protruding button and— and he hit the floor like a thousand tons of brick. Maybe, if he hadn't landed on his thick head he would have been badly hurt. As it was, he stretched himself out on his back and listened to the birdies chirp.

But one birdie chirped a final message to Eddie Gorgon as he opened his eyes and looked dazedly around. That birdie was yours truly—Race Williams. I simply bent over him.

"All right, Eddie," I told him pleasantly. "You've made your next to last crack about The Flame, in this life. Remember that. The next one is your last."

"I'll kill you for this. I'll kill you for this," he said over and over again, in a dazed sort of

way. But though I lingered by his side for a moment he made no effort to reach for his gun.

People were gathering now. The manager had run in from the main dining room, two burly waiters behind him. I didn't expect trouble—but then I'm always ready for it, so I sort of got my back to the wall and stood smiling at the manager.

The manager looked from me to the still prostrate Gorgon. It wasn't a memory that would linger pleasantly in his mind. Eddie Gorgon was a big shot, with his brothers behind him. But then, I was something of a big shot, with nothing but myself behind me—or maybe a gun or two, though they're generally before me.

I think the manager would have decided in my favor, for I was on my feet and the more immediate danger. But he didn't have to decide. The crowd sort of fell back. A giant of a man had entered the doorway. There was something of resemblance between him and the man on the floor. Eddie Gorgon was sort of a replica of the big man in the doorway, though the face of the reclining gunman was younger and less lined. It was also less controlled. Yep, I knew the big bozo. Joe Gorgon, the active member of the feared and fawned upon Gorgon brothers. Joe Gorgon, New York's most deadly racketeer, most politically prominent—and reputed to be one of the fastest-drawing gunmen in the country's greatest city—or out of it, for that matter.

Well—maybe he was. I stood, so, with my back against the wall. If he was sure that he was faster than I, here was his chance to prove it. I don't give way to any man when it comes to pulling rods. That's my living. If it's going to be my death—well—I folded my arms and waited.

I think that he saw me but I can't be sure. At least, he never looked straight at me. I stood my ground while he went over and knelt

beside his brother. There was nothing to read in his hard cruel face, with the small nervous little eyes. But he didn't have to worry if his brother was alive or dead. Already Eddie Gorgon was sitting up, and the curses died on his lips as he looked into the hard, unsympathetic face of his elder brother, Joe.

And that was all of that picture. Fingers fell upon my arm.

"Come, come—" said a soft, persuasive voice. "Don't be mixing yourself up in some common brawl that don't concern you. We don't want to be overconspicuous here tonight. At least, not yet."

I shrugged my shoulders and followed Rudolph Myer through the narrow hall, out into the cloak room, and so to the main dining room. It was a cinch he hadn't seen the little byplay. And it was a cinch I wasn't going to mention it to him. He might be of a nervous temperament, and consider it not altogether conducive to a long life and the pursuit of happiness.

CHAPTER II AT THE GOLDEN DOG

"Mussy bit of a row inside," Rudolph Myer jerked his thumb back toward the bar when we had taken seats in the almost deserted dining room. "Looked like big Joe Gorgon crossing the—. But, there—I've got a job for you."

"Never mind that yet, Myer." I dismissed that topic for the time being. "What's new of The Flame? Still going straight?"

"Still—an hour ago, anyway. But she don't fancy the 'honesty is the best policy' racket, I guess. I don't think it's the money, Race; the drudgery of the work; the law stepping in and tipping her boss off that she's

got a record, every time she lands a job. The girl's got the stuff in her. I think it's the excitement; the lure of danger; the control of men, she misses. Imagine her keen, active, if criminal, mind now solving the length of a bolt of silk! Though—damn it—the cheapness of her rooms, after being used to every luxury in life, should be enough to throw her. It's like me, Race. Maybe I wouldn't be honest if—. What are you grinning at?" He broke off suddenly.

I didn't tell him. Rudolph Myer was a queer duck and the crookedest lawyer in the city. Which is some record, no matter how you look on lawyers. But I dismissed the "honest," knowing how touchy he was on that subject. After all, honest lawyers are useless lawyers—at least, in the underworld. And Rudolph Myer was anything but useless. So I took the talk back to The Flame again.

"How about her estate—her mother's end of it, after her stepfather, Lu Roper, died?"

"Look here!" Rudolph Myer let the fingers of both his hands meet at the tips as he placed his elbows on the table. "I've done a bit of legal work for you, Race. We've been friends, and—listen. What do you really know about The Flame— Florence Drummond? Oh, I only did what you've asked me to do—helped her get jobs so that she could live honest—but as a lawyer of course I learned things. I had to, in trying to get her a bit of Mrs. Drummond's money in Philadelphia. But Mrs. Drummond wasn't her mother, Race. Mrs. Drummond simply adopted The Flame a great many years ago from an orphanage outside of Harrisburg. Things were sort of sloppy in those days. The legal papers for adoption never went through properly. Besides which, Lu Roper, her guardian, used what he could get his hands on. But he was a gangster and a killer, and got shot before they could roast him. No, there was little money for The Flame— besides which, she didn't even fancy my taking an interest in her. At least, lately." He looked toward the ceiling.

"Well—" I stroked my chin and feigned an indifference concerning The Flame I did not feel, "she's a good kid, Myer. She did me a good turn. Get her another job—good pay. Make it look natural. I'll foot the bills."

"Yeah—" His shrewd, sharp eyes danced. "You should know her best, Race. Yet you seem to be the only man who ever knew her who thinks she's feeble minded. I warned you it wouldn't work."

"What? She knows that I—"

"Maybe." He shrugged. "Read that." He shoved a note across to me. It was not sealed. I took out the single folded sheet. It read simply enough.

Race:—

*You must see me tonight.
This is not a plea. Perhaps you owe
me that much. I'll expect you at one
o'clock exactly. Climb four flights—
second door left—rear. Apt. 5-C.*

*I am halfway between the
girl and the woman you knew.*

THE FLAME.

"I am halfway between the girl and the woman you knew."

That final line was perfectly clear to me. I thought back to my first meeting with Florence Drummond. The wistful, child-like girl who might have been just out of boarding school. And then the times when she was the hard, cruel woman of the world, taking on ten years—her mind shrewd, her every action alert, her face stony and cold—a leader and organizer of criminals. The death of Lu Roper in the Pennsylvania station, back in the Tags of Death affair! The steady hand as she killed the man to save my life; her fight in the underworld, against the distorted brain of the man known as The Angel of the Underworld, in his mad, fantastic,

yet almost real grasping for a single Power. Of the night she destroyed that collection of evidence that would set the streets of the lower city afire with blood; of her disappearance into the maelstrom of a great city; her fight now to go straight.

I looked up at Rudolph Myer, and in my mind was the question: When The Flame wrote that note to me, did she love me—or did she hate me? And I—. Well—The Flame was her name. Given to her because men were attracted to her as the moth to a flame. And again my knowledge that to love The Flame—for a man to hold The Flame in his arms—was to die. Call it superstition if you like. But those who had held her had died. As well to call it a superstition to believe that if you look down the loaded end of a six-gun and press the trigger you're apt to be amazed at the results.

"You read this?" I asked, for Rudolph Myer was watching me closely.

"Why not?" he said. "It was open. A confidence between lawyer and client. And if you seek legal advice, it is—Don't go."

"Why?"

"Because," he said very slowly, as he lit a cigar, "The Flame is a very remarkable woman. You will either hold her in your arms and die, or—" He shrugged his shoulders. "But after all that might be the way. A lovely woman! I am sometimes glad that the lure of the flesh does not appeal to me."

"And how does she stand toward me now?" I wasn't paying much attention to Rudolph's chatter. Greed, I believed, was his single passion.

"I think—as she writes. Halfway between love and hate, with your presence there tonight to decide. But I've got something more important for you—or at least, something that

may be important. Look here!" He placed his hand in his pocket, drew forth a long thick envelope and handed it across the table to me.

This time I had to break the seal. And inside the envelope were five one hundred dollar bills.

"From a client," said Rudolph Myer. "The fee for keeping a closed mouth and escorting an individual from—from one destination to another."

"And the client?" I fingered the bills. They were new and fresh.

"Proposes to remain incognito." The shoulders hunched again. "But if you recognize his features—I can not prevent that. I might add," he winked broadly at me, "that I knew him at once. And to miss this opportunity might be the mistake of your life."

"Might?"

"Yes—might. The thing might go no further, of course. There is that possibility. Your name is in his head. His task is a tremendous one. But there are times when even a man whose pen is weighty enough finds the gun a much surer weapon. At least, tonight he needs the service of a bodyguard."

I fingered through the bills a moment, tucked them carefully into the envelope again and handed it back to Rudolph Myer.

"It's not enough," I told him. "I'll want a thousand for the job."

No, I wasn't greedy, but I knew Rudolph Myer. I thought this client, who had consulted him, had paid more than that—told him to offer me more than that. Rudolph would certainly subtract a good commission for himself.

He saw my reasoning too, for he nodded his understanding as he waved away the proffered envelope.

"It's a small job, Race. I told him five hundred wasn't enough to interest you, but he wouldn't pay more. 'I'm not thinking of the five hundred,' he said, 'and if Race Williams is the kind of a man I think he is and some have described him, neither will he. It's small work—half an hour by a man's side, with the chances a hundred to one that nothing will happen. I don't believe Williams is a grafter, like other private detectives in the city. But he may get out of this the biggest thing in his career. Myer, I could hire a half dozen strong armed men tonight—trusted men—for less than half that sum. Don't tell Williams this, but I'm paying five hundred dollars for the opportunity to look him straight in the eyes and read what's behind them—and judge.' "

"Yeah?" Somehow I believed that Myer hadn't got much out of it for himself after all. "What do you think?"

Myer hesitated a moment.

"I think this man could offer you certainly the biggest case of your career—and certainly too, if not the most hopeless one, the most dangerous. If I were you I'd cop off the five hundred, tip my hat to the gentleman in question and leave him flat. I'll be waiting here until you come back."

"Here? Why?"

"Well—" said Myer, "I'm acting for—shall I say 'our' client, and expect to be paid my regular fee. I've engaged this table for the evening. There will be interesting people at the adjoining table—or so I understand. I think you'll be asked to deliver a message to one of them, and I shall report his reactions to that message."

"Then what?" I was growing interested. Mysteries are all right in books, but you don't meet so many in real life. Besides, I like guys who give you straight talk. And when Myer didn't say anything, I said:

"I'm going to meet The Flame by one o'clock, you know."

Rudolph Myer snapped out his watch.

"It's twenty minutes to eleven. You're to meet—er—our client at eleven. He promises to keep you only half an hour. You'll be back here before twelve, and on your way as soon after as you wish."

I nodded at that. "But—how come this man picks you to pick me? Why don't he come straight to me?"

"I'll tell you this much. More, I'd consider betraying the interest of a client; and at present it's to my best interest not to. This client came to me, spoke of my familiarity with the underworld, and asked me to deliver a message to a certain party."

"And the party was—?"

"That you will probably learn later."

"And the message?"

"That I didn't find out. The name of the party who was to be the recipient of that message was quite sufficient for me. Even though I didn't learn the contents of that message, my—or rather—our client was honest enough to tell me that the delivery of that message would gain the animosity of the greatest menace in the city of New York. I like money. But I like life better. I turned him down flat." Rudolph Myer grinned across at me. "But I did tell him there was only one man fool enough to take the chance. Of course, Race, I named you."

"And then?"

"He walked about a bit and said, 'I have thought of him. I have often thought of Williams.' And half to himself, 'But if it had to come out, I wonder how the papers and the people—and even the officials—might take it.' "

"Tell me some more."

"That is all. Name yourself a good price if you go on with the thing. But make no promises until you are sure of the circumstances. And get yourself a job chasing pickpockets before you decide to cross the man our client names."

Now, if Rudolph Myer had not wanted me to mix myself up in this thing he couldn't have gone about it in a worse way. I may be fussy about the cases I take and don't take, and where the lack of money won't always keep me out of a job—the lack of danger might. When I get mixed up in a case I like things to happen.

When there was no more to come out of Myer I grabbed up my hat, was rather amazed at the place I was to meet my unknown client—which was in front of a drug store—and with a final sentence to Rudolph Myer, left the table.

"See you some more," was all I said.

At the main street door of the dining room I met the head waiter, and parted company with a yellow boy that brought a smile to his face. And when you can buy a smile out of Russett, the head waiter at the Golden Dog, you've spent some real money.

"Who'll be the party at the next table to Mr. Myer tonight?" I asked him. I don't invest money in smiles alone. I like talk.

"Tonight!" Russett looked down at the bill in his hand before he spoke. "Tonight—and

most every Monday night—who else but Mr. Gorgon—Mr. Joseph Gorgon.”

“Ah—yes,” was all I said. But I must have liked it, for I repeated that bit of eloquence, “ah—yes” to myself again as I sought the street.

The Gorgons, for some time prominent in the city of New York, were suddenly shoving themselves into my life—or perhaps, to be more exact—I was shoving myself into their lives. But, any way you take it—things looked promising. That is, if you look on sudden and violent death as promising.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN OF VENGEANCE

I bought a paper as I rode down town in the subway. Things certainly were breaking wide open in our peaceful city. One more city magistrate had been forced to resign from office. The Grand Jury had indicted two others, and the name of a Supreme Court judge was featured pretty conspicuously in the latest investigation—featured with an indifference to a libel suit that bespoke great confidence on the part of the *Morning Globe*.

And once again on the first page was the picture of Joe Gorgon, with the caption below it.

TWENTY YEARS AGO HE SOLD PEANUTS. TODAY DOES HE SELL JUDGESHIPS?

And through the story was a rehash of the several examinations of Joe Gorgon: The rise of the Gorgon brothers to fortune, if not exactly fame; how Joe Gorgon, back in the days when his name was Gorgonette, had pushed himself up to the leadership of the old Gorilla Bridge Gang, when his younger brother, Eddie,

was running barefoot in the streets of New York.

The article went on more or less sarcastically about the unfortunate “breaks that young Eddie Gorgon was getting in life” according to his brother Joe. Twice Eddie had actually been indicted for murder, and to the knowledge of the newspapers Eddie was questioned on half a dozen crimes of extreme violence. But how many times the hand of the law, hampered by criminal magistrates, crooked politics and the brotherly love of Joe Gorgon, had been stayed, was beyond the record of that newspaper.

“Investigations may come and magistrates may go, but the rule of Joe Gorgon in the city of New York is still with us. But where his brother, Eddie, is constantly in trouble, the breath of scandal has not blown upon Joe Gorgon—at least, not hard enough to blow him into a prison cell, where he undoubtedly belongs.”

That was headline stuff. I skipped to the column heads. One, at least, was good for a grin and reminded me of Eddie Gorgon’s last laugh, about looking a Gorgon in the face and dying.

LATEST EAST SIDE GUN-MURDER RECALLS COLUMNIST’S STORY OF THREE GORGON BROTHERS.

And the reporter here had played upon his imagination a bit, but made a rather plausible story for the public at that. He dished up first the article written by a well known columnist comparing the Gorgons to the old myth, and Hawthorne’s immortal tale of how Perseus was sent out by the wicked king to bring back to him the head of one of the Gorgons, three winged monsters with claws of bronze and serpents for hair. In this article the writer had nicely called the Gorgon brothers monsters with claws of gold, whose many hairs were the gangsters, crooked public servants and

racketeers whom they controlled. But the old Greek myth said that to look a Gorgon in the face meant that the one who looked would turn to stone—or die.

And, continued the story, Eddie Gorgon had certainly stared long enough at Butch Fitzgerald, in an East Side dive, to fulfill the old myth. It is sufficient to say that Butch Fitzgerald had died—been shot to death on Delancey Street. Though Eddie Gorgon presented indisputable evidence that at the time he was visiting friends in New Bedford, Massachusetts, there are many who would bet their last nickel that Eddie Gorgon had a face, if not a hand, in the murder.

But the article, in conclusion, said that the enterprising columnist, not forgetting that the old myth and Hawthorne's tale consisted of three Gorgons, had gone out and not only hunted himself up another Gorgon brother, but had interviewed that brother, Professor Michelle Gorgon, a quiet man surrounded by his books. "An artist and a scholar, whose collection of first prints is the envy and admiration of both amateur and professional collectors. If Michelle Gorgon feels the notoriety which his brothers have given his name, he keeps it well buried inside him. But it is rather well known that neither Joe nor Eddie often visit their brother's apartment atop one of Park Avenue's most pretentious dwellings.

"It would be a queer trick of fate if this educated and quiet, soft spoken Michelle Gorgon after all turned out to be the fine Italian hand that has guided his brothers up the ladder of doubtful fame. For, after all, to talk with Joe Gorgon leaves one with the impression that despite his rather forced smoothness of surface, his Gorilla days are not far behind him."

Of course I had heard that story before. Just the fanaticism of a columnist, but maybe very real to Eddie Gorgon or his brother, Joe. After all, I've often said that crooks are like

children at play. Anything that stimulates or satisfies their vanity is quickly grabbed at. Yep, I could very easily see them coddle to that Gorgon myth, rather than resent it. And certainly Eddie Gorgon had glared me down. But then, if I remember Hawthorne's tale of the GORGON'S HEAD, Perseus had used a sword, and I—well—I go in heavy for guns, and I'm still alive to tell you that a forty-four in the hands of a man who knows how and has the will to use it takes a lot of glaring down—even from a Gorgon. But I shrugged my shoulders, folded up my paper, and stepping out on the subway platform climbed to the street above.

I met my man—or rather, he met me. I was hardly out of the subway station before he walked straight up to me.

"Race Williams." He eyed me closely from under his gray felt hat. Keen, sharp, hard eyes. But I gave him look for look. And I didn't know him. That is, I did and didn't. His face was familiar. But we'll simply say that he was about forty-five; clear, weather beaten skin; piercing, cold, but honest eyes—and the chin of a fighter. Not pugnacious, you understand more, determined, ambitious. A go-getter, and what I liked mostly—not a guy to be sidetracked from his purpose.

He had a way of talking straight talk.

"You will not, of course, presume on my identity. If you discover it, forget it. I shan't go into details about your qualifications. I believe in laying my hand on men personally. If I'm fooled, I want to fool myself. I don't want to blame any one but myself. You have been paid for this job tonight. If it is my pleasure, afterwards, I want you to forget this—this incident. That's agreeable, of course."

"Suits me." I was trying to place him, but couldn't. This much I felt. I had spotted that map in a daily paper—and not so long since either. But I shrugged my shoulders. If he

wanted it strictly business he could have it his way.

He led me to a car, threw open the door and watched me climb in.

"I shall drive," he said. "You shall watch that we are not followed. I am putting a great confidence in you."

"Okay!" was the best I gave him as he slid behind the wheel.

"You are not a very talkative man."

"It's your racket." I shrugged.

"Yes—my racket." And he seemed to think aloud, as Rudolph Myer had described it. "Entirely my racket." And then, with a half turn of his head toward me, "I am placing in your hands tonight the life of a man. Maybe, the life and honor of a great many men. What do you say to that?" He fairly snapped the last words at me. I didn't like it. I didn't like his attitude. He was treating me like an ordinary gunman—the gunman the papers sometimes painted me.

"You're trying to buy a lot of silence in New York for five hundred dollars," was what I said to that.

He sort of jumped the car around the corner.

"If a man's honor is for sale, I could never raise a sufficient sum to bid for his silence against—" He hesitated, and then, "I am not buying your silence, Mr. Williams. It is my understanding that it is not for sale. I'm paying you for your time—and your courage, which I understand is for sale. I back my judgment of character rather than my bank balance." I think that he smiled. "Perhaps it's less altruistic and laudable when I confess that my bank balance, compared with my judgment, is negligible. I must confess that I picked you first from—

well—if not exactly hearsay, from the opinion of another."

"Rudolph Myer." I smiled a bit.

He smiled too. A hard sort of smile.

"You believe that?" he asked.

"Well—Myer told me so."

"Quite so. I told him that." He nodded, pulled the car up by the iron fence of St.—well—I'll just say, a well known city hospital, and leaving it there in the dark walked by my side to a small gate.

We passed slowly into the hospital, down the dimly lit corridor, ignored the elevator and climbed to the second floor. There another long corridor, a turn to the left, through a curtain into a dark alcove at the end—and a man who had been sitting beside a partly open door jumped to his feet, and with a hand to his hip swung and faced us.

I got a jolt out of that. The man, in plain clothes, was Detective Sergeant O'Rourke, of the New York City police.

"A police case." I guess the words were jarred out of me, and probably not in an enthusiastic voice. The police don't often want me in with them—and I don't want them in with me. Fair is fair! Now, was it simply to identify a man that I was there? I turned to my guide and client. Let the police fight their own battles! They do everything to hamper mine. Five hundred dollars to identify a suspect that the police couldn't lay a finger to! Well—I'd tell this lad where he got off. But I didn't tell him. He was talking.

"Detective Sergeant O'Rourke," he said very slowly, "is off duty tonight. That is, off regular police duty."

O'Rourke was all right. It wasn't working with him I objected to. In fact, I'd go a long way for O'Rourke any time—and had. And O'Rourke would go a long way for me—and maybe, after all, he had. But, as I said, I swallowed my hasty words. I would see what broke.

A white clad nurse opened a door for us, stepped quickly aside, sniffed once—then bowed and left the room. Another nurse, who was sitting by the side of the single bed, rose as we passed behind the screen and I looked at the man on the bed.

He was very old, I thought. His hair was gray. But it was the corrugated skin of his sunken cheeks, the deep lines that set off vividly the hollows that were his eyes. Emaciated parchment covered the single hand upon the white sheet; thick, purple ridges ran from his fingers to his wrist, to lose themselves in the sleeve of the snowy white hospital night shirt.

"You don't know that man?" my client asked me. And there was nothing of anxiety or hope in his voice. It was simply a question; an ordinary question he might ask any one. So he hadn't brought me there for the purpose of identification, for he hardly looked at me when I shook my head.

The old eyes opened. Burning, colorless orbs, except that they shone like two coals of fire. My unknown client stepped to the bed and took him by the hand. The old man clutched the hand frantically, dragging his other with a great effort from beneath the clothes. Eyes alight with both fear and fever burnt from those hollows as his fingers clutched that single strong hand in a grip of terror.

My client spoke.

"It is all right, my friend. I have come back as I promised. I have come to take you away from here. Take you where you'll be comfortable." And as the eyes still burned

steadily—terror and horror in their flaming depths, but no recognition—my client leaned down and barely whispered, "Take you to a place where you will find safety—safety and vengeance."

"Vengeance! That is it. That is it. That is what you promise me." There was a decided foreign accent to the old man's words, that was not hidden by the thickness of his voice as he pulled himself up in the bed and kissed that hand he held over and over. "Vengeance!" he said again. "The soul of Rose Marie cries out for vengeance. It is years ago—many. They feared me then. I am not so young now. The Devil. Yes, that was it. They called me The Devil. And now—" And he fell back on the bed, muttering to himself "prison" and "sickness" and "silence." That was all I could understand.

It was at that moment that the nurse who had left the room came back with a doctor. An elderly gentleman who, from his dignity and bearing, was evidently the big medical shot at the hospital.

"I have waited for your return." The doctor snapped out his watch as he spoke. "Not simply to advise you, but to warn you. The patient will get better here, with proper care, the right nourishment, and—and less disturbances. If you move him there is the possibility—I'll say more—the gravest probability that he will die." And at the request of my unknown client he dismissed the nurses.

"I understand and appreciate your interest." My boss had some dignity of his own when he wished to use it. "Let me assure you, Doctor, that you have done all that your professional ethics demand—even as your deepness of human feeling dictates. Let me assure you again that for this man to remain here means almost certain death. No." He raised his hand. "I have said more than I should, now."

"But an ambulance, surely?"

My client hesitated a moment, and then:

"I am afraid not. Too many would know—and to drive it myself would create hospital talk. No." And suddenly and abruptly, "You will kindly ask the nurses to return and make the patient ready to travel."

"But my dear sir, it is a question of human life, and—"

"You are not going to dispute my authority." A hand went into his pocket and came out with a folded sheet of paper.

"No—no." The doctor turned slightly sulky. "I took the trouble to check you up more fully on that this evening from the district attorney's office."

"From the district attorney, himself—personally?"

"No. From the district attorney's office."

"You've been a fool." My client exploded slightly for the first time, and then calmer, "or perhaps I have. But let me assure you that the importance of the man being moved is now even graver. You will call the nurses—at once. Any delay on your part is hampering the cause of justice."

"It's kidnaping," the doctor mumbled. Looked again at the document which my client held in his hand before him, and finally went to the door.

"Kidnaping, certainly—but official kidnaping." And as the nurses came into the room, "You will do me the kindness, Doctor, to tell me just how long ago you telephoned to the—" with a glance at the nurses, "officials."

"Shortly. Perhaps an hour ago. The thing worried me. I—. Can't you wait a minute, sir? The whole thing is unseemly—inhuman—and without precedent in the hospital."

"So—they suggested that you hold the man. Not by force, Doctor—not by official authority—but, let us say, by diplomacy."

And he had the doctor. He squirmed beneath those eyes—the accusation in the man's face. But years and breeding will tell. Dignity won out and the doctor gave him eye for eye.

"And what if they did, sir? It was most natural. You are not hinting that the district attorney's office of New York City would enter into a conspiracy with me to hamper, as you put it, the cause of justice—or that they are not acting in this situation in good faith! I believe, sir, were it as you have hinted, the word would be 'crooked.' "

"Not 'crooked,' Doctor. Let us say 'a hurt pride'—'a false ambition'—or perhaps just the word 'politics.' A word with you in private?"

And I was out of it. But the doctor was a more friendly man when, ten minutes later, we descended to the basement of the hospital in the slowly moving elevator, while Detective Sergeant O'Rourke held the limp, unconscious body of a little old man in his strong arms.

As we passed that main floor I breathed easier. Not in fear or even excitement, you understand. Perhaps in relief. For, after all, the game as I play it is always in the interest of my client. And the man who moved so quickly by the open steel work of the old elevator shaft door was John H. Holloway, an assistant district attorney of the city of New York.

CHAPTER IV

NOT BAD SHOOTING

Now, one thing seemed certain. My client was quite a lad, any way you look at it. If he put something over on the hospital and walked out with a patient he was a high class criminal, which I didn't for an instant believe—even if the presence of O'Rourke didn't eliminate such a possibility. Detective Sergeant O'Rourke was known in the city as "The Honest Cop." Which being an honest cop was the reason for his still being a sergeant, despite his recognized courage and ability that should have entitled him to an Inspector's shield.

But whoever my client was, he was a big shot in his own field. Big enough evidently to keep the district attorney's office from crossing him—at least, in an official capacity. I was getting a bit interested, also I was taking an interest in this lad's map again. It was familiar all right—but not from life, I thought again, but from the newspapers. The newspapers! I liked the taste of that and spun it around on my tongue. It would be worth recalling later.

There we were, out in the hospital grounds. My client leading, O'Rourke following, with the unconscious burden, and I bringing up the rear. Nothing exciting? Maybe not. Yet to me there was a feeling of tension in the air—pending disaster. This client of mine walked with such a steady, almost grim step of determination. If ever a lad had set himself one tough task to bring to a conclusion, this was the bozo.

Tall buildings all around us, the dull lights of the hospital behind us. The outline of the white coated doctor, who stood in the doorway rubbing his chin and moving his lips as if he talked. Nothing but the quiet, somber, and somewhat iodoformed air of a summer night in an orderly city hospital. Yet, for all that, I swung a gun from under a shoulder holster beneath my right arm and stuck it in my jacket pocket.

We made a little gate and came out on the street, perhaps half a block from where our car was, for we had entered by a different gate.

Right behind the car was another, a closed car—parked. We had to pass it to reach our own. It didn't have such a sinister appearance. My client plodded straight on, but O'Rourke slowed up a minute and spoke to me.

"Don't be too free and easy with them guns of yours now, Race. Tonight, it looks like diplomacy. That boat there behind our car is from the district attorney's office. I'd hate to be recognized on this job, but the city's rotten with racketeering graft, or—" And he jostled the human burden in his great arms as he pulled his slouch hat down over his eyes.

Did instinct warn me of danger as we turned on that sidewalk and started toward the car parked so close behind ours? No, I guess it wasn't just instinct. I'm always ready for danger, and there was something wrong about that car. I could see behind the wheel. No well trained police chauffeur sat straight and stiff, ready and waiting. No uniformed man leaned against the car or paced the sidewalk behind it.

One thing I did know. My client wasn't anxious to have the district attorney's office in on his little adventure tonight. And the district attorney's office would like very much to be in on it—that is, without seeming to force their presence. It would be simple then for a man to crouch low in the rear of that apparently deserted car, and then follow us. And my boss got the same idea, for he paused suddenly—waved O'Rourke to stand back, and turned toward that car.

A strange thing happened. The red rear light on that car went off—the brake light. You'd hardly have noticed it but for the fact that a moment before I had been looking aimlessly at the make of the car, wondering if it came to a

dash through the city streets, if we'd be able to lose it.

The tiny rear light remained. The red brake light, just below it, had gone out. That meant one thing only. Some one crouched in the front of that car had released his foot or his hand from the brake pedal. Why?

An auto horn screeched suddenly, down the block behind us. A motor raced as a car started in second speed far down the street. O'Rourke turned quickly, facing the sudden screech of the siren. Of course my client reacted in the same manner as did O'Rourke. Just as he stretched out his hand and grasped the open window edge of the car, he straightened, turned his head and looked down the street.

But not me. Gangsters don't announce themselves in that style—at least, if they're making an attack. And if it were the police, the job to assure them of our respectability must come from my client or O'Rourke. As for me—I kept my eyes trained straight on that parked car; the front window. The siren and the racing motor would not distract my attention, if that was its purpose—and it was.

It happened. I won't say it was expected, or even what I was looking for. But then, I won't say it was unexpected. Not unexpected, because in plain words—I don't allow the unexpected to happen, if I can prevent it.

A face bobbed up in that car window. A dark coated arm shot above the half open glass, and the heavy bore of a nickel plated six-gun was smacked right against the side of my client's head. I saw the flashing eyes, the set chin, the thick sensuous lips of the gunman, and knew that the rod he held was, at that distance, heavy-enough to blow my client's head to pieces. I knew too that the hand that held that gun was steady, and that the thick lips were cruel. My client turned his head suddenly and looked straight into the weapon which in the

fraction of a second would carry death. And—. But why go into it?

I simply raised my right hand slightly, closed my finger upon the trigger and shot the gunman smack through the side of his head. Hard? Cold blooded? Little respect for life? Maybe. But after all, it didn't seem to me to be the time to argue the point with the would-be killer. Remember— I was some twenty feet from him—and shooting at an angle.

The gun crashed to the step of the car. The gunman jumped back. And as I ran around the rear of that car he tumbled to the street and lay still. It was a cinch that he had the door open behind him. It was a cinch too that the car which shot up the street was neither a police car nor that of attacking gangsters. It was simply the getaway car for the man who had attempted the life of my client—for it half slowed, swerved to avoid the body in the street, and as its headlight played upon the dead white face, shot away up the block.

I didn't run out and take pot shots at the fleeing car, but made sure that the gunman had been alone. I jerked out my pocket flash, and with that in one hand and my gun in the other, looked the car over. The gunman had been there alone— that is, as far as life was concerned. But in the back of the car lay the body of the chauffeur. The job was a quiet one. Some one had stuck a knife in his heart and twisted it around. There was a welt on his forehead, too, from a blackjack, the butt of a gun, or some other blunt instrument. He had been knocked out, then, before he was killed.

A brutal bit of work certainly. But maybe necessary from the gangster's point of view. You can't tell how long a guy will stay "out" from a smack on the head. And the waiting killer couldn't know how long it would take for my client to appear on the street.

O'Rourke had laid his human burden against the stone wall surrounding the hospital and was taking a look-see into the car with me.

"It's Conway," he said, and his voice shook slightly. "A good boy. Only taken off his beat three weeks ago and assigned to the district attorney's office. Been married two months, on the strength of the promised promotion. It's a tough break for a guy—a tough break for a cop. And the lad you—you gave it to. Just another gangster. A lad that Joe Gorgon's gotten out more than once."

"Joe Gorgon's some guy." I put the flash back in my pocket. "But I'd like to see him get his friend out of this mess." And in what I think was justifiable pride, "It wasn't a bad shot, O'Rourke."

"No—" said O'Rourke, "it wasn't. I turned just in time to see you give it to him. He had it coming."

"You'll make a good witness when—" I straightened suddenly as a police whistle came from down the block. "Do I have to explain this, and—"

"You won't have to worry this time, Race. Colonel—" he stopped suddenly. "Our man's a big shot. He—. But it looks like all hell's going to break loose in the city. Like—"

"Our last case together. The Angel of the Underworld—and Power." I helped him out.

"No." O'Rourke shook his head. "For that was a man who looked for power—who grasped it, too, in rather a fantastic way. But here is Power already established. Nothing fantastic. A reality of money and greed, tearing into the bowels of a great city. Influence—justice—"

"You're talking like a book," I told him. "Let's think of this present mess, and—"

But my client, who O'Rourke called Colonel had already broken into life. He came around from the off side of the car, where he no doubt had been examining the stiff and getting a justifiable and personal kick out of it. Anyway, he had snapped back into life. I saw him talking to O'Rourke just before the harness bull came up the street.

"Just a coincidence that you were here," I heard him say, as he turned quickly from O'Rourke and picked up the unconscious old man from the grass beside the wall. "And if that doesn't go over—" a moment's pause, and very slowly, "But mine is an authority that will carry far." And this time in determination, and nothing slow about it, "To the Mayor of the city itself, if it must be—though notoriety is the last thing we wish. Foul murder has been—. Come!" He turned to me, and half staggered down the street with the sick man in his arms.

"I'll take the boy friend." I nudged his arm. He seemed very shaky—his face very white. The old man was a load for him.

"No—no." He half wiped at his forehead, jarring the man, who muttered something unintelligible. "It's better so—much better so." A pause as I opened the door of his car for him. "I didn't think they'd go as far as that with me—with me."

CHAPTER V

LET THE DEAD REST

O'Rourke was talking to the harness bull down the block when the Colonel took the wheel and despite my efforts to get him to let me handle the car, we pulled from the curb.

"It was horrible," he said. "He died—his face not a foot from mine. I saw the light go out of his eyes."

"Pretty bit of shooting, eh?" I leaned back in the rear seat and braced the sick man's head against my shoulder. Personally, I didn't see anything to grumble about. Things had broken good—for him.

"It was awful—terrible."

"Yeah?" This lad riled me. "Let me tell you something, friend. You got the finest bit of shooting you'll ever get—at any price. And when I think of a job like that for five hundred smackers I could burst out crying."

Maybe I was a bit sore. But then, wouldn't you be? I pride myself on doing my work well. And though there was nothing really remarkable about the shooting itself—the circumstances sort of being in my favor—it had taken quick thinking. The real artistic end of it was not in the bullet beside the gunman's ear, but in the fact that I was in a position to put that bullet there. Another lad—especially the sort of talent the Colonel would get from a private detective agency—would have needed a search warrant to find his gun at the right moment.

"It isn't you," the Colonel said. "But that he should die like that, my eyes on his eyes and—"

"Next time keep your eyes closed then," I snapped at him.

"I'm not blaming you—" he started.

And that was enough. The old boy had let his head sink down so that it rested on my knees, which gave me a chance to lean forward and spill my stuff close to my client's ear.

"Let me tell you this. A split second's delay in that bit of gun-play, and—bing! there'd be some one to say 'Doesn't the Colonel look natural?' You got me into it. You brought me along. If you were aiming on committing

suicide, so that the insurance companies would call it homicide, you should have told me so." And waxing just a bit sarcastic now, "You misrepresented the job—or at least Myer did for you. You got your life saved and a lad knocked over for five hundred dollars."

"I never expected it. Never thought they'd dare. It couldn't have been the old man, Giovoni, they wanted to kill. They couldn't have known. It must have been me. But—I'll pay you more. What you wish—what you charge for—"

"A flat rate for a corpse, eh? Well—I took the five hundred and I'll call it a day, unless unpleasant complications arise. It was your party—your fun—and you've got to foot the bills."

"I shouldn't mind." He was nodding his head now, as he narrowly missed a cruising taxi. "I've been through it all—in the war. But here, in the city streets—sudden and violent death!"

"Then don't stick your face into the business end of strange guns," I told him. I was a bit hot under the collar as I ducked another look back over my shoulder to be sure we weren't tailed.

You've got to admit I had a right to feel sore. Here I was, due for a pat on the back—or several pats for that matter, and this lad was crabbing and throwing the "human life" stuff into my face. What did he want me to do? Break down and run to the district attorney's office with a confession? If ever a lad needed one good killing, that gunman was the lad. I started to rake it into the Colonel again—and stopped dead. It took his mind off his driving—at least I thought it did, for he dashed toward the curb and a pole—and finally stopped before a large house on an up-town side street. There was a name that stretched across between the entrances of two houses. I didn't get the lettering then.

The occupants of those two combined houses were more or less expecting us, for the Colonel had hardly climbed the stone steps and pressed the bell when two men in white coats came down the steps, bearing a stretcher. They made quick work of the old guy, Giovoni, in the back of the car. He was muttering now, and breathing sort of heavy. It didn't take a minute to place him on that stretcher and carry him inside.

I climbed out of the car and walked up and down a bit, as the Colonel followed them inside. There was a round shouldered, mustached gent who stood by the door as the stretcher bearers passed. You didn't need three guesses to tell you that he was a doctor—The Doctor.

From the sidewalk it was easy to lamp the name across the two buildings. ELROD'S PRIVATE SANITARIUM it read. But I didn't need that bit of information to wise me up that it was a Quack House.

I spent my time killing butts and looking the street over, but it was a cinch we hadn't been followed. Twenty minutes passed, and one of the white coated stretcher bearers came down the steps and asked me to go inside. I did that little thing. Entered the hall, turned left and stepped into a large waiting room, where the Colonel and the lad I had spotted for the boss sawbones were chewing the fat over a bottle which stood on a table. The white coated stretcher bearer closed the door, leaving himself on the outside.

"Mr. Williams—Doctor Elrod." The Colonel smiled as the Doctor and I shook hands. Doctor Elrod was a harmless, slightly bent, calm little man, with the professional grin of confidence perpetually stamped on his good natured face. I passed him up and listened to the Colonel.

"I have told Doctor Elrod a little—just a little of our experience and strain of this evening. The Doctor was in the war with me." The Colonel emptied his glass, lifted the bottle, poured himself out another hooker, shoved the bottle toward me and indicated a glass with his free hand.

"What's this for?" I looked at the liquor. It said "Genuine Bourbon" on the outside of the bottle.

