

Drake smashed the slash-mouthed killer against the balustrade

FROM THE BLACK BOOK OF CRIME

# THE DEATH CHAIR MURDERS

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

*Cold Hands of Horror Reach Out for the Innocent Victims of a Specialist in Slaughter—and Jonathan Drake, New York's Ace Manhunter, Speeds into Action! A Gripping Complete Book-length Novel of a Grim Executioner's Vengeance Voltage!*



## CHAPTER I THE LAST MILE

**W**ITH THE FIRST FAINT GLIMMER of returning consciousness the gray-haired man opened his eyes. A rough hand was shaking his shoulder, and he heard a gruff voice speaking—a voice that was little more than a roaring in his ears. Then gradually he sensed the meaning of the words.

"All right! Snap out of it!" snarled the deep sinister voice. "Your time has come!"

The harsh pronouncement made the man jerk up his head. Dimly he was trying to take in his surroundings. His hearing, his first sense to become normal, was bringing him various sounds that formed a muffled undertone to those words that were still ringing in his ears. The rustling of clothes and the scrape of feet as people moved about. Somewhere a radio was playing softly, a snatch of sentimental music, the strains of "Annie Laurie."

"Cripes!" a taut voice rose to one side. "When I think of burning it gets me even now!"

"Shut up!" came in the heavy tones of another man. "Don't you know it ain't right to talk when a guy's gonna go?"

Amazed, the elderly man wondered whether he could be hearing aright. What were they talking about, why was there that hushed grimness in their voices? It frightened him, even though he did not know what they meant.

His vision partially cleared, revealing first the gray shadowy walls and ceiling. Then, as he turned his head, with growing horror he saw the steel bars before him. Shadowy figures hovered about him. Their faces were coarse, hard, in the dim light.

He felt a throbbing pain in his head, slowly he raised his right arm. His fingers touched his hair and felt the place where the clot of dried blood had matted the gray locks tight against his scalp. He was trying to think, to remember who he was and how he had come here. Something was crazily wrong. That talk—the bars—

“Your number’s up, Mister!” one of the shadowy figures said huskily.

Number? Did he have a number then? He gulped back the unvoiced question, trying to clear his eyes, but they still felt bleary.

Then suddenly his head was forcibly yanked back. A clicking noise sounded, he caught the silver gleam of the hair clipper, felt its coldness on his scalp. Almost simultaneously there was a sound of ripping cloth in his left trouser leg. He felt the hairs on that leg bristle as air met them.

They had shaved his head, slit his trousers!

Even as the frightful significance of it smote his blurred consciousness, he heard their voices again, beating into his brain over the dimming radio music.

“Think we should let him have any last words?”

“Hell, no!” There came a harsh, barking laugh. “He’ll talk enough when he walks the last mile!”

That final phrase sent an icy stab of sick terror to the very pit of the gray-haired man’s stomach. There could be no doubt now—this was to be an execution, and he was the victim!

He tried to speak, but his dry throat was constricted, he could only make a blurting, incoherent sound. He must remember—try to think! He couldn’t recall having killed anyone. He couldn’t remember any trial, any court in which a judge had sentenced him to death. Sobs formed inchoate in his throat. Somebody ought to explain! Somebody ought to tell him how in heaven’s name he had come here! There must be a warden—

HIS dazed eyes tried to search the faces. They didn’t look like countenances he would associate with

prison guards. They were a hard, mean-looking lot. Their voices were coarse, gruff, and they held glinting revolvers in their hands.

“All right!” one of them said, a tall one with a slash of a mouth. “Come on!”

The gray-haired man’s legs were like jelly now. “He had to be dragged, pushed, even lifted at first. Then he walked mechanically, shuffling actually, for he realized there were felt slippers on his feet. Coldness seeped through the soles of the slippers, he knew he was walking along flagstones. The radio receded as he moved away. The gruff voices called to him softly. “So long!”

“Give my regards to hell! No tellin’ when I’ll go there, too!”

“Bigger guys than you have burned!”

Hard, cruel voices, mocking him as he went, not a friendly one among them. They faded into the distance, finally.

Step by step, pushed and dragged along that walk. That ghastly walk he had read about in the newspapers. The walk criminals called the Last Mile!

But why were they making him go so fast? They seemed to be hurrying everything along, giving him no chance to think, to remember. He had thought things like this were slower, more dignified. Now rapidly each forced step was leading closer, closer.

That torturing gap of blankness in his mind! He couldn’t seem to fill it. Horrible enough that he was doomed to pay this ghastly penalty, but to pay it without being able to remember the crime he must have committed was insufferable agony.