"It's been a trying evening," said the Colonel, "and I've been a little severe with you." He shoved a glass across the table now. "You'll need something to steady your nerves. I think I have—have further work for you."

I shoved the bottle back across the table to him. He was the army man again, I thought. Severe—kindly—patronizing. I didn't like it. And I'm not a guy to nurse a thing. I gave him what was on my chest.

"You couldn't be severe with me," I told him, and meant it. "You're not big enough." And letting him down on that, "Nor is any one else. And I haven't any nerves. Some day maybe I'll drink with you. But liquor comes under the head of pleasure with me—not business. It's not that the stuff would bother me any," I threw in, for I didn't like the way he nodded his head. "It's the psychological effect. I like to feel that when a guy," and I looked at the Doctor and toned my line down a bit, "falls down, he didn't collapse through the neck of a bottle I'd been handling."

"The Doctor's as right as they make them." The Colonel nodded. "We've discussed you together, Mr. Williams. Now—well—I wonder about those nerves. I'm sure the Doctor would like to—. Rather—in a professional way, it would be interesting to study your reactions to sudden—sudden danger."

And Doctor Elrod had quickly and perhaps nervously stepped forward and

clutched at my wrist. I could see the watch in his hand.

I jerked myself free and stepped back a bit. I didn't like it. I spoke my piece.

"The Doctor," I said sarcastically, "can experiment with rabbits and guinea pigs. I'm not playing either tonight. Science, Colonel, can not play a part in a man's—well—a man's guts. The Doctor wasn't there tonight to hold my hand or feel my pulse." And suddenly, "If you must have a demonstration—" I snatched up the bottle of liquor, poured the small glass full to the very brim, and sticking it on the back of my outstretched hand, held it so. Never a drop of the "perfect stuff" fell to the floor to eat a hole in the rug.

"You can laugh that off," I told him, "if you're bent on some low scientific relief."

And he did. I liked the look in the Colonel's eyes then. Maybe not admiration exactly—rather, call it good sportsmanship. But he only nodded, winked once at the Doctor, knocked off his drink, and taking me by the arm walked to the outer door.

"You will guard the patient well, Doc," he threw over his shoulder. "Your medical skill is not half as important as the secrecy of the man's whereabouts. I—" and turning suddenly to me, "Good God! Williams—I never thought to tell you—to ask you. We might have been followed."

"We were not followed," I told him flat. "You can kiss the book on that."

"Ah—yes, yes." And as we went down the steps and climbed into the car, "I was upset, Williams. Very much upset. You could not have acted differently, of course. Indeed, if you had, I—"

"Would have been as stiff as a mackerel." I finished for him. There was no use to let him minimize the part I had played.

"Yes—exactly." He was thoughtful now. "I have a family back in Washington; a responsibility which makes me think that perhaps—" and straightening as he climbed in behind the wheel and I shoved in along side of him, "But I'll see the thing through to the end—and I apologize for my rudeness. My—. There!" He stretched out a hand and gripped mine. "You saved my life tonight, and there are no two ways about that."

"Okay—" I told him. "Forget it. Let the dead rest. You paid for it. It was part of the job." Funny. When you get credit you don't want it, and when you don't get it you're sore as a boil.

We drove for several blocks without a word. Then:

"I think I'll drive you home with me. I have a job that it's almost suicide to give a man."

I smiled at him, and chirped:

"The suicide clause has run out on all my insurance policies. Besides which, I'm considered a bad risk, anyway, now. So—"

"Williams," he said very slowly, "in some respects you are a very remarkable man."

Well—he wasn't the first one who had given me that line. But somehow I liked it. He didn't strike me as a guy who went in much for the old oil.

CHAPTER VI

A THOUSAND DOLLAR MESSAGE

His house proved the regulation brown stone front—just a copy of the private hospital affair, a shade closer to the center of things in the city.

He let us in with a key, carefully closed the heavy front door and pushed me quickly before him up the stairs to the floor above.

“I have taken this house for my stay in the city,” he said, as we climbed to the first landing. “Just a man and his wife to look after me. An elderly, not over bright couple, who are long since in bed.”

A pause as we passed along a narrow hall, and he stood with his hand upon a door knob—a key turning the lock with his other hand.

“I think I shall take you quite a bit into my confidence, Williams. Yes—quite a bit. But come in.”

He threw open the door and we entered a comfortable living room facing on the street.

“You’ll excuse me just a moment.” He walked to a door in the rear of that room, inserted a key in the lock and went on talking before unlocking it. “Make yourself quite comfortable there. I have a—. Well—a man is waiting for me behind this door. One who might grow alarmed—greatly alarmed—if he heard us talking here. I must ease his mind.”

He spun the key, pushed the door open just far enough to admit his body, and slid himself through the narrow aperture, disappeared and—.

The door opened wide this time, and the Colonel was back in the living room again looking quickly around. He opened a closet, the key of which was in the lock; then without a word ducked quickly back into the bedroom again. For it was a bedroom. I could see the bed

plainly now—an open window, too, across the room from it.

“What’s the matter?” I spoke close to the door, my gun half drawn. Even the most particular movie director would have been satisfied with the perplexed, excited emotion his face was registering.

“Nothing—nothing. It’s just my nerves, I guess.” The Colonel blocked my way for a moment, then with a jerk to his shoulders stood aside and pointed into the bedroom. “He’s gone,” he said. “I’ve searched the room. There’s—. And he used the lamp cord—the wiring—to lower himself to the alley.” He pointed excitedly to the length of wire that was twisted around the bed post and hung over the window-sill.

“Yes.” I saw that. The house was old—there was only one electric floor plug and that was across the room, so there was a generous length of wire needed to reach the lamp. The wire was made of heavy rubber. I leaned out the window and pulled it in. Offhand, I’d say that it reached within—well—ten feet of the ground. Not much of a drop for a man of average height. But my flash, cutting a ray of light into the blackness below, disclosed the fact that whoever had left that room was certainly not lying on the flagging below. I ran the light along the alley a bit, and found it as empty as a country constable’s helmet.

“It’s your show.” I turned to the Colonel. “It wasn’t much of a place to lock a guy up in anyway, unless he was hog tied—which—”

“There was no man a prisoner in this room.” He had a way of pushing his chin forward and his neck back when he hit his dignity. “That is, an involuntary prisoner.” He amended his last statement slightly. “Poor—poor, unfortunate creature.”

"I don't want to stick my nose into your affairs," I said, "But I don't go in for riddles either. Wise me up or drop the subject. I don't care which."

"The man in this room," the Colonel broke in, "was the man who brought me the information about Giovoni—the old man in the hospital. It was worth his life if certain parties discovered it."

"Oh. A squealer—a rat. A—"

"No." The Colonel shook his head. "Not in that sense, for I paid him nothing. I would trust you with his name, but that would be breaking a confidence. I promised him secrecy. He came here of his own accord, a withered, sickly, drug addict. He had no money, no friends, and he would not tell me who sent him. At one time he was useful to a certain—a certain trio of criminals. And then the drug. Once a relief from the nightmare of his life; now, to still the craving of his body—and the fear of his mind. He had been useful before; now he feared that he was to be killed. Not because he had ever betrayed these murderers, but because he knew something. Something that he was afraid they might read in his eyes, or that he might let slip in a drug-crazed moment. Yes, he feared death—murder."

"Sure. Some one was going to put him on the spot." I nodded. It may have been a rather new and unique procedure to the Colonel, but to me it was an old racket—a natural one. A member of a gang no longer able to hold up his end. Body and mind weakened, and the gang afraid that if he was dragged over the coals at police headquarters—denied his drug—he would talk.

But the Colonel was talking again.

"Yes—on the spot. That's why he told me what he did. He wanted protection; protection I could have given him. Tomorrow I

would have put him where they could not find him. In fear that they would get him, he came to me. Now—in fear that he was not safe here, he has lost himself in a great city."

"It all depends on who THEY are," I suggested. This running up and down an alley after another guy's hat was beginning to lose its interest.

"Ah!" The Colonel stroked his chin, pushed me into the living room, indicated a chair and sat down across from me. I took the cigar he offered me, shoved it into my pocket, and lit a cigarette.

"Mr. Williams," the Colonel said very slowly, as he drummed on the arm of his chair, "would you like to see the city purged of vice and crime—racketeers, and most of all, corrupt officials—crooked magistrates. Yes, and even members of the higher courts perhaps? For the hand of graft can find its way into the pockets of the mighty. It is bad indeed when greed and ambition enter the same brain."

He was so serious that I tried not to smile as he went on.

"You are a good citizen—a staunch citizen. Wouldn't you like to feel that you played an important part in cleansing New York's cesspool—wouldn't you?"

"At the right price?" I looked straight at him.

His dignity hit him again. The outward chin—the backward neck. I killed his words.

"Before you go on with your altruistic oration, let me spill a bit of chatter." I leaned forward and gave him what was on my chest. "I daresay there isn't a big shoe manufacturer who wouldn't want to see every child in the country wear a pair of his shoes—but he don't give them away. Henry Ford would like to see every

man, woman and child sporting a Ford coupe—but he don't give them away. It's business with them. When these men are called upon to give to charity, they make out a check. You never saw John D. Rockefeller alleviate the suffering of the unemployed by giving each one of them ten gallons of gas. But he has given away more money for charitable purposes than any man in the country.

"Now—if you want a man hunter, I'm open for such work. And I expect to get paid for it. If a contractor builds a small house he gets a small sum. If he builds an apartment—. Well—that's me. I'll take small pay for a small job and big pay for a big job. If you're raising a fund to help clean up the city and want me, as a good citizen, to contribute to it—all right. I'll give you a check, and expect to see ninety per cent of the money go back into that cesspool you were speaking so elegantly about.

"I'm no amateur detective. I'm a hard working, private investigator. I won't take a job that isn't straight and don't interest me. I may be just a common gunman in your estimation, but I'm a big shot in my own—my own line. At least, others think enough of me to pay me well. I don't know your racket, but I know mine. There. That's a chestful for me, but it's gospel. At least I've made myself clear—that I'm not doubling for a Saint Patrick and driving the snakes out of New York."

"Yes," he said slowly, "you've made yourself clear. But I expect to pay you. You're a very conceited man, Race Williams." And more slowly even, "Undoubtedly a very courageous one also. The man I will want you to face—the man I will want you to deliver a message to is a man who has crushed every one who has stood in his way, politically or financially—and though I can not prove it, I believe that behind him is the greatest villain—the greatest murderer—the—. Here!" He took a folded bit of paper and threw it into my lap.

"Just what price does a big shot like you want, to deliver that message to Joe Gorgon? Stop!" His hand went up as I read the single line on the paper. "The message means nothing to you. But, as God is my judge, I believe that Joe Gorgon would murder, without a moment's hesitation, the man who delivered that message to him—if he believed, as he must believe, that that man was familiar with its significance."

"Just hand this to Joe Gorgon—nothing more?"

"No. Repeat the message to him tonight. Say it as if you were giving him some information. Say it loud enough for his friends to hear. Oh—they won't understand it. Then report to me his reactions to the message."

"Don't you think I'll be blasted right then and there?" I couldn't help but be sarcastic.

"No, not then and there. Not you—after what I saw tonight." And his face paled slightly, in memory of the dead gunman, I thought.

"And that's all you want me to do? When is the message to be delivered?"

"At once—at the Golden Dog. Mr. Myer is keeping the table for your return."

I looked down at the message again. It seemed simple enough. Cryptic, perhaps. I was thinking of my knocking Eddie Gorgon about, just for amusement. Now—well—this little bit of byplay would only accentuate the animosity of the Gorgons. Besides which, I'd be paid for a hatred that I had already acquired under the head of pleasure.

"And that ends my job?" I asked.

"I hope not. If things are as I believe, I will be able to employ you in the biggest case of your career. The anger of the Gorgons won't matter to you then. It will already be

established after you deliver—. But here. It is not fair—it is not right. You are a man whose business brings him into queer places; the blackness of dismal, deserted city streets in the late hours. Come! Give me back the message. I forget that you saved my life tonight.”

But I closed my fist about that bit of paper as I came to my feet.

“Friend,” I told him, “I’ll hurl this message into the teeth of the devil himself for one thousand dollars.”

“Yes, yes—I believe that you would.” And suddenly, “Done! For after all it is a great step toward a glorious accomplishment. Here.” He took my hand, pressed it a moment and then dragged open a drawer.

I counted the money and pushed it into my pocket. He went on.

“There will be five hundred more if you do it knowingly! As if the message means as much to you as I hope it will to Joe Gorgon—or the man behind Joe Gorgon. The Third Gorgon. Doctor Michelle Gorgon.”

“And that’s the whole show?” I asked him, as we left the room and descended the stairs together.

“No. I would like, if possible, to know where Joe Gorgon goes after you deliver that message.”

“I can arrange that.” I was thinking of my assistant, Jerry. A product of the underworld—a boy I could always count on.

“Good!” said the Colonel. “Telephone me here, then.” And he gave me his phone number. “And, Mr. Williams—would you be willing to,” and he smiled, “at a price, of course, work for me? Work for the overthrow of the Gorgon brothers? Work silently and secretly, to

get evidence against them—rid the city of their presence? A big job, a hard job, and a job that must be accomplished before the opposing political forces appeal to the governor for another investigation of the racketeering. One man is responsible for it all—you know that.”

“You mean Joe Gorgon?” I nodded. Yes, I thought I knew that.

“No—” he said. “I mean Doctor Michelle Gorgon. Neither Joe Gorgon nor his racketeers take a step that is an important step without its having been ordered by his brother, Doctor Michelle Gorgon. And Doctor Michelle Gorgon buys judgeships, has crooked officials appointed, and fixes juries. Yes, he is the brains that directs the hands of murderers.”

“I’ve heard that too. But I don’t know if I fully believe it.”

“Well—fully believe it now. For if you don’t, you too may be caught in—. But, there—I can count on you.”

“Yes.” I tossed my cigarette out in the street, for we stood on the steps of the house now. “But just how do you fit?”

“That—. Well—it might break a confidence. But be sure that I hold the interests of the people, the honest public officials; the citizens who would wish to see their own forces—their own elected officials, their own law and order clean out the menace before outsiders are brought in.”

“Why not come down to cases?” I looked at him under the brim of the slouch hat I jerked onto my head.

“Yes, yes.” He seemed to think a moment. And then suddenly gripping my hand, “Deliver this message. Then I’ll see if you still feel—feel that I have a right to ask you to work

with me, since they will suspect—yes, know—that you have taken sides with the enemy.”

I grinned at that one. But I saw his point, even if it did sound silly.

“All right,” I said simply. “You want to see if I still have the stomach for it. You’ve been reading your Hawthorne again. THE GORGON’S HEAD. To look a Gorgon in the face is to die! And it would be useless for you to come to terms with a man who is about to do that. Yep—you can’t make a deal with a dead man.”

And before he could find an answer to that one I was down the steps, after flinging my final line.

“Joe Gorgon will get your message—and it’s the easiest thousand dollars I ever earned.”

And I was gone. Swinging down the street—breathing deeply of the cool summer air.

When I finally found a taxi I looked again at the message I still held in my hand, stamping the words into my mind.

“THE DEVIL IS UNCHAINED,” read the message. And I wondered. Was the devil the little sick old man, Giovoni, we had left at Elrod’s Private Sanitarium? And if so, would he throw fear into the heart of a Gorgon—the city’s biggest racketeer? Joe Gorgon. Absurd? Maybe. But I remembered once, when the accusing words of a ten year old child sent a shrewd, intelligent man to the chair for murder. “Out of the mouths of babes and old men come—” And though it don’t seem to be quoted just right, it might make a deal of sense at that.

But I didn’t drive straight to the Golden Dog, for I had plenty of time to put on my act for Joe Gorgon and still meet The Flame. I went smack to the Morning Globe office. I knew the man who’d be on the desk at that hour and I’d done a bit of thinking.

They work fast in newspaper offices. They have to. I was turned loose in the morgue, with a man who knew his pictures. Ten minutes later I was staring into the face of the man known as the Colonel. That set chin and those determined eyes stood out in that photo. There was quite a bit to read about him. His war record; his marriage; and his wonderful accomplishments in the army intelligence department.

His full name was Charles Halsey McBride, and he had graduated from college with a deputy Police Commissioner of the city of New York. A commissioner who was taking his job seriously and raising hell all up and down the line, for he was a wealthy man who had the money to do it with and even the backing of the Commissioner—at least, that was the rumor.

“Sure,” said the newsman, chewing what he must have thought was a cigarette. “McBride’s done some good work, though he blew up in the Chicago investigation. Too much notoriety, I guess, though he never made a squawk. There was talk of the government sending him into New York, but on account of his friendship with the Deputy Commissioner it might make hard feelings. At present, I think he’s got a leave of absence, though there’s a rumor he’s working secretly for Washington on the Power Trust. It’s unconfirmed though, and we don’t know where he is. But city rackets are out of his line. Trusts—big business—mergers—and oil investigations are his meat. He’s got a brain in his head, but you can’t sit down in a courtroom behind locked doors and hang murders on lads who have witnesses kidnaped or killed—intimidate witness, who won’t dare

CHAPTER VII

A BIT OF MURDER

talk—and hire others to do their killing; others, who don't know for sure who really paid them to do—" The phone rang. "But McBride isn't the lad for that kind of job. It doesn't call for sharp questions from behind a desk."

"No," I said, "it doesn't." But I was rather thoughtful at that, as I left the chap to his phone and departed.

Colonel McBride! Here was a lad who didn't intend to sit behind his desk and listen to big guys explain their positions through the mouths of clever and high paid lawyers. This lad had guts—and sense, I thought, when he took me on. But it was a cinch he hadn't come on orders from Washington. If he had, it would have been in the papers. Then, who was behind him? Certainly he wasn't doing this on his own initiative— besides, Detective Sergeant O'Rourke was taking orders from him—and what's more, Colonel McBride had authority. But—he had said that he wished to clean up the city—the Gorgon brothers—before outside authority stepped in. It might be possible that he was working for the Commissioner himself—privately and secretly, until the time to strike came—building up an evidence that would stand the gaff of a jury trial.

And I didn't feel that I had broken a confidence by looking him up. He knew who he was hiring. I had a right to know for whom I was working. A lad in my position can't tell what might be put over on him. I wouldn't even put it past certain officials to try and frame me. But—I had other things to think of. Jerry, the boy who worked for me, would have to be reached and be outside the Golden Dog to tail Joe Gorgon.

After giving Jerry a jingle at my apartment, I drove up town and entered the Golden Dog at exactly seven minutes after twelve o'clock.

Rudolph Myer had something under the table that wasn't ginger ale. He was pounding

nervously on the table, but bobbed up straight as I entered the room.

And at the next table was Joe Gorgon with four other men. His great bulk was shoved far back in the chair, his knees crossed, his thumbs stuck in the armholes of his vest, and a cigar protruding from the corner of his mouth. The other four men I knew. One was a ward leader, called Jamison, and beside him my little playmate, Eddie Gorgon. The other two guys' faces were familiar. One, a fairly well known lawyer—and the other, well—just a face. I couldn't place the name of either.

Joe Gorgon didn't see me. His mind was suddenly occupied by the entrance of Billy Riley, one of the three biggest political leaders in the city.

I heard Gorgon call to Riley as he passed the table, and what's more, Riley was nearer to Gorgon than to me. It was a cinch that Riley heard him. It was a cinch too that Riley didn't want to hear him. Like most of us, Riley liked to claim the acquaintance of well-known men—influential men. But Joe Gorgon was getting himself just a bit too well known. Yet Riley didn't have the stomach to turn him down flat. Money flowed from Joe Gorgon's pocket like from the United States mint—and Riley had a fondness for money.

Jamison, the ward leader, looked up quickly— questioningly, from Joe Gorgon to Billy Riley. I read, just as well as Joe Gorgon did, what was in his mind. Perhaps Jamison didn't word it as the book of etiquette might, but in his own way Jamison sensed that Joe Gorgon was getting "the cut" direct.

"Riley! Riley!" And Joe Gorgon was on his feet with a rapidity that was astounding in one of his size. Two steps he took, and clutched Riley by the arm. Riley turned, and his smile of greeting was nervous—strained.

"Join us for a few minutes." Joe Gorgon made no effort to keep the conversation private. But there was nothing in his voice but hearty good fellowship.

"Can't, Joe." And Riley nearly choked over the name. A moment's hesitation, and when Joe Gorgon still held his arm but said nothing, Riley stammered, "Got a party waiting—" and then something low.

"Nonsense. Everybody's got time for Joe Gorgon." And Joe clapped a great hand down on Riley's shoulder. "Friends of mine always have time to join me." A moment's pause, and again, "Always—while they're friends." And the last just reached me as I passed to the next table and flopped down beside Rudolph Myer. But I did see that Billy Riley wasn't so big but that he took the chair Joe Gorgon pushed out for him.

Eddie Gorgon looked around and saw me. His sullen eyes flashed into life—his left hand gripped the table cloth—his right hand slipped beneath his armpit. There was a cut on the side of his mouth. I liked that. I smiled over at him. The hot blood went to his head. He came suddenly to his feet and stood so.

An outside influence had come between Eddie Gorgon and me. The head waiter called out. A heavy-set waiter laid down a tray and hurried to the table of Joe Gorgon. But the running, shabby little form was there before him. An emaciated, wild-eyed man, twitching, gripping fingers that stretched quickly out as he fell to his knees and clutched Joe Gorgon by the coat. Joe Gorgon looked from the crouching figure to his brother, Eddie. Eddie nodded, turned quickly and disappeared toward the bar.

The kneeling man cried out.

"Don't let them kill me! Don't let them kill me! Don't have me—"

And Joe Gorgon was on his feet. His two hands stretched out and gripped the kneeling man by the collar. Seemingly without effort he jerked him to his feet, held him so—tightly, and stared into that drawn, unshaven face.

I knew the lad. A harmless, half crazy little snowbird in the underworld. Just "Toney" they called him. If he had any other name I hadn't heard it. But he spoke no more. Whether the grip on his collar was so tight as to cut off his speech, or whether the glaring, staring narrow eyes of Joe Gorgon cowed him I couldn't judge. It was all over in a matter of seconds. Joe Gorgon thrust the man roughly into the hands of two waiters, with the single statement:

"Some bum, I guess. I don't know him." But his eyes followed the whining, crouching, helpless body as the two waiters half carried, half dragged him from the room. And, somehow I wondered if the fantastic newspaper story of the Gorgon myth had—had—. But Joe Gorgon was seated now, and Rudolph Myer was talking—saying the thing that was on my mind.

"Did you see him stare at that man? Did you see the glare in his eyes? A superstitious lot, these warm-blooded people. I tell you, Race, Joe Gorgon was marking that poor unfortunate for death. Not consciously, perhaps—just that he half believes in his own power. Did you hear what the man said? His final words? 'Don't have me—killed' was what he would have said. I saw it in his eyes, before fear kept the words from his lips. And Joe Gorgon. He's a man, Race—a brute without pity—without fear—without nerves. See him now. No emotion of any kind."

"Well—" I came to my feet, grinning at Myer. "We'll see if we can't knock a bit of emotion into him."

"You're not—not now!" Myer half leaned forward to clutch at my coat, thought better of it and watched me cross to the other table. I made a hit too as I approached. Billy

Riley smiled uncertainly. Jamison gulped his drink. Joe Gorgon turned and looked lazily up at me.

"You—Gorgon!" I flipped a finger against Joe's chest. "I want a word with you."

"And you are—?" He pretended not to know me.

"Williams—Race Williams." I fell into his humor. I didn't intend to cross him or rile him. I wanted him in an open, happy mood. I wanted the emotions, if any, that came from my message to start from scratch.

"Williams?" He seemed to think, then grinned at the others. "Not the boy detective?"

"Exactly. It's nice, Mr. Gorgon, to think that you remember me. I'm flattered indeed." And I grinned like a school boy who has gulped his cake in one swallow and not burst before the horrified gaze of the principal.

Joe Gorgon frowned slightly. I wasn't one to take anybody's lip, and Joe Gorgon knew it. Or if he didn't know it, Eddie must have told him. Then I guess his own conceit got the better of him, and he figured out that he and Eddie were two different people and that I'd think twice before I tried that game on him. For his frown disappeared and he smiled, his huge head bobbing up and down.

"Well—" he looked around to see that the others appreciated his high class humor, "let us hear what you have to say. Surely I shouldn't mind. Already one of your breed—at least, one who sells his information to the highest bidder—has—. But, come—don't stand there grinning like an ape."

"I've got a message for you." And I leaned down suddenly, twisted my lips slightly, and shot the words at him like any gangster, with deep secret meaning behind them.

"Joe Gorgon," I said. "The Devil is Unchained."

Now, there didn't seem to me much sense in the words, or much for a man to get gaga over. But they paid a grand to deliver and therefore must carry some weight. And they did. If ever a lad got a thousand dollars' worth out of a message, that lad was my client. Those words wiped the smile off Joe Gorgon's face like you'd run a vacuum cleaner over it. There was a sudden quick flash of bright red to his heavy jowls, that gave place almost at once to a dull white. His right hand stretched out and gripped at the table. He half came to his feet, and sank back again—reached for his untasted cup of coffee, slopped it over his vest, set it down again, and gave the sickest smile that ever a gangster pulled off.

"All right, Mr. Joe Gorgon." I guess there was elation in my voice. "Laugh that one off—or play the look of death, and—" I stopped dead and jerked erect. From outside on the street came a shot; another—half a dozen in quick succession, with the rapidity of machine gun action. People jumped to their feet. I stepped back from the table. Billy Riley had taken Joe Gorgon by the arm. People were going toward the door. The head waiter was trying to tell the customers in a high pitched voice that a tire had exploded, and urging them to keep their seats or they'd give the place a bad name. A bad name for the Golden Dog! Not bad comedy, that.

Some one pushed the head waiter in the stomach and walked out the door. Others hesitated. The music broke into life, and I stepped out on the street. A few buildings down the block a tiny crowd had gathered. They were standing around something on the sidewalk. A harness bull was ordering them back. Another was running up the street, and a man in his shirt sleeves stood in a doorway, wildly blowing a police whistle.

From the small private entrance to the Golden Dog came two men. Joe Gorgon walked by himself, though the man beside him—Billy Riley—held his arm. I saw Gorgon wave him aside as he climbed into a taxi, but I saw something else with a grin of satisfaction. Another taxi pulled suddenly from the curb down the street. Through the back window a hand waved to me. Like his namesake in the papers, my boy—Jerry—was also on the job.

I moved toward the ever thickening crowd, pushed my way by a couple of people, grunted as the back of a man half blocked my vision, ran smack into a policeman, and got a look at the dead man on the sidewalk.

It was Toney, the little sleigh rider who had sought Joe Gorgon's protection a short fifteen minutes before. And now—well—he had more holes in him than a sieve. He must have had his back to the gun, and spun when he fell. For plainly in the bright light from the jeweler's window his face stood out. There was no doubt of his identity.

CHAPTER VIII

FOOTSTEPS ON THE STAIRS

Well—that was that. A man had looked a Gorgon in the face and died—or a Gorgon had looked a man in the face and the man had died. Take it any way you wish. Not much loss to the community certainly. Toney had been a shrewd, clever little gangster. A sure shot to gay-cat a job or listen to conversations, or get his nose in wastepaper baskets before the city wagons carted them away. Now—I shrugged my shoulders. It was a cinch that Toney had outlived his usefulness to Joe Gorgon, and his weakening mind and body had become a danger. Anyway, it don't take much reasoning

to say that he was dead. No one would deny that.

I pushed back through the crowd, walked up the street, paused before a United Cigar store and snapped my fingers. What had Joe Gorgon said to me there in the Golden Dog? Words that hadn't seemed to make sense at the time. He had said, "Let us hear what you have to say. Surely I shouldn't mind. Already one of your breed, at least one who sells his information to the highest bidder, has—" And then he broke off. What did he mean? Toney—Toney was selling information to someone—and Eddie Gorgon had left the restaurant to—. Well—Toney had died within a very few minutes. Toney, who had begged Joe Gorgon not to kill him. Toney, a drug addict who—

I shrugged my shoulders. There are times when I don't need a brick building to fall on my head to wise me up to things. And if my thought wasn't true, there was no harm in it. But—I went straight into the cigar store, stepped into a pay telephone booth, and parting with a nickel called the number Colonel McBride had given me.

He answered almost at once. I told him how well his money was spent, and of the tumble Joe Gorgon had taken out of his message.

"By the way," I said casually, "the man—the one that dropped out of your bedroom window tonight. He didn't happen to be a shabby little Italian, not too young, a worn blue suit, yellow brown shoes, a gray flannel shirt none too clean, no tie—and answering to the name 'Toney?'" "

"I—why do you ask?" But the answer to my question was in the tone of his voice.

"Because," I said, "you were right about his fearing death. He was killed tonight. Less than five minutes ago, half a block from the

Golden Dog.” And I told him about Toney coming to the table.

“He was mad—drug crazed—to go to Joe Gorgon. You think—”

“You can’t get a jury to convict on a thought,” I told him. “But Eddie Gorgon left his brother’s table a few minutes before the murder occurred.”

“Good God! that is terrible—terrible.”

“This old man—Giovoni. How important is he to you?”

“He means, perhaps everything—at least, at present. I have a man in Italy investigating the—” and he bit that off. “But Giovoni is safe. Let me know as soon as you can where Joe Gorgon went when he received that message.”

“Yeah. Want me to keep an eye on Giovoni?”

“No, no—that would be the worst thing you could do. Don’t go near El—that place. The man is perfectly safe now.”

Silence on both sides—then he said:

“That’s all!”

And we both hung up.

It lacked a half hour before I was to meet The Flame—but then, perhaps the hour had been suggested by Rudolph Myer because of my other engagement, which he had planned. But I was anxious to get back to my apartment and hear Jerry’s report as to where Joe Gorgon went in such a hurry.

I won’t say I reasoned things out as I rode down town in the taxi. Not me. Reason only too often confuses, especially when you’ve

got little to reason on—not reason with. But thoughts would flash through my mind, and I let them swing along.

The message I had delivered to Joe Gorgon was a knock-out, certainly. No one would deny that. The biggest racketeer in the city had come very close to taking a nose dive. A few words had brought fear to the man who “feared nothing.” Perhaps it was that he feared nothing physically, but the mental reaction to my few words was—

I tapped on the window. We were perhaps a block and a half from The Flame’s address. The taxi pulled to the curb. I stepped out and paid the lad off. One thing in my mind. Was The Flame with me or against me when she sent that note? Anyway, I’d look the block over before meeting her. Not very trusting? Maybe not. Oh—I’ll admit it’s nice, noble, and high minded to have a trust in your fellow man—or fellow woman for that matter. But it’s not exactly healthy in my line of work.

The main street was more or less deserted— just one car. But it stood out in such a neighborhood. A high priced, high powered boat, with a uniformed chauffeur at the wheel. Still, a guy gets used to seeing stranger things than that on the city streets. I passed it up, turned the corner and entered the side street, where according to the number The Flame should live.

Perhaps I got a gulp when I walked past her number. It was a shabby, dreary looking apartment house. Rather hard to connect The Flame up with it. You sort of seemed to think of her with all that was beautiful and, maybe, expensive.

So far I spotted nothing that looked like a trap. I peered into doorways, paced down past half a dozen houses, turned quickly, walked straight to The Flame’s apartment house, found the door unlocked—so ignoring the bells, slid

into the dimly lit lower hall and started up those stairs.

Started up—and stopped dead. And just when I stopped, or just after I stopped—feet a floor above stopped. Not imagination, that. Not—

I went on. Slowly mounting the stairs. Good sense of hearing—instinct? Call it what you will, but something told me that feet preceded me up those stairs—feet that kept a flight ahead of me. Feet that had been coming down when mine started up, and now stepped carefully back up those stairs—in tune with my own footfalls.

I didn't stop to listen any more. I listened without stopping. Some of my steps I made heavy, some I made light. Sometimes I increased my speed, and it threw the other lad—whoever he was—off his stride. He couldn't keep step with me, and two or three times I heard him plainly on the flight above. He was still steadily increasing his speed as I advanced, and I don't believe I gained a step on him.

Then I tried a light whistle—started an air—broke off in the middle of it and heard his running feet stop, and again try to step with mine.

All right. While he retreated there was no danger. He didn't intend to attack me, then. So I started up the third flight, ever watching above for glaring eyes or a threatening form. But none came. Distinctly I heard old boards creak down that hall. A dull sound as if a foot struck against wood, and a door closed as I reached the landing, turned on the fourth floor and mounted the final flight.

In the dim light I made out apartment 5-C. Listened just a moment, before I knocked on the door. I shrugged my shoulders. After all, it wasn't an inviting neighborhood. There was no

reason to connect up the slinking, retreating figure with my visit to The Flame. No reason at all. Yet—I did.

The door opened and I saw her again. There was a hesitancy in her manner which was new to The Flame.

"You—Race. You're early. Just a minute." She closed the door quickly as I entered, left me—so—in the small hall, slipped quickly-down the narrow passage and disappeared from view.

I followed her of course—quickly—silently. She slipped through worn, old curtains, and almost ran across the room. But I reached the curtains in time to see her sweep a bundle of bank notes from the table into a drawer—and something else. Something that glittered, and clinked in the drawer before it snapped shut.

"Now—" She turned, stopped dead when she saw that I was already in the room, half glanced toward the table, shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"Same old trust in The Flame, eh, Race? Well—what do you think of my diggings—my outfit—the reward of honesty?" And in a mock sort of sincerity, "Honesty—the one thing that the rich leave for the poor to fatten on."

I didn't like her mood, so I waited and looked the room over. Things were old and worn, but the place was spotless. The skirt and jacket she wore might have passed for a fashion picture until she got near the light. Then the cheapness of the material forced itself on you in spite of the aristocratic carriage. And as I looked at her I thought of her final sentence in that note. Certainly she was halfway between the girl and the woman.

CHAPTER IX

THE GIRL WITH THE CRIMINAL MIND

When The Flame didn't speak, I tried:

"You didn't bring me here to fill me up on Communism?"

And she laughed.

"No—hardly. That wouldn't be fitting in me. Communism is a hatred of the poor for the rich—not simply an envy. But—" She stepped quickly forward and laid both her hands on my shoulders. "I had to see you again," she said, and those brown eyes sparkled as she looked up at my face. "Sometimes I wonder if it's just my pride that you're the only man I wanted, that I couldn't have—and then I hate myself. Other times I wonder if it's that thing we read about in best sellers, and laugh secretly at. Simply love. Funny. You're the only man who ever—"

"Let's not go into that, Florence." I took her hands off my shoulders. "Let me tell you it's far harder not to love you than it would be to love you. There's your life and mine. I wouldn't have the right to ask any woman to share mine and—"

"Stop!" and the youth went out of her face and the woman crept in. "I made an agreement with you. Anyway, I made it with myself. I'd go straight. And I did. I went straight, though every cop in New York was trying his damndest to drag me back into the life again. The joke of it, Race! They pulled me out of twenty dollar a week jobs, where the chance to rob the cash till might bring me a few dollars. Me. The Flame! Whose advice—or even suggestion—was bid for in the thousands. And what right had they? I've never done a stretch—never even seen the inside of stir. And they rode me, Race. Didn't want to let me take twenty dollars for ten to twelve hours work a day."

She laughed now, and I didn't like her laugh.

"They even had me tossed out of jobs where the boss was paid to take me on. A bought position in a sixth grade store. Even the slimy employment agents, who send you to a job or hire you for one, take it out of a girl's pocketbook or her body. Yes, I found the same graft in the East Side sweat shops. All my life the law has taken things from me—even to that real love in the orphanage, when I was a child. A memory. The one decent thing in my life. But why try to make you understand? Honesty? Why, honesty is simply avoiding or evading the law. You can buy a job in the city today—from the position of the meanest worker on the city dump, to a judgeship of even the higher courts. Well—I'm through."

"Easy does it, Florence." I knew what a woman she was when she worked herself up into one of these fits.

"Easy does it! That's what you tell me. But through the months you let me sit night after night in this lonely room. I loved you then. Maybe I love you now. I don't know. But I hate myself for it. I had you come tonight because I thought—well—just pride. I looked at myself in the glass. I'm still The Flame. I've still got the same active—and, yes—maybe criminal mind; still the same beautiful body. You can't deny that. Now—what do you want me to do with it. Sit here and rot it out in this dirty dive? Sit here—for what? So that you can come in to me during my old age, and tell me that you've bought me a bid to the poorhouse? The poorhouse! Why, you've even got to have money or influence to get into it."

I'd seen The Flame bad before, but never quite like this. Rudolph Myer was right. I shouldn't have come. But still, if I had known the truth—known exactly how I was going to

find her—I'd have come anyway, I suppose. But I simply said:

"I didn't think you wanted me, Florence."

"That's a lie," she said, very calmly. More dangerous for that calm I thought. "That's a lie, Race. You knew I wanted you—and I wanted you tonight. I wanted to look at you again. I've been living in a dream, but Myer let me know the truth. You bought and paid for half the rotten jobs I worked on. He didn't tell me in so many words. He didn't have to. And, Myer—" she stopped, flashed those bright, keen eyes on me now. "Well?"

And that "Well?" was a stickler, you got to admit.

"Florence—" I tried the "soft words turneth away wrath" business. "Why don't you be a good sport? You and I have played the game together—faced death together. Just a couple of good pals. I've got some money. Let me give you a stake, until—"

"Just chums!" And her laugh was like finger nails along a wall. "I suppose you'd want me to show you a good behavior card every month; report in person to Rudolph Myer once a week; hit the sawdust trail and shake a tambourine down in the Bowery! And all this while you go around with a gun in your hand and the peculiar idea of personal ethics which allow you to knock over some gunman and trust to the city to give him a decent burial. No—I don't want your money. When I take something I give something in return for it, and—"

"Such as this." My hand had fallen upon the table and rested on a small object that dug into my palm. I picked that thing up now and held it out to The Flame. I'm no jeweller, you understand, but the thing I held was a ring—and the diamond in it was large and real.

"Yes." The Flame cocked up her chin. "Such as this." She snatched it from me, looked at it a moment and shoved it onto a finger. "Such as this. You want to know why I brought you here tonight? Well—I wanted to tell you this. I wanted to look at you again and know. Now—I'm through. The city doesn't want honest citizens. There are dicks right on the Force today who opened car doors for me and touched their hats when they knew I was riding high in the rackets, who have insulted me when I was straight. Politicians—public office holders—and perhaps even a big criminal lawyer, who you—" She stopped dead, pulled open the drawer of her desk and tossed a roll of bills out to me. "That evens it up. There's every penny, as nearly as I can figure it out, that you spent to keep my brain straight and my body—" She shrugged her shoulders, stepped back and looked at me. "You don't like that line, do you?"

"No—" I said, "I don't. It's cheap stuff. And by 'a criminal lawyer' you don't by any chance refer to Rudolph Myer?"

She laughed. But she ignored my question.

"I've tasted the virtue of poverty and didn't find it palatable. Now—I'm through. I've a chance. I'm going to take it." She looked straight up into my eyes, and those brown glims of hers were brilliant. "And I'm not starting over. I'm not building up something. I'm to meet a mind that is like mine—brilliant, quick, active. I'm starting in again. Starting in at the top of the ladder."

"Yeah?" I pulled a butt, stuck a match to the end of it and took a chestful of smoke. "I'm sure glad, Florence, that you're not overmodest about your own abilities." And as she just looked at me, "Well—you didn't bring me here to walk up and down my vest and dig your heels in at each button, did you?" And when she still played the looking game—the brilliance fading from her eyes and a shrewd, speculative

cunning creeping in, I forgot the “you catch more, flies with molasses than with vinegar” and opened up like a valedictorian.

“Kid,” I told her, “you’ve got guts or you haven’t got guts. There are no two ways about that. You can’t play the game if you can’t stand the gaff. I—” And suddenly, seeing the woman of the night—the Girl with the Criminal Mind—creep into her face, I lost my nerve or made a stab at bringing to the surface the good that I knew—or maybe felt—or maybe only thought—was in The Flame. “Look here, Florence—I’ll play along with you. We’ll meet occasionally. We’ll have dinner together. We’ll come up here afterwards and—”

“And you’ll explain to me the virtues of honest living.” She snapped in on me, and the eyes blazed again. “I’ve told you I’m through. I am giving you a break. After tonight—The Flame lives again. The Girl with the Criminal Mind takes her place on Broadway. And the police and the rotten officials, who thought my reign was over through lack of guts—not being able to stand the gaff—will bow and scrape again.”

I reached out and placed my hands upon her shoulders. She swung slightly, raised those small delicate hands with the quick, living fingers toward me—swayed once, I thought—and maybe only thought—then with a quick jerk she tore my hands from her shoulders.

A simple movement mine—a quick movement hers. But—well—we all have our moments. Weak or strong, I won’t try to lay a name to that one. I’ll simply say that The Flame was a very beautiful woman. I’ll simply say that experience had taught me that to love The Flame was to die, and for a split second I didn’t care. Maybe she lost her chance; maybe I’m wrong, and I simply lost mine. Maybe, again, I stood on the brink of disaster and was saved. Anyway, she spoke her piece. I’ll give her credit for saying what was on her mind, so that there was no misunderstanding it.

“Race,” she said, “you can’t help me and you can’t hurt me. But I can hurt you. I want one favor from you—one last thing I’ll ask. You’ve often said you owe me something.”

“Yes,” I told her very seriously, “I do. If ever you need me I’ll come to you.” I stood watching her now as I finished very slowly. “Even knowing that I may be walking to— into— . Well—I’ll come. That much you can count on. I’ll come.”

“And come armed.” There was a sneer in her voice.

“Yes—and come armed,” I told her. A guy may be willing to be a fool, but draws the line at being a damned fool.

“Well—” she said, “I’m willing to cry quits. You owe me nothing. I owe you nothing. Just one promise I want. That—for two—” and stopping and looking at my face, “that for two weeks you’ll enter into no case—no matter what the inducement—no matter what the incentive.”

I thought a moment, and then:

“I’m crossing your plans—your crooked plans?”

“Yes,” she said very slowly, “you’re crossing my plans—my crooked plans.”

Another moment of thought. A straight look into those brown, hard eyes, and I gave her a direct answer.

“I won’t do it.” That was flat. My ethics may be warped, my ideas twisted, but there’s no guy who can say I don’t like my own game, and don’t play that game as I see it.

“All right!” she snapped suddenly. “You’ve had your warning—or rather, should I

say— your notice.” And with the slightest twist to those thin, delicate lips, “I suppose you still think—or still say—you’ll come to me when I need you—if I need you.”

I looked her smack in the eyes.

“I still say I’ll come to you if you need me— if you send for me.” And very slowly, “And I still say that I’ll come armed.”

“That’s a threat.” She jerked up her chin.

“You can take it as you please. I’ll pay my debt. For no man can tell when The Flame will be a good citizen—a fine woman. But no man can tell either when—”

“She’d lead Race Williams to—to his death, eh? That’s what you want to say, isn’t it?”

“Maybe.” I guess my smile was sort of dead. I won’t say that I loved The Flame. But I will say that I admired her. Certainly, if she was built to do great wrong, she might just as well be built to do great good. You see, the dual personality doesn’t fit in with my practical nature. I always sort of look on it as synonymous with “two faced.” That is, that it’s an outward change, and doesn’t really take place in the individual—but only in the mind of some one who knows the individual. In plain words, there were times when I thought The Flame was all bad, and the good—that youthful, innocent sparkle—was put on to fool others. But fair is fair. There were times also when I felt that The Flame was really all good, and the hard, cruel face—that went with the woman of the night—was put on to hide the real good in her.

There we were, facing each other in that small, sparsely furnished room. The Flame with her back to the curtain by the window, and me with my back against a bare wall, my right hand thrust indifferently into a jacket pocket.

The Flame bit her lip, and emotions you couldn’t lay a finger to ran over her beautiful face. I didn’t bite my lip. I waited. A long minute passed—feet seemed to creak on the worn stairs outside—steal along the hall and stop by the door of apartment 5-C. Just seemed to, you understand. That don’t mean it was nerves on my part. I haven’t any. But I have got a keen pair of ears. Ears that weren’t sure that the sounds— the faint, almost imperceptible sounds they caught—weren’t from the natural, but eerie creakings of an old structure. Let us just say that I liked my back against the wall.

The Flame seemed to be listening too. After a bit, she spoke quickly and hurriedly.

“I’ve played the game as I’ve seen the game. I’ve given you your chance. Now—” she spread out her hands, and her voice was raised—at least, it was shriller, “you stand in my way, Race Williams, and I’ll—I’ll—by God! I’ll crush you.”

There was a curve to the corner of her mouth, a narrowness to those brown eyes from which the sparkle of youth was entirely missing. There was almost a sneer in her words—but certainly there was a threat to them.

“All right,” I told her. “We’ve played the game together and we’ve played it as opponents. I haven’t squawked yet, and I won’t squawk now. I—”

And I broke off suddenly. A knock, not too loud and not too low, upon the outside apartment door.

I swung quickly, half stepped toward that door—and stopped.

“Don’t!” The Flame clutched me by the arm. “I—It’s better not to have it known you came here. Please! The fire-escape. It’s the top

floor— a single flight to the roof. Please, Race. It means more than you think, to me.”

“Then it’s not war yet.” I smiled at her now, took a few steps forward, threw back the tiny curtain, flipped the window open higher, and took a last glance over my shoulder at The Flame, who stood there uncertain—at least, seemingly uncertain—for it’s hard to believe that The Flame could be uncertain about anything. So I’ll just say that she stood there in the center of the room.

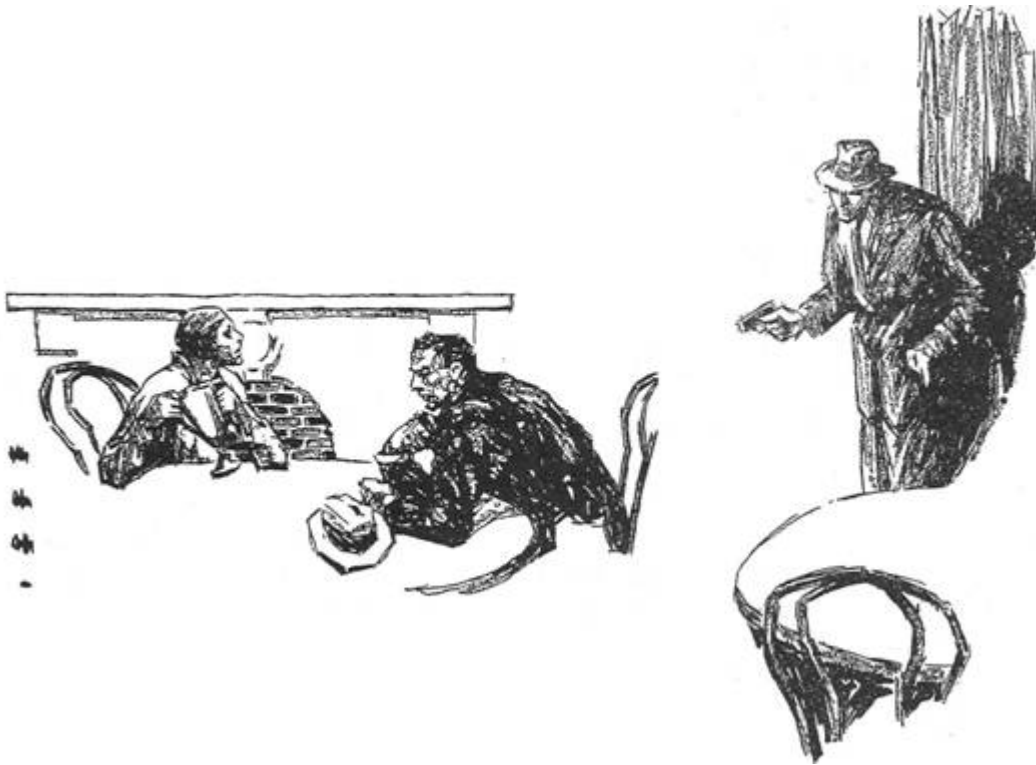
With half an eye on that small, aristocratic right hand of hers with the long

tapering fingers, I threw up a leg and placed a foot on the window sill—and stepped back into the room again. I was looking straight into the sneering eyes and twisted lips of the gangster, Eddie Gorgon—but, much worse, I was also looking straight into the mean, snubbed nose of a forty-five automatic.

As I stepped back, Eddie Gorgon quickly slipped through the window I had so accommodatingly raised for him, and stood with a look of triumphant hatred on his face.

CHAPTER X

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG



HERE WAS NO excuse for it. I wasn't proud of myself at that moment. Certainly I didn't trust The Flame, but at the same time I didn't expect—even if she did decide to hate me—that she'd shove me on the spot so quickly. Truth is truth. I didn't trust The Flame. Hadn't trusted her when I came. But a mind like The Flame's doesn't lead a man to a trap in her own apartment. And the reason why isn't "good ethics" or even "good sportsmanship." It's just common sense. Even in a city where gang murders have ceased to be front page news it's not quite safe to decorate your own room with a corpse.

Now, as I say, the thing was surprising—but not unexpected. And maybe "unexpected" is not the correct word there. Maybe it might be a better choice of words to say that I was simply not unprepared for such an emergency. If I happened to be looking down the nose of Eddie

Gorgon's gun, my gun was drawing a bead some place along about the center of Eddie Gorgon's stomach. And my finger too was tightening upon the trigger as I raised my jacket pocket slightly and picked out the spot where any ordinary man, according to Gray's Anatomy, would wear his heart.

I won't mince words. And I won't say that there aren't heroes in the pictures, and in real life too, for that matter, who can knock a gun out of a man's hand even when shooting from a jacket pocket. I can do it myself—probably could have done it right then. But "probably" isn't enough. And where a bullet through Eddie's arm or leg would have been noble and high minded, it wouldn't have interfered with the quick pressure of his finger upon the trigger of his automatic.

No. I know gangsters. I knew Eddie Gorgon. There was death in those bloodshot eyes. Bum hooch in them too, but I didn't get

that then— and his twisted lips were cut and raw, where I'd leaned on him a few hours before.

But truth is truth. I was going to kill Eddie Gorgon—kill him before he killed me. Nothing saved him now but his tongue, which licked at his lips—and his eyes, that gloated before he talked. He was a lad who liked to shoot a little bull before he shot an enemy—especially when he had that enemy covered.

I wasn't worried. A single roar, a prayer for the dead, and the stiff on the slab in the morgue would be labeled EDDIE GORGON. Eddie Gorgon, the racketeer who had beaten his last rap. I like to see a lad go out with a gun in his hand—a gun gripped tightly in a dead hand. It has a soothing effect on a jury.

Eddie didn't say, "Throw up your hands." He was lucky there. Those simple words would have been the same as the medical examiner's signature on his death certificate, though he didn't know that.

"So," and there was a sort of snap to Eddie's lips when he spoke, "I was right about the dame and you. She's to step out again—so you're back. And I was right about myself too. Me—Eddie Gorgon. There ain't a guy living who's mussed up Eddie Gorgon and lived to tell about it. The boys will know who done you in. The boys'll know why. They'll say it took a Gorgon to step in and smack a gun against Race Williams's chest and blow hell out of him." The grin went, the gun came forward more menacingly. His face shot closer to mine, and his whisky sodden breath made halitosis seem like a rare perfume from the Orient.

"Don't move!" Eddie almost spat the words as I half drew my face back. "I want you to know the truth before you go out. I've not only taken your life but I've taken your dame. The Flame won't be sorry for the message she sent me that you were coming here. She'll be

Big Time now. No one will bother Eddie Gorgon's woman." And with a sneer or a leer—or just a twisted pan, call it what you will, Eddie sputtered on. "She's a neat piece of goods, Race—but they don't come too good for Eddie Gorgon. A guy's life and a guy's woman! Well—it ain't so bad for a bust in the mouth when I wasn't looking. I guess, Race—"

My finger tightened upon the trigger, hesitated a moment, and I shot the words through the side of my mouth at The Flame.

"Is what this rat says true? I don't mind the trap so much." I half shrugged my shoulders and glued my eyes on his finger that held the trigger of the automatic. "But I do think you might have grabbed yourself off a pickpocket, or even a stool-pigeon. Besides which—"

"All right—now," Eddie Gorgon horned in. I had seen the sign in his face while I talked. Just the lust to kill, that so many gangsters work up with dope, or hatred, or passion—but which Eddie Gorgon didn't need to work much in order to bring it to the surface. He was an alley rat; a great guy to hide behind an ash can and shoot a lad in the back. A great guy to—

But no more words. He was a killer. And my finger started to close upon the trigger of my gun. Just a sudden tightening, and—

I held back, my finger half closed, my eyes glued on Eddie's gun. The Flame spoke.

"He lies, of course. Eddie, drop that gun!" There was the single movement of The Flame's right hand, a flash of nickel and ivory, and the girl had jammed a gun against the racketeer's ribs. There was nothing of fear or desperation or hysteria in her action or her words. Just that single movement—and the slightest grunt from Eddie. He didn't have to look down to know. And what's more, he didn't look down.

The sudden impulse to raise my left hand and twist the gun from his died without a movement.

I'll give Eddie credit for that much. He wasn't the movie villain, who, at the first disturbance or even suggestion to look up, lets his gun be taken from him. It takes time, you know, to raise your hand and grab a gun—a second or two. And a second or two may not be much time in life, but it is an eternity in death. Even a novice can close his finger upon a gun trigger in a second. But as I said, Eddie knew his stuff. He saw the danger— from me more than The Flame, and cried out his warning.

"Don't you make a move, Race, or I'll plug ya. The girl ain't got the guts to put a Gorgon on the spot. She ain't—"

"Drop your gun, Eddie." The Flame's voice was hard and cold. "The Flame fears neither man nor devil, and that last, I guess, throws in a Gorgon. I'd rub you out like a dirty mark. Where do you get that stuff about me? Where—"

"You! What did you bring me here for? Why did you send for me?" His gun dropped from close to my head to my chest, and flattened there. "Why, I was smack on the fire-escape." And half incredulous—half pleading, "What's eatin' ya, kid? Didn't I set you up handsome? Didn't I get you rocks and—"

"You! You talk too much. You bought my mind, not—" She laughed. "The Flame your woman! Drop that gun."

"Not me." Eddie Gorgon jabbed the gun harder against my chest. "You ain't still got a yen for this yellow dick, eh? I drop my gun, get knocked over, and you send me a wreath!"

"Talk sense, Eddie." The Flame seemed to try to reason now. "Suppose I did send for you. I didn't expect you to come up here to my

rooms; to have the police drag me over the coals just when I'm ready to step out again. And, you—"

"Me!" said Eddie. "They can't do nothing to me. I'm a Gorgon. Why, kid, I have an alibi that—"

"Would roast me," she cut in, and her voice was hard again. "I tell you, Eddie, if you press that trigger—"

A soft voice broke in from the little hallway.

"Race Williams will shoot suddenly from his right jacket pocket, and be a very much honored newspaper hero." And as my finger half closed, the mellow voice went on, "No, no—Williams. I am sure things should be done more amicably. The gun, Eddie—on the floor—at once!" And in a sudden change of tone that was as metallic as a cheap phonograph, "Drop that gun— Edward!"

Eddie's gun smacked to the floor, like you'd knocked it from his hand with a crowbar. Mine came from my pocket and pounded against the chest of Eddie Gorgon. For the time I had forgotten that knock upon the door. Now—I didn't turn. I didn't need to. Some one stood in the doorway, and that some one undoubtedly had me covered.

CHAPTER XI

THE THIRD GORGON

The voice behind me went on—soft, persuasive, almost like a woman's, but with a sinister meaning to it that belied the words themselves.

"That's a good boy—a fine boy. You are impetuous, Eddie—and I am afraid you have been drinking. You will stand back—so—close to

the wall.” Eddie moved as if a hand directed him. “And you, Florence, will lay your gun there upon the table. Mr. Williams, of course, will keep his. It is his trade. I am afraid he is not so susceptible to suggestion. But I am sure he is not so religiously fanatical as to object if I paraphrase even so great a book as the Bible. ‘Those that live by the sword shall perish by the sword.’ Which, I suppose, if we had a more modern version would go for guns too.”

Feet moved now—slow moving feet. Both Eddie Gorgon and The Flame were unarmed. Eddie Gorgon was leaning against the wall, breathing heavily, but not watching me. Rather, the slow moving feet—and I could just see the shadow cast upon the floor.

I swung quickly and faced the man. Maybe I knew—and maybe I didn’t. Here was the man who hobnobbed with greatness. Here was the man whom a few felt, and fewer mentioned, as the secret power of Joe Gorgon. The man who called judges by their first names, and political leaders by their last. One who had written books on civil and criminal law, though he had never practiced law. But I’ll give you the eyeful as I caught it.

In the first place, he was not armed. There was a thin, Malacca cane over his left arm, a gray glove upon his right hand, and its mate clutched in the fingers of that hand. His muffler, slightly open at the neck, disclosed the whiteness of a boiled shirt. And his braided trouser legs added assurance to the impression that he was in evening dress. But his face got you, and the eyes in that face held you—held you in spite of the shadow thrown on them by his black felt hat.

His face was as white as marble, and his eyes such a deep dark blue that at first glance you’d almost think they were black. There was not a single bit of color in his face and his nose was sharp and straight, his lips a single, thin red line. His eyes didn’t blink when they looked at

me. They just regarded me fixedly; too alive to be compared to glass. Watched me from between heavy lashes that didn’t flicker. The whole outline of his face and perfection of his features couldn’t be compared to a portrait because of the unnatural whiteness of his skin—and the living fire of his eyes.

I hadn’t seen him often—few saw him often. And his picture never graced the papers. But somehow I knew that I was looking into the granitelike countenance of the Third Gorgon, Doctor Michelle Gorgon.

None of us spoke for a moment. Eddie leaned against the wall and stared at the man who, through some freak of Nature, was his brother. The Flame looked at him too, studied him, I think. Maybe I was wrong, but I did get the impression that she had never seen him before— despite the fact that he had called her Florence.

And the Third Gorgon spoke.

“I am not sure,” he said very slowly, “but I feel that at least one of you, and perhaps all of you, owe me a debt of gratitude. But we’ll skip that. It savors too much of our criminal courts. Plenty of knowledge but not enough evidence.” He paused a moment, sniffed at the air, let those flickerless eyes rest on his brother, and half bowed to me.

“We must bow to you, Williams, as the physical dominance in this room—perhaps, thanks to me. Fine wines warm a man’s blood and make more active his brain. Poor liquor, even when taken by another, nauseates me. I know you, of course—have read about you and seen your picture in the papers. I understand you do not go in for murder.” A moment’s pause, and his head cocked sideways as he put those eyes on me. “That—that is true?”

"It depends on what you call murder." Somehow I couldn't feel exactly at ease with this guy.

He shook his head.

"Ah, no. No—not at all. My ideas of murder are not entirely expounded in my books. They are private thoughts and opinions which must be withheld for the public good. And I will not say murder in the legal sense, for if I've followed your exploits correctly you have not obtained your ethics from the criminal code."

"Well—get to the point. What's on your chest?"

His thin lips dropped slightly, and just for the fraction of a second those eyelids flickered before he spoke.

"You disappoint me, Williams. You really disappoint me." And with a sudden snap, "I am speaking of the putrid condition of the air, caused by the presence of my brother. Will you stand in the way of his departure? In plain words—he is unarmed. Are you bent on murdering him?"

"There's the police." Maybe I was sparring for time. "He attempted my life, you know."

"Come—come, my dear Williams." Doctor Gorgon seemed annoyed, and then he smiled—only his lips moving. "But you joke." He turned and looked at The Flame. He stepped close to her. For a minute he stood so—then his hand went beneath his coat, and despite the fact that he was sideways to me I half raised my gun. But when he withdrew his hand it held nothing more dangerous than a pair of nose glasses attached to a very thin black ribbon.

He placed the glasses upon his nose, leaned forward and stooped—for he was close

to a head above The Flame. Then he raised his hand and removed his hat.

If The Flame resented his attitude she did not show it. I saw her little head bob up—those brown eyes, hard and cold, stare back into his. Then he turned to Eddie Gorgon, half impatiently.

"You may go, Eddie." And with a raise of his hand as Eddie started to say something sulkily, "Tut—tut, boy. He shan't kill you, you know. And if he intended to, he would hardly do it in my presence." And when Eddie still held his ground, "That will be all, Edward. Not by the window, you scamp." He crossed the room quickly this time, patted Eddie on the back as he half pushed him toward the door. "I am sure that Williams realizes there is a lady present and will not object to your leaving us."

I didn't object. Maybe I realized there would have been nothing to do. That is, nothing to do but lay a chunk of lead in Eddie's carcass or call the police. But one thing I did get, and that was that Eddie Gorgon feared that affected "Edward" of his brother's more than even my gun.

"Affected." Well—I'll withdraw that word. No—Damn it. One thing that Doctor Gorgon got over to me, even if I don't get it over to others, was his sincerity—or perhaps, just his own belief in himself. He sure was the white haired boy, though now that his hat was off, there was just the glimmer of gray in the jet blackness of his hair. The first few strands of it, which hung near his forehead.

The Flame looked quickly up at me as Doctor Gorgon followed his brother to the hall. I smiled back at her. Not a pleasant smile, maybe—but one of confidence. There was a peculiar look in her eyes. A questioning, uncertain look.

"Well—" she said at length—while the hollow, whispered, inaudible tones of conversation came from the little hall, "why don't you say something? Don't stand there looking accusingly at me. I—. What right have you? Why—. Well—say something!"

And I did.

"He travels farthest who travels alone." I did a bit of quoting myself, like the Doctor. "And that probably goes for traveling fastest too. Your friend, the Doctor, noticed the gun in my pocket, which covered his brother." And after a pause, "I wonder if you did, and if you were protecting Eddie or me."

"You think I brought you here to—to your death? Well—why don't you say so?"

"Should I?" I shrugged my shoulders. "Is it necessary? Rudolph Myer said I was the only one who took you for being weak minded. At least, Eddie was here—said you sent for him, and you didn't deny it. That he muffed the works by acting too soon, and—perhaps—talking too much, isn't your fault. But you certainly picked yourself a fine little playmate, when you did decide to—"

"Race," she said very slowly, "you and I can't fool ourselves any longer. At least, I can't fool myself. I've never posed as being good. Quite the contrary. To hear you talk you'd think I had suddenly changed. Just one thing. You don't believe I led you into a trap tonight?"

I sort of laughed.

"What else could I—"

"The same old song." She came close to me, put those glims on me. "Always accusing—never believing. Come—" I let her get close to me, let her place her hands on my shoulders—even let her slip them back about my neck and onto the back of my head.

"Come—" she said again, "you don't believe it. Yes or no."

"Yes—" I said, "I do believe it. You can't come the 'kid act' on me any longer. You can't—"

"You fool," she whispered hoarsely, looking toward the door. "I never ate my heart out because I couldn't get you—have you. I could have had you whenever I wanted you—you or any other man. But I wanted you to want me, too. Don't you see? I didn't want you like the others. I could always have made you—can make you love me. Because—well—look here."

That little body of hers was close to me. Warm breath was on my cheeks, hands pressed the back of my head. I just grinned down at her, lifted my hands slowly to take hers from about my neck—and she did it. One quick movement; one quick jerk—lips that touched mine; a breath that seemed to go deep into my body; a burning in my forehead; a quick, dizzy rush of blood—and her eyes, flaming and soft, and—. Oh, hell—it happened. Just for a second—maybe a split second—I crushed The Flame to me, held her so—then thrust her from me, flinging her half across the room. A chair turned, spun a moment, and toppled to the floor.

CHAPTER XII

QUEER TALK

Had I lost my head? I don't know. Why lie about such things? Yet—. Maybe I hadn't been carried away by her presence—. But The Flame was beautiful; The Flame was—. Why shouldn't a man hold a beautiful woman?

I leaned against the wall and looked at her. She was smiling at me. What was in her mind? Here was a wonderful woman. No—

something else struck me then. The line I had just pulled on her. "He travels farthest who travels alone." And she was coming across the room to me.

The woman! No—the woman was gone now. It was the girl, Florence Drummond. The sparkle of youth in her eyes—a softness—a realness that made me rub my hand across my glims and blink.

"You're right, Race. Maybe, after all—" She stopped dead, and straightened. The hall door closed. Soft, slow feet—and Doctor Michelle Gorgon was in the room.

He ignored my presence completely—went straight to Florence, lifted both her hands in his and stared at her without a word. And The Flame looked back at him. Nothing of anger, just a straight look from clear deep eyes. No color came into her cheeks; no embarrassment to those great brown orbs.

"So you are The Flame. The Girl with the Criminal Mind. Do you know that you are a very fortunate young lady? Very fortunate indeed. I think that I could like you a great deal. I—"

"Doctor Gorgon," I crossed the room, "Miss Drummond has had a very trying evening as it is. I think perhaps we will call it a night."

He was very tall. He turned his head slowly and looked back over his shoulder at me. For some time he regarded me fixedly with those unblinking blue eyes.

There was nothing of anger in them—nothing even of hostility. More annoying for lack of either, I guess. He looked like a scientist studying some bug. And, damn it all—what's more, he looked natural. Not as if he was affecting it, but as if he really meant it. As if he were trying to be—well—not polite—say, tolerant—and hide from me the fact that he regarded himself very much my superior.

"I wonder," he said at length, "if you know exactly who I am."

"Yes—" I said, "I do. And it don't mean a thing to me. And I wonder if you know exactly who I am and—"

"And that it will mean quite a bit to me?" I think that he smiled—at least, his lips parted. "I am afraid, Race Williams, that you mean very little to me. To my brothers—yes. Their blood is hot, and the brute strength of the beast is dominant in them. But I am very sure that in you I would find little to worry about. I am afraid I have little interest in the physical. I abhor, as I said, firearms—shrink most appallingly from violence, and physical exertion of any kind incapacitates me for days. You don't go in for murder, you see— and where I must bow most humbly to your physical superiority, it wouldn't really interest me personally. No—you can not mean anything to me. You—" he paused a moment, and I saw his eyes rest upon the overturned chair, move quickly from The Flame to me, and then he said, "Well— perhaps you may mean something to me, but not in the sense you believe."

He certainly could talk. There were no two ways about that. And what's more, he could read what was on my mind—or, maybe, written upon my face. Anyway, I did have it in my mind to show him something of the physical that would surprise him. He looked big and strong enough not to be playing the woman.

"Really, Williams, I am sure you do not intend to use physical violence—at least, in the presence of a lady. You—"

"Doctor," I told him, "you may be hot stuff with Eddie and a few other bar flies. And you may stand in with certain big men—and it may even be true what's hinted; that you—well— that you're the Third Gorgon that I'd always looked on as sort of an underworld myth

until you stared Eddie down. But if you are the big guy behind the political racket, the judgeship scandal racket, and even the murder racket— well—drop Miss Drummond’s hands, or I’ll throw you down the stairs.”

He didn’t get mad—which made me just a bit madder.

“I wonder if you would,” he said slowly. “It might be interesting and—” He shook his head. “No—no, we anticipate things.” But he dropped The Flame’s hands.

“I think you had better go, Race,” The Flame said.

“Not me,” I told her. “I’ll wait until the Doctor decides to make an ‘out’—which will be soon, I’m sure.”

“Don’t be a fool.” But there was more of interest in The Flame’s face than anger. “I—I won’t need you.”

“Good God!” I didn’t like that “I kissed you and got you” look in her eyes and I let her know it. “I wasn’t thinking of you—but myself,” I told her. Which was true. And I looked at Michelle Gorgon when I got off that last crack—and wondered. Yep, here was a lad I didn’t understand, and what I don’t understand I don’t like.

“But Doctor Gorgon has something to say to me. Something that I’d like very much to hear.” And she didn’t put those glims of hers on him like she did when she wanted to swing a lad her way. She looked him straight in the eyes—clear, interested—more than interested. Deeply anxious.

“In his way Williams is right.” Doctor Gorgon nodded condescendingly. “We must see life—or even death—through the brain that is given us. I do not think, dear lady, that I need say more than I have already said to you. I will

not say that you have been foolish, for I do not know the thoughts that that mind of yours might carry. Certainly, not what others might read there. But let us say that if you are not correcting an error, you are making a change of plans.” He walked to the table where the money The Flame had tossed there for me still laid. He ran his fingers through the bills, looked at The Flame, jerked open the drawer, and without hesitation lifted out some bills and some jewelry—held them out, so, to The Flame.

“This is all?” he asked.

“No—” The Flame pointed to the ring on her finger.

“I see,” he said. “I will take it. No—just throw it there on the table. You understand, even though it all comes from the same treasury, it is better that it is returned to the— the sender. For it was his thought, you see—and I am afraid, not exactly a business one.”

“The money on the table,” The Flame spoke very slowly, “belongs to Mr. Williams.”

“Seven hundred dollars.” This time Michelle Gorgon’s eyebrows moved slightly. “Well— comparisons might be odious. This is yours, Mr. Williams?” He held the bills out to me.

I was just about to knock them from his hand when The Flame spoke.

“Surely, Race,” she said. “If later events prove unpleasant to you, you’re not planning on throwing that in my face.”

I took the money and shoved it into my pocket. I didn’t like the present racket. I felt stupid standing there with the gun in my hand, but I was still standing there—and stupid or not stupid, I shoved that gun into my jacket pocket and still kept my hand on it.

Very methodically Michelle Gorgon searched through the drawer of that table, found an envelope, studied its size a moment, then put the money and the jewelry into it, added something from his own wallet and carefully sealed it. Then he crossed again to The Flame and started in with his line as he looked steadily at her and ignored me.

"You are a very beautiful woman—that is, to any man. To me, now—if your limbs were twisted things; your face a hideous death mask, you would still be a very beautiful woman—if those eyes remained untouched. The eyes, my dear, are the peepholes to the inner beauty of the mind. I wonder if you understand me. Understand why I verbally maim your beautiful body."

"I think I do," said The Flame. "I think— I do."

"And you do not mind?"

"No—" she said. "I do not mind."

"I am not playing at the magician, then. The mystery of whose tricks are known only to himself."

"No—" she said. "I understand you fully."

I had stood enough of being made monkeys out of, and I let them know it.

"Well—I don't understand," I said. "And now, Doctor, you and I are on our way. If you don't believe in the physical, here's your chance."

He turned, thrust the envelope toward me and said:

"I wonder if you would care to return this envelope to its rightful owner."

"No—" said The Flame. "He'd—he'd kill him, or be killed."

"I think not," said Michelle Gorgon. "But even so," he shrugged his shoulders, "the one is a cross which I am beginning unwillingly to bear—and the other—" he looked at me hard now—and I glared back at him, "a threatening menace on the horizon. Maybe an imaginary menace," and turning from me to The Flame—and back to me again, "perhaps a real one whom—" A pause, and suddenly, before I could get a word in, "Will you, or will you not return these—this envelope to its sender."

I took the envelope and shoved it carelessly into my pocket.

"Yes—" I said, "I will. Who is the man?"

"Eddie Gorgon." There was a slight chuckle. The arm that I had half raised, to bring down on his shoulder was caught, and I was walking from the room with Doctor Michelle Gorgon.

I didn't break away. I didn't twist my arm free and hurl him across the room. Somehow I felt silly enough. Somehow, kid like and foolish like, I wanted to carry the thing off as well as he did. Here was a lad who talked and talked, and said nothing. Or did he say a lot, and I didn't have the wits to get it? But he never threatened—never raised his voice in anger. Treated me in rather good natured contempt—and, to myself, I wondered if we'd been alone would it have been the same. Wouldn't I have just hauled off and cracked him one, or—? But there's not much pride in that thought.

And The Flame. Damn The Flame. I wondered if she knew how I felt. That was what hurt the most—that was what cut. Yep, The Flame was laughing at me. Not out loud. Not in a way you could notice even. Maybe she wasn't even laughing at me. But that will give you an idea of the way I felt. These two seemed to have

reached an understanding which I did not get, though I heard every word.

This Third Gorgon—this wop with the white skin and the steady, unblinking eyes, the soft voice and—. Damn it, he didn't seem like a wop—didn't seem like anything but what he represented himself to be—a—. But that's what I was representing him to be. Certainly he had done something to The Flame—reached some understanding with her.

Mind you, a guy can feel stupid, silly, and what have you, and still not walk up in front of a machine gun and wait for the gunman to turn the crank.

I let Doctor Gorgon hold his elbow crooked beneath my arm. One reason was because of The Flame. The other because he had taken my left elbow and my right hand still held the gun. Why hadn't he grabbed at that right arm? Then I'd have some excuse to hit him one.

CHAPTER XIII

JUST ANOTHER WOP

Now, in the outer hall I jerked my arm free, twisted Michelle Gorgon slightly and none too gently, and slapped my gun against his side. Maybe he wasn't any gangster—maybe he didn't tote a gun. But the lower city just reeked with the rumor that, if the truth were told, Doctor Michelle Gorgon had put more men on the spot, big guys, racketeers, than any gang leader that ever putrifed our city. It was even rumoured that a noted jurist had dined with Michelle Gorgon at his home the night of his disappearance.

But back to facts as I knew them and concerned me personally. Eddie Gorgon had gone out in that hall a short while before. The

hall was dimly lit, but enough to see plainly our two figures walking down those stairs, and distinguish one from the other. Besides which, I hadn't and wouldn't search Michelle Gorgon. Oh—not that I believed all that talk about his not carting a gun—though certainly he hadn't produced one when he entered The Flame's apartment. But— I just couldn't search him. That superior air of his! I'd show him I didn't care if he carried a gun or not. If he did, and wanted to use it on me, that was his privilege.

No, it wasn't because of him personally, that I shoved a gun against his side. It was because of the gang he represented, ruled, through his brothers—or maybe just his brother, Joe—for Eddie could only be counted on to shoot a guy through the back at three paces.

"You know, Williams, you are not a very trusting soul," Michelle Gorgon said to me as we went down those stairs. "A gun in my side, now. I abhor the melodramatic—sudden death by violence except of course in the abstract."

I didn't exactly get that one, so I let it ride. Later, I got the impression that by "abstract" he meant he killed his enemies without being present in person—just his mind controlling and directing the hand of the one he selected to do his murdering for him.

My gun clamped against his side, though, was paying a few dividends. For, late as the hour was, Doctor Gorgon hummed softly as he descended the stairs, and once a lump of blackness which might have been a shadow or the lurking body of a gunman, seemed to fade back into the darkness. Of course, shadows don't make boards creak, as they fade away. But, again, the house was old, and I wasn't in a particularly good humor.

When we stepped out on the pavement a Rolls Royce stood before the building. A man wrapped in a great coat swung open the car

door as I caught the initials in gold stamped upon it. Another, at the wheel, brought the engine into life—though that part I guessed at, for you hardly heard it purr.

“I’ll take you home, of course,” he told me, as I hid the gun partly under my coat as we neared the car door. “Not just courtesy, my dear Williams—not just because you were about to suggest any such procedure—but because your life is very dear to me tonight. I wouldn’t have anything happen to you while with me, or just after leaving me. You see, the police—or at least one imaginative policeman has taken quite an interest in me. It is a help, of course. It is convenient to know that, when anything unpleasant happens that might be laid to the interests of my brother, Joe, through the watchfulness of our great police system suspicion can not direct its unpleasant breath upon me.”

I was willing to go with him, all right. And as I got into the car and sat down beside him, he said—and there was little of humor in his voice—rather, he seemed to think he was stating a great universal truth.

“Yours is rather a silly position tonight—now. Like the man who held the lion by the tail and was both afraid to hang on and afraid to let go.” He raised the speaking tube. “Park Avenue, and home,” he said.

Michelle Gorgon dropped the tube.

“Do you know, Williams, that doesn’t seem quite courteous; that you should see me home instead of my seeing you? But a strange fancy struck me. I would like you to pay me a visit—like to talk with you. You wouldn’t consider it venturesome to visit me—now—at this late hour? I think that maybe I can interest you.” And as he rambled on I began to like it better—feel better toward him. I just leaned back and listened. Sometimes these lads who talk, no matter how clever they are, say

something—say something they shouldn’t. Yet, never for a moment did I forget that Michelle Gorgon was a big man. Not one seeking power, but one who had obtained it. And even in the underworld, even in crooked politics, you don’t talk yourself to the top—or, at least, if you do—you talk yourself out again. Now—why was he dragging me along? Why did he take such an interest in me?

And once he cut in quickly in his ramblings.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Who could help it?” I answered, for there had been an irritable note in his voice, and I rather liked it. So, I thought, there is a way to get under that skin of his. And with that thought I felt better. Funny. I encouraged him to talk now.

“Why do you want me to visit you—and why should I?”

“Because I will interest you. As to your safety. If you were my most feared enemy, my home would be the safest spot for you in the whole city of New York. The police watch it occasionally. One policeman in particular. And I think, while I’m on the subject, I’ll tell you his name. It amuses me and helps establish my reputation, this interest in me. My life is an open book. The police see me come and go. But my mind is closed to all but myself. Silly, this following me about, watching my home. And how long do you think it would take me to stop it—have this busy-body removed from the Force? Just long enough to lift a phone and put a word in the ear of the right party. You might tell my shadow that. I believe you know him. His name is Detective Sergeant O’Rourke, an efficient officer. I should hate to see him removed from duty. You might tell him that, any day, I may grow tired of his attentions. And when that day comes, it will be too late for Sergeant O’Rourke. You see, it will be greatly to

his advantage to grow tired of me before I grow tired of him.”