His mind worked in those moments when he knew a man was supposed to review his whole life, but there was nothing but disconnected fragments. A large estate, a prosperous stock brokerage, both seemed to belong to him. Then they were gone again, tucked away in some hidden part of his brain. But there was something he did seem to remember. Some kind of a fight in which he had battled hopelessly against a number of men—his hand pulling a gun; something crashing down on his head. After that, nothing until now. Had he killed someone with that gun? Was that why he was here now?

They had brought him to a stop. A man stepped past him. The man wore gloves on his hands, rubber gloves. He had a sharp, thin-cheeked face which, at the moment, looked as cadaverous as a death’s head. There was no doubting his office—this was the executioner!

“Okay!” snapped the man with the slash-like mouth, his voice crisp and low. “Hurry up with it!”

The grey-haired man knew then the journey was over, but he didn't dare to turn his head to look. Firm hands gripped him, strong fingers digging into his arms. Like a helpless puppet he was moved by their hard clutch. Something was being attached to his slit-trouser leg, to the naked flesh—metal; a dome-like metal cap was clamped coldly on his scalp!

The sensation seemed to clear away some of the dazed blankness in his mind. Suddenly his eyes widened with utter, horrified incredulity. He heard his voice struggling from the depths of his lungs to his trembling lips.

"Wait, wait!" he pleaded hoarsely, almost inaudibly. "You can't do this to me! A mistake! Listen! I'm Jefferson Rushmore! I'm Rushmore, don't you hear me?" His voice rose to a shriek as he saw the stolid, impassive faces about him. "I couldn't have—"

"Shut up!"

The hand of the tall man cracked him across the lips with stunning force. The blow brought a flow of blood, knocked his words back into his very teeth.

But at the same time, even though he felt the cold electrode on his leg, the chill metal cap of doom on his head, Jefferson Rushmore's bleared eyes cleared suddenly and in one ghastly rush, like a flood bursting dam, full and terrible memory came.

Frenzied, his lungs struggling to push out a scream, his bloody lips opened, but could only form half-articulated words.

"I know—" he mumbled.

And at that precise moment the gloved hand of the executioner pulled the switch!

Jefferson Rushmore felt only the first impact of the stunning shock that leaped through his body, making it jerk convulsively. Then all consciousness left him as the high voltage coursed through him.

The prosperous stock broker who had been mysteriously missing for twenty-four hours was dead!

that came from the sleeping city. Like pale, transparent shrouds it lingered about the dark pier extending from a large deserted brick building. The sluggish dark waters of the river slapped gently against the pilings, whipped into white-caps by the wind which carried eddies of mist before it.

Out of the darkness appeared a solitary figure, his face a vague blotch of white, and then another and another appeared. The men gathered slowly, having come by various, furtive ways. They walked out onto the pier, the gloom and mist hiding them from the lighted city. Hands held hats and overcoats that whipped with the breeze. Eyes strained out over the waters, ears listened for one certain noise. Like ghosts they reached the end of the pier and stood silently waiting.

And then over the occasional moan of river craft a thrumming sound rose in the night. Louder it grew and closer, the throb of a powerful motor. Framed in two streaks of white spray as it cut through the water, a long sleek launch with a single auto-like cabin loomed into view. In the pale light the gleaming metal fittings of the craft were visible, giving a sense of ultra-modernity, of speed and opulence.

"The Executioner," muttered one of the watching men. "He's here!"

"Quiet, you fool!" snarled another. "We ain't supposed to use that name. We are to call him Mr. Voltage."

The powerful motor died in a moan. The speedboat veered as it slowed, drifting. It came alongside the pier, its cabin dark. On the dock the men reached out and caught a mooring rope and swiftly fastened it to hold the launch.

A bright light illuminated the cabin as a switch was pressed. All eyes could peer through the thick but clear glass of its windows, which occupied the greater part of it. In that lighted interior they saw a strange, bizarre figure to have come cruising in from the night mist.

They were gazing at the figure of a man standing in elaborate, formal evening dress which had strange embellishments on it. Across the stiff white shirt front was a wide black ribbon in the center of which was a small skull and cross-bones; on the coat, underneath an opera cape, could be seen a tiny silver ax dangling from the lapel—the emblem of the Executioner.

But what made the figure so bizarre was the fact that his head was completely hidden by a black hood that only revealed his eyes through holes cut in the cloth.

## CHAPTER II MURDERERS MEET

**H**ILL FOG CREPT IN from the Hudson, filling the black shadows of the late night with eerie gray mist, muffling the undercurrent of nocturnal sounds



"Crasher come yet?"

Harsh, with a short guttural metallic tone, the voice rasped forth from the masked head, coming through some imperceptible opening of the cabin window. The question was tense, despite the blighting quality of the voice which gave the speaker a diabolical aspect.

Gruff voices rose from the pier in answer. Heads shook.

"No, Mr. Voltage, Crasher ain't back yet with the other boys."

"We're hopin' nothin' went wrong!" An imperious arm rose from the figure in the launch. The white hand of the Executioner commanded silence.

"Nothing can go wrong, not the way I have planned it." There was egotism in the weird voice, and ruthless power. "Meanwhile, make your reports—and hurry! There is no time to dally. Tate, what about your progress?"

A burly man with stiff bristly red hair stepped forward. He wore no hat despite the chill of the night air.

"No trouble, Boss," he said grinning, as his face was revealed in the light from the speedboat's cabin. "We picked up the feller you wanted without any trouble. Got him hid in a safe place until Crash and the rest are ready for him."

"Good!" said the man called Mr. Voltage. "Crash knows what to do next."

"I hope that first guy got the same thing they gave our old boss," said one of the other men. "But I kinda wish—"

"So you are curious!" There was a hard note in the strange voice of the Executioner. "You want to know more of my plans, is that it?"

"Hell no, Boss! We ain't askin' any questions!"

"Whatever way you plan it is all right with us. We don't want to know too much," another put in hastily.

VOICES broke off as a group of newcomers hastened to the edge of the pier, having identified themselves to armed lookouts.

In their lead walked a tall man with a slash-like mouth. Behind him came a thin-faced, sharp featured individual whose face reminded one of a death's head.

"It's Crasher, Boss! And Rudy!"

"Crasher!" The voice from the swaying launch came with unconcealed eagerness. "You carried out my orders?"

"It's all done, Boss." The slash-mouth man was already at the edge of the pier, grinning evilly. "All of

it just like you wanted! The boys were a little shaky, maybe, but you can't blame them. Rudy here did his stuff perfect!"

"Good work, Rudy!" The Executioner's voice was a guttural commendation. "Now give me full reports, thorough reports. How much did he suffer, how much did he know before he died?"

The reports were given in all their grisly detail, for when an item was omitted the Executioner at once inquired about it.

"What were his last words?" he demanded finally.

"That he was Jefferson Rushmore, and somebody had made a mistake," answered Crasher.

"We all knew his name," said the man in the speedboat. "And there was no mistake—Jefferson Rushmore had to die—die by electrocution."

"Yeah," muttered Crasher and Rudy nodded. "That's the way our old boss went."

"Exactly," said the Executioner. "All in all, boys you should feel glad. You have not forgotten what happened to the man who was your leader. It was because you have not been able to erase that from your memories that you are working with me and for me now. But you think that we strike these blows to men who have felt that they were safe from harm merely for revenge. That is not entirely true. It is far bigger than that. It is something unparalleled, with riches in it such as you never dreamed, never saw in the day when you and your Big Shot were cleaning up."

"That's what you've told us before," said Crasher, and added hastily: "And we believe you. Boss."

"Then we understand each other," said the Executioner. "I'm no glutton. I shall let you in on the spoils, for your faithful service and to help you gain the revenge that you seek. But remember—this is the biggest thing any man has attempted in this town." Again that ominous voice became a withering rasp.

"But to fail, to blunder, or so much as question too much, means swift punishment—punishment such as you know I am capable of dealing. Is that understood?"

Like the heads of mechanical dolls the listeners nodded in fearful and silent assent and the Executioner appeared satisfied until his gaze centered on the big red-headed man named Tate.

He was scowling as he glared at the hooded figure in the speedboat.

"Well, Tate?" the Executioner's voice was cold and deadly. "You don't appear satisfied. Is there something on your mind?"

"Yes," snarled Tate. "You may control these guys by

handing them a lot of chatter about what's going to happen, but I ain't seen no real dough yet. That job me and the boys pulled for you tonight was risky—and I want to get paid for it now.”

“Now?” the Executioner asked softly but ominously. Then from the cabin of the speedboat there came a flash of flame and the soft *sputt* of a silenced gun.

Tate reeled back as a bullet caught him in the chest. He fell off the edge of the pier with a faint splash as his body struck the river.

HERE'S your pay—in full. That is what happens to men who disagree with me.” The harsh voice of the Executioner broke through the tense silence. “Are there any other objections?”