“Yeah. I’ll tell him when I see him, Doctor. This is your place?”

I was just a bit surprised. We had drawn up before one of the finest apartment houses on Park Avenue. No rendezvous of gangsters, this.

“You hardly expect hidden passageways here, and secret methods of disposing of bodies.” He smiled. “As to sub-cellars—well—my quarters are thirty-three stories above the street. There are thirty-two to the building.

“You are on the roof?” I asked.

“On the roof. One might fall off, of course. But even one with your love of violence can see the danger to me in that. Really, it is possible— but a man would have to be most desperate, and greatly in fear of—of you. No, no—” this as we walked into the spacious hall and entered an elevator. “Death must have its part in life, even in my life, Williams. But it must be smoothed over, and distant—seen, as I said, in the abstract. In plain words. If one annoys, it is better to have him removed through, shall I say—suggestion?”

We sped quickly to the roof, walked down a corridor. Gorgon stopped before a heavy door, waited several seconds, then placed a key in the lock and swung the door open. And as we walked across the wind-swept roof, beneath the brightness of the stars, toward that California bungalow, he chatted on.

“You see, Williams, why I might go a long way not to give all this up. The Italian emigrant has gone far in your city—risen perhaps by the customs your laws so agreeably set out for him. In your city—my city—a man first must banish conscience. Second, create a mind without a body, without emotions.”

We had crossed the roof now, passed under a canopy by the small trees between giant plants. There was real grass, clipped as smooth as a putting green, a tiny fountain, and the ripple of falling water against the slight night wind.

There were three steps of fancy brick and we were on the small porch. A single twist of the door knob—no waiting this time—and I followed Doctor Gorgon into a large, square hall.

He tossed his coat and stick onto a high backed chair, placed his hat upon them, and motioned me to do the same with my hat. But the night was not cold. I wasn’t sporting a top coat. My felt hat had cost me twelve bucks—I’d keep it with me. It wouldn’t be at all surprising if I had to leave the house of Michelle Gorgon in a hurry.

But he was persistent, and I wasn’t going to be small about it. I let him take the hat from me and place it on the chair.

“A social call, Williams—and let us hope, a friendly call. A hat upon your knee would break the illusion and savor distinctly of the law, the police, at least, as we know the police detective in books and plays. Come, I never keep the servants up. I have always felt rather mentally above the teeming millions of the city. This home of mine is perhaps the realization in a material way of my mental attitude. In here—we will be quite alone.”

He walked across the generous hall to a smaller hall, and across that narrow stretch through curtains, and stood aside for me to precede him, as he held a door open.

I didn’t like it but I couldn’t see any harm in it. My hand was still in my jacket pocket; the Doctor’s body so close to mine that I pushed against it as I passed, and just stepped far

enough into that room to—. And I drew a surprise.

It was a library. Expensively bound volumes, deep, soft chairs, heavily curtained recesses before windows. But I saw none of that then. I was looking at the figure of a woman in a large chair, the rug hiding her limbs and body to well above the waist. The neck was long and slender, but there were discolorations upon it—heavy, purplish-yellow stretches, which covered the face as well. Patches of skin that seemed to have long since healed, after a burn.

And the woman's hand. I saw her left hand stretched out upon the rug. Twisted, sort of inhuman fingers, thin, emaciated, crippled arm. And Doctor Gorgon had stepped into the room beside me. He too saw the woman.

Yep—you could knock him. He was no superman at that moment. Chalk white, his face may have been before—perhaps it couldn't get any whiter—but at least it took on a new hue. A yellowish white of milk, with blotches in the perfect skin. Blotches like the curdling of milk, just as it turns sour. One hand went under his collar and pulled at it as his mouth hung open. For nearly a minute he looked at the woman. And so did I.

And I was onto Doctor Michelle Gorgon. I thought, too, as I watched his face that perhaps I was the only one in the whole city who was onto him. For that minute, maybe less, he was just what I had placed him for—Eddie for—Joe Gorgon for. Doctor Michelle Gorgon was just a wop, just a human, physical, rotten bit of the life he controlled and stood above. A racketeer, a gangster, a slimy underworld rat. Believe me, for that best part of sixty seconds he did more tricks with his pan than our greatest actor ever pulled off in a Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde performance.

His mouth opened, his lower lip hung down.

Little bubbles of saliva gathered as he tucked his lip in and pulled at it with his upper teeth. He didn't speak. Not quite. One read, though, all the foul words he would have said if he could have spoken when he desired. But in a moment of mental strain and physical reaction he got hold of himself. Yet, his voice trembled when he finally spoke to the woman.

"What are you doing here? How dare you come, and—" He swung suddenly on me. "Outside," he said. "In the hall. Outside, Williams!"

Outside it was. It wasn't my party. The heavy door leading to that little hall nearly took my arm off as he closed it and clicked the key. One thing I had seen before that door got me. That was the woman's eyes. Deep brown they were. Mysterious, living, beautiful eyes, like—. And I took a gasp. Like The Flame's. Like—. And the words of Doctor Gorgon popped into my head, chased one another around and formed a picture. A woman with a maimed, twisted body. Nothing but her eyes; nothing—

And from behind that locked door the woman cried out— Shri!ll, piercing. A scream of terror, even horror.

"No—God! No. He must never see me like this. I won't come again. I swear I won't. I wanted a glass—a mirror." A sound like an open palm against a face and the cry of the woman. "Help—he's going to kill me." And this time the voice died, as if a hand stilled it. Not a hand across the mouth—but a sudden gurgling sound to the stilled voice, as if fingers had clutched at her throat—followed by the sound as if bodies struggled, or one body moved heavily.

I lifted my hand and knocked upon the door. A moment of silence followed my knock. Then I struck the door again. And when I say "struck" I mean just that. Heavy as the door

was, it rattled like thin slats when I pounded my fist against it.

CHAPTER XIV

I GO IN FOR ACTION

That second knock was a wow, and no mistake.

It brought response from inside. There was a jolt, the slipping of a chair, a whispered voice—another, I thought, which sounded like a man's. Feet crossed to the door, and Michelle Gorgon spoke. His voice was soft again, but there was still a tremor in it.

"There, there, Mr. Williams. A little difficulty—family difficulty, that you would not understand. And please don't pound like that again. I'll be with you in a minute. I—"

Feet moved across the floor. Feet that didn't belong to Michelle Gorgon, by the door. Feet that were too heavy for that delicate, crippled woman in the big chair.

I know I was silly. It wasn't any of my business. If I had any sense I'd have lifted my hat and left the place. Yet, I'm the sort of a guy who does silly things, and likes to do them. Why think it out and reason it? Reason's a damn poor excuse, most times, for not having guts. I didn't reason then—and I didn't think it out. I obeyed the impulse. And the impulse was to—well—here was a chance to talk to Doctor Gorgon. And in a way, at least, I understood—and he would understand in a minute. Damn it, he didn't expect me to keep pounding on that door, like an hysterical woman.

"Open that door—and keep the lady there," I said. "No talking like a book now, Doctor. You'll have to talk like a man for once. Open the door now, or, by God! I'll put a bullet through the lock."

He answered.

"If you do that you will wake the house. Men who might not understand." Feet were moving quickly inside—heavy feet, that were weighted under a burden, I thought. The woman was being taken from the room by another door.

"No more wind, Doc." I was giving him the truth now. "Open the door, or get out of the way while a bullet goes through the lock."

"Williams, I—"

And that was that. Doctor Gorgon might speak just to hear himself talk, but I didn't. There was a single roar of my gun, the splintering of wood—and a shattered lock. My hand on the knob, my shoulders hunched, with a thrust of my body I had that door open and was in the room. The time for talk was over. When I want an "in" I generally get an "in." And when I take a shot at a lock, that ends that lock. Forty-four is the caliber of my guns. Maybe old fashioned and not much in use today—but a forty-four can certainly do a surprising lot of damage.

This was my field, my game. I didn't more than step through that door when I slammed it behind me and took one quick slant at Doctor Gorgon. His eyes were staring now, but for a different reason than his usual attitude—the "nothing can excite me" stuff. Well—I won't say staring—rather, bulging. The deep blue pools were hitting high tide, and sort of flooding their banks.

But both his hands were empty, and a curtain on the far side of the library was swinging slightly as I caught a glimpse of the trouser leg of a man.

I brought up my gun, leveled it on that waving curtain and the disappearing leg, and

gave the boy who owned the blue trousered limb a chance to live.

"You behind the curtain. Stop—or I'll—"

"Stop!" Doctor Gorgon's voice rang out. "There has been a grave misunderstanding. You may return Madame to the room at once."

And Madame was returned. Michelle Gorgon may have known a lot more words than I did, but, believe me, the few words I have serve my purpose at times. This was one of those times.

Two men carried the woman. She shrieked as they brought her back, in a kind of a swing chair, between them. Personally, they were rather stupid looking fellows but they knew what a gun was and the purpose of it, and the havoc it might raise, for they kept their eyes riveted on mine.

And Madame bellowed when they brought her in. She was not a pretty sight now, worse even than before. Her hair streamed over her forehead and her mouth was twisting spasmodically.

She sort of gasped out her words.

"Michelle—please—good God! not like this. That any man could see me like this—my hair—" She was trying to fix her hair with that twisted hand, and making a mess out of it.

Well, I was into it now, and I stepped across the room and stood before her.

Doctor Gorgon crossed quickly to her too, smoothed back her hair and patted her hand. He was leaning down and looking at her. I pulled at his shoulder and straightened him.

"Madame," I said, "you called for help. What—"

"She is not well." Michelle Gorgon horned in quickly—rather too quickly, I thought, though I don't know why I thought it. "She has had a sudden illusion that she would see some one again— some one very dear to her. And unless she is more careful, that illusion will come true— much more careful." And as I turned sharply on him, "I mean her health, of course. As you see, it is not—"

"Can the chatter." And turning to the woman, "What's the trouble, lady?"

Her eyes were suddenly alive.

"Trouble—trouble. I dreamed it. I do not know. Take me away, Michelle. That a man should see me like this, when I was once so beautiful. A young man too. Take me away. But tell him, Michelle. Let me hear you tell the gentleman how very beautiful I was before. Tell him." There was almost a child-like anxiety in her voice, a sudden quick flash to her eyes, that died in the making, a simper in her voice, a coquettish tilt to her head that was either disgusting or tragic, I wasn't sure which.

"Yes, she was a very beautiful woman, Mr. Williams. Very beautiful indeed." Michelle Gorgon leaned close to her again and looked into her eyes. "Indeed—" he said very slowly, "she was once—once very beautiful."

The woman screamed, threw herself back in the chair and lay quite still. I was very close to her—very close to Michelle Gorgon. He had said nothing to her that I hadn't heard. Certainly he had not touched her, or even pulled "a face on her."

"Take Madame to Mrs. O'Connor." Gorgon spoke to the men who held the chair— then to me, "With your permission, of course." And there was a bit of a sneer to his voice.

"Sure. It's all right by me," I said easily. But, damn it, I didn't feel entirely at ease. Not

that I was sorry I shot through that lock. Maybe it was a mistake, maybe it wasn't. But we all make lots of mistakes. None, more than I. I'm not a lad who won't admit a thing is wrong, just because he did it. Not me. But—well if it was wrong it was just too damn bad. Nothing could change it now. Nothing I could do then would take a forty-four bullet and shove it back into my gun again. Why cry over it?

"Explain the—the explosion," Michelle Gorgon said to one of the men. And when the man he spoke to looked at me rather blankly, "You might say to the servants that Madame has caused a disturbance. That is all." He watched them carry the woman from the room, even walked to the curtains and pulled the rug that covered her legs slightly closer about her feet, and held the curtains open as they passed from view. Then he turned to me.

"You might have killed me with that shot," he said. "Absurd, of course—but I could swear I felt or heard the bullet pass very close to me. The newspapers evidently do not exaggerate your— your idiosyncrasies. You do not know it, Williams, but you took quite an advantage of me. I allow nothing untoward to happen in my house."

He was talking more, I think to pull himself together. And one thing struck me. I hadn't noticed it before. Maybe it was because he was disturbed, but when he threw a big word into his conversation he seemed to grope for it—feel for it, as if he tried it out first in his own mind before he spoke it. He walked up and down a bit as he talked, finally paused, looked at me a moment, and walking to the wall pressed a button.

The man who came to the door I had rather demolished was old, bent, and every inch the trained servant. Michelle Gorgon looked at him a moment, hesitated, then spoke.

"The No. 1 Sherry, Carleton—Carleton." He repeated the name "Carleton" very slowly, as if he liked the sound of it and hoped that I would. Then to the man again, "Madame has had a spell. We are very fond of her, Carleton—very fond of her indeed. We must put up with a great deal."

"Very good, sir. The No. 1 Sherry." And the man left the room.

Michelle Gorgon had exaggerated, to say the least, when he told me the servants had retired.

"There, there, Williams." Michelle Gorgon paced the room slowly as he talked. "You have made it a trying evening. I do not believe, though, that the shot was heard outside, or below. It was unfortunate, and I forgive you. I was angry of course, to see—to see Madame so." He shrugged his shoulders and half extended his arms. "It is my burden, my cross, and I am afraid there are times when I do not bear it like a man. I hope you will need no further explanation. You are my guest. May I simply say that the lady is my wife and that she met with a very serious accident, which maimed her body and affected her mind. She has never seen her face since the accident. The shock might kill her. We watch her rather closely. As you see, there are no mirrors in this room. But the reflection in the glass of a picture, the highly polished surface of a cigarette case, and such objects, have given her more than a suspicion. But she does not know the whole truth. Only a mirror could tell her that.

"I have been advised to send her away—a private hospital. But she does not wish to go." He looked dreamily at the ceiling, as if in reminiscent thought. "It would be better for her, of course, far better. But we cling to sentiment, Williams, almost childishly hang onto the subconscious allurements of the past. Indeed, she was a very beautiful, and a very accomplished woman. Like—" He paused, the

door opened, and the servant entered with a tray.

"Like The Flame." I helped him out. I don't know why that was on my mind, but it was.

"Like The Flame—yes," he said very slowly. He reached for a glass, lifted the bottle and poured me out a drink, and taking one himself, motioned Carleton to place the tray and bottle on the table.

"You, if you are a judge, will appreciate this wine," he held the amber glass, with its long stem, before the lamp. "I have a friend who puts a seal upon it before it leaves France. It comes from the very cellars of the Marguery, in Paris. My own seal is placed upon each bottle before it is even moved from the shelf. It is very rare and—"

Michelle Gorgon paused and looked at a white card which lay upon the tray. He half bowed to me, stayed Carleton with a raised hand and said:

"You'll excuse me, Williams." And he turned over the card, read it through carefully, moved his eyebrows a bit, but did not permit his eyes to blink.

"I told him, sir—" Carleton started.

"Apologies are unnecessary, Carleton. He would not have come unless— You may tell him to come in." A moment's hesitation, and just before Carleton passed out the door, "A bottle of whisky. We must not be inhospitable." And to me, "It is my brother, Joe. You do not object, I am sure."

Maybe I did object. At least unconsciously, for I half came to my feet. Then I shrugged my shoulders but said nothing. Joe Gorgon had pushed himself to the top as a racketeer because of his speed with a gun. Yet, I

don't believe there's a lad living today, or dead either for that matter, who can pull on me. But then, a lad with a gun hand like that wouldn't be dead, which gave me the thought that Joe Gorgon was still alive.

"You will excuse me again, Williams." Doctor Gorgon picked up a bit of paper beside the telephone on the table, studied it a moment, turned it face down and glanced at the clock on the mantel. It was eighteen minutes past two.

"It is almost like a play," he went on. "Each scene set to intrigue the audience. Each scene—. But this will be my brother, Joe. An impetuous man, dynamic, invigorating. But let me know what you think of the Sherry."

I watched him sip his and heard him say, as he tipped the glass.

"Here's to crime—your business, and mine."

And, damn it, the "mine" was gotten off in a way that made the wine stick in my throat before going down. Sinister, crafty, evil. There was no expression on his face, but for a moment I thought that I saw the real man. The man I had seen a part of that minute when Madame—or whatever fancy name you'd hang on her—was discovered in the room. A stern face, an intelligent face. Nothing of the sensual or animal in it. Yet, again, for a fraction of a second I saw, or felt that I saw, the real Michelle Gorgon, and it gave me a certain satisfaction.

CHAPTER XV

DEATH STRIKES AGAIN

Joe Gorgon walked into the room. His eyes flashed and his lips twitched as he saw me. He had known I was there, all right. There were no

two ways about that. He hardly noticed the quick steps of Carleton, but he did spot the bottle of whisky the servant placed on the table, poured himself a quick and generous drink and threw it into him before he spoke a word. Somehow I felt that Joe was the kind of a lad for me, the kind of a lad to do business with. His first words were classic, as I understand the classic. He looked at his brother and jerked a thumb toward me.

"What's he here for?" And then quickly, "Williams and me had words tonight. I have a message for you, alone. God in—"

He stopped, poured himself another drink, knocked it off, stared at his brother, Michelle Gorgon, a moment, half raised a hand as if to slap it down upon the table, changed his mind and threw himself into a chair, crossing his legs in a position of ease. Just a position, mind you. Joe Gorgon was a worried man.

"What's he here for!" Michelle Gorgon repeated his brother's words. "I might ask you the same question about yourself, Joe. I invited Mr. Williams up to pay me a visit. That's more than you—but no matter. My home is chaos. My—" And suddenly, "Why am I indebted to you for this visit?"

"I want to see you alone," said Joe. And leaning forward, "I've got to see you alone."

I liked the byplay between the brothers. The one, Joe, the best known character on Broadway. The other, well, no man could lay a finger to Doctor Michelle Gorgon.

"Got to!" Michelle Gorgon leaned slightly forward. "Got to—Joseph. Really, I'm afraid you forget—" and a smile, at least a smile with his lips—or anyway, a twist to his lips, "You forget the duty of a host to his guest."

"Cripes!" Joe Gorgon came to his feet. "Williams is here. He knows something. He—. Damn it, Mike—he's not going out of here a—"

I fingered my gun, of course, raised my pocket slightly too. Even thought of pulling the rod out and laying it on my knees, in a sociable way. But I didn't. I took another sip of the wine and understood why Joe drank whisky. Not that the wine wasn't good. It was probably great stuff, great stuff for a garden party. But you'd have to go at it wholesale to get a kick out of it.

"When thieves fall out honest men get their due," was going strong with me—of course, fully realizing that the honest man must have his hand on a rod and a finger caressing a trigger— or he'd get a "due" that would be surprising to him.

Joe Gorgon stopped talking. Michelle's eyelids never flickered. The good natured twist to his mouth, that might be better described as tolerance rather than a smile, never changed. But the pupils of his eyes seemed to contract, as if you looked too long at a thing in a bright light, and found it getting smaller and smaller, yet sharper, as it got smaller. His right hand went below the table, and he lifted a book and tossed it across the polished surface so that it spun slightly before it struck Joe's outstretched hand and lay still.

Joe's hand fell upon the book. His mean little eyes grew large as his brother's contracted. He sort of clutched at his side when he spoke.

"For me?" he said. "Good God! you're not giving that book to me!" And his face cleared slightly as he glanced at me. "For Williams."

"Maybe. I hope not." Michelle Gorgon turned his eyes on me, and I looked down at the expensively bound volume. I saw the title stamped in gold upon the cover.

"The Tanglewood Tales," I read, "by Nathaniel Hawthorne."

I took another sip of the wine, leaned out, and with my free left hand flipped back the pages. It was a deluxe edition, and the volume opened at once to THE GORGON'S HEAD. I grinned up at Michelle.

"For me?" I said, fingering the book.

"I hope not," said Michelle Gorgon again. "Indeed, I hope not. But it's not all fancy, Race, that mythical tale of Hawthorne's. History repeats itself."

"I want to speak to you alone." Joe Gorgon threw off another drink, and his brother glanced disparagingly at the bottle and sipped his wine.

"Anything you have to say, Joe, can be said in front of Williams, here."

"No, it can't," said Joe. And the liquor was doing him some good, for he glared back at his brother now. "This talking around corners may be good stuff with your crowd, not mine. Williams, here, is one of my kind. He wants straight talk. At least, he gives straight talk. You're—. Yes, damn it, I'll get it in. You're sitting on the edge of a volcano and—. I have a message to deliver to you, alone."

And that was my cue. I thought I knew why Joe Gorgon had visited his brother. I thought I knew the message he had to deliver. I had seen that message of mine throw Joe higher than a kite. Why not work it for a double header? Why not find what effect it would have on the Third Gorgon, the brains of the three brothers? Why not deliver that message myself? And I decided to try it. I said:

"Why argue the point out? I delivered a little message to Joe, here. He wants to pass it

on to you. I'll save you trouble and give it to you myself, Doctor." And before Joe could horn in I shot it out, with all my flair for the dramatic, and with the memory of Joe's contorted map when he heard it.

"Michelle Gorgon," I said. "The Devil is Unchained."

It worked twice on Joe. He stretched out a hand quickly and grabbed his brother's arm. His face twisted, and his lips parted at the corners. And he watched carefully the features of his brother, Michelle; watched, I thought, for Michelle to give a single shriek, lie down and roll over.

But Michelle Gorgon still smiled with his lips. He said simply:

"How droll. What a droll message!"

"Don't you understand?" Joe Gorgon shook his brother by the arm. "Have these years so dulled your—"

"Stop!" Michelle Gorgon shot the words through his teeth. There was an animal-like viciousness in the way his head shot forward, as he glared at his brother. "You're trying to push a peanut wagon across this living room, just as you pushed it on Canal street twenty-three years ago. You had your stand then, Joe. You protected that stand. You enticed rival vendors up an alley and put the fear of Joe Gorgon into their hearts, and went your way and protected your corner, and sold two bags of peanuts where you had sold one before. And now, in your heart you're still running the same peanut racket, still entertaining the same fears, still drinking the same poison. Now—" Michelle Gorgon paused. The phone rang sharply on the table beside him.

"You'll pardon me, gentlemen." He half bowed to me, very seriously, and to his brother with a touch of sarcasm. "I think that I am to

have a message that will be of much interest to each one of us, more so than Williams' rather em—epigrammatic reference to the devil." He picked up the phone and said: "Doctor Gorgon speaking. Yes, I understand. I have not been at home. Oh, I see. No, I was not asleep. I am interested in all that affects the life, the tranquil life, of our city." A long pause, and then, "Thank you very much. I shall read of it at breakfast, in the morning."

He placed the receiver on the hook. Carefully filled up his wine glass, lit a cigarette and settled back comfortably in the chair. He eyed us now.

Those same unblinking globes, his elbows on the arm of his chair, the tips of his fingers on either hand coming slowly together. It was some time before he spoke, and then only in way of forestalling the sudden words that started from Joe Gorgon.

"It's a funny world," said Michelle Gorgon slowly. "A very funny world indeed. It will hardly interest either of you. But I just received a message that an Italian gentleman, lately landed in this country, was stabbed to death at Doctor Elrod's Sanitarium. Ah—most distressing. Most distressing."

CHAPTER XVI ON THE SPOT

Of course I understood what Michelle Gorgon meant. Giovoni, whom Colonel McBride and I had gone to so much trouble to protect—Colonel McBride very nearly losing his life when we moved the Italian gentleman from the city hospital to Doctor Elrod's Sanitarium—was dead. Murdered within a few hours. I knew it. I believed it. But—

"No—" I cried out as I jumped to my feet. "What time—and where were you, Doctor Michelle Gorgon?" I stopped and sat down again. But this time when I stretched out my hand, it reached for Joe Gorgon's bottle of whisky and not the No. 1 Sherry.

"Really," said Michelle Gorgon, "your emotions, Williams, do you proud. A poor Italian gentleman. How distressing. But you were saying something about—. Was it—er—that an evil spirit had broken his chains?" And leaning forward slightly, "Or was it that the devil was chained again, chained this time forever, in death."

Confused? Yes, I was confused, and mad. Was this the reason that Michelle Gorgon had brought me to his home? So that I would be with him? So that he would know I could not be interfering with this murder he had planned? For that he had planned it I had little doubt. As to Joe, it seemed a cinch that he wasn't in it. His eyes just bulged.

Michelle Gorgon walked slowly around the table and laid a hand upon his brother's shoulder.

"Like our good friend, Williams, here, Joseph, you are a man of action. And I daresay it serves our purpose and is necessary in our every day life. But we must not forget that the physical is only an impulse, directed by the mental. When it is not so, we are told that it is reactionary, impulsive, instinctive, maybe—which is simply the polite way of placing us on the level with animals. When the brain ceases to function and leaves the body, it becomes a useless thing, no matter, Joe, if that brain is not a part of that particular body." A pause. "I see I confuse you there. But try and remember that a brain is necessary to the body, to your body, whether it be your brain or my brain, Joe. One brain, then, may control many bodies—but many bodies can not control one brain. It—" Michelle Gorgon stopped and looked at the

bewildered face of his brother. "But no matter," he said quickly. "You understand that I am always ready to help and advise you. Ready and anxious, even, but never compelled to. In plain words, your visit here tonight was unnecessary and inopportune. You have seen that."

"Yes—" said Joe, "I have seen that. And, the visit of Williams?"

Michelle Gorgon smiled at me.

"A weakness of mine, Joe. A petty vanity, which all great minds are subject to. For the present you have nothing to worry you. You may sleep and play and—" He looked at the bottle and shrugged his shoulders. "Mr. Race Williams has been taken care of for tonight." He put his hand before his mouth, stifled a yawn or an affected yawn. "The hour is late. You will excuse me, Williams, I know. The interview is over."

I hadn't had my say; hadn't had half a chance to open up, and now, damn it, he didn't give me the opportunity. Joe Gorgon had moved toward the hall door. Of course I moved with him. Maybe I should have held my ground and believed in the Sanctity of the Home stuff. But I didn't. And it was too late now. Like a woman, Michelle Gorgon had had the last word. He turned, sought the little door that his wife had gone through before, and left us flat.

There was nothing for me to do but leave—leave with Joe Gorgon, presumably New York's biggest and most feared racketeer.

We passed out the front door, across the roof under the covered canopy, and through the thick, steel door which let us into the upper hall of the apartment house.

"He's a great guy, isn't he, Race?" Joe pushed out his chest and looked me over.

The elevator door clanged open, a sleepy eyed operator banged the door closed, and we descended to the street.

Silently Joe and I made our way through the spacious hall with its great pillars and towering plants—out onto Park Avenue.

"Williams," Joe Gorgon didn't threaten. He spoke his stuff like a man. "You know me and I know you. Judgeships have been bought and sold before your time and before my time—and will be long after it. Things haven't changed any in the city. It's simply newspaper competition. My world—our world—is a rather small one, after all. I've never laid a sucker on the spot. Men want money—you and me and them. You're a persistent bird and no mistake. You rile a guy—rile him bad. But you can't change life. I daresay there ain't a lad in the city today better informed than you. Yet, you can't do anything to me—nor Mike." He half looked back up the apartment as he chuckled in the "Mike." "Well—Michelle may talk in circles, but when he strikes he strikes straight and hard."

"Well," I said, "come to the point."

"Yeah." He bit at a match and spat a piece of it in the gutter. "It's a bad time for too much excitement. How much do you want to chuck the game and take up golf?"

"I don't play golf," I told him.

"Oh—I mean—" He paused, scratched the other end of the match on the box and stuck it to a black cigar. "All right. You and me have made our names stand out a bit. We've both seen plenty of trouble. Now, you're asking for it. That's it, isn't it?"

"I guess so, Joe," I said.

"Okay!" He looked at me a moment and grinned. "The look of a Gorgon." But his smile was pleasant. "It's a silly racket. But it's paid

dividends in the right places. You'd be surprised if you knew the sales increase in Hawthorne's bit of work. But—take care of yourself. S'long."

Joe Gorgon turned, and was gone. There were no two ways about what he meant. In the language of the underworld, Race Williams was on the spot.

I went home. Any way you look at it, it had been a busy night. On the spot. Well, it wasn't the first time I was put on the spot and wouldn't be the last, I hoped. If I took a little trip for my health every time I was threatened I'd have been around the world a hundred or more times, and still traveling. No, sir, there would be nothing for yours truly, Race Williams, to do for a living unless it was conducting world tours.

That doesn't mean I didn't take the threat of the Gorgons seriously. Besides which, it rather pleased and flattered me. In the first place, they had something to fear from me. A dope fiend might be knocked over on the public street. An unknown Italian might be stabbed to death in a hospital. But the doing in of Race Williams is a different thing, again. Besides, which, some of the best racketeers in the city have been after me, and missed. But they didn't stay after me very long.

I'm not a lad who runs when the bullets fly— at least, if I do run, I run forward and not backward. And if Joe Gorgon wouldn't have any touch of conscience about putting a bullet in me, I wouldn't have any either about putting one in him. An even break, that.

Jerry was waiting up for me.

"There's a lad been calling you on the phone. Sputtered, he did—and seemed to think you spent your time with the receiver clamped to your ear. Trying to make a telephone operator out of me too, and—"

"Did he hang a tag on himself, Jerry?" I asked.

"No. He said you'd know. And for you not to go out again until he got you. He'd ring every fifteen minutes. But, Gawd! He's been buzzing up the bell every five, I think. There you are. Seven minutes, by the clock." Jerry pushed his hands out as the phone rang.

It was my client, Colonel McBride. His mouth was full of words, his words full of sputters. He sounded like a bunch of Japanese firecrackers.

But I got enough.

"The man, Giovoni—dead—murdered—stabbed to death in the hospital."

"I know," I said. Giovoni, of course, was our little friend that I had carted about.

"How—how do you know?" he demanded breathlessly.

"Does it matter?" I asked him. "The question is, how did they know where he was? But here's a surprise for you. I spent the evening, or the last hour, with Doctor Michelle Gorgon. Some one was kind enough to ring him up and tell him of the murder. How important was Giovoni? I mean, to you, not himself."

"Important!" He fairly gasped the words. "Giovoni was Michelle Gorgon's father-in-law. He was everything. The man who could return Doctor Gorgon to Italy for a brutal murder—clear him out of the country—straighten—"

When he stopped for breath I encouraged.

"His father-in-law?" I didn't get that. The woman called Madame had not looked like a wop.

The fire-crackers went on.

"Yes, at least, I think so. I was told that. Oh— damn it—I have nothing to go on, now. Giovoni never talked much, never gave me much information. He wanted to confront Michelle Gorgon and denounce him. Pay him back for—Michelle Gorgon killed Giovoni's daughter years back, in Italy. It was a brutal murder. Damn it, man, he saw his daughter murdered, watched it, helpless and—"

So he, Giovoni, was not the father of Madame.

"He told you this? He—"

"No, he didn't tell me. He was an old man. He lived his life, spent his days, in an Italian prison. It was vengeance to him. Toney, who you said was killed, told me, the little drug addict. I brought Giovoni from Italy. Now he's dead. How did they know where he was?"

"You must have talked to some one."

"No one, not a soul. I learned enough from Giovoni and Toney. I have sent an agent to Naples to investigate the story that Michelle Gorgon killed his wife there, over twenty years ago. She was Giovoni's daughter, and her name was Rose Marie. The story is that Michelle Gorgon was convicted of the crime, and escaped. It may be another week before I learn the truth from Italy. In that week of waiting we will leave Michelle Gorgon alone—make him feel that he is safe from the crimes of the past, that he actually committed himself—at least, if the whole thing is not a fabric of lies or the hallucinations of a drug crazed mind. It is possible that Toney may have misled both Giovoni and me.

"Would you be willing, Mr. Williams? I need your services against the Gorgons if this proves true or false, and I will mail you a check in the morning as a retainer. But don't come to

see me. Don't ring me up. I want Michelle Gorgon to think that I have dropped you, perhaps even dropped him. I will get in touch with you when I hear from Italy, or from one who knows much, but will not talk yet. It may be only a few days. It may be a week. What do you say? Will you risk it? The pay will be good."

"Don't forget to mail the check in the morning," was my answer.

CHAPTER XVII

INFLUENCE VERSUS GUN-PLAY

As a matter of fact it was ten days before I again heard from my client, Colonel Charles Halsey McBride. But the check had come, and where it wasn't a fortune, it was for ten thousand dollars. Which is plenty of jack, as real money goes today.

But I kept to the letter of Colonel McBride's instruction. I didn't frequent any place where I might meet the Gorgons. That was a little tough. It might look to the Gorgons as if I were afraid of that "on the spot" threat. Also, I still had the envelope containing the currency and jewelry which Michelle Gorgon had asked me to return to his brother, Eddie. Yep, the temptation was strong to look Eddie up and slip it in his hand. For the money and jewelry were given to The Flame by Eddie—as an inducement, I guess, to bring her into the Gorgon outfit. But Doctor Michelle Gorgon had looked at The Flame and seen bigger things for her. So it was that he suggested rather sarcastically that I return the money and jewelry to Eddie Gorgon.

Anyway, since the killing of Toney, the little drug addict, not far from the Golden Dog night club, Eddie had sort of disappeared from his usual haunts in the city. That is, for several days. The last couple of days he was back again.

But I understood that the police were not looking for him. Such was the power of Michelle Gorgon— or the so-called cleverness of the police in giving Eddie a free run. Take your choice.

But, as I said, it was ten days before I heard from Colonel McBride. Then, on Thursday evening, at exactly eleven-fifteen, he called me on the phone.

“I should have called you before.” He got down to business. “Giovoni, Toney, it all seemed so strange. Yet Toney came over on the boat with the Gorgon brothers, over twenty years ago. They were called Gorgonette then. Michelle was twenty-seven then, but looked younger, Joe no more than in his twenties, and Eddie just a small boy. Williams, we may have to start over, try to prove something here in New York. You see, I thought we could pin this crime of years back on Michelle Gorgon. No excitement in the city; no involving others; no influence, no bribery, no jury fixing to fight against. Just the turning of Michelle Gorgon over to the Italian authorities for the murder of his wife years back. Now the Italian investigation seems to have proved a—well—entirely false.”

“There must be something in it. Giovoni was murdered. Toney was murdered. And certainly by the Gorgons. Why kill them if they didn’t fear what they could say?”

“Yes. But, Williams, we should have a long talk. My life was attempted yesterday. Some one else has told me that Michelle Gorgon did kill his wife in Italy. But on top of that I have indisputable evidence from my agent in Naples that Michelle Gorgon, or Michelle Gorgonette was never married in Italy. But, enough talk on the phone. I am wondering if I should come to see you or have you come and—”

“I’ll come and see you,” I cut in quickly. “The Gorgons have killed two men, who for all they know may have told you something. There was an attempt on your life, you say. If the Gorgons think you know too much, then you are a menace to them. And get this straight, Colonel. The Gorgons have a direct and efficient way of dealing with menaces. I’ve been looking up the Gorgon record during the past week. And I guess I can name as many murders that they committed as any dick on the Force, including your friend, Sergeant O’Rourke. But naming them and presenting them as evidence to a jury are two different stories, which the Gorgons know as well as I do.

“It’s well known in the underworld that Joe Gorgon shot down Lieutenant Carlsley over four years ago. Yet, they couldn’t even get the grand jury to indict Joe. Then there’s Eddie Gorgon’s brutal murder of the laundry owner who defied the laundry racket and paid for it with his life. At least four people saw that murder. No graft there. The jury was composed of honest citizens. That was straight out and out terror. One witness was drowned; another had disappeared; and two others changed their stories right on the witness stand, giving a description of a murderer that would better fit any man in the city of New York than it would Eddie Gorgon. Friends gave Eddie a dinner and presented him with a loving cup the night he was freed.

“And what’s more, you’re right about Michelle Gorgon. He’s the brains of the whole show. Directs the killing, covers himself, and never has a hand in it. ‘Murder in the abstract’ is what he calls it. He—” I paused, strained my ear against the receiver. Not a sound. “Are you listening?” I asked, just in a natural voice. No one likes to shoot his trap off just to hear himself talk. At least, I don’t.

“Are you listening?” I tried again, his time louder. Perhaps an anxious note came into my voice as I strained my ears to catch the

faintest breath. And I thought that I heard something. A distant voice, or a buzzer, or, damn it, maybe just the odd sounds that the telephone wires put on as an added attraction to the subscriber.

I jiggled the receiver hook, spoke quickly— maybe louder—maybe fearfully. Just instinct. Just those nerves I talk about in others and deny having myself. But somehow I felt that tragedy had suddenly stepped into that distant room, that something had happened to—. And then, when I was sure, and about to jerk the receiver back on the hook and dash from the room, his voice came, low, soft—and maybe it was caution in it instead of fear, maybe an anxiety instead of dread, maybe—. But he whispered, for I barely caught the words.

“Come down then. I’ve got a visitor. I think maybe I’ll learn the truth.”

The voice died. The receiver clicked across the wire, and silence. But had there been a roar—the beginning of a roar, just before that receiver dropped back upon the hook, or had there—? Hell, these Gorgon boys could stir up fancies. Fancies? I thought of the dead snowbird before the night club, the little Italian with the knife in his chest, the—.

“Jerry,” I grabbed up my hat and stepped to the apartment door, “I’m going out again. And put your hat on. I’m taking you bye-bye.”

Jerry’s eyes shone, his lips parted and his big, uneven teeth jumped into the sudden gap. But he didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to get ready. Though I seldom took Jerry with me on any such errand he always hoped that I would, and was always ready. Besides which, Jerry knew his underworld by being kicked around it, not from books or the papers. And he was the best shadow since Mary’s little lamb fell foul of some mint sauce.

It didn’t take Jerry long to turn the corner, dash to the garage and rush my car out. And we were on our way.

“Big thing you’re going on, isn’t it, Boss?” Jerry just bubbled with enthusiasm.

“Big enough, Jerry,” I told him, as I skipped over to Fifth Avenue. I like action, none better. Maybe I got a thrill now. I daresay I was the only man in the city of New York, or out of it, that the Gorgons had put on the spot, and still lived. And what’s more, still intended to remain alive.

Jerry tried again.

“Them Gorgons ain’t it?” And when I looked at him, “When I followed Big Joe I knew who lived in the swell dump he went to. His brother, the Doctor. It’s gospel in the right places that Joe never makes a big move but the Doctor advises it. He never pushed no cart on the Avenue, did the Doctor. He never played any gat in Joe’s rise. Most of the big timers don’t even know the Doctor to speak to. But they know what Joe means when he says, “I’ll think it over,” or “I’ll tell ya tomorrow.” I remember once O’Hara, the big bootlegger, the wise money, hearing him say to Joe Gorgon, a year or two before O’Hara got bumped off, and I came with you—”

“All right, Jerry,” I helped him out. This lingering over a story was Jerry’s way of finding out if I were interested, “what did Mr. O’Hara pull on Mr. Joseph Gorgon?”