The men again shook their heads, frightened into silence by the swift ruthlessness with which one of their number had met his death.

“Good!” said the Executioner. “Very soon now things will break as I have planned. The Law will be baffled; the public will be shocked and horrified. Headlines will fill every paper, for they will know that the Executioner has struck! That is as I wish it! That is all!”

And like some diabolical dictator of death, the black hooded figure raised his white-gloved hand in a gesture of dismissal.

THE lights of the launch cabin went out in the next instant. The mooring rope was released by a man holding it. In the misty night the powerful motor of the speedboat roared.

The craft backed out into the water, turned in a churning mass of spray. Then like a projectile, it shot away into the gray fog and was promptly swallowed by the mist as its motor faded into the distance.

Breaking up, the group on the pier hurriedly left the scene. In a few moments only the darkness and mist lingered in the place of that strange and sinister meeting. The darkness and mist and the white face of a dead man who floated in the black water for a few moments before it was carried away by the current of the river.

### CHAPTER III DRAKE TAKES A CASE

IN WHAT HAD ONCE BEEN a millionaire's mansion on upper Fifth Avenue, Jonathan Drake sat at his desk in the huge library. The light from the ornate desk lamp in front of him gleamed on his strong face, revealing the straight nose, the firm lips and the keen blue eyes. It brought out the touch of gray in the thick dark hair just above his ears.

As he sat there it was not difficult to realize the strength of character in this slender, wiry man. He possessed a keen analytical brain, was an excellent judge of human nature and was absolutely fearless. It was this bravery in the face of danger that had stood him in good stead many times during his hectic career.

Many of those occasions were brought back vividly to his mind as he thumbed through the huge black loose-leaf volume that rested on the desk in front of him, for this was the case-book of Jonathan Drake. On its neatly typed pages were the full details of the various cases on which the criminologist had worked, and there was not a one among those records that did not terminate with Drake having brought a criminal to justice, and having been able to produce enough evidence to force the guilty man or men to pay the full penalty for their crimes.

It had been on his first case, that was listed in the Black Book as that of the Creeping Killer, that Drake had displayed the brains and ability that had gradually enabled him to be listed among the top ranking men of his own field. A single strand of hair on a murdered man's coat sleeve had been his only clue, but through that he had finally tracked down a ruthless killer who had terrorized a whole city.

As he turned over the pages of the Black Book other cases were brought back to mind one by one. The Case of the Blind Man's Cane, in which the tapping of a blind man's stick had been the signal through which a gang of counterfeiters were able to elude the police until Drake found a way to trap them in their hideout.

The Case of the Stolen Bullet, and many others that had gained him the respect and liking of the police commissioner who had become his friend.

Drake had been thoroughly trained in all types

of physical combat. A skilled boxer and wrestler, he also had been instructed in the art of jiu-jitsu. His knowledge of firearms was extensive and he was an expert marksman with every type of lethal weapon from automatic to machine-gun. He was an excellent duelist and could handle the foils in flashing style.

He had been educated in both this country and abroad. He possessed a working knowledge of many branches of science, medicine and the arts.

This was Jonathan Drake, who though still young, had firmly established himself as a criminologist of note, to which his Black Book bore mute testimony. His keen brain, his constant research, had placed him in such a position that he received willing cooperation from all of the high police officials throughout the United States and in most foreign countries.

The walls of his library were lined with bookshelves that extended from floor to ceiling, and there was a wheeled ladder standing in one corner that made every volume easily accessible. Here were no musty, unread collectors' items, but practically every bit of literature that had been devoted to the study of criminology.

On the latter flat-topped desk was a teletype machine connected directly with police headquarters, a recent friendly gesture on the part of Police Commissioner Slade. On the machine's swift moving tape appeared the latest reports of criminal activities, of missing persons, of stolen cars, and all of the vital and routing information that was sent out by the teletype operators at Centre Street.

In another room on the lower floor of the house was a complete file of descriptions, fingerprints and photographs of most known criminals. While in a third room was a morgue of newspaper clippings dealing with all of the important crimes that had been committed during the past twenty years. The entire fourth floor of the house had been transformed into a complete laboratory where Jonathan Drake used all of the most modern methods in tracking down various clues.

IT WAS in this house that had become a complete miniature investigation bureau that the detective had lived and worked during the ten years that had passed since he had started his career. Here that the number of cases recorded in Jonathan Drake's Black Book had swiftly increased until there were scores of them listed. The police with whom he had worked had been deeply appreciative. Between Jonathan Drake and the minions of the Law there was none of the usual antipathy that



*Jonathan Drake*

sometimes develops between the police and private detectives.