“It was a liquor deal, I think, a big one, for control of the entire Bronx. When Joe told him what was what, O’Hara says, ‘Are you speaking through your own mouth, Joe, or through the mouth of the Third Gorgon?’ And, Bing! Like that, when Joe gave him the office that he was simply an echo, O’Hara smacked right in on the deal—like nothing at all. I hear as how the Doctor makes judges now, and sells

justice at so much a head. They say as how he can pull a murderer right out of the Tombs for the right price. That's how he gets his money, and—. But if it was me, I'd say this Eddie Gorgon is the worst of the lot. Shoot you in the back like THAT." He snapped his fingers.

"In the back, eh Jerry?"

"Yeah. That's his way, unless it's a snowbird. Do you think he got little Toney that night?"

"Maybe." I was listening though. "But I think, Jerry, if I had to fear any man, I'd pick the influence to fear. It comes natural and sometimes easy to pop at a guy who's standing behind a rod he didn't aim right, or pull the trigger quick enough. But influence, you see, hasn't any body."

Jerry scratched his head.

"It don't sound right." He seemed to think aloud. "But I think I get what you mean. This Third Gorgon don't sport no firearms. That may be hot stuff for the police, or you, with your finicky ideas. But there's a hundred or more guys in the city who'd find it much easier to give a guy the works who's unarmed than—"

"But those guys won't. Maybe there's no reason for them to do it. And maybe a good reason why they shouldn't. You wouldn't want to be the guy who knocked over Joe Gorgon's brother, would you?"

"No," said Jerry, "I wouldn't. But Joe Gorgon only kills for business, for necessity, while Eddie—. Well—he's got the killer instinct, Boss. You might duck in and out, and hide from influence—but you can't do nothing with a gun against your back."

"And that's the point," I told him. "It's influence, Jerry, that puts that gun against your back, whether it's Eddie's gun or Joe's gun, or a

hundred or more other guns. If you kill a rat, another takes its place. If you kill a dozen rats, a dozen take their place. But if you kill influence, you kill where the rats breed. How the devil can you walk in and shoot down an unarmed man," and, very slowly, "and get away with it?"

"Well, they all get it sooner or later," Jerry said, philosophically. "But if Eddie Gorgon was after me, like I hear as how he's after you, I'd forget influence and shoot the guts out of Eddie Gorgon."

Not elegant? Maybe not. But practical just the same. I simply said:

"Eddie Gorgon is only a common murderer, and as such not to be worried about. You see, it's influence again, Jerry. If it wasn't for his brother, he'd have been taken for a ride or roasted at Sing Sing long ago. Now, get this training into your head. A common murderer is only as good as the gun he draws, if you can forget what's behind him. But—. Here's where we lay up. My business is just around the corner."

CHAPTER XVIII ON THE LONELY STREET

We parked the car and I took Jerry as far as the corner with me. Colonel McBride's hangout was Number 137.

"No. 137," I told Jerry, as I tried to point out the house down the street. "It's possible—" and I stepped back from the corner. Of course I couldn't be sure, that is, as to the identity of the man who moved restlessly in the shadows across from 137, but one thing was certain. He was conspicuous enough to be a flat-foot; defiant enough to give the office to any marauder that No. 137 was protected by the law and not a safe place to bother. I often

wonder why the police go in so much to prevent crime, that is, temporarily, by a display of law, when a little cagy work might capture the criminal and prevent the crime permanently.

“Stick around,” I told Jerry. “If you see any one you fancy, follow him and give me a report later.” And as Jerry grinned up at me, I gave him the orders he liked so well. “On your own, Jerry,” I said, “Scout around the block behind, if you like.”

“Right’o, Boss.” Jerry half raised a hand in salute. And I turned the corner and walked toward 137. Nearly half a short block, it was, and I’m telling you that, for some reason, no one ever found a block so enmeshed with danger, maybe imaginary danger. But you’ve got to admit that since I was in this case every trick had been taken by the Gorgons. And now the fear, well, I won’t admit the word fear, maybe, but anyway, the apprehension that the Gorgons were about to take another trick—yep, in spite of the fact that a bulky shadow, without an attempt at concealment, was crossing the street before I got halfway down the block. And that bulky shadow had all the earmarks of a headquarters detective.

So things were safe enough from that position. I spun on my heel and turned quickly back, slipping close to the shadows of the old houses. Once I looked over my shoulder. The man was hurrying toward me. I increased my pace, reached the corner again and turned it quickly, paused by the building and stuck my eye back down the street.

The man was on my side of the street now, on the house No. 137’s side. He had his hat in his hand and was scratching his head. Twice he stepped toward the corner and twice he drew back again. I couldn’t even see his face, yet I thought that I could read his mind. He was told to watch that house, to watch who came to it. It wasn’t up to him to think for himself.

Finally he hurried back down the street, paused for a moment before 137, and then quickly crossed the street and hurried up the steps of the house opposite. I smiled at that. It struck me that I was to gather the impression that he was an ordinary householder, going home, while he watched me from the darkness of the doorway.

I shrugged my shoulders. There are front doors as well as back doors. After all, I might be wrong about this watcher. But anyway, I wanted my visit to be private.

My car was still parked in the middle of the block, but Jerry was gone. I knew Jerry’s way. He’d walk clean around that block. I skipped down to the next side street. It wouldn’t be so hard to measure off the distance, slip down an alley, straddle a fence and drop into the rear yard of 137.

But I didn’t do that little thing. Just about where I guessed the house behind 137 should be two figures emerged and crossed quickly to a big sedan parked by the curb. You could clearly make the figures out, though to recognize them was not so easy. There was not enough light. But one was big enough to be Colonel Charles Halsey McBride.

As that black sedan door opened, the smaller one of the two men paused, drew back a bit and quickly shoved off the arm of the other, that clutched at his. I jerked out a gun and ran down the street.

One of those two men, the one I thought my client, the Colonel, had thrown up his hands and cried out. A figure had suddenly jumped from the closed car and clutched him. Two other shadows bounded down the steps from a dark vestibule and were on him from behind. Almost in the time it takes to tell it, that one man was bundled into the car and the other man had escaped and was running down the street, away from me.

There was no chance to overtake that car. It had jumped ahead in second gear and was dashing down the block. I saw it swing into Broadway under a light, sway perilously as it turned left, and disappeared from view. But I thought too that I saw a slim, boyish form come from an area way and start in pursuit of the man who had fled. And with a little gulp of satisfaction I thought that I recognized that slim pursuing figure as my assistant, Jerry.

Now, I could have gotten the man who ran down the block in the same direction the fleeing car had taken. He wasn't very fast, and slightly bent, and rather uncertain.

But just as I took out after him came more trouble from behind me. I heard the tires skid as a car turned the corner from the same direction I had come. I jumped quickly for the first retreat.

A two foot drop into a basement entrance. Turning, I leveled my gun as the car screeched to a stop at the curb. The occupants of that car had seen me all right, for two men hopped to the street.

I put my gun in my pocket and called out to the broad shouldered man who was slipping along with his back close to the building, toward my hiding place. I had gotten a good look at his map.

"Glory be to God, Race Williams," said Sergeant O'Rourke. "Surely it's not you that's making all this disturbance! You'll be the bloke that started down the street a few minutes ago, just before the light flashed."

"What light?" I asked him.

"The—well—the Colonel's. If he needed help he had only to flash his light on and off in the front room, where he sleeps. And he did just that."

"When?" I asked.

"Less than three minutes ago."

I counted up quickly. The time to leave his room, go down the stairs, pass through the lower floor into the back yard, climb the high fence that must be there and pass through the alley to the street. And he hadn't left that alley in a hurry. Just a slow walk, and—.

"He couldn't have flashed a light in his front room," I told O'Rourke, "less than three minutes ago."

"But he did." O'Rourke nodded emphatically as he grinned. "I had me own eyes on it. I thought maybe the—some one might try and pay him a visit, so I left the way open for an 'in,' you understand. Not an 'out.' And it'll be about three minutes, now, since the light flashed. The boys will be playing the front door, while we take the back. Come on, Race. The Colonel will be safe as a fiddle, with his door locked and his gun in his hand and the police busting in. Make it snappy. I've got a few boys across from the front of the house who'll be in by now. I took no chances."

I grabbed O'Rourke's arm as I followed him into the alley, two other dicks closing in behind us.

And I told him what I had seen, watched his feet hesitate, watched his hands that were gripping the high fence let go their hold, as the full significance of what I said caught him.

"You don't think one of those men was the Colonel?" O'Rourke asked anxiously; then shaking me, "You do?"

"I do." I gave him the truth.

"Did the other man have a gun in his ribs and—? But he couldn't. The Colonel's door was

heavy. Two windows facing on the street with a man below them and one in the house across the way, watching. No, he wouldn't open that door for any one. That, he promised me. But come on. Maybe it was—"

"Two other fellows," I started sarcastically, and stopped. What was the good of riding O'Rourke now? If damage was done, it was done. And, another thing. It struck me suddenly. O'Rourke, or no one else, could have prevented the man leaving that house. Certainly, if it was the Colonel, he went of his own free will. Maybe, under some threat, maybe, under some promise, maybe, with some one he trusted. Maybe—. But the light! If he had flashed the light as the pre-prepared signal to O'Rourke, then he had gone in fear. But that light! He wouldn't have had time. And I gave it up. We were over the fence, in the yard, at the foot of the steps leading to the back door.

O'Rourke gave his orders in a low voice. Placing men carefully to watch the cellar windows, and then growling roughly for me to come on, he climbed the steps to the rear kitchen door— found it open and entered the house.

Lights were blazing now. Flatties pounded through the rooms. Some of them I knew, some I didn't. Some were the best detectives on the city Force. A tall, straight figure with iron gray hair spoke to O'Rourke.

"The front room is empty. The bed has not been slept in. Evidently he wasn't expecting to retire at—at the time whatever it was happened. But the Colonel's gone."

"Yes," said O'Rourke. "No sign of any one. Search the house."

"Men going through it now," said the gray haired dick. And as a lad holding an axe came into the room, black and disheveled, "About the cellar, Tim?"

"Even stirred up the coal." A round Irish face grinned. "Not a chance for a mouse to hide away."

"You got the axe, I see. Give it to me." The old dick addressed Tim.

"Er, what for?" demanded O'Rourke.

"There's a closet door that's locked, and a key missing, in his nib's bedroom." The dick jerked a thumb upward. "It may mean nothing, but we'll have a look."

"Give me that axe." O'Rourke took the axe, pounded up the stairs, with me at his heels. He nodded to the cop who stood in the outer room, and walked to the closet door in the bedroom. He pulled at the knob and said:

"Hi, Colonel." Listened a moment, half lifted the axe and put it down again, and turned to the cop. "Don't want anything disturbed here. Papers and the likes of that. A strong man should jerk that door smack off its hinges." He grabbed at the door. A quick jerk, and O'Rourke cursed. The door held fast. Then he spotted the lamp cord knotted to the end of the bed, and it took his mind off the door. But it was curled on the floor and no longer hung over the sill, as it did when I first visited that house.

"A lad might have come up by that, slipped through the bedroom, and, damn it, I forgot about this window. But how the devil could he throw it down to himself? Certainly he didn't leave by it and—"

"I don't think that fits this racket." And I told O'Rourke about Toney, the little snow-bird who had left the house where he had sought protection.

"The lad who was killed last week." O'Rourke nodded. "That's what comes of being so secretive. This Colonel has more information

coming to him than you'd find in the World Almanac. He tells you this and he tells you that, and shuts up like a clam when you want to know the how of it. Passes his word to stoolies, his word of honor as a gentleman, he tells me. Now, see what comes of it? Two men dead, and me not even knowing where the Italian, Giovoni, was till I looked at his dead body at Elrod's Sanitarium. I'm to take orders, Race." He looked at me suddenly, "I think we'll keep quiet on this—this disappearance 'till we hear something. It will be the biggest and worst thing in the world if the Colonel turns up dead. You know who he is, of course."

"Of course," I said. "Colonel Charles Halsey McBride, friend of the deputy police commissioner, and no doubt working secretly for him."

"Well, it sounds good, in theory. And one can't blame the Commissioner for showing the district attorney's office, and maybe state officials, that he can take care of his own department. If Michelle Gorgon rides, it bursts up the biggest racket the city has ever known. Just now, I'd lay you a hundred to one that I can name twenty-five murders in New York that Michelle Gorgon is responsible for, directly responsible for. Yet, I'd lay you another hundred to one that I couldn't prove a one of them in a court of law. I—" He threw up his head. Some one called him.

"Coming!" said O'Rourke, in answer to a shout from down stairs. "I'll leave you here, Race to keep an eye on that locked closet door. I wouldn't keep a thing from you. But men are men, and you couldn't expect them to coddle to an outsider. Come on!" he said to the cop by the door, and following that cop out into the hall he closed the door behind him.

What a break for an amateur detective! To go over the room alone, find those hundreds of little clues that the regular police officer misses. You know what I mean. The man is

found dead in his palatial library. The police search the place. And then the amateur detective discovers in one corner of the room a cord of wood, or under the bed an Austin car, that the hard boiled Inspector of police had overlooked. Oh, I daresay there are clues, if guys are willing to leave them. But a burnt cigar ash only tells me that some one has smoked a cigar, and nothing more. Real clues, to me, are letters, letters that any guy able to read can understand.

I jerked around from the desk I was pawing over. A key had clicked in a lock, the lock of the closet door.

I stepped a little to one side, drew a bead about the center of that door, saw the knob turn, but heard no click as the latch was slowly slipped back again when the door gave an inch. Then that closet door opened very slowly. Wider—wider—and I saw the figure.

The face was very pale and slightly dirty beneath the long peaked hat. The blue shirt was rather a bad fit, at least, baggy, and little hands were shoved in jacket pockets. A man's clothes and a boy's figure it may have been. But I knew her at once, of course. It was The Flame, alias Florence Drummond. The Girl with the Criminal Mind.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FLAME FIGHTS FOR FREEDOM

Well—" The Flame sort of gasped, as if breathing had suddenly become a luxury, after the closet. "I'm in a mess, I guess."

"You guess right," I said, when I got my own breath back, but I didn't lower my gun.

She smiled a wan little smile as she looked at my gun, and lifted both her hands from her jacket pockets, empty.

"There isn't time for a plea, Race, even an explanation, if I had any. What are you going to do—about me?"

"What do you think?" Maybe I sneered slightly. "You picked the Gorgons as little playmates. There have been two murders already, and may be another, now. You," and with a smile of my own, "you even have put me, or are in with those who have put me on the spot."

"God in heaven!" she half threw up her hands. "Don't preach. And there have been as many spots picked out for you, in your day, as for a leopard."

"You're in bad, Florence." I came a little closer to her. She looked very tired; there were rings under her eyes. "There's no reason I should protect you. If you'll sell out the Gorgons, I'll—"

"A stool-pigeon! You want to make a stoolie out of The Flame. You—. I might tell you that letting me go may mean a man's life. I might tell you—. But just one question. Will you let me go? Yes or no."

"Florence," I ignored her question, "if I get you out of this. If—. What will you promise me. What will—"

"Don't play the heavy dick. I'll never squeal, for a price, if I could squeal." She glanced quickly down at the watch upon her wrist. "Well, shout out, or stand aside."

She pushed by me suddenly and made for the door, just as if she didn't know the whole house was thick with police.

I clutched her by the arm and swung her back. She spun, and looked at me. There was hatred, or anger, or defiance, in her eyes. Then she read the truth in mine, I guess, because her eyes went sort of fearful, like a frightened animal, before I spoke.

"The Flame," I said, as I gripped her arm tighter, "has swung with her mind and her eyes the honor of many men. You know something, and, by God! you're going to talk. You've made monkeys out of me long enough. Yes, you're right." I looked straight into her eyes. "I'm going to turn you in to the cops."

And she wilted. Was in my arms, her little head upon my shoulder, her arms about my neck. She was sobbing softly. I leaned down and forced up her head. The tears in her eyes were real, the quiver to her lips seemed hardly possible of acting. It was the girl again, but this time without the sparkle of youth in her eyes, the laughter on her lips, and—.

"Race," she said. "Race, Race, give me a break. Give me a—. You can't hold me like this and turn me in to the police. You don't know what it may mean. Why, why—let me go. Let me go."

Maybe I held her the tighter. Maybe I bit my lip. Maybe I even brushed back her hair. I looked straight down at her a moment, and spoke words that my lips formed but my brain never directed. The truth too, perhaps, though who is to tell it.

"Florence," I said, "I love you."

She raised herself on her toes, the sparkle blazed through the mist in her eyes, and—oh, damn it—she kissed me, held me so a moment, then jerking herself free smiled up at me.

"That's what I wanted, Race, that's what I needed to make me—. Goodbye." She thrust

the key of the closet door into my hand, turned again toward the hall door, as my hand shot out and gripped her by the arm.

"You're—you're not going to let me go?" I guess just bewilderment raced over her face at that moment.

"No," I said very slowly, "I'm not going to let you go."

"But you must, now—after—after—"

"I've got to keep you," I interrupted. "I've got to turn you in. It isn't you I'm going to live with. It isn't your eyes I'm going to look into the rest of my life. It's myself I've got to live with. It's myself I've got to face in the glass each morning. Maybe I'm hard, cruel. Maybe, as more than one paper has said, I'm a natural killer. Maybe—. But, by God! I've never sold out a client, and I won't now. I—"

And I stopped. Feet beat down stairs, along the hall outside the door, seemed to hesitate, then go slowly on, to fall heavily upon other stairs.

"All right," The Flame said slowly and with an effort, I thought. But she had a way of pulling herself together, and a way of putting something into her eyes that cut like a lash. "You let me go and I'll give back to you the life of your client."

I thought that one out.

"Your word, your honor?"

"The honor of The Flame." She laughed, like a shovel being scraped over a cellar floor. "I'll give you back the life of your client. That's the whole ticket. Take it or leave it." And she folded her arms defiantly.

"When?"

"I'll meet you in," again her eyes went to her watch, "In thirty minutes, at Maria's Cafe."

"Maria's been closed by the police, two days ago," I said.

"Not for you or for me. I told Rudolph Myer to tell you to meet me there anyway. I had something to—. You got the message?"

"No," I said, "I didn't."

"No? Well, perhaps not. What do you say?"

"But how to get you out of here." I scratched my head. What about O'Rourke? Would I take him into my confidence? Would he let The Flame go, or—? No. I thought I knew how a cop would feel about that. And I thought of the window, the lamp cord. But there would be a cop in the alley. I might call him off. I might—. I turned to The Flame.

She was at the door, had it partly open, was peering into the hall.

"You can't—the police—droves of them," I whispered hurriedly. "The window, maybe, if—"

She shook her head and put her finger on her lips. It was in my mind to detain her now. Not because of any duty to a client, though. Because, well, I didn't believe a rabbit could slip through that cordon of police.

I shrugged my shoulders. After all, had I made a right decision? Was it because of my client that I let The Flame go? Or was I just anxious for an excuse not to be the one that turned her in? If the Colonel were dead, they might even hold her for murder.

"At Maria's Cafe, then," she whispered. And as my hand stretched toward her arm, "I

have an 'out,'" and she was gone, closing the door silently behind her.

Perhaps it was the best way out. I wouldn't be responsible if she were caught now. And I found myself listening for her feet in the hall, listening vainly. Not a sound. But they wouldn't shoot a woman. They wouldn't—. And I remembered suddenly that The Flame was dressed as a man, also, with a little pang, that The Flame, for all I knew, might be armed and that—. Damn it, which had I let free in that house? The woman of evil or the girl of good?

I threw open the door and listened. Voices from below, just murmurs. Heavy feet on the floor above. Feet that turned and came down the stairs. Loud feet. A dick nodded to me in the dim light, his hand clutching at the banister.

"I don't know what the racket is," he said, "but except for them two servants, the man and his wife upstairs, frightened silly, and who never heard a sound, the house is empty."

"Yeah." I tried to listen. Would there be a shout as they caught The Flame, or would there be a shot as The Flame was spotted, lurking in some dark corner? Or, and I waited as the cop looked over my shoulder into the room, and then went on his way.

Maybe there were visions of a crumpled little body at the foot of a flight of stairs, a white, childish face, eyes that had no sparkle—and—.

A minute, two, three, perhaps five passed. Then feet coming up the stairs; Sergeant O'Rourke's gruff voice; his hand upon my shoulder, pushing me into the room. And he spoke.

"Hello!" He stood, looking at the open closet door. Then he turned to me, looked at my

hand, and the key I held stupidly in it. "You found the key, eh?"

"Sure," I said. "On the desk, under the blotter, near the phone." But I still stood by the door, listening.

"Empty, of course." O'Rourke was in and out of the closet. "Well, Race, it's a big racket, a big responsibility." A moment of silence. "Guess I'll shift the burden, though the orders were to act alone." He ran fingers through his mottled hair, "I guess I'll give the Commissioner a buzz." He reached for the telephone. "It may turn out a mess if we keep it from the press too long, what with the district attorney's office wondering about it and the entire blame falling on the shoulders of the Commissioner if—. Colonel McBride is quite a lad, you know."

"Wait." I held O'Rourke's hand. "It's just possible I—"

"I—what?" demanded O'Rourke, his hand gripping the phone.

"I may stir up something. Wait."

"Wait?" gulped O'Rourke. "Well, I'll pass the 'wait' along to the Commissioner. It's his show. I don't want to be an official goat, after all these years."

We both straightened. The phone rang.

"Now what the hell?" said O'Rourke eagerly, and as he jerked off the receiver, "Yeah, what do you want?"

A moment's pause, and then from O'Rourke:

"Who wants to know? Who are you? Why, unless I know you, you can't. All right, he's here." O'Rourke pushed the phone to me, his hand over the mouthpiece.

"Guy wants you. Don't sound like the Colonel. Don't sound like any one. A mouth full of marbles. Better take it."

"Race," said a disguised, mechanical voice, that I couldn't recognize.

"Right," I said. "Race Williams."

"Talk a bit, so I can be sure."

And I did, pressing the receiver close to my ear and pushing O'Rourke off with my shoulder. O'Rourke had a curious turn of mind.

"Now you talk," I finished.

"It's Rudolph Myer," came the faint message. "Tried to get you at your apartment. The Flame must see you at the Cafe Maria. It means a lot, so she says. Suit yourself about going. Some one may be listening. Why she can't put over her own message, I don't know. But she said to come alone, unseen."

"How did you know I was—"

And I turned to O'Rourke. The click over the wire told me that Myer had cut me off. There's no percentage in talking to yourself.

"Who was that?" asked O'Rourke.

"It was—a lad about another case. I told him to call me here."

"Mighty liberal with your client's phone." O'Rourke bit off the end of a cigar, spat it across the room, and added, more sarcastically, "And forgot you told him you'd be here."

"Well—" I said. "Then it's business, this business. I've got to leave you."

"Sure!" nodded O'Rourke. "I'll give you an 'out' down stairs. The boys wouldn't pass the

district attorney through this house tonight without my orders. Remember that."

"Okay. And sit tight for a bit, O'Rourke. I'll give you a jingle later."

O'Rourke looked at me before he spoke. Then he said very seriously:

"God! Race—it would be a great thing if your yen for gun-play developed in the right direction, if a certain party, a certain Gorgon got a little round hole in his forehead."

"Yes," was the best I could answer. Damn it all, was I getting nerves? Was I still listening for the sharp report that would tell me The Flame was— But I pulled myself together and looked hard at O'Rourke.

"Don't put a tail on me tonight," I said.

"No." He seemed to think, and then, "No, I won't. But remember what I said about the district attorney himself not getting out of here tonight without my Okay." And raising his voice as he walked with me to the stairs, "Brophey, see Williams to the corner and let him ride—alone." I chewed over O'Rourke's last crack about the district attorney not getting out. I didn't get it then, unless—unless—. But certainly, after the cards O'Rourke and I had dealt each other over the years, he couldn't distrust me. As to holding out on him, he couldn't resent that. It had been our way of playing the game, always. If you don't talk to any one, you can't suspect any one of giving your plans away. When things go wrong, then, you can lay your finger smack on your own chest and nail the guy who's to blame. That much is gospel.

CHAPTER XX

AT MARIA'S CAFE

I had a little time to kill and entered an all night drug store, called up my apartment. Not actually expecting that Jerry would be back, you understand, but just not bent on missing any tricks. Jerry had not returned yet. I hoped he had spotted and, maybe, followed the man who had run when Colonel McBride was grabbed.

Then I drove around the town a bit, just getting the air. And I didn't exactly do any thinking, that is, constructive thinking. But, mostly, I never do. The Flame had certainly pulled a Houdini on the police and Sergeant O'Rourke. Was she still hidden in that house, or had she walked smack through the police net unseen, or had she bought her way out?

There's nothing fantastic about bribery. It's a matter of how much, and the type of man the receiver of the bribe is. You don't have to know him first. It works, from a ten spot to a strange speed cop, to a grand for a police captain, who has found the stock market a sucker's game, but hasn't recognized himself as that sucker yet.

The Flame was clever. There are no two ways about that. She had gotten into the house, maybe, even arranged that bit of kidnaping. Doctor Michelle Gorgon had picked himself some rare talent when he picked The Flame and—my hand went to my breast pocket. Damn it, I was still carrying around that envelope containing that bit of change and the jewelry which I had been requested to turn over to Eddie Gorgon.

Maybe The Flame would answer some questions at the Cafe Maria. The Flame had already intended to meet me there, before she popped out of that closet. And you know—. Well, we're all a bit of a fool, I guess. Somehow I wasn't worried so much about The Flame any more. A guy gets cocky at times. I had held her, told her I loved her. And—she loved me. There were no two ways about that. Any lad who had

held The Flame as I did—. But the time was drawing near, so I sped over to Maria's Cafe.

According to my custom I left my car around the corner, walked leisurely down the block, spotted the darkness of the entrance, and went to the little side door down a few steps and knocked.

The door opened almost at once. I nodded as I recognized the bartender.

"Hello, Race." He opened the door far enough for me to slip into the dimness of the hall, but spotted almost at once the bulge in my right jacket pocket.

"Gawd!" he sort of laughed. "And me thinking it was just an affair of the heart."

"There's a lady waiting to see me, Fred?" It was half a question, half a statement.

"Yeah." He nodded. "The little room back of the bar."

"Any one in the bar?"

"No. The Federal officers have closed us up."

"You're a nice boy, Fred." I followed him into the bar. "I wouldn't like to see anything happen to you." No threat. Just a warning in my words.

"Cripes!" He slowed, and looked at me. "You ain't got nothing up your sleeve, I don't know about?"

"Nothing up my sleeve. Be sure there's nothing up yours." I followed him to the door in the rear, down another hall and to another small door.

"You weren't dragged in here." Fred gave me the words over his shoulder. "And the

door 'out' ain't barred and locked now." He put a hand on the knob. "What do you say? Got a change of mind? Want to beat it?"

"Do your stuff," was my say.

"Right!" He spun the knob, shoved open the door and chirped, "The gent to see you." He turned quickly, pushed by me and closed the door after him. I heard his feet slipping over the uncarpeted floor of the outer hall.

The room was like any other back room of a speak-easy. A single dome light hung from the ceiling, giving a sharp light. There were eight or ten tables, plain wooden armchairs drawn close to them. Not piled up on top, for they wouldn't be doing any cleaning for a bit. The room still reeked of bum hooch. The open window on the alley didn't help much. There was an old fashioned mantel to one side, above a fireplace that had been bricked up, and a battered but shining silver loving cup supposedly in the center of that mantel.

And, alone in that room, was The Flame. No dirty masculine get-up now. Silk stockings, black skirt, and a tight fitting, worsted sweater coat affair. To crown that off she had a beret cocked on the side of her head, and a cigarette perched jauntily between her lips.

"You did turn up," she said. "But then, you would. You always were a fool for courage. Sit down."

I walked to the window, closed it, and pulled down the heavy shade. I'd rather chance slow death by poison air than a bullet in the back. There was another exit, with a key in the door. I spun the key and turned the knob. It locked all right. An alcove recess, with dirty curtains, proved to be a blind. Just a closet with shelves. Across from that was the door I had entered by.

There was no key in the lock. I kicked a chair in front of the door, stuffed a cigarette into my mouth, saw that The Flame was close to the mantel, so dragged up a chair and sat beside her. I could see the window and the door with the chair against it, and had the alcove on the right.

The Flame started. It was the old racket all over again.

"Race, I'll make you a proposition. I'll chuck the Gorgon outfit if you do. I'll chuck the city. We'll cross the pond, hop down to the Riviera, and—"

"Same old hoey," I cut in. "Florence, you've given that to any guy you wanted to make— make for the time being—make and then break."

"Yes." She nodded very seriously. "I have. Because I've always thought of it. Thought of it with you, Race." A hand crept across the table and rested on one of mine. "We could meet every day, spend long evenings together, understand each other—and bust up the show or stick together for life. There's something big between us, something I never understood. There's been times when I wished you were dead. Times—"

"Florence," I cut in, "I'm here for one purpose only. Your promise. I want to know where—"

"Yes, that's so." She seemed to be listening. "It's not a good place to talk names here. But, somehow, I wanted you to know." She leaned forward now, and barely whispered the words. "I don't know about you, sometimes you simply blunder through things. I've hashed up my life; maybe I wouldn't go if you wished it, maybe I'm hell bent for destruction. But you're looking at a woman now, not a girl. A woman that's going straight to her death, who's got to go through with it."

I didn't like that talk. Somehow I believed it though. Somehow—. And I stiffened. There, slightly to my left, the knob of a door was turning—the door I had pushed the chair against. I didn't say anything to The Flame. I simply laid both my elbows on the smeared table, my hands up close to my chin, one hand also close to the shoulder holster beneath my left armpit.

The door moved slightly too, very slightly, not enough to even push the chair—that is, the chair by the door. But it moved my chair—or, at least I moved my chair enough to bring me directly facing that turning knob which put my back to the alcove closet, and left me just about on the opposite side of the table from The Flame.

The Flame looked up as I moved. The color seemed to suddenly drain out of her face. Her fingers half reached for her handbag upon the table, hesitated, and she stretched her hand to the mantel and lifted down the loving cup, looking it over. Then she read aloud the inscription on it.

"To Eddie Gorgon," she read, very slowly. "On the occasion of his return to the Maria Club—August 27th—1929." She read it in such a low voice, such a forced, almost ominous voice, that it startled me. But I remembered that dinner too. It was the day Eddie Gorgon was released from the Tombs, when the jury failed to convict him for the murder of an East Side laundry man, who had courageously fought against the then notorious Laundry racketeers.

The door knob quit turning. The door gave a sudden jerk and a voice spoke behind me, by those curtains, from the little alcove closet that I thought had no "out." Yep, I had let that door take my attention.

"Don't move," said the voice of Eddie Gorgon. "This time, Race, we'll be satisfied with

the bullet in your back, where the bullet in any rat should be found. That a girl, Florence. Read him again what's on the cup."

Trapped? Certainly. Trapped like a child. I could hear Eddie Gorgon cross the floor; knew that he stood a few feet behind me. And there I was, with my right hand under my left armpit, the fingers clasping a gun that I—I could never use. Why hadn't I made sure of that closet? Certainly, those shelves in it hid another door. Was it my stupidity, or my conceit, or my belief in The Flame, or—.

I looked at Florence. I wanted to see how she took it. I wanted to see if at the last minute she would regret my death. I wanted—. And her face was deathly white. She had betrayed me into the hands of the enemy and was paying a price for it. But a hell of a lot of good that would do me now.

"Show him the cup. Read him again what's on the cup." Eddie mouthed the words. "Just once more, then I'll let him have it."

The girl moved the cup. Her eyes sought mine, mine hers, until the cup blocked them both. Yes, the cup blocked them both. And I saw something else. I saw the sinister, rat-like eyes, the twisted lips, and the gun too, the gun held in a steady hand but a thin hand. For Eddie Gorgon seemed long and gaunt—some sixteen or more feet tall, and his arm was as thin as a match stick. And I knew. I was looking at Eddie's reflection in the polished surface of the oval cup.

It was in my mind to draw, swing and fire. All that, of course, while Eddie Gorgon pressed the trigger of his gun. It couldn't save my life. He was too close to miss, too close not to have a chance to fire several times. Just the one chance that I might take him over the hurdles with me.

There was no use to make excuses to myself. Eddie Gorgon had entered that closet while some lad attracted my attention at the moving door. No, I wasn't proud of that moment. There might be one excuse for it, and the worst kind of an excuse. My own vanity. Perhaps subconsciously I had thought that once I had told The Flame I loved her I was safe. That the ambition of her life was realized, that if she could have me she would never think of—. And then just one thought. He travels farthest who travels alone. But The Flame was talking.

"Easy does it, Eddie," she said. "Race might talk. You know what he might tell, what your brother wants to know. What—"

"This is my show," Eddie snarled in on her. "Look the rat in the eyes, kid. Watch 'em dim. Not a move, Race. Keep them elbows so I can see them. Just a single jerk of your shoulders, and out you go."

And what was I doing? Just sitting there waiting for death to strike through the mouth of a blazing gun held in the hand of an underworld rat, a common murderer, I had told Jerry.

No. Plainly in that cup I could see the long, gawky form of Eddie Gorgon. My elbows never moved their position on that table. But my hand moved—my fingers moved. Already my right hand had pulled my gun from the shoulder holster, eased it out and shoved it up toward my shoulder. And The Flame still held the cup in her hands—very steady.

Would I try one quick jerk and a shot over my shoulder at Eddie? Maybe I'd have to. The reflection in that cup was clear enough, the features of Eddie, the skinny appearing extended arm, the snub-nosed automatic, the barrel of which appeared long enough, as reflected in that cup, to be a rifle barrel. And—.

"Don't shoot yet, Eddie," The Flame said. "I got him here for you, didn't I? I want him to answer a question."

And my gun crept slowly higher up my left shoulder, my arm never moving, my elbows steady upon the table—just my wrist curling upward and my head moving slightly sideways, slowly sideways. I hoped Eddie was far enough behind me not to see my gun—at least, until it had crept up and over my shoulder.

"Yeah," snarled Eddie Gorgon. "But what about me? You made a deal with me. You let me horn you in with us Gorgons, played me for a sucker until Michelle came along, and then what, then what? I got a mind to snuff you, too."

"It's all the same." The Flame seemed to half appeal. "It's the same business, the same racket. I have to listen to Michelle just as you have to listen to him. Whether you brought me in or he brought me in, I'd be working for him just the same. I—"

"That may be Michelle's idea, but not mine," said Eddie quickly. "He could have your mind, but not me. I was staking your body, not your mind. Besides which, I still think you've got a yen for this dick. I've played the game, taken orders, done Michelle's dirty work. But no man can take my woman. No, by God! not even Michelle. And Michelle would never know but it was an accident if I knocked you over."

My gun was higher, right on my shoulder now. Not over enough to show, Just—. The face of Eddie looked so long and lean in that cup, the eyes were so close together.

"Eddie," and The Flame's voice was soft and low, "don't talk like that. I saw in Michelle only your interest. I saw only—"

"I seen your face and I seen Michelle's there in your apartment, when you stuck me up.

His talk of ‘in the abstract!’ Well, the abstract wasn’t in his eyes then. He was just a man who wanted a woman, my woman, and you were just a woman who wanted a man, a bigger man than Eddie Gorgon. You knew what Michelle might mean to you, and you dropped me. Michelle didn’t want no mind, he wanted a body. You sold yourself to me, I paid you cash. And, tonight, after the dick, Williams, crashes out I’ll—. But he’ll take it first.”

And my gun was up. I won’t say that I read the will to fire suddenly in Eddie’s reflection in the cup. I won’t say that I recognized it in his voice, though I think I did. I won’t even say that The Flame’s sudden shrill cry did the trick.

But she did call out.

“Now, Race!”

Zip! Like that. My finger closed upon the trigger—and I threw myself forward on the table.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MAN IN THE WINDOW

There were two roars, a clang like a bell in a shooting gallery—and I was on my feet. If the cup didn’t betray me I had placed a hunk of lead smack between Eddie Gorgon’s eyes.

And Eddie Gorgon stood there, his mouth hanging open in surprise. I jerked up my gun to fire again, but I didn’t fire. Eddie’s gun hung by his side, then his fingers opened and he dropped it to the floor. Not a mark of a bullet on him. No hole in the center of his forehead. And I saw his eyes just before he folded himself up like a jack-knife and sank to the floor. Eddie Gorgon had died on his feet, and only a missing tooth or two in the mouth that hung open, and

the tiny bubbles forming on his lips—red bubbles—told me where the bullet had gone. Not exactly a perfect shot, maybe, but a serviceable one just the same. I’m no miracle man.

After all, Eddie Gorgon had meant to kill me, and he was dead. I shrugged my shoulders. The thing I had pressed that trigger to do had been accomplished.

The Flame was on her feet too—and clutching the cup to her. She was very white and very shaky, and I noticed that she turned her head from the body. I saw too that the cup had a hole in it—that the first two letters of the word EDDIE were missing. That was the bell-like ring then, as Eddie’s bullet hit the cup.

“Did you—? He didn’t hit you, Florence?” I was close to her now, supporting her trembling body and placing the cup on the table.

“No, no. It was the cup—saved me. His cup—saved me—and you too.”

“You saved my life, Florence. I—. And after trapping me here.”

“Fool, fool,” she cried out, beating me away as I would have held her. “I’ve taken on too much and can’t think it out. You, you won’t think. It seems impossible and too grotesque to believe, but we must believe it, must. I’ve never trapped you.” And suddenly pushing me from her and backing away:

“You have nothing to thank me for, Race. He had to go. He had to die. Brains—brains—brains. And it took the animal in Eddie to nearly ruin everything. I can’t die yet. I mustn’t die yet. I’ll die with him, as she died with him, for she died. Damn his soul, what a living death she died!”

Which was all confusing to me, you've got to admit.

The Flame didn't raise a hand this time to stop me as I went toward her. She didn't need to. It was her face, the distorted hatred of it, or was it fear, that I took for hate, or perhaps it was horror. Anyway, I held my ground and simply looked at her, turned, and picking up the cup wiped it clean of finger-prints and placed it back on the mantel.

"We better get out of here, Florence. The shot, the man by the door. The bartender, Fred, and—"

"You can be sure that there is not a soul in this house tonight, right now. If the shot was heard, it was heard outside." She clutched at her throat and half glanced at the body.

"He's lying there," she said. "After all, he was human. Made by the same hand that made you and me and Michelle, and even good people we read about. I must lie like that some day. Soon— very soon—and I know it—and go on toward it. But he's lying there, Race, a human, like you and me. Is he dead?"