Drake was not the type of man who ever became obnoxiously aggressive. He was a firm believer in the old adage that two heads are better than one. It was because of this that he surrounded himself with a staff of capable assistants. Men both old and young who had been trained to work under his direction, and who were always on call when he felt their services were needed.

Of all of these it was upon young Tommy Lowell that Jonathan Drake depended the most. Though just twenty-one, Tommy had been with the detective ever since Drake had started his career. At that time he had been an orphan newsboy of eleven who had become a friend of Drake.

The criminologist had legally adopted the boy,

given him a good education, and Tommy Lowell had developed into an excellent assistant. Red-headed, freckled-faced, he was bright and quick-witted and learned swiftly. Now the two of them lived in the big house on upper Fifth Avenue with two servants who took care of the place. Here they devoted their time to a never ceasing war against crime.

Tommy's attitude toward Drake was that of a youth toward an older brother. He respected and secretly idolized the slender dark-haired man, but their attitude toward each other was casual, at times rather flippant, though Tommy always addressed the detective as "Chief" and there was a compliment in the way he used the word.

There was nothing that delighted the boy more than to neatly type the details of one of Drake's cases from the detective's shorthand notes that they both could read and place the pages in the Black Book.

Tonight Tommy Lowell sat nearby as Drake put aside the case book and glanced at the moving tape of the teletype machine.

"Anything new and startling in the way of police news, Chief?" asked Tommy with a grin as he watched Drake reading the tape. "They find that missing broker yet?"

"Apparently not," said Drake. "Here comes another flash on it—*Jefferson Rushmore still missing. All police requested to be on constant lookout for this man.*" Drake stopped reading. "The usual description follows."

"We know that description," said Tommy. "Thick gray hair, thin face, Roman nose, thin lips. Five feet seven, weight one hundred and fifty. No distinguishing scars on face or body. Age fifty-eight. Detectives have questioned Mrs. Rushmore and servants at Long Island residence, unable to gain any important information save that no ransom demands have been received up to date." Tommy Lowell yawned. "Want any more of it, Chief?"

"No thanks, Tommy," said Drake hastily. "That will do nicely." He picked up a pipe and filled and lighted it. "I had an interesting talk with the police commissioner while having dinner with him tonight."

"What did he say?" asked Tommy eagerly.

"That of late crime has been on the up-swing, and he is afraid that the Rushmore thing may be the forerunner of a real crime wave. He seems to have some hunch regarding this Rushmore affair—feels that there may be more behind it than just a mysterious disappearance."

"Maybe he's right," remarked Tommy. "If Slade is worried there is more to it than we thought. I—"

He stopped speaking as the phone on the desk rang and Drake picked up the handset.

"Hello?" he said. "Oh, yes, Commissioner . . . What! . . . I see . . . Yes, yes . . . All right, I'll join you there." Drake's eyes had become keen and hard as steel as he put the phone back on its stand.

"What happened?" asked Tommy.

"Jefferson Rushmore has been found. He was murdered—electrocuted!" Jonathan Drake got quickly to his feet. He drew an automatic out of the desk drawer and thrust the weapon into his pocket. "I'm to join the commissioner at once."

"Want me to go with you?" asked Tommy eagerly.

"No, you stay here. I may need you to work with me later. Might want you to contact some of the staff. Stay close to the phone, Tommy."

"Right!" Tommy nodded. "I'll be here waiting, Chief."

#### CHAPTER IV THE BURNING DEATH

**P**ATROLMAN KELLY, as it happened, was an alert copper who took his beat-duties seriously. At mid-night, having phoned in his report, he resumed his patrol in the desolate far-west-side Manhattan section. Down Bank Street to West, thence around the block towards Hudson.

Bank Street lay asleep and dark, most of its buildings being offices and warehouses, were deserted. Others, occupied by cheap lodgings, were mostly dark, too. A tavern on the corner of West Street was the only sign of real activity. Lights came from its misty windows and from its open door a radio blared in the night.

The patrolman's heavy shoes pounded up the hard stone pavement. There was scant traffic. A rumbling van crossed the intersection. Another smaller metal-bodied truck moving onto the block from West Street. Patrolman Kelly noticed all these things, had even whistled with the blaring tavern radio playing "Annie Laurie." Now, having rounded the block, he went down other streets on his patrol, paused at his box to phone



in, and coming back met the sergeant, walking as per regulations in the opposite direction.