I took another look at Eddie, lifted his hand and let it fall back again. I didn't need any medical certificate of death to tell me the truth. It had to be Eddie or me, and—well—if I wasn't exactly glad it was Eddie, I was glad it wasn't me.

"He's dead," I told The Flame, felt the long envelope in my pocket bend as I knelt so—the envelope which Michelle Gorgon had asked me to deliver to his brother, Eddie. I drew it out. To leave it with Eddie now, there on his chest, would be a gruesome sort of humor, maybe. But it wasn't that which made me stick it back in my pocket. Some one beside the Gorgon crowd might first find Eddie. No need to advertise this bit of killing yet. At least there was no need to

implicate The Flame, if others knew about that money and jewelry in the envelope.

No one but Fred, the bartender, had seen me come into the Maria Cafe, and Fred was off for the night. Wise men of the underworld don't speak of the events which precede violent death, at least, to the police, they don't. And certainly it wouldn't take a lot of brain work on the part of either of the Gorgon brothers to guess who sent Eddie bye-bye.

"Come!" The Flame went to the window and threw it open, and let in the cool night air. It felt good. I turned, looked the room over once for any sign of my visit, was satisfied with the inspection and reached the window in time to take the girl by the arm.

"You forget, Florence, what I came here for. I want to know where Colonel McBride is. Is he alive?"

"Yes, he must be. Let us get away from here first. Surely," she looked at me as I still held her arm, "we can talk as well in the alley."

"Yeah, with every ash can concealing a gunman, for all I know? You trapped me twice. You—. Oh, I give you credit for saving my life, Florence. But you change so quickly that I can't chance it. This may be one of your weak, or perhaps, from your point of view, one of your strong moments. Anyway, to love The Flame is to die," and somewhat bitterly maybe, "and I put myself on that sucker list tonight, in the house of Colonel McBride when you popped out of the closet. Oh, I'm not blaming you, Florence. I'm beginning to think that label you've won is not just a moniker of the night. The Girl with the Criminal Mind."

She swung suddenly on me, her hands gripping my arms above the elbows, her eyes looking into mine. Anxious, fearful, haunted eyes. Different than I had ever seen her before.

But then, The Flame was always different. Of course women are supposed to faint at violent death, but then, The Flame never ran true to biological or physiological, or what have you, form. Still the death of Eddie had knocked her, it seemed. Yep, The Flame was out of character, or maybe, in character. No one knew the real Flame, I guess, least of all me.

"One question, Race, just one question now. Do you, do you love me?"

"I don't know." I guess that was the truth.

"Did you mean what you said, there in Colonel McBride's house, when you thought I must be caught or killed? You, you said you loved me, you know. Did you mean it?"

"Yes, I meant it then," I told her, almost viciously. "And maybe I mean it now. It's a queer thing though, Florence. No one can lay a finger to it. But love you or not, I don't trust you. I don't think you even trust yourself. I—"

She half glanced at the body again, and shivered slightly. And I let her slip over the sill and drop into the alley. Yes, I let her. But I very nearly stepped on her heels, I dropped so quickly after her.

"You better put out the light," she told me. "I imagine that's the way Eddie would have done it, if it were you lying in there. You see, the place is closed. They expect, or Eddie expected, to let the crime ride. Maybe it would be days before they were supposed to find you."

"Then you did trap me," I cut in.

"Ah," she swung on me suddenly, "then you didn't believe I trapped you. You tried to believe it, but couldn't. That's it, isn't it?" She shook me by the shoulders. "You couldn't believe it. Try as you might, you could not believe it."

"Couldn't!" And maybe my laugh was queer. Maybe I didn't want to believe it, but that I didn't was a different thing, again. Inside of me, maybe, I denied it to myself. But I'm a reasoning man, and certainly I believed it.

"You mean to tell me that you didn't know Eddie was there!" I demanded.

"No, I didn't know. I don't expect you to believe me. But I didn't know until I heard him, saw him."

"But who told Eddie? Fred, the bartender?"

"Fred didn't know whom I was to meet, until you came. He didn't know I was to meet any one until five minutes before you came. That he got in touch with Eddie, or that Eddie just happened to come here, would be impossible."

"And you didn't have Eddie come to the apartment, your apartment, that night he jumped me from the window?" There certainly was disbelief in my voice.

"No," she said slowly, "I didn't."

"Quite a coincidence, quite a coincidence. And I don't believe in coincidences."

"Nor do I." She snapped that back at me as she slipped down the alley and we reached the street. "But I do believe in using your brains, just once in a while, Race. You can't plug on always like you do." And with what might have been a smile, "There won't always be a woman, a woman with a criminal mind, to lift loving cups for you and—"

"Florence," I said, "what of Colonel McBride? You promised if I let you go—"

"Oh, I may have lied to you, to get away. It might have been a promise I can never keep. But I'll try, I'll try. Michelle Gorgon knows where he is, and I—. Michelle Gorgon is friendly toward me."

"Yes," I said, "he is." And with an effort I stuck to my client. "What about Colonel McBride?"

"Well." She blazed up. "Michelle Gorgon wants information from him. He wants to know who is behind McBride, where McBride learns things, and—. Race, go to Michelle, tell him you'll quit the case."

"Quit for that mountebank!" I sniffed. "I should say not. A client hired me, and—. But I'll go to Michelle Gorgon all right."

"If you stay on the case, nothing can save your life now, now that Eddie is dead. Don't you see? Michelle Gorgon loves me. And superstition or not, to love The Flame is to die." Her lips curled, and her smile was more sad than sinister.

"Death for me too, then." I half laughed. I could feel her fingers bite into my arm, but she did not speak.

"Florence," I said. "You love this man, this Michelle Gorgon. You have been swept off your feet by his influence, his money, his air of superiority, and his admiration for—"

She turned on me viciously. Then, after a moment, she said, almost softly:

"But, yes, he attracts me greatly. To have him love me, want me. It is the ambition of my life."

She tried to go. I held her arm. But I couldn't say anything. She looked straight at me and spoke again.

"Race, use your head. When the day comes that you believe in me, absolutely trust me, take pencil and paper and go over this, all of this, from the beginning—from the very second that you stepped into the case. Think who is the best informed one you know, of you and me, and—" Then suddenly, "O'Rourke brought you into this, didn't he?"

"No, he didn't."

"No—No—But he must have. He must have. It couldn't have been—"

"It was—" And I stopped. I couldn't trust her.

"Rudolph Myer, maybe." She thought aloud. Then, "No. That wouldn't be logical. That wouldn't—. But of course it was Rudolph Myer."

She turned suddenly, flung both arms about my neck, and kissed me. And she left me. Walked smack out of the alley just as a harness bull turned the corner and sauntered leisurely down the street, half a block away.

As for me. I went back down that alley, hopped in the window again and turned out the light. I'd pay a little visit to Michelle Gorgon before Eddie's body was cold.

But I wasn't to pay my little visit to Michelle Gorgon just then. Feet sounded in the alley outside, feet that hit heavily for a moment against stone, then moved cautiously toward that window. It was a cinch that those feet belonged to a heavy body that had dropped from the fence dividing the houses.

It wasn't the harness bull from outside then. My first impulse was to beat it by the front way. My second, to stick it out. It might be one of the Gorgon outfit, come to see if Eddie had disposed of me. There was only one way to find out, that was to wait and see what broke. Nothing dangerous in my position now. There I

was, close to one side of the window, my back pushed against the wall, my gun in my hand. No, there was nothing to be alarmed about.

A form blotted out the faint semblance of light from the window. Not light enough there to recognize a man, or anywhere near it. But light enough to barely make out the bulkiness of huge shoulders, and the whiteness of a face. For a moment I got a thrill. To myself I said, "The Second Gorgon, Joe Gorgon." My finger squeezed a gun trigger slightly. I was beginning to dislike the Gorgons.

A white hand crept over the sill. A split second later a pencil of light bit into the darkness, crept along the floor, picked out a lifeless foot, ran quickly up the body of Eddie Gorgon and smacked on the side of his face. I rather liked that. The dead gangster lay so that you could not recognize him. My friend at the window would have to come into the room if he wanted to identify the thing that had been Eddie Gorgon, feared racketeer.

He did just that little thing. And what's more, he didn't like it overmuch. Not from any lack of moral courage, I guess, but from the physical effort. For although he started in the window without a moment's hesitation, he didn't like the bodily exertion, for I heard him grunt plainly.

CHAPTER XXII

O'ROURKE HAS A HUNCH

He was in the room now, across to the body, leaning over and turning the dead face into the light of the flash. He whistled softly, muttered something to himself that didn't seem like a curse, and I was smack behind him, my gun in his back.

"Don't move, brother," I said, "unless you want to lie down beside your little playmate. Now—that flash. Good." And the man laughed, and the light struck his face.

Maybe I laughed too, but not with quite as much mirth. The hard, grizzled map I looked into was that of the "honest cop," Detective Sergeant O'Rourke.

"Well," I said, "what are you going to do?"

And I didn't drop my gun. The first thing I thought of then was Rudolph Myer, a habeas corpus writ, and the amount of bail. Not that I didn't trust O'Rourke, but he might be the efficient cop now, not the loyal friend. Through and through O'Rourke was a cop.

"What am I going to do?" He ignored my gun, walked to the window, closed it, pulled down the shade and pressed the electric button. "It's what are you going to do, and what did you do?"

"I took your advice," I told him, "and laid a bullet in one of the Gorgons. It was self-defense, and more. I was, was trapped here. And you put a tail on me, after you promised you wouldn't."

"Well," he said, "it don't look like you were trapped. Let's talk it out, Race. You and me are in the same racket and under the same boss, but working at odds. And I ain't above telling you now, that I got you into the Gorgon mess. But that's confidential."

"You got me in. I thought—"

"You thought it was Rudolph Myer, and so it was. That was my little plan. I didn't want you to know. But no matter, now. Working the same game or not, here's a lad been croaked. We can't just pretend it never happened, you know. We'll run it through as a matter of form.

There's big people behind you. McBride, if he's alive."

"He's alive," I told O'Rourke. "Don't charge me with this shooting. Let me put it in a form of a complaint. I went to the Maria Cafe, was attacked, and shot a man in self-defense—and I call on the authorities to investigate the attack on me. Then it's the district attorney's move against me. I'll be ready with bail, and—"

"Good stuff, and does credit to your honest nature." O'Rourke grinned. "But Eddie isn't going to be missed that bad. At least, by the police department. You may not know it exactly, but you're just as much a part of the city's police system, with their rights," and with a little grimace, "and without their restrictions, as I am. I've got a lot of authority, and a big lad to take the blame, if things go wrong. We'll let it stand as a gang killing for a little bit, at least, to outsiders."

"O'Rourke." I cut in with a sudden idea. "Could you keep this quiet, just for a few hours, maybe, until—" And I went into the thing. "I want to see Michelle Gorgon. I want a good talk with him. I—. But if he knows I got his brother, well, it won't give me a chance to work on this thing. Every—"

"I know," said O'Rourke, rubbing his chin. "How long do you want?"

"A couple of hours."

"It's after twelve," said O'Rourke, snapping out his watch. "I'll give you until morning, five o'clock, or if you can make it earlier, better still. But you can't go to Michelle Gorgon now—not quite yet." And very slowly, "His wife was moved last night to a private hospital down town. Do you know what that means, Race?"

"No," I said, "I don't."

"But I think I do." O'Rourke nodded vigorously. "Nothing can happen in Doctor Gorgon's home. He's through with her. She's going to die."

"But she couldn't. He wouldn't dare murder his own wife. That would be the end. The—"

"He murdered his wife years ago. But who the wife was—" he scratched his head. "The best detective in the city has been to Italy, Race, and if that little Giovoni spoke the truth, there's no evidence to show that Michelle Gorgon was ever married before, in Italy or any place else. I tell you, I've been working on Michelle Gorgon for over a year, and it wasn't until this judgeship business came up and Colonel McBride was secretly called in by his buddy, the Deputy Commissioner, that I carried authority in it. The Commissioner himself is behind McBride. I tell you, this judgeship business is nothing to Michelle Gorgon's murder racket. He has many enemies, of course. But when an enemy becomes big enough for him to notice—that enemy dies."

"But if I couldn't find out anything about Michelle Gorgon's former wife, whose, at least claimed to be, father-in-law got rubbed out the other night—I have found out plenty about his present wife. More than any man in the world knows; more than Michelle Gorgon himself knows; more than the wife herself knows. Laugh that off." There was a ring of pride in his voice.

"And Gorgon's wife—. What do you intend to do?"

"I intend to talk to her. I understand she's slightly loose in the upper story. And I know that she had a terrible accident, airplane accident, in which Michelle Gorgon didn't get hurt, and I understand that she had a gentleman friend, for she was a very beautiful woman. There's a story that Michelle Gorgon maimed her purposely, but like his other activities it

can't be proved. Anyway, she didn't jump from the plane, but crashed with it. I want to talk to her before anything happens to her. That's that. If that isn't playing the game with you, Race, nothing is."

"But you promised not to put a tail on me, and—"

"So that rankles. Well, forget it. I didn't. No more questions about that, now. Let it drop. But the phone in Colonel McBride's house leaked as soon as it rang. Anyway, we'll forget who you came here to meet. But come on. We'll have to chance the discovery of the body. You'd have chanced that anyway."

"Isn't it a little late for a hospital interview?" I asked.

"Sure," said O'Rourke. "But if it were four in the morning I'd go anyway. It isn't something, I think, that can be delayed overlong."

"You know, Race," O'Rourke told me, when we were safely out of the Maria Cafe and speeding to the private hospital in my car, "you're a man of your word and I'm a man of mine. Remember that. We've got to work fast on this, before something else happens. I work for the city. I work against time. I use stool-pigeons. Play on crooks who have been, or think they have been, double crossed. Even ignore some small crime if the individual will give information concerning a bigger one. I thought I'd go any length to reach my ends, and I have—I did. I've stirred up thoughts of passion, hatred, and vengeance. Now and here's a terrible thing for a lad who's been an honest cop over twenty years to say. If you were to put a bullet between them cute eyes of Michelle Gorgon, I'd, well, I don't ask you to do it and I don't say I'd thank you for doing it, but I'd sleep easier at night and, and, by God! I might even go on the witness stand and perjure myself that I saw Doctor

Gorgon draw a rod and heard him threaten to kill you."

"You've got a little hatred for this bird yourself, O'Rourke."

"Yes," he said, "I have. But it isn't so much hatred of Michelle Gorgon, but fear, fear of what I've done, fear of the uncontrollable fires I lit. But maybe the day will come, Race, when you'll be wanting to put a little lead bullet between these same two eyes of mine."

I laughed and said:

"It wouldn't be a hard mark to hit."

"No," said O'Rourke, very seriously, "it wouldn't. But this'll be the place. And it's as respectable as it looks." I stopped the car before the building, as O'Rourke talked on. "Ritzy too, and high priced. There's a doctor's name behind this institution that's gospel to the medical profession; a lad to run it who hasn't had ten minutes to himself to hobnob in the underworld since he graduated from medical school. It looks just like the sort of a place to faze the lowly Mick, known as Detective Sergeant O'Rourke. So, under those conditions, we'll go through with it. In we go."

And in we went.

Somehow O'Rourke seemed different to me. He talked more. Was it nerves? But surely, after his years as the most active detective on the police force, he wouldn't get finicky over a few murders more or less. I guess, maybe, he was just the man hunter on the hunt. The eagerness gets under your skin, you know. Still, he seemed different. But then, every one seemed different. Maybe we were all feeling that sinister air of superiority of the Third Gorgon. And I grinned to myself—of the Second Gorgon now. After all, Eddie was one of them. Eddie was protected by his association and relationship. And you couldn't get away from

the fact that all Eddie needed now was a shovel and some loose dirt.

The nurse who let us in was not so much surprised, but the lad in the white coat, who came out of the little room behind her, was more than surprised. He was shocked, and let us know it.

"Mrs. Gorgon—really. You can't see her, of course. And at this hour, under no circumstances."

"I know it's irregular." O'Rourke scratched his head.

"Irregular!" Doctor Importance, in the white coat, elevated his nose to avoid the stench of our presence. "It's impossible."

"Police business." O'Rourke produced his shield. "And damned important police business. We'll see the lady at once."

The nose came down and had to breathe the same air with us.

"May I—? You have authority, of course." But there wasn't much confidence in the young doctor's voice. He was simply repeating something he had read some place.

"You see the ticket of admission to the show." O'Rourke shoved the badge up higher. "I'll see Mrs. Gorgon now, just us two. Or if you want to stand on ceremony, I'll bring in the boys and make a party of it."

"I—I may notify Doctor Revel?" he half stammered. "It's—We couldn't disturb the other patients. Surely you wouldn't—Good God! It's not a raid. Not a raid, here."

"Never mind Doctor Revel. Come on, shake a leg." And we were all three leaving the room.

There was no doubt that O'Rourke had bulldozed the young doctor into taking us to Mrs. Gorgon's, or Madame's room.

"She has a weak heart, a very weak heart. You'll—"

"Tut, tut, young feller, me lad." O'Rourke was patronizing. "We're here to protect her." And as we left the elevator and entered the little white room, O'Rourke said, "Doctor Revel will be glad we came. You can notify him now." With that he pushed the young doctor into the hall, hesitated a moment, saw the nurse that came down the long corridor toward us, and holding the door open, said:

"We're police officers, Miss. We've got to question Mrs. Gorgon. Better come along with us." And to me, "I'm taking a chance, Race, but I think it's justified—but we better have this young lady with us."

O'Rourke switched on the light, closed the young doctor out in the hall, motioned the nurse toward the bed, and finding no key in the lock, dragged a chair against the door. The nurse was bright but slightly nervous. However, if she resented our presence, or even found it distasteful, she didn't let us know it. She obeyed O'Rourke to the letter.

We stood back while she approached the bed and spoke to the restless form upon it. The brown eyes opened now and blinked in the light—searching—fearful—dead, haunted eyes. Perhaps as the eyes of The Flame had been, for a moment.

"Two gentlemen to see you, Madame. Two gentlemen," the nurse repeated, softly. "They want to talk to you. They—"

And Madame saw us. A withered hand went to the scraggy hair; a sheet was jerked quickly up to hide the discoloration on her neck, and almost as quickly the twisted hand went

back under the clothes again. She spoke, her teeth getting in the way of her words.

"They mustn't see me, Miss Agnes—not like this. I'm not ready to receive callers. Two gentlemen, Miss Agnes? One a young man, a handsome young man, like—. No—no." And off she went under the covers.

But I won't go into the tricks of Madame. Both O'Rourke and I were glad we had the nurse, Miss Agnes, with us.

She looked at us once, more questioning than disdainfully. But O'Rourke held his ground.

"I must talk to her," he told the nurse, and at her suggestion we parked ourselves behind the bed screen while Madame was made what she called "respectable."

She talked too. Clearly enough sometimes, incoherently at others.

She sort of wandered on.

"No mirror, Miss Agnes. But then, I never have a mirror. What do you think the gentlemen wish, Miss Agnes? The young man, now—he came to see me once before. My skin does not feel so soft and beautiful—but then, my hand has lost its sense of touch. A little more powder, my dear. I'm sure, a little powder. It's my vanity, Miss Agnes." She lowered her voice to a hoarse whisper. "My husband was always so jealous," and she giggled. It was a girlish giggle. It was eerie. "Now, why can't I see myself, just once. He was a musician, so young, so handsome. He adored me, played to me, wrote a song just for me. And this accident. No, he mustn't see my twisted body. But my face, it is still beautiful, my eyes, at least. Michelle always said so, until last week. There— put my hand beneath the coverlet, and—"

We stepped out and saw the woman. What a hideous sight she was! Far worse now for the powder and rouge and nightcap on her head. But most of all it was the glint in her eyes—the simper to cracked lips that were now a vivid red. The yellow skin, great patches of it raw flesh, that were more horrible for the thickness of the rouge and the great daubs of powder.

"Madame is ready," said the nurse, Miss Agnes, looked at us. Partly in warning, maybe, for the woman was indeed terrible to look at.

O'Rourke jerked erect, went to the bed and sat down upon it.

"Mrs. Gorgon," he said. "We—I'm a friend. I heard you had some trouble. You wanted to talk about it with me."

"Trouble, to talk with you? I thought—. But then, maybe it is not true—and it is my face also. It was a very beautiful face. Who are you?"

"I am a police officer. I—"

The door knob turned, the chair slipped, and O'Rourke swung his head and spoke to me.

"Keep him in the hall," he said.

And I did. I pushed through the door and backed the gray haired man into the hall before me. He was wearing a dark dressing gown, and plenty of dignity.

"I am Doctor Revel," he said. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

And you had to admire the doctor. He didn't fuss and fume, and I didn't give him any heavy line.

"Police duty." I let it go at that, but I blocked the doorway.

The doctor looked at his wrist watch.

"Let me see your warrant," he said.

"Everything's Okay," I told him. "You have no cause for alarm. It—"

"If things were strictly as they should be, you would have seen me first."

"You can take the matter up with Headquarters in the morning, if you're not satisfied with the proceedings." I pretended an indifference.

"That has already been attended to." The doctor nodded. "At least, the police precinct nearest the hospital has been called. To me, the matter is very serious indeed. I can not of course create a disturbance in the hospital; there are some very sick people here. The disturbance, my dear friend, will be created tomorrow, make very sure of that." The doctor had a mean sort of calm about him.

The woman inside screamed. The nurse spoke quickly. I think O'Rourke cursed, but I'm not sure. But the doctor stiffened, and I stuck my head back in the door and said:

"The head doctor's here and he's not friendly and he's telephoned the precinct."

And the doctor stepped by me and into the room. Of course I could have stopped him, but I didn't. I wasn't fooling with any medical student now, and I knew it. This guy cut some ice.

He ignored O'Rourke and went straight to the woman on the bed, bent over her a moment, pulled out the twisted hand, pressed his other hand across her forehead, spoke quickly to the nurse, and I saw the bottle from which she measured the drops. It was digitalis. A strong heart stimulant.

O'Rourke and I stood around like a couple of saps. At length the doctor turned on O'Rourke and backed us toward the door.

"Well—" he said, when he had us in the hall, "have you an explanation?"

O'Rourke stiffened, and the bulldog chin shot out. The cop was ever dominant. He wouldn't take water even then. He was a tough old bird, and no mistake.

"Yes, I have," he said. "You read about the murder in Elrod's Sanitarium last week. Do you want to see that poor woman there snuffed out the same way? Don't high hat me, Doctor. I've been on the Force too long. And don't look so hurt. You read your papers. If you don't, someone must have told you. You know who that woman is. You know who brought her here. And you know what the name Gorgon stands for— unless you simply think, like a lot of others, that it stands for money only."

It was good stuff. The doctor didn't seem so cocky. Oh, his dignity was still there, but it had dents all over it. Finally he won out, and said:

"Are you hinting that my cupidity made me, made me take in this unfortunate woman?"

"I'm hinting at nothing," said O'Rourke. "Doctor Gorgon buys what he wants. That woman's life is in grave danger, and not from what's ailing her. I came in, didn't I? And he came in, didn't he?" O'Rourke jerked a thumb at me. "Now, what's to prevent some one else coming in, who hasn't got the woman's interest at heart, like us? And you can't throw hard looks and pompous words down the muzzle of a murderer's gun. Nor will they wait while you notify the nearest precinct."

Doctor Revel had a mental picture of the stabbing at Elrod's, I guess. A mental picture that for the first time he permitted himself to

think might happen in his tony establishment. His placid map and dignity of bearing were playing him false.

"I never guessed. I didn't know." He wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead. O'Rourke wasn't a bad talker, a bad cop. "Why didn't you tell me? Why—"

"Because I thought maybe you'd do just what you did do. Start the phone working. Get the newspapers into it, and—"

"The papers? The newspapers? The woman must go, of course. She's strong enough to move. We can't keep her here. She must go." The doctor was getting panicky. The word "murder" had thrown him.

"I thought—" O'Rourke started—clamped his mouth shut again and looked down the hall.

The slow old fashioned elevator had come to a stop. The door opened almost silently and a figure stepped into the light. It was Doctor Michelle Gorgon. Malacca cane, gray suede gloves, black ribbon dangling from his glasses, and all.

CHAPTER XXIII

DOCTOR MICHELLE GORGON

"Really," Michelle Gorgon said when he reached us. "Doctor Revel, Mr. Williams, and our dear friend, Sergeant O'Rourke. Surely something must have happened. Not, Madame, not a bad turn. Not—"

"You'll have to move your wife, Doctor Gorgon." Doctor Revel got that off first crack. "We can't have a scandal here. We—"

"Scandal! You will explain yourself, Doctor." And Michelle Gorgon's voice was just the right pitch, just the right touch of doubtful indignation.

O'Rourke didn't try to stop Revel. I guess it would have been useless just then.

"Sergeant O'Rourke tells me that your wife— that she may be murdered here, and—"

"Good Lord! an attempt on her life." Michelle Gorgon clutched at his heart—and, damn it! looked as if he meant it.

"No—no. But there will be—there is to be—. Sergeant O'Rourke—"

And O'Rourke horned in.

"It's like this," he said easily. "I was tipped off that there would be, or might be, an attempt on her life. I came here to see that everything was right, just right. No objections to that, eh, Doctor Gorgon?"

"Most certainly not. Most commendable." Michelle Gorgon nodded approval. "But, really, it seems absurd. Why should any one wish to harm her? Poor thing, she has not long for this world, I'm afraid."

"Vengeance on you, Doctor," said O'Rourke. "That might be it."

"On me, on me. But surely. Ah! yes, I see. This imaginary hue and cry in the yellow sheets. Connecting me up with my brother's activities. We make enemies in life, of course. We—" He put both hands to his head. Not tragically, not dramatically even—rather, a natural movement—which, if acting, was superb. "My wife, Madame. I shall see her. I shall comfort her." This, as Madame called out.

And he did comfort her. At least he quieted her in the few minutes he was alone in

the room with his wife, while we stood in the hall, Doctor Revel still insisting that the woman be moved, and O'Rourke just as insistent that she stay at the hospital.

"You can't throw her out tonight. The papers would get hold of you and razz you. To move her would work right into their hands if—" And O'Rourke, seeing that that wasn't a good line, killed it with a sudden snap to his lips. Doctor Revel was interested in human life, of course. But naturally he was interested in the reputation of his establishment. Certainly, any one will admit that a murder in his hospital wouldn't help business any.

"I'll tell you," said O'Rourke. "I could put a couple of men in the house for you, or better still, one inside and one outside."

"Wouldn't that be conspicuous?" But Doctor Revel was coddling to the idea now.

"They'll be in plain clothes. You might even tack a white coat on the inside one. He can stay by the woman's door. That'll protect your hospital, my reputation, and the woman's life. But here's Doctor Gorgon." And O'Rourke turned and told Michelle Gorgon what was on his mind.

Michelle Gorgon seemed enthusiastic.

"Excellent, Sergeant. Madame won't have to know, and won't have to be unprotected. That is settled then, though I think and hope that Sergeant O'Rourke's information about that unfortunate woman is—is erroneous. But you disturbed her, Sergeant. Oh, unintentionally, I know. What you said to her I could not discover, of course, from her. Her mind does not function coherently on the same thought for five minutes. Does it, Doctor?" He smiled encouragingly at Doctor Revel.

"She is lucid at times," said Revel. "She talks often of some imaginary poet or musician

whom she loves. She would rather die before he could see her as she is, and—and—. Huh—huh—" The doctor cleared his throat as Michelle Gorgon frowned slightly. "Nothing odd in that hallucination, sir. To the contrary, rather to be expected."

"No," O'Rourke whispered to me. "Nothing wrong in that, Race, because it happens to be the truth."

Then the front doorbell rang, and a cop was at the door, and some explanations were in order in the little reception room below.

Michelle Gorgon insisted that Doctor Revel see the patient, Madame, once more before he left.

"It will ease my mind, Doctor," Gorgon said. "It is some time since I was interested actively in medicine. I have brought her a few books, rather trashy, Doctor. Love stories, the old ten and fifteen cent variety. But she seems to be able to read them, or get snatches from them, for they ease her mind. Kindly let her have the light on until she becomes calmer. I do not wish to interfere, of course, with the regulations of the hospital, but she has been in the habit of awakening and reading until one-thirty, or playing at reading. She likes, too, to be alone when she reads. Miss Agnes can wait outside her door, or—as you see fit."

Doctor Revel left us. Five minutes later he returned. Not a word had been spoken between us as we waited.

"Mrs. Gorgon is rather restless and disturbed, but didn't wish to talk to me," Doctor Revel told Michelle Gorgon.

"There is no danger!" Michelle Gorgon came to his feet. "Nothing—"

"If you mean that she may take a bad turn in the night. Certainly not. Not more than

any other night. But I expect that she will have a restless night, a most unsatisfactory night."

And he looked around at the three of us, seemingly to place the blame equally between us.

"May I drive you gentlemen home?" There was perhaps the slightest twist to Michelle Gorgon's lips as he spoke.

"I'll stay here for a bit," said O'Rourke. And when Doctor Revel frowned, "Just till I get a man over. And I won't disturb your patient further tonight."

Michelle Gorgon looked at me.

"And you, my dear Williams, will you favor me with your company?"

"I don't know if I'll favor you—but I'll go along with you. I'd like a talk with you."

"Talk, talk seriously?" He stopped and looked down at me as we descended the steps of the private hospital.

"Seriously." I nodded, and meant it.

"Then you will come home with me, to my sanctuary, to my library. You're not afraid, of course?"

"Hardly." I shrugged my shoulders. "Are you?"

"Really, you joke. Really, Williams, I would fear you more dead than living. For the memory of the dead always so far outshines and even magnifies the petty significance of the living."

"I don't get that," I told him. And what's more, I wasn't sure that he got it. Somehow I had the idea that Doctor Gorgon's pretty vanities with words were simply the wish being

father to the thought, and in his case, perhaps, farther from the thought. In plain words, I mean he'd like to be considered one of the literati, and was far from it.

"No, perhaps you don't understand it. But tonight I shall not be epigrammatic. You will get in?" We had reached his car.

"No. I've got my own boat, and may need it later. I'll follow you home."

Michelle Gorgon shook his head.

"Do not follow me." And when I showed some surprise, "Precede me. To follow is dangerous. It might be misunderstood. Your life may become very precious to me. I am glad you have not run across my brother, Eddie. You see, he understands that your sudden evaporation from our every day existence would not be entirely displeasing to me. You are very fortunate, Williams. For the time being, I have taken you off what we so vulgarly hear expressed as 'the spot.' "

"Why?" I stopped as I moved toward my car, behind his.

"Why?" He hesitated a moment, and then, "Because I have suddenly decided to go out in society. Because I have decided to marry again. I would rather, for a bit, at least until after this marriage, be compared with the living rather than the dead."

"But you are married." The thing just blurted out.

"So I am, so I am." He playfully tapped me on the chest with a long, delicate finger. "But I have a feeling that it will not be for long. There are times when I really believe I have psychic power. This is one of those times."

"But who are you to—"

"Tut, tut, Williams. A man does not announce a bride while he has a wife living. But take care of yourself. My car will follow yours closely. Do not fail to visit me. I shall make you a most enticing offer of money, and introduce you to my future wife."

"But a man does not announce a bride while he has a wife living." I repeated his crack half sarcastically.

"Quite so, quite so," he told me. "And I repeat—I shall introduce you to my future bride."

With that he was gone, stepping into the huge Rolls Royce, the door of which a man held open for him.

CHAPTER XXIV

HIGH-PRICED INFORMATION

I started toward my car, hesitated and stood in the middle of the sidewalk. Had that last crack of his been a threat against his wife's life? Should I go and tell O'Rourke? Should I— But the Rolls still stood at the curb and O'Rourke surely expected more than I did that the woman's life might be attempted. Also O'Rourke and another cop were already in that private hospital. One thing was sure. O'Rourke was a thorough police officer. Only the best men would watch over Madame's life, and—

"The night air grows chilly," Michelle Gorgon was calling from the window of his car. "If you would rather postpone our little talk, and chat with the genial Sergeant O'Rourke, it is perfectly agreeable to me."

"Be right with you," I said confidentially, hopped into my car, stepped on the starter, shoved the old girl in second gear, and was

away, shooting down the street before the big Rolls Royce could even get moving.

No, sir, I didn't believe that business of taking me off the spot, or if I did believe it, I wasn't going to test out the accuracy of my instinct in such matters. It might be easy for Michelle Gorgon to pass the word along to certain racketeers, "Empty your machine gun into the car I'm following."

I burnt up the city streets, lost track of the Rolls entirely, and had my car parked around the corner and was waiting in the pretentious lobby of the Park Avenue apartment when Michelle Gorgon came in.

"An astounding man, Williams, most astounding." He shook my shoulders playfully. "You do everything with such enthusiasm. Now, when I wish speed," he went on, as we rode up in the elevator, "I take the airplane. I'm a great believer in the future of air travel, perhaps, even the present. I have more than one plane of my own."

"Yes," I said, "I've heard about your plane. Your wife likes it too, I suppose." And the sneer would not keep out of my voice.

Michelle Gorgon looked at the elevator operator, but said nothing until we had alighted at the top floor and the elevator door closed behind us. Then he said:

"That was untactful, and if not unkind, at least thoughtless. I am a man, Williams, who is no longer young. It has only been given me in life to love two women."

"Then you were married twice." I wasn't trying to be tactful.

"Not yet," he told me, let himself in the heavy steel door, and we walked across the roof, up the steps of the porch and into the bungalow. Once again I found myself in the

library. Once again the old servant brought the No. 1 Sherry and left us alone.

I got up, walked about the room, spotted the door behind the curtain, that Madame had left by on a previous occasion and found it locked. Michelle Gorgon watched me without objection, but with a little twist to his thin lips, and perhaps a narrowness to his eyes, though they never blinked. Just regarded me steadily, like the unblinking orbs of a young baby.

One thing I made certain of. That was—that no one was hiding in that room, or behind those curtained windows. Now, I'd fix my chair, back against real solid plaster and keep it there. I wouldn't be trapped again. Not twice in one night, by a Gorgon, anyway.

"You are perfectly safe here," Michelle Gorgon told me. "Besides, Sergeant O'Rourke knows you came with me." And he added, rather suggestively I thought, "Sergeant O'Rourke also knows that I came here with you, as does my servant."

I looked up.

"What do you mean?"

"That Sergeant O'Rourke probably knows why you came here."

"Do you know why?" My hand was on my gun now; I was leaning slightly forward. "Do you know why I took a chance like this, coming here alone with you, to your home, again?"

"Yes," he said, "I do know. To threaten me with physical violence unless I disclose certain information to you. That would be your way."

That startled me. In fact, that was almost exactly what was on my mind, but not altogether.

"You're partly right," I told him. "But not to threaten you, Michelle Gorgon, to act. You know my ways. You took your chance when you brought me here. Colonel McBride has paid me, trusted me. He has disappeared."

"Not an affair of the heart, I hope." Michelle Gorgon looked up at me from his easy chair.

And that was that. Not heroic, nor moving picture stuff. Not the sort of blood that runs through the body of a hero, maybe. But I was alone in that room, with probably the greatest murderer who ever cheated the hot seat. I took two steps forward, and had him by the throat. And I was talking.

"Now, where's McBride? You don't believe in the physical, Doctor Gorgon, except in the abstract. Well, you'll believe in it now. Where—" My fingers started to tighten upon that throat, but stopped. Those eyes held me, still staring, still unblinking, and yet there was nothing of alarm in them. Perhaps, just a touch of the curious. He spoke very slowly as he watched me.

"You are acting rather childish, Race Williams. Just a moment—" he cut that in quickly, as my fingers started to tighten and I started to talk. "Let me assure you," he went on, "that all arrangements are made for such a contingency as this. I believe, if I wished, I could go through physical violence, even torture, with a silent tongue, but," and he actually smiled, "I will not put myself to the test. I am just as determined a man as Colonel McBride. I imagine he has resisted pressure. But the point is—if you so much as close those fingers on my throat, the place will be alive with servants, not gunmen, maybe, but servants. I assure you that my system of protection here is unassailable."

He didn't speak like a man who was bluffing. He didn't—I let go of his throat and

stepped back. I had something else up my sleeve.

"You may be right," I told him. "You may have a system that will protect you from physical violence. But what would prevent me placing a bullet smack between those cute eyes of yours?" Somehow, O'Rourke's words crept in then.

"Well," he smiled with his lips, and actually sipped the sherry, "you and I would call it, shall I say, ethics. My brothers would call it 'lack of guts.' And do you know, Williams, I think that my brothers would be right."

Maybe he was right. Maybe he wasn't. I was fingering my gun speculatively. Oh, it's a weakness. I guess he was right, after all. It's the "woman" in all of us. I just couldn't bring myself to press that trigger and snuff him out. Couldn't? And I wondered. The men he had murdered, the man, Colonel McBride, whom he now spoke of as being under "pressure," which probably meant "torture." And, I let the trigger of my gun slip back and forth slowly. Who was the woman he was going to marry? Was it The Flame? I half raised my gun.

Did he read what was in my face, or was there anything in my face? I don't know, and so he couldn't. But I have always had an idea that at that moment Doctor Gorgon was nearer to death than he ever was before. And so did he, for he cut in quickly, and his eyes blinked now.

"Also," he said slowly, "it would be most disastrous for the Colonel, most disastrous."

"What you're telling me practically amounts to a confession." I tried police work.

"Hardly." And his smile came back as my gun went down on my knees. "Let us not be children at play. You knew that I knew where Colonel McBride was before you came here. O'Rourke knows that I know. At Albany they

know that it is my hand that guides the destiny of our courts. The rookies on the police force know that, when a man dies who has displeased the right people, that it is the hand of a Gorgon who directs that death. But what does it avail them? Nothing. Absolutely nothing! Protection is money. I have that. Protection is influence. I have that. Protection is fear. I have established that. Big men have sought my influence because it gratifies their ambition. They have taken my money because it gratifies their greed. And they've taken my orders because they recognize fear. And I can gratify that emotion to the last degree."

He was leaning forward now. And suddenly he unclosed his hand and hurled a bit of paper across the table at me. I unfolded it with my left hand as I watched him.

"The soul of Rose Marie cries out for vengeance," was all that was now written on that paper. But a word, two words or perhaps three, following the word "vengeance" had been carefully erased.

And the face that I had seen once before in that room was looking at me now. The face I had seen that first night, when Michelle Gorgon found his wife in the library. The contorted, evil features that Michelle Gorgon couldn't control. What a rotten soul the beast must have. The distorted mouth, the eyes now protruding, the lips quivering like an animal's. Yep, Michelle Gorgon was just what Joe was, what Eddie had been. Just an underworld rat. And this time his face stayed coarse and evil when he spoke.