A salute, and the two bluecoats walked together for awhile, the sergeant asking the usual gruff questions. They passed the tavern and the sergeant made some remark about getting them to tone down the radio. Kelly grinningly said it probably didn't disturb anyone in this God-forsaken neighborhood.

They were on Bank Street again now, just about half an hour after the patrolman had last walked along it. It was utterly desolate. The shoes of both coppers echoed on the paving.

The sergeant was preparing to go his way when Patrolman Kelly's alert eyes sharpened. His blue-sleeved arm pointed, his voice rose:

"Say what's that out there?"

The sergeant looked, followed the pointing arm into the river-misted gloom. Out on the street something bulked darkly, a huddled heap. The very aspect of it spurred both policemen into action. In one accord they ran out, the patrolman snatching out a searchlight. Its beam reached ahead like a tentacle as both men came to a stop. A surprised gasp broke from the sergeant and he started forward.

That was when the alertness of Patrolman Kelly probably saved his superior's life.

"Don't touch it, Sarge!" he yelled hastily. "For God's sake don't touch it!"

The sergeant withdrew his down-reaching arm with a fresh gasp of comprehension. For now he smelled a strange pungent stench, saw an insidious curl of faint smoke. He stood grimly issuing orders to hide his own confusion. The patrolman ran off to his post-phone while the sergeant remained on guard, but he made no further attempt to touch that ghastly corpse at his feet.

Just minutes later the block which had been so quiet became a bedlam. The wails of radio-car sirens, converging from many directions, reached a concentrated chorus as with their red headlights glowing the prowling cars tore onto the block. Detective cruisers followed.

A crowd, of which the tavern could have only contributed a small iota, materialized magically, for in Manhattan there are always people about to make a crowd at any time or place.

Scores of eyes were staring in horror at the gruesome sight now revealed by headlights and searchlights. A sight all the more sickening because in these moments no one could stop the silent thing that was still going on!

Sprawled on its back, was the corpse of an elderly

man. He was dressed only in shirt and trousers, but the latter looked, despite their dishevelment, like expensive well-fitting clothes. There were felt slippers in lieu of shoes on his feet.

But though the corpse lacked complete clothing it wore other and terrible apparel. The left trouser-leg had been slit. In the slit was visible a copper electrode, from which trailed a long wire. On the head above the gray hair, above the face whose dignified features were a horrible, splotchy crimson with eyes bulging like marbles, was a copper cap, also fastened tightly. Another wire trailed from this.

Eyes followed those wires to their termination.

Close by was an immense manhole. Its metal cover had been pried loose and lay on the pavement, the cover's lettering identifying the positive function of the manhole. The initials of the city's leading electric power company were marked on it.

THE manhole contained a switch of the power lines for this district. Here, in the wide but only four-foot deep aperture, the wires became gleaming copper bars. A live switch, which could be operated by the company's men only by the insertion of a special wooden bar.

The wires from the corpse were attached expertly to the copper bars of this switch. Interposed, however, was yet another switch—a smaller one which could cut those wires in and out from the current.

To those with even a layman's knowledge of electricity the picture was hideously clear. It was as devilishly simple as the killer was clever and ingenious. A human being had been connected by wires to the city's power lines! Lines which carried a high voltage to supply factories as well as the lower-volted current for domestic use.

A switch had contacted the man with the circuit, and the power of the company's generators had passed through the man uninterrupted, electrocuting him!

And horribly, that current still coursed through the corpse it had already "burned". Even as the crowd gathered, as the police and detectives who had first arrived looked on helplessly, they could see the literal transfiguration still taking place, see a body being changed by the mighty burning force of electricity!

Tendrils of smoke curled from the copper head-plate, singeing the hair. More smoke curled from the leg. The face itself became more and more mottled, as if being fried in an oven. There was a ghastly odor of scorching flesh.



Yet no one dared to go near the burning corpse, no one dared to try to turn off the switch that connected it into the power lines. Not being electricians, all feared the might of the power that could kill, even as it made the wheels of a whole modern civilization go round.

Then the green truck of the police emergency squad arrived, with its squad of mechanical experts. After them came a regular truck from the power company's emergency station. The powerhouse had not shut off the current, for that would mean crippling a section of the city that contained, among other things, a hospital dependent on lighting and electric apparatus.

Policemen and the company's own men went into the shallow manhole wearing rubber gloves and taking a rubber mat to stand on. In a matter of seconds they had the alien wires detached, switch and all.

The corpse was at last still. The live current no longer flowed through it, and the tendrils of smoke ceased curling.

The emergency squad gave its attention to roping off the block and keeping the crowd back. Detectives took charge, eyes thrust close to the corpse as they studied it intently.

Identification was swift despite the mottled, contorted features, for several detectives carried photographs of the man the police department had been hunting since his mysterious disappearance, and there were articles of identification on the body itself.

"It's Jefferson Rushmore all right!" spoke a grim-jawed captain. He shuddered involuntarily. "Poor devil, burning like that."

The alarms out for Rushmore were immediately withdrawn. Headquarters was instructed to telephone his wife that the search had ended.

The machinery of the police was set into motion of a murder investigation, for Rushmore could never have managed to perform this ghastly deed on himself.

Homicide arrived, with their kits and cameras. The medical examiner and his staff reached the scene, and a siren-screaming limousine with a silver shield brought the police commissioner, Thomas Slade, himself.

Striding through saluting bluecoats and detectives, the grizzled, keen-eyed commissioner arrived as at the medical examiner's assent, the ghastly copper headplate and leg-electrode were being detached from the corpse of Jefferson Rushmore.

THE commissioner listened to reports, outwardly calm in the face of this shocking finale to the search

for the missing broker. Only his gray eyes showed the horror, the bafflement he felt. He questioned the patrolman and the sergeant who had discovered the body. He spoke to the medical examiner, consulted detectives who were searching for clues.

Meanwhile a whole flock of aggressive men with police cards in their hats or hands were working their way through the growing throng. Reporters, who had gathered like buzzards at the scene, blarneying their way through the police lines, demanding their story. They made their way now to the commissioner.

"Come on, Commissioner, give us a statement for the *Star*!"

"Anything for the *Blade*? Got any idea what's behind the killing, Mr. Commissioner? We won't quote you if you don't want us to."

"Nothing now, boys," said Commissioner Slade with a wave of his hand in dismissal. "See me later, when I know what this is all about."

The reporters moved away, seeking the officers who had found the body.

The commissioner's eyes lighted as he saw a slender dark-haired man making his way toward him through the crowd.

"Thought you'd be interested in this, Drake," said Commissioner Slade as the private detective reached his side. "That's why I phoned you as soon as I received the first report. Had a hunch that the corpse would be Rushmore, and I was right."

"I am very much interested, Commissioner." Beneath his snap-brimmed hat Drake's keen blue eyes were surveying the scene about him. "I'm beginning to believe that you were quite right." He frowned. "There is far more to the disappearance and death of Jefferson Rushmore than appears on the surface, I feel sure of that now!"

"Come with me," said the commissioner. "I'll show you just what we've found."

Jonathan Drake followed into the center of the police lines beyond the milling crowd. He saw the body, over which the medical examiner was still working.

Even with the wires removed it was still a grisly sight, with its mottled face and protruding eyes.

Drake saw the wires and electrodes which had been tested in vain for fingerprints. He looked into the manhole. From what he saw and heard much became clear to his observant gaze.

He comprehended at once the simplicity and cleverness of the crime.

It was fiendish, in that it made use of regular city equipment for a ghastly murder. Anyone with a fair knowledge of electricity could have done the job.

But Drake saw other implications more bizarre and chilling which as yet the shocked police had not quite grasped—the felt slippers on the corpse, the electrodes, the slit in the left trouser leg and the partially clipped hair.

Jonathan Drake, as a grim witness, had sat on more than one occasion in the bleak death-house at Sing-Sing; once, too, at Trenton. He had seen condemned men his own detective work had brought to this final penalty ushered through the green door. Seen the electrodes fastened to their slit trouser-legs, the head-piece clamped to their skulls that had been shaved at the contact points. He had seen the electrocutioner pull the switch, the body jerk as the fatal current coursed through it.

He was thinking of these things now as he viewed the death-scene. He wondered at the strange parallel in the manner of Rushmore's death and the law's own way in so many states including this of taking its toll of human life.

And somehow that thought not only gave the whole crime its most chilling, horrible aspect, but set his brain working swiftly.

Could this have been a murder of revenge, of grim retaliation, because Jefferson Rushmore had sent someone to the chair? It was worth considering.

"Well, Drake," said the commissioner as they moved to one side. "I'll give you all that we've got on this case so far."

HE SHOWED an initialed wallet well stuffed with money, and containing a driving license made out in the name of Jefferson Rushmore. A handful of change, some keys, a few other personal belongings.

They had been in the trouser pockets, there being no coat on the murdered man.