"I'll give you one hundred thousand dollars for the name of the person who wrote that message, who for the past week has been sending those messages. Who—"

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean!" He fairly cried out the words. "Who is it that rings the phone at

night? Who is it that speaks that same message in the cracked voice of a man who tries to imitate a woman? Yet, it is a woman's trick. But there can be no woman, no man either, no living man, now. Don't you see? Don't you understand? No one in the world but myself knows who that— who Rose Marie is."

"Your first wife, in Italy." I tried to throw him.

He only laughed.

"McBride thinks of a first wife, in Italy. The shrewdest Italian detective on the Force has visited my home town in Italy, traced me until I left for America, traced every move I made since leaving the boat in New York, twenty-three years ago. But they know nothing. Giovoni told them nothing. Williams, I offer you one hundred thousand dollars for the name of the person behind McBride, behind O'Rourke. The person who tells them so much, but no more. The person who seeks a personal vengeance against me. The only thing in life I have feared. And I don't know, don't know who it is, nor why it is."

"Rose Marie, eh?" I was looking at the name.

"Yes, Rose Marie. Let that help you. But, one hundred thousand dollars for the name of the person. It's a lot of money." He was calmer now. "I have the cash here, ready to pay. Crisp, new bills."

"But suppose I don't know who wrote it?" I wouldn't admit I didn't know, yet. Which, from his next words, was an unnecessary precaution on my part.

"Of course you don't know. If you knew what this person—" he spread his arms far apart. "Colonel McBride don't know, or he would have acted. But Colonel McBride knows who the person is, for that person gave him such information as he has. That person

suddenly decided to work it alone. Yes, McBride knows who it is, and McBride won't tell. Won't tell yet." A drawer in the table came open.

"One hundred thousand dollars. I have it here. It is yours if you will tell me the name of every one, and what's taken place, to the least detail, since you entered this attempt to eliminate the Gorgons, last week."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You'd be wasting your money," I said, but I was trying to think. Was some one onto Michelle Gorgon? Did some one know what that little Italian, Giovoni, had known, and was that some one waiting to get a good price for that information from Colonel McBride? But that couldn't be. If it was simply a question of money they'd blackmail Michelle Gorgon. So I tried that question on him while he seemed ready to talk.

"Has any one tried to shake you down?"

"No, no. There is something deeper than that, far deeper. I can not understand it. But this person who knows, keeps it, keeps the knowledge from all but me. Why? Why?"

"Why do you tell me, why put anything into my hands?"

"Put anything into your hands!" His voice was scornful. "McBride was told, and O'Rourke was told, that I murdered my wife back in Italy. They—. But no matter. You have been told it too. But like every other accusation against me, it fell through, when—"

"Giovoni died," I tried.

Michelle Gorgon ignored that. He said:

"I tell you because, because it may be that such—certain information may come to you— and I assure you, Williams, that it will be to your best interests to sell that information to

me. But some one told McBride of Giovoni, some one told McBride of—but no matter. The subject is dropped. You will remember it only when you wish money. If I could, could—” He took his head in his hands and pressed the temples at the sides.

Then he changed suddenly.

“And now, Williams, for my little treat. I wish to take you below with me. Just a few floors. It is perfectly safe. Really, you’re not alarmed? I promise you that I shall interest you.”

CHAPTER XXV

APARTMENT 12-D

But I was alarmed. Not afraid, you understand. There’s a deal of difference between the two, at least, in my way of thinking, there is. And you’ve got to admit that I’ve got to live or die on my way of thinking, and not some one else’s.

“Maybe I am like you in some things, Williams. If I have made my plans I go through with them no matter what may threaten.” This, as we left the bungalow and entered the upper hall of the apartment. “Yes, go through with them even if they lead to destruction. For, like Aristotle, I must follow my star.”

“Like Napoleon, you mean.” For once I knew something that he didn’t and had to get my oar in like a kid.

“Napoleon. Yes, I said Napoleon.” He fairly snapped the words, and for the first time I saw color in his cheeks. He did have his weak side then, and, damn it! it was brought out by a reflection on his—well—I suppose the word is culture, which is rather a laugh there.

“I meant Napoleon,” he said as we entered the elevator, “if perhaps I didn’t say it. You can see, then, how disturbed I am tonight.” And in a louder voice, directed to the elevator operator, “Very much disturbed. Madame is very ill, John. I’m quite worried about her. The twelfth floor, please.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I hope it’s nothing serious.” The operator didn’t appear overinterested, but Michelle went on.

“Not serious from a medical point of view; not serious physically, John. But then, they have not watched over Madame as I have. It’s her mental condition. There have been times when I was afraid she’d do herself a harm. She’s threatened it. I spoke of it tonight, didn’t I, Williams?”

“No, you didn’t.” I looked at him strangely. He was a talker, there was no doubt about that. But I had not expected that he’d hold forth with the elevator operator on his domestic affairs, at least the mental afflictions of his wife.

“But I should have mentioned it to you, Williams. It worries me greatly.” This, as we stepped out on the twelfth floor and I followed him down the wide hall to a mahogany door, labeled 12-D.

A moment’s wait while a bell buzzed far back behind that door.

“It’s all right, Williams. I am going to introduce you to my future bride,” and as a maid opened the door, “I am expected, of course, Lillian.”

“Of course, sir,” said the colored maid, and held the door open for us to enter.

“A little surprise, Lillian. Don’t mention that I’ve brought a friend. Not a word, now.” And something passed from Michelle Gorgon’s

hand to the maid's hand as we entered a beautifully furnished living room.

Was I a fool to come? I didn't know. But I'd have come anyway, and bride or no bride my hand still rested on the gun in my jacket pocket. I remembered that I wasn't in the "sanctuary" of Michelle Gorgon now, and though I remembered also that the elevator man, John, had seen us get off at the twelfth floor and that O'Rourke knew I was in the building—Well, I'm noble minded and all that, but I wasn't a good enough citizen to be willing to play the part of the corpse that finally roasted this inhuman murderer, Michelle Gorgon.

And that was that. There was a sound of laughter and running feet, and a girl was across the room. Two arms were around Michelle's neck.

"It was nice, nice of you to come, and I stayed up. Who—" She dropped to the floor and looked at me. "What is he doing here?" And the girlish sparkle went out of those eyes; the youthful softness went from her face. It was the woman now. The woman of the night. As I had expected, but never let myself believe, it was The Flame, Florence Drummond. The Girl with the Criminal Mind. And perhaps half a hundred other aliases in her innocent young life.

Bitter? Yes, I was bitter. Only a short while ago she had told me that she loved me. Maybe Michelle Gorgon's presence had some strange power over her. I had half thought that from her previous actions. But, she had not felt his presence when she ran from that room to greet him.

"You see, I'm disturbing the lady." I half turned toward the door.

"Ah! Yes, yes." Michelle Gorgon seemed to be enjoying himself. "We just stopped in, Florence. I have an engagement, and I wanted to tell you that I couldn't visit you tonight."

"If it's a test—" The girl looked sharply at him.

"If it is, it's not for you, my dear." Michelle sort of plucked at her arm. "My confidence in myself, the beautiful things I can shower on you, in the wonderful places I can take you. In—" And turning to me, "Just a minute, Williams. For the last time, you are looking on The Flame, The Girl with the Criminal Mind. Now, that mind will be occupied with nothing more criminal than making a man happy by, by—" He went very close to her but still watched me. "By-allowing him to adore her," he finished.

And The Flame laughed.

"You're somewhat of a dumb bunny, Michelle." Her voice was that of the young girl again, but her eyes and face weren't. She looked at me defiantly as she stretched both hands upon his shoulders. "You too listen to the gossip of the street, Michelle." She put her head close to him and whispered something softly. I didn't get it, but somehow it riled me just the same. I said, purely vindictively, and perhaps without point, but anyway what was on my chest.

"High class house, this. No references needed to get an apartment here, I guess."

Michelle Gorgon shook his head.

"On the contrary, the clientele is picked most carefully. Miss Drummond's references were of the best. From the owner of the apartment himself." And with a smile, "You see, the deeds to this property happen to be in my name."

While I tried to laugh that one off Michelle Gorgon raised an arm and placed it about The Flame's shoulder. What did it all mean? Was Florence tired of poverty, and

taking riches? Was she tired of being ruled, and wanted to rule? Was—? And Michelle drew her close to him, his eyes ever on me, steady, staring things. Watching me, not in alarm or fear; more, a curious glint, as if he had brought me there for this very purpose. To watch how I took it.

Maybe I didn't take it well. My left hand clenched at my side, my right caressed the butt of a heavy caliber six-gun in my jacket pocket.

The temptation was strong to slap him down. Maybe I would have acted upon that temptation. Maybe I wouldn't have. But the thought came then. Was The Flame, after all, the one lured by wealth, by the strange influence of this man? Or was Michelle Gorgon the one lured? Lured, as so many other men had been, by the fascination of this strange girl? Was Michelle Gorgon now the moth attracted by the flame?

Any way you put it, I turned my head, hesitated a moment, then walked toward the exit door. I heard The Flame say:

"And these strange messages, this shadow that bothers you, Michelle. Can't I—"

"Uh-huh." At least Michelle Gorgon made a funny noise in his throat that sounded like that before he said, "At a time like this, Florence, why bring that up?" He was annoyed, and showed it.

But Michelle Gorgon reached the apartment door almost the same time I did. We passed out into the wide hall together. He hadn't gotten my goat, and I'd show him he hadn't. I said:

"I thought a man doesn't introduce his future bride with a wife still living."

"No, not with a wife still living. I have a presentiment that—" He paused and looked at

his watch, and smiled with his lips. "But the offer I made you, Race, the money I will pay for the name of the one behind McBride, behind O'Rourke. Tut, tut, don't answer yet. The shadow that overhangs my—yes, my life—will be wiped out, as all other shadows have been wiped out that threatened a Gorgon, The Gorgon.

"Since you've entered this, shall we call it a case, what has happened? Who has taken every trick? Toney, the little Italian drug addict. He died before he spoke out the whole truth to McBride. Giovoni. He died before he spoke out the whole truth to McBride. Every one who has stood in my way has died."

"Every one but your wife." I was thinking of his talk of marrying The Flame.

"I have told you that I am psychic. I have a feeling now, a strong feeling now, that the wife you speak of, God rest her soul—is dead."

He pressed the two elevator buttons. The one for an up car and the other for a down, and we waited. Almost at once the machinery broke into life. There was the hum of a motor far below. But it was the down car that came first. Just before the elevator reached our floor, Michelle Gorgon said:

"No. A man never introduces his future bride while his wife is living." And, damn it! he rubbed his hands together, as if he gloated over something, something which I could not believe. "You have been with me all the evening, Race, no one is to deny that. What a nice alibi for a husband who might be suspected of murder. The abstract, Williams. The abstract is—"

The door of the car clanked open and I stepped within.

"Every trick." Michelle Gorgon stood by the door a minute. "And not a single one for you."

"No. No." Maybe it was foolish, maybe it wasn't. But I was mad—damn good and mad. Anyway, I did it. I shoved my hand quickly into my pocket and drew out that envelope. The envelope Michelle had asked me so sarcastically to deliver to his brother, Eddie.

"I won't get a chance to deliver this message, Doctor." I tried to keep the vindictiveness and the gloating out of my own voice, but I guess they crept in. After all I'm only human. "So, since you'll see Eddie before I do, I'll ask you to deliver this."

He just eyed me, steadily, unblinkingly, as his hand stretched out for the envelope. But I didn't give it to him then.

"I'll just put Eddie's address on the envelope for you," I told him, jerked out my pencil and scribbled quickly upon the white surface. Then I shoved it into his hand, pushed him back from the door, slammed it shut and said:

"Down, John. Make it snappy."

Maybe I'd made a mistake, but I didn't care. I'd have done it again any time, under the same circumstances. I'll bet that grin was wiped off his lips, and the unblinking baby-like stare out of his eyes. For I had written on that envelope:

*Eddie Gorgon, Esq.,
Slab One,
The City Morgue.*

CHAPTER XXVI

MURDER IN THE ABSTRACT

As I left the building and hurried to my car, yes, hurried, I thought to myself: There, let Michelle

Gorgon count up the tricks in the game, and laugh that one off.

There was nothing to do now, of course, but tip O'Rourke off that Eddie Gorgon's body could be picked up and carted away, for Michelle Gorgon to deliver the envelope to.

Michelle Gorgon was some boy. He had a way of getting at you, a convincing way. I thought of Colonel McBride, and more than half wished that I had gone through with the thing and sunk fingers into that white, delicate skin of Michelle Gorgon, until he told me where Colonel McBride was. And then, there was The Flame. I didn't try to think overmuch on that. I didn't want to think about that.

There was also the guy who had something on Michelle Gorgon, knew who his first wife was, if there was a first wife. At least, knew enough to put fear into Michelle Gorgon. It looked as if, for once in his younger days, Michelle Gorgon had gone in for a bit of murder that wasn't in the abstract, after all. But enough of that.

One other dominant thought. Michelle Gorgon's crack about "a bride and a living wife," and his crack about having psychic power. I entered a subway station and found a telephone booth, decided to pass up the hospital as a call at that hour, but buzzed O'Rourke at home. His wife answered my jingle. She was not reassuring.

"The Sergeant," Mrs. O'Rourke always called him that, "hasn't been home. But he called a little while ago, saying he wouldn't be home tonight at all. And him only a Sergeant, with the worries of an Inspector." And after a few more natural complaints, she told me, "He said, if you called him, Mr. Williams, for you to come straight to—to some hospital. I don't mind the name of it, but—"

And I hung up on the good lady, dashed from the station, sprang into my car and made monkeys out of the few traffic lights which were still operating.

O'Rourke was the first lad I saw when the cop by the door of the hospital stood aside for me to enter. O'Rourke didn't wait, or couldn't wait. Anyway, he led me smack into a little room and chirped it out.

"She's dead, Race. Yes, I know, with a cop in the alley and me at the door—in the hall, mind you."

"Shot?" I said.

"No." His laugh wasn't pleasant. "I'm not as bad a cop as that." He clasped his hands together. "Poisoned. Murdered by her husband, just the same as if he stuck a knife in her chest and turned the blade. But you won't get a verdict on it, not a chance. There ain't a jury in the country, nor the medical examiner for that matter, but will call it suicide."

"What sort of poison?"

"There was no label on the bottle, but the smell of burnt almonds was strong. Prussic acid. I guess we all agree on that."

"And how— Who do you think gave it to her?"

"She gave it to herself, you fool. I tell you I was at the door, Donnelly under the window. Michelle Gorgon left it for her. I can swear to that. But who's to believe it? Not the doctors. Not the medical examiner. And certainly no twelve men in a jury box. There's enough evidence to disprove that Michelle Gorgon brought it here. Listen!" And O'Rourke gave me the whole show.

"Most of the time I heard Madame moving in the bed. Then she sort of cried out.

Miss Agnes, who was writing right across from me, on the other side of the door, went in to her. I went as far as the door, and looked in. Madame waved us out. She spoke too, said she was all right. She was holding a book very tightly closed in her hand, but she didn't want anything, wouldn't take anything. And Miss Agnes came out and closed the door. Madame asked that the door be closed, when we left it open a crack.

"She was restless, Race, very restless. And I couldn't swear that she didn't get out of that bed and crawl across the room. But I would swear to that if it would roast Michelle Gorgon.

"The whole thing seemed silly, my sitting there like that, when I ought to be out on the McBride hunt, and I was just about to call it a night and put another lad on the door, when—well—it's almost funny. I didn't hear anything, unless you can hear a sudden quiet. But Madame wasn't restless any more, hadn't been for some time—hadn't—. And I called to Miss Agnes. Not because I was alarmed at the quiet, but because I just wanted to have a last look at Madame before I left.

"And," O'Rourke's hand went under his collar, "she was dead, Race, and in one hand was the empty bottle that had held the poison, and in the other withered hand— Well, make a guess."

"The book of love stories," I tried.

"Wrong," said O'Rourke. "In the other hand she held a tiny mirror. For the first time, she looked at her face in a mirror—and took her life. That'll be the verdict, and don't you forget it."

I put my oar in.

"But who gave her the mirror? Who left her the mirror and poison? Michelle Gorgon, of

course. He had the opportunity when we were out of the room, and—”

“Yes, he did. If that was all there was to it we might pin it on him, at least as manslaughter. But there is more to it. The devilish cunning of the man, or—. But listen to this. Beneath her bed was an open bag, the small, over-night bag she brought with her to the hospital. And that bag had an inside flap, a sort of secret pocket, that was now open. No—” he saw the question on my lips, “Miss Agnes had put the bag in the small closet. She hadn’t noticed the flap when she unpacked the bag—it was well hidden. And she hadn’t noticed since early evening if the bag was still in the closet or under the bed. But in the pocket beneath the flap that now hung open was another tiny bottle of the same poison. Pointing out nicely to a jury where Madame hid her poison, maybe for weeks.

“Brophey sums it up like any dick, any lawyer for the defense would, and any jury would believe. Madame had secreted that poison there for the moment she could bear her terrible affliction no longer. And the mirror too—for the day she got the nerve to look at herself. For the mirror was a pocket affair, and could be hidden in a case. The case was on the bed beside her.”

“And you sum it up, O’Rourke?”

“Like you,” he said harshly. “Michelle Gorgon planned this for a long time. He came here tonight, gave her the mirror and the poison. Maybe he threatened her, maybe he didn’t. Maybe she had been pleading for the chance to end her life. But he did it. Defiantly, while I was there. Just laughed at me.”

“Murder in the abstract.” I thought aloud.

“Abstract or no abstract, the woman’s dead. God!” O’Rourke threw up both his hands,

“if I only had the guts to lay a hand on him and drag him in for it.”

“No, O’Rourke, you can’t do that. With what Michelle Gorgon told me, for he knew his wife was going to die, and what you suspect—well—the jury would just think it a police frame-up. We couldn’t hang the crime on him.”

“No, we couldn’t,” O’Rourke admitted grudgingly. “Doctor Revel says it’s quite possible that Madame crawled to the closet and got the bag. But he’d like it a straight suicide, with no investigation, of course.”

“Of course.” I agreed. “Did you—did some one notify Doctor Michelle Gorgon?”

“Yes. He should have been here by this. Word was left with his servant. Gorgon had stepped out of his apartment for the moment.”

“Yes.” I thought aloud. “He was with me.”

And now what? I suddenly realized that I had entirely forgotten, in the rapid happenings, that I had had no word of my boy, Jerry, whom I had left waiting for me when I went to visit Colonel McBride. Jerry, who had disappeared when I decided to make my appearance at the Colonel’s house from the rear instead of the front. Jerry, whom I thought I had seen leave an areaway far down the street and follow the person—the man who had left McBride’s house with Colonel McBride. Jerry, who might be able to tell me who—. But no more thought. I had forgotten Jerry. I’d give my home a buzz now and see if he had returned.

But first I told O’Rourke about my message to Michelle Gorgon, but not of the envelope, for I didn’t want to bring The Flame into it—at least, yet. Just that I had wised Michelle Gorgon up as to where they could find his brother, Eddie’s, body. At the City Morgue.

"Good!" O'Rourke snapped up the phone on the little table. "I'll have the boys pick up the stiff, just say I was tipped off to a bump in Maria's Cafe. Let the surprise and joy be theirs." And he grinned at me, but his grin had lost much of its spontaneous good nature.

As for me. I grabbed myself another phone and buzzed my number. And this time I got results. I'm telling you I breathed easier when Jerry's voice came over the wire.

"Never mind me, Jerry," I cut short his interest. "Did you recognize the lad who left the block in such a hurry?"

And Jerry did. And Jerry told me so. And the name of the man brought back to me the words of The Flame. "Use your brains. Go over this thing from the beginning."

And I did go over it—did think. And the thoughts I got were amazing, astounding, but not unbelievable. When I came to, O'Rourke was standing beside me.

"O'Rourke," I said, "now that that bit of shooting is out, I think I'll go down and talk to Rudolph Myer."

"But I'll cover you. The Commissioner will cover you, if we don't find the Colonel. Hell! Race," he cut in on himself, "you said to sit tight on that, you might know something."

"Might," I said. "I will know something soon. But just for safety's sake I'll get over to Rudolph Myer. You can't tell who might step over your head."

"The Commissioner's head too?"

"Who is Rose Marie?" The question just came to me.

"God!" said O'Rourke. "If we knew that we'd know everything. Toney said it was

Michelle Gorgon's wife. Giovoni spoke of Rose Marie as Michelle Gorgon's wife. And—oh, some one else said it was Michelle Gorgon's wife. But we've gone back over the years and Michelle Gorgon was never married in Italy."

"Couldn't Michelle have been married under another name?"

"He could have, but he wasn't."

"But if Giovoni was his father-in-law, then— then who was Giovoni's daughter, and who was her husband?"

"Giovoni's daughter's name was Rose Marie, all right. We've established that as a fact. And she was brutally murdered, too, by her husband. We've established that too, even if it was many years ago. But Michelle Gorgon's name in Italy was Gorgonette, and Rose Marie's husband's name was Nicholas Tremporia and he was a Greek. He escaped after the murder, and was picked up on the railroad tracks on a dock near Naples. Fairly ruined by the train, he was. We only found that out since Giovoni was murdered. So you see, if Giovoni had lived and talked his head off, it wouldn't have hurt Michelle Gorgon any. Giovoni was a little bugs, I guess."

"Then why have him killed?"

"I don't know," O'Rourke said despairingly. "Something else, maybe. But certainly Michelle Gorgon was not Giovoni's son-in-law. That much is established beyond a doubt."

"Yes?" I chewed that one over, but I didn't like it. There didn't seem any sense, then, in the kicking over of Giovoni. The phone rang and O'Rourke answered it. I had already started for the door.

O'Rourke held up his hand. I waited until the call was over. Then O'Rourke said, and though his voice was calm, it was a false calm:

"You needn't bother about Rudolph Myer. The body of Eddie Gorgon has—disappeared."

"Disappeared!"

"Well, it isn't there in the Maria Cafe," snapped O'Rourke. "Choose your own word for it. But if there's no corpse there's no criminal lawyer necessary. That much is a cinch."

"Nevertheless," I told him, as I passed through the hall to the front door, "I'm a boy scout and believe in preparedness. I'm going to see Rudolph Myer. Wait here. I think something is going to break."

And smack at the front door I bumped into Doctor Michelle Gorgon.

"Ah! Race Williams," he said, and though he looked at me unblinkingly I read hatred in his eyes, "I have another presentiment, quite contrary to former thoughts of you. It is that you are about to die; to be found with—" He broke off as O'Rourke followed me to the door. Then he said, "I have just heard of Madame's sad end. How distressing. Most distressing, Detective Sergeant O'Rourke."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE KILLER INSTINCT

But I was gone, hurrying to my car, speeding down the street. Something big was about to break. Any possible doubt that Colonel McBride was held prisoner by the Gorgon outfit was dissipated by my conversation with Michelle Gorgon, and that the man was being tortured for information—information that seemed

imperative to the liberty, if not actually the life, of Michelle Gorgon seemed also sure. I shuddered slightly. Michelle Gorgon possessed, in his best moments, not the least touch of human compassion. Now, with his very life in the balance, he'd do anything to get that information from Colonel McBride.

Another thing was certain. McBride would have to be rescued very quickly. There wasn't one chance in a hundred that he would be let free, even if he talked, and I remembered that set jaw of his, the determined eyes. Oh, it may have knocked him to see another killed, shot down before his eyes, as I had shot down the lad the night we were moving Giovoni to the private sanitarium—and it may have unnerved him to think that Toney and Giovoni, whom he wished to protect, met their death, but I didn't think he'd talk, and I knew what that would mean for him.

With this important thing on my mind I was going to consult my lawyer, Rudolph Myer? That's right. That's exactly what I was going to do. As I drove down town and through Greenwich Village to Rudolph Myer's house, I thought upon, and even enlarged upon, if that could be done, the sufferings that Colonel McBride was to be put through, was now going through, or had been put through. Not nice thoughts? No, decidedly not. Nevertheless, I had them, and I held them, for they stirred a hate and a passion, and perhaps even a lust to kill. Bad business? Maybe. But my business tonight was bad business.

There was no guard at Rudolph Myer's house, and I'm not sure if there was a light, though I think one shone beneath the second story window shade, that overlooked the side alley. Side alley? That's right. For I was looking the place over. Rudolph Myer and I were good friends. Had been so for a good many years. He was my lawyer in many instances, and a mighty good one, if a high priced one. But I never begrudged him a cent I paid him.

Now, I guessed that I knew Rudolph well enough to play a practical joke on him. Sort of slip in and surprise him. And surprise him I certainly would. He was alone in that house. The only servant he had left each night. There was nothing for him to fear. He was the friend of the unfortunate, the criminal. The finest fixer in the city of New York.

I went to the back, crossed the stone court, carefully up-ended an ash can, stood upon it and rapped myself a little hole in the window pane. No feeling for electric burglar alarm wires. No need of that. I had been in that room too often not to know. Rudolph Myer knew crooks. He was a firm believer in that saying that any crook who wanted "in" got "in"—if he wanted "in" bad enough.

Well, I'm no crook, but I wanted "in" bad enough. I just stuck my fingers through the hole, snapped back the window lock, lifted it carefully, slowly, silently, and stepped into the room. My rubber soled shoes made no noise across the linoleum of the kitchen and even less noise as I crossed the thick rug of the dining room, through to the hall and onto the wooden stairs. I picked the front stairs because, well, they were less likely to make noise—had no door bottom and top— and besides which, they would bring me up to the hall and close to that door, the door of the room from which I thought that tiny light had peeped.

All stairs are creaky, of course, no exception to this old outfit. But I had luck, in a way. Some one was moving around up stairs—some one was moving quickly, furtively, quietly back and forth, back and forth across the floor.

I made the upper hall, took a couple of quick steps down it, guided by a light from a partly open door, and stopped dead before that door as the quickly moving feet inside ceased, and some one seemed to listen.

Then it wasn't "seemed" any more. Some one was listening. For the person in that room had held his breath, and then let it go again in a sort of whistling sound.

Finally the feet crossed to the door, paused, fingers reached to the side of the door and pushed it open wider, and I stepped through the opening and faced Rudolph Myer.

Certainly he was surprised. Maybe even shocked. He rubbed his hands across his eyes as if he wasn't sure, then half straightened his bent shoulders and tried playing at the corners of his mouth with the thumb and index finger of his right hand. He was fully dressed, and a hat and top coat lay over the end of the bed.

"Surprise!" I said, closed the door behind me and spun the key in the lock. Then I looked around the room as he backed away from me. One suitcase already packed stood shut by the bed. It had heavy straps around it. The other was a big affair and needed another shirt or a couple of socks before locking. There was little doubt that Rudolph intended to go bye-bye. Five minutes later and—. But I hadn't been five minutes later. Why dwell on that?

And Rudolph Myer spoke first.

"Race, Race Williams. How did you get in? And why?"

"And the answer is—Who cares? I won't waste time, Myer." I backed him across the room, my eyes on him. "You two-timing skunk! After all these years you sell me out. You left the house of Colonel McBride tonight with McBride. You trapped him into the hands of the Gorgons. You two-timed him as you did me."

"I didn't," he cried out. "It's a lie. Before God I swear I didn't."

And I had him by the throat, forced him to his knees.

"Don't try to lie out of it. My boy, Jerry, was down the block and saw you. They're torturing McBride," I told him, and my voice shook. "You know me, Myer. I don't have to threaten you. You've kidded me about my shooting, for I've paid you well. Now, you double-crossed me and I'm going to kill you, kill you." I squeezed his throat tighter, saw his eyes bulge, watched his tongue protrude, then I thrust him from me. Disgusted? Maybe. Through with him? Not me.

Rudolph Myer stretched a hand, let it slip into his open suitcase and half pulled out an automatic. I liked that. He couldn't possibly believe he had a chance against me with a gun, yet he tried to get one. Why? Because he was afraid. He read the truth in my blazing eyes.

I didn't fire. I simply leaned over and rapped his knuckles with the nose of my forty-four. Then I kicked his gun under the bed and told him what was on my chest.

"Listen, Myer." And I didn't have to do any acting to get my part over. "Understand this. I've come here tonight for the purpose of killing you."

"That would be—murder." He half lay, half knelt on the floor.

"You can't murder a rat," I told him. "Anyway, what difference does the name it goes by matter to you, or to me either? No one saw me come here. No one will see me go. And don't be thinking up wise cracks. Let me tell you what I know.

"You got me into this Gorgon case, because the Gorgons knew I was coming in anyway. You found out that McBride was coming on, to help the Commissioner. You knew that O'Rourke had been after the Gorgons for years. Michelle Gorgon probably told you. He

has a way of hearing things, through crooked officials, and crooked, shyster lawyers, like you.

"You knew where McBride planned to take Giovoni, to Elrod's Sanitarium. You told Gorgon and he had him murdered. And it was you who told me The Flame wanted to see me at her rooms, and you, alone, who knew I was going to meet The Flame there. Then you told the Gorgons, or at least, Eddie Gorgon, and you let Eddie think that The Flame sent the message. I don't know why, I don't care why, but you did it again at Maria's Cafe, and Eddie Gorgon died. You somehow got McBride out of his house tonight and into the Gorgon trap. I don't know how you did it, why you did it, though I guess you were paid for it."

"No, no. Not then, Race. It was The Flame. I wanted her. I loved her. I thought—"

"The Flame? You!" I had to laugh.

"Why not?" And Rudolph Myer's beady eyes snapped back to life. "Many have, others have. Am I any different? I'm not so young, but neither is Michelle Gorgon. I'm not so, not—. Don't you see, Race? What she did to others she did to me. And, Race, she led me on. I swear she did. I've done business for Michelle Gorgon. She got it out of me, all out of me. She sucked me dry of every bit of information, then laughed in my face and—"

He read it in my eyes. He clutched at my coat now, kneeling there at my feet.

"Don't kill me, don't. I know you can get away with it. I know the man-made laws can't touch you. But you've never done that. Never gone in for murder, Race. Never—. You've lived clean. There's other laws beside those of man. There's God's."

"There's the laws of God and the laws of man, Myer. And there's the law of death, for the rat, for the stoolie, for the two-timer. You

sent Giovoni to his death. You sent Colonel McBride to worse than death. You tried to send me to death, and—By God! you’ve got to pay the price.” I half raised my gun.

Was I going to kill him then? I don’t know, so you don’t know. But certainly Rudolph Myer thought he knew. He screamed out as he clutched at my knees and begged for life.

“I’ll tell you where McBride is if you let me go. Don’t you see? It was The Flame, The Girl with the Criminal Mind. Am I made of different stuff than other men? Isn’t there blood in my body too? And she laughed at me and told me she loved you, and you only. And, and—. God! Race, I was mad, mad. I wanted you dead. I thought, if you were—if you—. Don’t, don’t kill me. It’ll be death for McBride. Death for The Flame.”

Was it to save McBride that my finger didn’t close on that trigger, or was it because of The Flame? What Rudolph Myer said might easily be true, for I guess most any man would fall a victim to The Flame. Most any would, and many had. Or was it simply that I couldn’t get up the guts to press that trigger and snap out Myer’s life? Or—? But I did say:

“You, you wouldn’t know where McBride is.”

“Yes, I do. I do! Promise, give me your word that you won’t—won’t kill me if I tell you.”

“If I save McBride, you can go free,” I told him. “But I’ll know if you lie about him. I know more than you think. To begin with, I know that you fled down that street, stopped in a telephone booth in a drug store and made two telephone calls. One to me, the other to—”

“To Michelle Gorgon,” he told me, and I believed him. Then he gave me his story.

“Michelle Gorgon found out that Colonel McBride was coming to the city by the request of the Police Commissioner, through the Deputy Commissioner. He had me worm my way into McBride’s confidence by telling him things about the Gorgons—things that O’Rourke had already unearthed, but were not evidence. McBride told me about this Giovoni, but no more than his name and that he had arrived in New York, and was taken sick. He didn’t tell me where he was, nor where he was going to take him. That was the night before I met you. I watched McBride’s house and saw him go to Doctor Elrod’s Sanitarium the following morning. So I knew that would be where he’d take Giovoni. I was working, alone, for Michelle Gorgon. Joe or Eddie knew nothing about my connection with Michelle. Michelle Gorgon liked to play without his brothers once in a while. It strengthened his hold over them.”

“Did Michelle have you notify Eddie when The Flame had you date me up for her, both those times?”

“No. I did it myself. I let Eddie think it came from The Flame. I wanted you—. I, I loved The Flame.”

That was a funny one, maybe—but easy to believe.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE POLICE HORN IN

I looked at my watch. The “whys” the “wherefores” of the thing were not as important as knowing where McBride was. I told Myer to talk, and quickly. He did. He said:

“I went to see Colonel McBride. He expected me and left the kitchen door open, as he didn’t want the police to know I was there. He was telephoning, up stairs. I whistled up to

him from the kitchen door. I was nervous. I thought I heard some one in one of the front rooms, so I kept in the dark. I thought it might be the police. Colonel McBride came down to me. I pretended excitement. I told him I had some one in a car on the street behind, who would tell him all about Rose Marie, and how she was murdered. I told him the person wouldn't come in, for him to come out. He said he was expecting you, Race, but he came with me when I said it would only take a minute. He—" Myer had the good grace to gulp, anyway, "He trusted me. Joe Gorgon was out in the car, with some others and—. I didn't know they intended to torture him. That's the truth."

"And they told you where they were going to take him?"

"No," he said, "they didn't. But I had a— a colleague around the corner with a car to follow them. I—well—I like to have information of my own if things go wrong, like now." He looked at my gun and tried to smile.

I nodded at that. It would be like Myer. Slippery—never trusting any one. Always with a card up his sleeve. Yes—I believed him.

Then he gave me the address where Joe Gorgon and his racketeers had taken Colonel McBride. Ricorro's garage. A notorious, all night garage, where the front doors never closed. I had a hunch Myer was speaking the truth. Somehow, at such times you know.

One more question I couldn't help. I had always looked on Myer as a straight shooter to the one who paid him, if crooked every other way, and certainly not in the cesspool of the city's rackets.

"What made you double-cross McBride, Myer?" I asked. "Did Michelle Gorgon hold something over your head?"

"Not in the sense of blackmail, if you mean that." Rudolph Myer had recovered quickly and was on his feet now, lighting a cigarette with a shaky hand. "I don't think any one could ever get anything on me again. No, Michelle Gorgon's methods are much simpler and much more direct. He came to me, Race, and pounded a long finger against my chest. 'I need you, Myer,' he said. 'Come come, we won't quibble. I'll pay you well to act for me. I always do. It's not for you to decide, but for me to decide. You're in with me now, till I'm through with you—or you're dead by morning.' That was all he said, Race. That was all he needed to say. I know my city. I know my law, and know too what little protection it could offer me. I'd have felt safer hearing my sentence of death passed by a judge in court. For law or no law, I knew as well, or even better than any man, that Michelle Gorgon is above the law. And—and I wanted very much to live."

And the worst of it was, it was true.

But I didn't kill any more time. And I didn't listen to Rudolph Myer's protestations when I took those straps from the bag and a couple of bathrobe cords from the closet and trussed him up.

"I daresay you can work yourself free of those straps, but not these," I said, as I jerked out my irons and fastened them about his ankles. "I'll come back and release you as soon as Colonel McBride is free. Now, anything else to tell me? For your life depends on my success."

He could take that any way he liked—but he talked. He said:

"Joe Gorgon'll be there tonight, not Michelle though. How many Joe will have with him I don't know, but he won't trust many in this— this, I don't think."

And I gagged him. But his eyes bothered me. They were watching that bag, the closed bag. I wondered why, tried to open the bag and found it locked, started to take the gag out of Myer's mouth, saw the excitement in his eyes and tried his vest pocket—and there was the key, attached to the generous watch chain.

I snapped open that bag and got a jar. No wonder Myer was interested in that bag. He was afraid to tell me about it, and was afraid not to. The bag was full of money. Crisp, new bills of large denominations. Rudolph Myer, then, had been leaving the city for an extended visit. I didn't have to count it. But I closed the bag, carried it to the closet and chucked it behind a lot of clothes.

"I don't blame you, worrying," I told him. "That's a lot of jack. But it'll be safe there until I return."

There were many things I wanted to ask him. Each one perhaps more important than the other. But there wasn't time. Not long now before dawn, and the life of Colonel McBride at stake. Who was Rose Marie? Why did she cry out for vengeance? Did Myer know whose voice on the phone so upset Michelle Gorgon? I didn't wait for that information. I only stopped long enough down stairs to put through a call to O'Rourke.

"Hop a subway," I told him, "and I'll pick you up at The Bridge. Don't argue. I've got a line on McBride. The time for chin-chin is passed. Snap into it."

Well, I had used my brains for once, as The Flame had suggested, but I hadn't used them until Jerry told me that Rudolph Myer was the man who escaped down the street after the attack and abduction of Colonel McBride. Then, maybe it wasn't much thinking. I just got a kaleidoscope picture of past events and knew that Rudolph Myer was my meat.

I met O'Rourke and I told him what was on my chest.

"They'll kill McBride if we come in force, yet we can't chance an attack alone. Just one man may be guarding that garage and maybe ten. Here's the ticket. I know Ricorro's. It's an all-night garage. The big front doors are always open. It would look bad if they closed them now. I'm for betting they'll be open."

"Ricorro's Garage!" O'Rourke stroked his chin. "Well, it's got a bad enough name, though we've never really pinned a thing on Ricorro. And you don't know if McBride is in the basement below or on the floor above."

"I don't know even if he's there at all. But dying men are supposed to speak the truth. And I'm telling you, O'Rourke, Rudolph Myer was as near death as any man who ever peeped a final message. But I'm strong for the basement. Here's the lay. There may be a way out that we don't know of. You get a raiding squad and cover the block, but not till I'm inside."

"You and me inside," O'Rourke horned in.

"No. Just me. This is my racket. If I'm discovered, they may think I'm alone, and not kill McBride. I work alone. If you're with me—but you have a wife and kid."

O'Rourke laughed.

"I've been reported killed so many times, and given up by the ambulance surgeon so many times, that the old lady wouldn't even get a bad turn. Besides which, what has the old lady got to do with police business? As for my kid, well, he's going to be a copper, Race—a real copper." And suddenly bursting out on me, "Where do you get the stuff that you're the only living man in New York with any guts, any eye—and any gun hand? I'll be a—"

I switched that talk and turned to McBride's interest. Finally O'Rourke saw it enough my way to let me flop into the garage first. Once the surprise was over, he'd follow. That seemed fair enough. What I was mostly afraid of were spies. Watchers on the outside, who'd give the alarm as soon as the cops got anywhere near the garage.

O'Rourke put through a call for the boys to meet us. He had a picked crew waiting and ready, and told me it wouldn't take five minutes to fill that garage with flatties. I didn't like waiting for the coppers there in the dark street some six blocks from Ricorro's Garage. I get restless just before a bit of action, not nervous, you understand, sort of rarin' to go, and the longer I wait the worse I get. So I spent my time telling O'Rourke all that had taken place in my talk with Michelle Gorgon, and his offer of a hundred thousand dollars for the name of the party behind McBride, the party who rang up Michelle Gorgon. Of the note, "Rose Marie cries out for Vengeance—" with a couple of words erased at the end of it.

"Yeah, Michelle Gorgon would like to know." O'Rourke chewed an unlighted cigar. "McBride could tell him, but won't. I could tell him, but won't. I—.

"O'Rourke," I cut in, "I've laid my cards on the table. What about yours? Who is the one who knows so much, and why can't you get the information from that party?"

"Because I can't," snapped O'Rourke. "And I have passed my—. Well—I can't tell you who it is—that's flat." And suddenly changing the subject, "Who'd think it of Rudolph Myer? Imagine it! The police have been trying to get something on Myer for years and always failed, and finally he mixes himself up with a bit of murder, kidnaping, maybe torture, and what have you, all at once. There's no understanding human nature, Race. But it'll just show you what

a lad we're dealing with in Michelle Gorgon. Certainly he must have put the stony, Gorgon look on Myer. And you say Myer was ready to jump the city, bags packed and all. But why? He never guessed you were onto him. He couldn't know that Jerry saw and recognized him. Maybe he was just leaving for a day or so, on business, business for the Gorgons, Michelle Gorgon."

"Not Myer." I nodded confidently. And I told O'Rourke of the suitcase full of money. "Did that look like a short trip?" I asked.

"Yeah?" And O'Rourke let his mouth hang open a minute. "One hundred thousand dollars for the name of the one behind McBride," he said thoughtfully. "For the one who strikes fear in Michelle Gorgon's stomach, for he hasn't any heart. One hundred thousand dollars for even a hint of who it might be. One hundred thousand dollars for—" And O'Rourke suddenly clutched me by the arm. "You don't think—think that bag contained exactly one hundred thousand dollars?"

"It might. Why? You don't think—?"

"But I do think, exactly what you think now. That Rudolph Myer knew, or guessed, and sold the information to Michelle Gorgon. It—. Wait." And O'Rourke climbed suddenly from the car, went back into that all-night drug store, and following him to the corner I saw him step into the telephone booth.

"Phew—" he rubbed his forehead when he came out. "At least, no harm has been done yet."

"O'Rourke—" I started, and stopped. The riot squad was on the job. Two big cars were coming down the street.

Now, I didn't have things my own way. O'Rourke did agree with me that the police cars stay five blocks from Ricorro's. But O'Rourke trailed along with me to within a couple of

blocks of the garage—then I let him out of my boat.

“I don’t know what you told the cops, O’Rourke,” was my final message to him, “but I’m certain that a police parade will kill the show.”

“Nothing to worry about,” O’Rourke told me. “They’ve got orders to wait, then surround the block. I’ll sort of keep an eye on you.”

“Too much interest, and McBride dies.” I took the hand that O’Rourke held out to me. And I grinned as I put the police whistle into my pocket. Why argue over that?

“You’ve sure got guts, Race,” he said simply, and I drove off.



CHAPTER XXIX

JOE GORGON DOES HIS STUFF



HERE ARE TIMES when I feel that I earn my money. This was one of them. I had an idea that one man, working alone, might get to McBride. One man, driving alone into that garage, would probably not send a signal of warning to Joe Gorgon. One man might—. But I swung the corner, dashed down the main street, spotted the wide open doors of Ricorro's Garage and drove smack in. I want to tell you it was a big moment.

Certainly I got service—service one doesn't expect in a garage.

A lad sitting on the running board of a truck jumped to his feet and came quickly toward me. He carried a wrench in his hand. Though he was dolled up like a car washer I recognized him as I stepped from the car, and what's more, he recognized me. He was more or

less of a well known gangster. And I had the advantage of him. Where he didn't expect me I expected him, or one of his kind.

We faced each other a split second only, as I stepped from the running board. My car protected us from being seen from the little lighted room that would be an office.

He never spoke, never more than half raised that wrench, when I let him have it. Just a single up-swing of my right hand, and the barrel of my gun crashed home. Yes, I know. If I were real high minded I'd have hit him with my fist. But I'm not high minded, and besides, my knuckles bruise easily and I have yet to see the head that will dent my rod.

His eyes did a "Charlie Chaplin" as his knees gave. Then he laid down on the floor. So much for that. I don't waste time on these birds, and I didn't waste time now.

Not a soul in that dimly lit garage as I crossed the smeared cement floor to that little office. Boy, what a break! As I pushed open the

door, Ricorro's fat little form was coming toward me. He stopped dead in the center of that office and gaped at me. Then he turned quickly to the roll-top desk.

"Don't be a fool, Ricorro," I told him. "It's Race Williams. I'm killing tonight."

Melodramatic? Sure. Who's to deny that? But then, in the new underworld of our great city, melodrama is real life—and death too. Anyway, it was the kind of talk Ricorro understood. He stopped dead, chucked up both his hands and stood so. He knew his stuff, did Ricorro; knew my reputation also. Life in the underworld had taught him that the man with the gun talks, and the man without a gun listens.

A sudden noise behind me and I half swung aside, so as to face both Ricorro and the office door. Then I shrugged my shoulders and let it go at that. O'Rourke was there, slightly out of breath, slightly red of face, but with a gun in his hand. He must have run the two blocks.

"I'm sorry, Race. I had to—. Look out!"

A revolver cracked. A figure, or rather, the shadow of a figure fled down the little hall back of the office, where he had been hiding. With a warning to O'Rourke, I dashed into that little hallway. There wasn't much to fear from a lad who couldn't shoot better than to miss both of us.

"Watch that bird, Ricorro, O'Rourke," was all I said as I got under way.

I saw the running figure through the glass of the door which led into the garage again. Just another door where Ricorro could go in and out, and miss people he didn't want to see in the front.

Now, had this scurrying rat spoiled the party? If Joe Gorgon was in the basement, did

he hear the shot? Somehow, I thought not. The motor of my car was still running. The floor was of thick cement. And as I dashed into the dimness of the garage I called out my warning to the fleeing, ducking figure ahead.

I could have shot him, but I didn't. I thought I knew his kind, his breed. I thought he'd drop his gun and cry out for mercy at the first warning. But he didn't. He ducked quickly behind a car, fired once from the darkness, where I couldn't see him, and I cursed out my big heart, or my assurance that he'd stop when I warned him.

Now the going was not so good. This lad was bent on warning the others or making his escape. But while he was loose in that garage he was a real menace—both to my plans and my life. And I saw him again—far in the rear now, a dim figure between two cars. He was kneeling on the floor, pulling at something. I covered him and again called out. You have to admit I was giving him a break.

And this time he had to have it. He raised his gun and it spouted flame. And that was enough of that. I only fired once, saw him sort of straighten, clutch at his chest and go down. I don't go in to miss. It's not good business.

I was on him before he could fire again, that is, if he was alive, to fire again. And he was alive, but not in condition to cause trouble. Besides which, he had shown me the entrance to the basement. A great slab of heavy timber in the cement floor, with an iron ring in it.

I grabbed his gun, took a grip on that iron ring, lifted the trap door and started down wooden steps. Things were as quiet as the grave below. The grave! I wondered. But faint heart never filled a spade flush, or rescued a McBride, and I believe in going after things with a bit in my teeth.

I didn't find blackness below. As soon as I spotted enough light I jumped those steps two at a time and made the bottom. A quickly moving figure is much harder to hit than a slowly moving one. That makes sense, though a lot of people think you must creep up on an enemy to be effective.

If Joe Gorgon had heard those shots, he wasn't in the open, waiting. The basement was musty and damp. Perhaps half a dozen cars stood out weirdly in the dim yellowish light. There were barrels, that looked as if they might contain oil; a part of a car here and another part there. Loose lumber, old tires, and great hunks of tin, or what looked like great hunks of tin.

There were no little side rooms, no locked doors. No doors at all, except two big ones which, I thought, opened into the car elevator, for I had spotted doors like them directly above.

But you couldn't tell. The doors might be a blind. I stepped over to them, and stepped back from them again. Low, but distinct, just the same, was the hum of an elevator. Was it going up or down? I thought down, then knew down. For, as I raised my gun, those doors opened and—Colonel McBride stood smack before me, right in the center of that elevator. Despite the fact that I was looking from the light into the semi-darkness of the unlighted elevator, I recognized him. His face was white, bruised, and cut too. But he was standing on his feet. Standing alone. And I saw the bulky shadow behind him just as that bulky shadow saw me. It was Joe Gorgon.

From behind McBride Joe Gorgon fired. No word of warning. Just a spit of orange blue flame, and a sudden icy coldness across my cheek, as if some one had pulled a red hot iron over it. Yes— I mean that. It was a coldness that burnt.

Joe Gorgon had half turned his great bulk sideways, so that he was completely protected from my fire by Colonel McBride. Joe wasn't like his brother, Eddie. He didn't gloat over his kill. And what's more, he wasn't going to talk himself out of his kill. He was drawing a bead now over McBride's shoulder—his head low, his eye down close to McBride's arm—just a fraction of a sight from under that arm. Joe didn't hurry, but he didn't lag either. Maybe a second. Maybe two. Maybe less, even.

I had to do it. I wasn't fifteen feet from the standing, staring, sort of lifeless McBride, and the hidden crouching bulk of Joe Gorgon. It was my death, McBride's death, or—.

And I did it. I jumped forward and fired, to be closer even when my heavy forty-four found its mark. I fired smack at the right arm of Colonel McBride.

Just the roar and the flash of my gun echoing upon the roar and the flash of Joe Gorgon's single shot. It worked. McBride crumpled to the floor. Joe Gorgon jumped sort of in the air, half spun, fired wildly, and I laid my next bullet smack between his eyes. Just a little round hole, ever growing larger. Joe Gorgon waved his hands once. His right foot came slowly up, like a lad in the slow motion pictures. Then he pitched forward on his face.

Yep, a forty-four is a mighty handy weapon, even if old fashioned. My bullet had gone through the fleshy part of McBride's arm as if it were papier-mâché, and landing in Joe's shoulder had knocked him back, just as if you'd hit him with a battering ram.

But it was McBride I was thinking of. He was so white and silent. The blood was pouring from his arm just above the elbow. An awkward place to tackle, but I did the best I could to make a tourniquet with my handkerchief and pencil as I blew frantically upon the police whistle. Police whistle! Imagine it! I never

thought I'd have use for one of those things. But now, I was glad O'Rourke had forced it on me. The thing was over! McBride was safe, and Joe Gorgon—. Already his body was cold enough for little devils to be skating on his chest.

They came. Half a dozen plainclothesmen, a police surgeon, and O'Rourke leading them.

"I had a doctor in the car," O'Rourke said, "though I should have brought an undertaker. Joe's dead of course. And he got McBride first!"

"He did not!" I told O'Rourke emphatically.

Then I explained the necessity of plugging McBride, felt O'Rourke dabbing at my neck with a handkerchief, and for the first time realized that the warm stream running under my collar was not perspiration, but blood, and that the bullet had been closer to doing me in than I thought, for the wound was along the side of my neck and not my cheek. Queer, that? Maybe. But queer or not, it was the truth just the same. I guess it's much easier to see where you plug another guy than to know where you're hit yourself. But why bother? After the police surgeon had fixed up McBride I let him play around my neck. And he did. With a gallon or two of iodine, and a lot of conversation as to what might have happened if the bullet had been a fraction of an inch to the right.

CHAPTER XXX

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD

McBride came around in that little office up stairs and talked a bit. I listened but didn't get it at all.

"I never told him," Colonel McBride said over and over, until he seemed to get his bearings better. "Joe Gorgon threatened me and struck me with his gun while my hands and feet were bound. And then he decided to go after me in earnest. A hot iron that he heated in the little stove up stairs. It was the shot that saved me, for he stopped and listened. Then untied my feet, and with a gun pressed against my back led me to the elevator."

"Yes, we know all that," I cut in. That wasn't very important now. "How did they get you here—Rudolph Myer, wasn't it?"

"Yes, though he may be an innocent party to it. He came to me and said that the girl had decided to talk. That she would tell me everything. That she was waiting in the car on the street behind. That seemed right. She had promised to come to my house. Promised to, at least—"

"What girl?" I asked quickly.

"The Flame, of course. She—"

But O'Rourke was at him—shutting him up—speaking hurriedly.

I turned on O'Rourke.

"The Flame? She knows! The voice on the wire that so worried Michelle Gorgon; the cracked voice of a man trying to imitate a woman. The Flame? Why, she's going to marry Michelle Gorgon. She's—. Come, O'Rourke, out with it."

"Now, now, Race." And as two white coated lads came in with a stretcher for Colonel McBride, O'Rourke finished, "I guess it's time you knew everything, but it's not for me to tell you. I passed my word to The Flame. Come, we'll go up to her apartment and see her. Tut, tut, don't look at me like that, Race. She'll be expecting us."

And up to her apartment we did go. And maybe I did look at him "like that." Like what? Oh, like anything O'Rourke thought I looked like.

Think! The Flame had said, "Think." And the one thing I couldn't do as we made that trip up Park Avenue was—think.

This time we drove straight to the door of the flashy apartment. The dawn was breaking in the sky. Brophey, the detective who had been at McBride's house after his disappearance, stepped from the shadows and saluted O'Rourke. O'Rourke explained the dick's presence before the apartment to me.

"When I left you in the car by the drug store," he said, "I made a couple of calls. One, was to cover this apartment and drag in Michelle Gorgon."

"On what charge?"

"The murder of his wife," said O'Rourke. "I couldn't think of any better charge, and even if I couldn't hold him it wouldn't look so bad. Prussic acid is hard to buy—especially by a crippled, half witted woman who has never been on the street alone since her—her accident."

"I think that was a mistake," I told O'Rourke, and meant it.

"I had another reason. I had to do it to protect The Flame. Any luck, Brophey?" he asked the dick.

"Doctor Michelle Gorgon has not come in," Brophey said, "And The Fla— Miss Drummond has not gone out—at least, since I've been here."

"Good!" said O'Rourke as we passed into the apartment house. "We'll see The Flame." And as I started to question him again, "Just a

jaunt to the twelfth floor, Race, then it's up to her."

The night man didn't like the hour we sought The Flame. O'Rourke didn't argue. He showed his badge, pushed the elevator man, John, back and said, "Twelfth floor, and no lip."

Another plainclothesman, who was sitting on the cold stairs beside the elevator, came to his feet when we reached the twelfth floor. O'Rourke was thorough, anyway. But certainly Michelle Gorgon would get wind of the police display and not return. I said as much to O'Rourke.

"I didn't want him to return," said O'Rourke. "I didn't want to make the pinch unless he came here for The Flame. I'd of had to pinch him to save her. Anything stirring, Cohen?"

"Not a thing," said Cohen. "No one in or out of 12-D since I've been here."

It took time to get into that apartment. At last the colored maid, Lillian, opened the door.

"Miss Drummond?" said O'Rourke. "Miss—" And the girl didn't have to tell us. We both read it in her face. But when she came out with it, it startled me just the same. Florence, The Flame, had received a telephone call and left the house, perhaps a half hour earlier.

"Just before the boys got here," said O'Rourke, the mental figuring showing on his face.

"Miss Florence left a letter for a Mr. Williams—" the maid started, but O'Rourke had shoved by her and was into the living room, snatching an envelope quickly from the table. He held it a moment in his hand, then tore it open. When I followed him and grabbed at his arm, he said:

"All right, it's for you." He chuckled the envelope in the basket and handed me several sheets of paper. Then he turned to the maid. She was frightened. She was talking.

"You're the police, ain't you, Mister?" she said to O'Rourke. "Well, Miss Florence acted funny. There were two telephone calls. The first woke me up. I didn't hear what she said."

"That would be my call." O'Rourke thought aloud.

"The second call came right after it," the maid went on. "I didn't try to listen but I couldn't help it." Which meant she had her ear to the keyhole, I thought, but said nothing. "Of course I didn't hear what came over that wire, but I heard Miss Florence say, 'All right—the airport.'"

"What airport—My God! What airport?" And O'Rourke was shaking her by the shoulders and saying over and over, "Good God! he's going to do it again." And suddenly, to me, when there was nothing more to get from the now thoroughly frightened maid:

"Read that, Race. Read all The Flame wrote."

He picked up the phone, and I heard him say, "Roosevelt Field airstation. Damn the number! This is police headquarters."

But I was reading the closely and hastily written letter The Flame had left for me. It started bluntly enough—but here it is.

"I love you, Race.

"What a beginning for the last will and testament of The Flame. At least, the last if you should read this.

"I am going back a great many years. I never knew my real father or mother. I was brought up in an orphanage outside of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. But in that orphanage I had a mother's love. It was my sister who stood between me and the heartaches, and even the brutality of the institutions of those days. She gave up opportunities of adoption, suffered undeserved punishments, to give herself a bad name so that she would not be taken from me. For she was not the incorrigible girl the orphanage authorities painted her. She was good and kind and beautiful, and the criminal instinct in my mind was not in hers.

"She was older than I—much older. Then one day a lady took me away. That was Mrs. Drummond. A kind, wealthy, and somewhat foolish widow. She believed those stories about my sister—that she was bad, and never let me see her or speak of her.

"Then Mrs. Drummond married Lu Roper, and later she died—an unhappy woman. I called him my stepfather. If Lu Roper did not actually plant the seed of crime in my childish mind, at least he developed it to its present perfection. But he is dead now. Criminal! Murderer! Gang leader! You remember him.

"I learned later that my sister escaped from the orphanage—ran away when she was held illegally after coming of age. She never knew what became of me. I never knew what became of her—except, that it was charged that she took money with her from that orphanage, which charge I never did believe. I never tried to find her. I never wished to find her. It would have broken her heart to know that I wear—and deservedly wear—the name: The Girl with the Criminal Mind.

"Things were done rather shabbily back when I was adopted. And that's why I did not inherit the money from Mrs. Drummond that I should have received. But other things were brought up in that fight for Mrs. Drummond's wealth.

"One man, Race—a fair and honest man—in his pursuit of Doctor Michelle Gorgon, came as far as that court when Mrs. Drummond's money was being kept from me. He was a clever, determined man. I joined forces, to a certain extent, with this man— but why hide his name? He will tell you now. He was Detective Sergeant O'Rourke. And this is what he discovered:

"The wife of Michelle Gorgon was my sister. And Michelle Gorgon had taken her in an airplane, and—. But you know that terrible story. Michelle Gorgon didn't expect my sister would live. But she did live, maimed and twisted in body; wracked and dead of mind. He did this because she was going to leave him—for another man—some one she loved only in her heart and soul, and would love only so—until she was free of her husband, Michelle Gorgon.

"So I went in with O'Rourke and Colonel McBride. Such is my mind. I wanted—not justice, Race—but vengeance, I guess.

"And I learned who Michelle Gorgon really was. I learned who Giovoni was. He was an Italian criminal, known as 'The Devil' years ago. I gave Giovoni into the hands of Colonel McBride, but I didn't tell him all I knew. I couldn't. I wouldn't. Until I was sure that the so-called Michelle Gorgon had purposely planned my sister's terrible 'accident.' Rudolph Myer helped me, but until tonight I didn't suspect how much he really understood.

"Toney, the little drug addict, came over on the boat from Italy with the Gorgon brothers twenty-three years ago. He knew the truth. There was no Michelle Gorgon. Michelle Gorgon met his death in Naples, beneath a train, twenty-three years before. And it was the escaped murderer of Giovoni's daughter, Rose Marie—Nicholas Tremporia—who took his place. He came to America as Michelle Gorgon—or Gorgonette—as the Gorgon brothers were then called.

"The immigration laws were not so strict in those days. Michelle Gorgon's body was mangled beyond recognition by the train, and it was wearing Nicholas Tremporia's clothes and carrying Nicholas Tremporia's papers and little possessions—which gives the idea that, perhaps, after all, the death of Michelle Gorgon was not an accident—but that he was laid, drugged, upon the tracks by foe Gorgon and Nicholas Tremporia, as Eddie was but a child then. For Michelle Gorgon had money; had a good reputation in his home town. And, again, what points to his murder is the fact that Joe Gorgon was as much upset by the coming of Giovoni as was his supposed brother, Michelle. Let us still, for clearness, call him Michelle.

"So much for that. I did not tell what I knew to Colonel McBride. Toney did not tell what he knew to Colonel McBride. We left it in the hands of Giovoni to identify the murderer of his daughter.

"After Giovoni died and Michelle Gorgon thought himself safe, I began to hound him—with telephone calls—little notes, which, if another found them, would mean his end. Each night I'd send him a note, that read:

*"THE SOUL OF ROSE MARIE CRIES OUT
FOR VENGEANCE*

—MR. NICHOLAS TREMPORIA.

I paused a moment in reading the letter. I recalled the note Michelle Gorgon had shown me—the words that were erased at the end of it, and knew they were the three words he feared so much. MR. NICHOLAS TREMPORIA.

O'Rourke was still telephoning. I heard him calling the airport at Newark. I went on reading.

"I know now that my sister is dead. I know now that Rudolph Myer sold me out. I know that—because Sergeant O'Rourke telephoned me that Michelle knew it was I who held his secret. But I am not certain that it can be proven, now, that Michelle Gorgon is really Nicholas Tremporia.

"I know too, Race, that if ever you read this it is Goodbye. For I have just received word from Michelle Gorgon to meet him at the airport. He knows, now, that I was the voice on the wire—that I sent him those notes—and no doubt knows, too, that his wife was my sister. But he doesn't know that I know he knows. Yes—I am going with him. If he plans my death, he will perhaps tell me the truth first—that he purposely maimed his wife—my sister. He may gloat over his vengeance on me. But it will be worth death to—.

"I love you, Race. Since you are reading this note; since you have kept your word with me. Since your honor would forbid you opening this letter after reading what was on the envelope—until now. Goodbye. Look for my body in Northern Westchester. But let me hope it will not lie there alone.

*"To the End,
"The Girl with the
Criminal Mind,
"FLORENCE."*

CHAPTER XXXI

DEATH FROM THE SKY

I laid down the letter and looked at O'Rourke. He was still telephoning, madly.

"Newark airport, yeah. Michelle Gorgon— no. Not at all. I—" And down went the receiver.

It wasn't the time yet to have things out with O'Rourke. The Flame was dead. She had more than hinted as much. But she couldn't be if she had only left the apartment a short while before. Another thing in that letter struck me. "Since your honor would forbid you opening this letter after reading what was on the envelope."

O'Rourke was buzzing the phone again. I said to him in a cracked voice:

"Is there an airport in Westchester— northern Westchester?"

And he didn't answer me. The receiver clicked up and down. O'Rourke was an almanac of information. I heard him calling an airport some eight or ten miles above White Plains.

As for me. I'm not a dumb ox altogether. I was fishing into that waste basket for the envelope that O'Rourke had tossed there. And I found it, spread it out, and read what was written on it.

"Race—I trust to your honor not to read this note until twelve o'clock, noon." I looked at my watch. It was now exactly twenty minutes to

five. I guess my eyes got a little harder as they looked at O'Rourke. He had made sure I wouldn't see what was on that envelope. But I didn't say anything. He was talking on the phone.

"Never heard of Michelle Gorgon! Well, it's damn near time you bought a New York newspaper. No order for a plane to go up—none gone up—and wait—just a minute. Any plane there owned by a Miss Drummond? A—. That's it. That's it. Her pilot dropped in with it early in the week? Listen. Get in touch with the police and see that—that that plane—. Listen—Damn it!" He pounded the hook up and down. "The fool's cut off. Central— Damn it, give me that number I—" O'Rourke dropped the receiver. "Some one cut the wires, I'll bet. Come on, Race. There's a chance yet."

"Yes, a chance yet." I faced him as he stood up. "So you're the light haired boy who got The Flame into this—. Who let her take this trip tonight. Who—. And you once suggested a bullet between your own eyes, O'Rourke, once—" Maybe my hand touched my gun. "Why didn't you warn her?"

"But I did," said O'Rourke. "As soon as you told me about that pile of jack in Rudolph Myer's bag I rang her up and warned her not to open the door to any one, that my men would be there shortly. For her not to see Michelle Gorgon, and—"

"Maybe you did." I thought of the letter. "She knew and she went anyway. God! O'Rourke. How could you do it? How—"

"If we've got to differ, Race, let it be later. Maybe, in a different way, I think as much of The Flame as you do. I'll talk now. She's talked in that letter. But let's be friends now, Race, at least allies. It looks like The Flame went, purposely, to her death. Come on. To the airport in Westchester. There's a chance."

"There's no chance," I told him, as we hurried from the apartment. "He's taking her as he took his wife. The Flame crossed him. She was out to ruin him, and he knows it."

The sky was brightening as we dashed through the city streets. I wasn't quite my own man. I let Brophy drive the police car, and I sat in the back with O'Rourke. That car carried the police insignia. There would be less delays.

"Look here." O'Rourke leaned close to me and spoke. "I saw a chance to get the Gorgons through The Flame. And I was right. She found out more in a month than I had found out in a year. But she wouldn't tell me, wouldn't tell McBride. At least, not until she was sure, beyond any doubt, that Michelle Gorgon had maimed her sister. She was afraid I told her that simply to get her in with me."

"Then she was working for you all along."

"Yes and no," said O'Rourke. "In a way she was working with me, but really working for herself. But I thought, once she was convinced of the truth, she would turn Michelle Gorgon in. It was she who found out that Toney came over on the ship with the Gorgons, though what that information was worth I never did know. It was she who discovered, through Toney, about Giovoni. But Giovoni wouldn't talk out until he could confront Michelle Gorgon. Besides, he was taken desperately ill, aboard ship. But we got enough from him to know that he was called 'The Devil' years back. And you never suspected The Flame?"

"No." And suddenly, "You knew she was at McBride's house that night, in the locked closet?"

"Sure," said O'Rourke. "I thought as much as soon as I found that closet door locked, and remembered that I had told The Flame about McBride signalling me with the light, for

help— when she warned me that he should never be unprotected. She had come in the back way, through the door that was left open for Rudolph Myer. She knew, or felt, that McBride was in great danger and came to warn him. She hid in one of the front rooms when McBride came down stairs to meet Rudolph Myer. She thought it was the police though, and never suspected McBride was leaving by the back door with some one. So she didn't see with whom he left. But the moment she knew he was gone she suspected some trap of the Gorgons, ran up those stairs and flashed the danger signal with the light.

"Yes, I suspected she was there in the closet, but I didn't know for sure until I met her in the hall and gave her safe passage from the house. That's what I meant when I said to you that the district attorney himself couldn't leave that house without my Okay. You must have thought me an awful hick cop. But she didn't want you to know too much, Race. She was afraid you would give the show away trying to protect her, but in her heart I think she wanted you out of the case, because she thought you'd—well—get yourself a hole in the ground."

"I never thought of her working in with the police."

"And she wasn't," snapped O'Rourke. "It was vengeance, or retribution, or a great love—or a great hate. But each day I thought she would get the proof from Michelle Gorgon himself that he had maimed his wife, her sister. And then, I thought, she'd blow it all to me. Now, she's gone with him, knowing that he's onto her. Why?"

"Do you think—maybe she don't—didn't understand you?"

"Hell! I told her flat, that Rudolph Myer had sold her out to Michelle Gorgon. Then I gave her the office to sit tight. The Flame's no child, you know."

"No." Death—destruction. All that The Flame had told me came up before me now. "O'Rourke," I said slowly, "I don't know. But if The Flame's dead, get away from me— get—. Good God! I—. We've been almost pals. I—. Why didn't you tell me The Flame was in it—with—with us?"

"I couldn't. I passed my word. She wouldn't help me unless I did. And I also passed my word not to ask you into the case. In a way, I broke that promise. I had McBride bring you in— through Myer."

"And the note, with what was written on the envelope. She trusted to my honor, and—"

"That's it," said O'Rourke. "There's too much honor, been too damned much honor. If you hadn't read that note we wouldn't be on our way to save her now. I'm a stickler about my own honor, Race, yet not a guardian of yours. It's best you read it, and—"

"Yes," I said, "it's best that I read it."

"Good!" He stuck out his hand, but I didn't see it. Finally he put it back in his pocket. "We must all go our way according to our light," he said.

"Yeah. I thought you were a friend, a real friend. And you're just, just a cop," was the best I could give him.

"But an honest cop," said O'Rourke. "An honest cop."

Brophey could drive. And the police siren screeched but little in the city streets. No talk, now, between us. Up Broadway to Van Cortland Park, through the park to Central Avenue. Sometimes sixty, sometimes sixty-five. It was then that I wished I had my own car. Out on that long stretch of concrete road I could have pushed it to eighty, and perhaps ninety on

that down grade just before you reach that slight upswing to the Tuckahoe Road. But, be fair about it. That down grade is quite some curve and maybe, maybe—. But this is not an automobile tour I'm writing about—nor a real estate ad for "Buy in Westchester"—nor even a treatise on the merits of certain automobile motors. It was a race against death. At least, I hoped it was. But maybe, after all, it was just a race with death, to find death.

It was perhaps five miles out of White Plains that I saw O'Rourke stick his head out of the window, then lean forward and tap the driver, Brophey, on the shoulder. The brakes ground; the car came to a stop just at a cross road. And that was the first time I came to life, and heard plainly the roar of a motor—an airplane motor.

Looking up I saw the plane. A biplane, pretty high. But even at that distance one could see that the motor was sputtering, and that the plane was circling. Then it suddenly dived, hesitated a moment, seemed to gain altitude and shoot toward the west and on a beeline with the road to our right.

And we were after it. A pitiful, hopeless little trio, in that modern invention known as the automobile, as helpless and as prehistoric as if we ran on foot, armed with huge clubs cut from the trees. Still, we sped down that road in the wake of the slowly diminishing plane.

Sixty! Sixty-five! A curve in the road, our wheels in the roadbed, a sudden jerk and we were straightened out again, with great empty fields behind the trees to our left. And again O'Rourke had tapped our driver, Brophey, on the shoulder. Again the brakes. This time we stopped beneath the shadows of a cluster of huge trees.

"Drive her off, in the grass there, out of the way," said O'Rourke.

"Good God!" I said to O'Rourke, as we climbed from the car, "I know it's no use and all that, but it seems like doing something to keep going. At least trying to save her life."

O'Rourke spoke.

"Here, keep in the protection of those trees. I haven't trailed Michelle Gorgon all these weeks without knowing his car when I see it. And that Rolls of his was parked in the field back there. Look!"

And I looked through the foliage. Yep, there was the outline of a car all right. But it wasn't the car I looked at. It was the figure that stood so still beside a tree. A figure that seemed like part of the landscape, or a scarecrow. Then it moved, and I knew that it was human. The figure watched that plane, the plane which had turned now and was coming back over the field. And then I saw the flash. Not for certain, not for sure.

But O'Rourke cried out.

"The plane's on fire, and some one is jumping."

A far distant figure, with a great hump on its back, balanced, swayed, seemed to clutch at a wing—then pitched out, swung slowly and came hurtling toward the earth. I waited, breathless, for a sudden jerk of that body and the great silk of a parachute to check the flight, and send the form drifting gently to earth. But no parachute opened. The body began to turn rapidly now; hands gripped frantically at the air; even legs seemed to be attempting to entwine space.

"Good God!" said O'Rourke, "he's thrown her from the plane, and—"

The falling body struck in some trees, went crashing through them, and I sunk my

head in my arms. So, destruction and death! That was the end of The Flame—that was—.

“And he ain’t having such an easy time of it.” O’Rourke gripped me by the shoulder. “The plane’s on fire. Something’s gone wrong. Look! It’s out of control, entirely.”

And it was. Fascinated, I watched that plane. Twisting, turning, diving, ever falling—ever nearer to the ground—ever—. And it swerved suddenly, about a hundred feet from the ground—seemed to straighten, then shoot upward, dip again, and dash straight toward a clump of trees not a hundred yards away from us.

“You can’t do anything for—for her.” And the words choked in O’Rourke’s throat. “But him, the dirty, lousy murderer! We’ve got him red handed this time. In death The Flame gave him to us.”

And we were running across that field. I’m not sure just what happened. But I think the plane paused in its drop, turned its nose up so suddenly that you could hear struts hum—snap, even—and with a crash it dove smack into a tree, twisted slightly, seemed to fall, and hung there.

You could see it blazing now.

“Quick!” shouted O’Rourke, dashing by me. “The damn thing may blow up in a minute. We—”

“Let him burn to death,” I cried out, and the next instant thought better of it. I hurled O’Rourke from me as we reached the now blazing wreck, jumped and caught a branch, and swung myself into the tree beside the plane.

I saw it all, and didn’t care. I saw the jury filing from the room. I knew my story in that second’s flash. I’d say I thought that Michelle Gorgon had a gun in his hand—and I shot him in

self-defense. For I was going to kill him—put a bullet right through his head before ever O’Rourke could stop me. Catch Michelle Gorgon for the murder of The Flame? Hang murder on such a notorious racketeer—who could influence judges, keep witnesses silent, intimidate jurors? No—he was going before a jury now that he couldn’t buy, couldn’t intimidate, a Judge he couldn’t fix.

And I saw him crouched there in the cock-pit. He’d know too. The flames flashed back suddenly, whipped by a touch of wind.

“All right, Doctor Michelle Gorgon,” I cried out, almost mad with rage and hate, and something else, something that made me half sob out the words before I killed him. But I wanted him to know. He must know. And he would know. For his body stirred, his head low on his chest beneath the helmet, tried to rise.

My right hand gripped my gun. My left hand stretched in, clutched at the face that was turned from me. I jerked that head around, and—and looked straight into the wide, questioning, frightened eyes of The Flame—Florence Drummond.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE END OF THE RACKET

I don’t know how I got The Flame out of that cock-pit. Maybe O’Rourke and Brophey did most of it. Maybe they didn’t. But, anyway, she was on the grass beside us.

O’Rourke was hollering something about water. Brophey was yapping about a flask in the car, and I held The Flame close in my arms.

“It wasn’t murder, Race,” she said over and over. “It wasn’t that. I ripped the parachute pack on his back with my knife when we got

into the plane. But I told him, I did tell him before he jumped. I couldn't help it. I—but he was gone— on the edge—and he left me there to burn with it—crash with it—for my parachute was useless. He had seen to that.”

“Ssh.” I warned her. “O’Rourke will hear.” Maybe he did hear, and maybe he didn’t. But, anyway, he was running across the fields, running to where the body of Michelle Gorgon had dropped through the trees. I could barely make out the unshapely mass on the ground.

And The Flame talked.

“I had to know about my sister. I had to know if he really planned it so that she was crippled like that. That’s why I went to meet him when he Telephoned me. You see, the plane was in my name. Michelle brought it to the airport only a few days ago. He registered it at the field under my name because he was afraid, then, that the truth could come out about Rose Marie. He was afraid—deadly afraid—of that voice on the wire, and was ready for a get-away. He told me everything, once we were in the air. Gloated over the way he had broken my sister. Told me, too, that he had killed her—made her kill herself.

“It was a horrible crime, that murder of my sister. He played upon both her mental and physical weakness. Told her that in the secret flap of her bag was a bottle of poison, and a mirror. And told her that if she were alive in two hours’ time he would bring to see her the man she loved—the man who had loved her.”

She stopped a minute and rubbed at her dry eyes. The Flame didn’t know how to cry, I guess. Then she went on.

“I couldn’t protect myself, Race. I had not expected him to act so quickly. Before we were off the ground he had taken my gun—and the mechanic who turned our propeller struck me a blow on the head. I was stunned, didn’t

fully recover until we were up in the air, high up.

“He was clever, Race. The mechanic was one of his men. That mechanic would swear that I had gone up alone. Michelle was to set fire to the plane, leap with a parachute, be picked up by a man waiting with his car and driven back to the city.

“‘This was to be our bridal chariot,’ he said. ‘Now—it’s your coffin, Florence. Like your sister, you crossed me. I loved you; I could have made you very happy. But you proved yourself a rat and a stool-pigeon. I give you death. I fight my own battles, I do not need the police.’”

“‘And I too can fight my own battles,’ I cried out, as he tossed something on the hot engine and did something to the controls. ‘Don’t jump, Michelle Gorgon! You’ve planned for me to be burnt to death in this blazing plane. I—’ as I saw him on the edge of the cock-pit, his gun covering me, his index finger cocked through the loop of his parachute chord, ‘I ripped the pack on your back with a knife as soon as you climbed into the plane. I cut your parachute. You’ll—you’ll have to burn with me.’

“He seemed to hesitate for a moment—then he smiled and stretched his hand back over his shoulder. The plane lurched. He cried out once, slipped, tottered—and fell. It seemed like hours that I heard his terrible screech of horror. Then the earth coming up, the trees and the crash—and you. But I swear I warned him that I cut—”

I put my hand across her mouth. O’Rourke was coming back.

“I’ll telephone at the first town and have them pick up that Rolls and that mechanic at the field—and then have a look at Rudolph Myer,” O’Rourke said, as we climbed into the police car. “And to ease your mind, Race. That

lad was as dead as old King Tut, and it was our mutual friend, Michelle Gorgon.”

“Yes, and anything The Flame had to do with it was self-defense, and—”

“You talk too much.” O’Rourke looked at me as he lit a big black cigar, and I gathered The Flame close to me in the back of the machine. “You know, the body of Gorgon still hung in the trees when I reached it.” And when I looked at him, surprised—for I had seen plainly that the body was on the ground, “I say it still hung in the trees. Get that! I know it, for I had to cut that parachute pack to ribbons with my knife to get him loose. Cut it to ribbons, understand!” And after a pause, while he glared at me, “It’s funny it didn’t open right, but then, they very often don’t, and there’s no explaining—no explaining it.”

After all, O’Rourke wasn’t a bad scout. But Michelle Gorgon was dead, and Michelle Gorgon had held The Flame in his arms. And—oh, I wasn’t superstitious or anything like that. That thought had nothing to do with my moving over in a corner of the back seat and sticking a cigarette in my mouth. I—I just needed a smoke, I guess.

Any more to it? Well—hardly. The body of Eddie Gorgon turned up in the river three days later. We could only guess that Michelle Gorgon had some of his crowd put it there. Why? Well— maybe because he didn’t want it discovered in the underworld, just then, that some one—particularly a lad known as Race Williams—had the guts to shoot his brother, Eddie—or the lad every one thought was his brother, Eddie.