"Evidently robbery was not the motive," remarked Drake. "Has he made any large withdrawals from the bank recently?"

"Not as far as we have been able to learn," said the commissioner. "But we do think there's some kidnap-extortion business behind this. Rushmore was a rich man. He mysteriously disappears. Now we find him murdered. It looks like a snatch in which the kidnapers became alarmed and killed their victim."

"Why should they have become alarmed?" demanded Drake. "No one had contacted them, and all the police knew was that Rushmore was missing."

"I don't know," said Slade. "That is something we will have to try and learn."

"You've found no other possible motive then? You think it's just a matter of gangsters picking out a wealthy man and kidnaping and killing him?"

"Yes." The commissioner nodded. "And they've used a method that has no clue by which they could be tracked down. There are no bullets in this crime, for the ballistics bureau to track to a murder gun. No strangling, stabbing, or other violent means from which an autopsy would give us a clue as to the way it was done, and who could have done it. No poison or venom our toxicologist would be able to run down for us."

"You are right, Commissioner," said Drake.

"Instead, we have a regular part of the city's ordinary fixtures tapped, turned into a death-weapon. And the only external things—the electrodes, switch and wires—could have been made from materials obtainable in a million stores."

"That's just the trouble," said Slade. "We might be able to trace where those things were bought—but it would take a long time and the chances of anyone remembering the buyer seems very slim."

"All the same I'm very much interested in this case, Commissioner," said Drake. "And I would like to work with the police on it."

"Of course," said Commissioner Slade. "Glad to have you do so, Drake. Is there any way in which I can help you now?"

"Yes. The first thing I want to do is to get all the data you have on Jefferson Rushmore. The report of the investigation following his disappearance. I trust that can be arranged?"

"It can, certainly." The commissioner nodded.

"Handle your end of the investigation as you see fit, but you may count on full cooperation from every unit of the police department whenever you need it. I'll see to that!"

"Thanks. That's all I wanted to know, Commissioner," said Jonathan Drake. "And you may rest assured that if I unearth any vital angles, you'll be the first to hear about it."

## CHAPTER V MURDER AGAIN!

**S**EVERAL HOURS LATER, with the night stretching to its end, Jonathan Drake was grimly at work down in the ornate-domed building of Police Headquarters on Centre Street. Here, where every great cog of the mighty police machine turned in perpetual motion night and day, Drake, armed with a special letter from the Chief which precluded any questions, talked to all the detectives who had been on the Rushmore case.

Before going to Police Headquarters he had phoned his home and talked to Tommy Lowell. He had given his assistant the details of the case and instructed Tommy to send some of the staff out to Jefferson Rushmore's Long Island estate in the morning and see what they could learn from the Rushmore neighbors.

At Centre Street Drake learned a number of things which interested him. The head of the Missing Persons Bureau told him of various questions and answers that had been accumulated from Rushmore's family, his business staff, his bank. He considered a report from Rushmore's office manager important. The manager had stated that the broker had appeared dazed when last at the office, and had received a mysterious visitor, after which he had departed hastily and was not seen again until his body was discovered.

Drake had retired to a room turned over to him and was sorting the paraphernalia of police reports, teletype slips, notes and memoranda. Even as he saw that as yet the murder still remained baffling there came a sudden interruption.

The frosted glass door whipped open. Commissioner Slade, wearing his hat and overcoat, poked in his head. His grizzled face was hard and he was excited. That alone made Drake tense with anticipation.

"I just got a report from Westchester County," the commissioner's voice was terse. "There's been another electrocution!"

Drake leaped to his feet, face taut, blue eyes cold and grim. Instantly he grabbed for his hat and topcoat, followed Slade out.

When the commissioner climbed into his waiting limousine in front of the steps of the building Drake was with him. Assistant Inspector Kerry, in charge of Homicide, made a third passenger.

"Step on it, Mack!"

The commissioner's bark brought a prompt response from the blue-clad chauffeur in front who had already been told their destination. The limousine shot forward, gears meshing. A second police car followed close behind it.

With sirens screaming into the thinning night the two cars raced uptown. Breaking all records, dashing through scant but veering traffic, past red lights, past a few saluting traffic officers on night duty, it streaked through Manhattan, this two-car parade.

The trip was brief, so brief that when they arrived at the grim scene on Putnam Road in Westchester, they found that nothing had as yet been done by the handful of trim-uniformed police and others there.

The gaze of the commissioner and Jonathan Drake swept over their surroundings as they got hastily out of the limousine with Inspector Kerry close behind them.

It was a macabre setting, this lonely and desolate section of wooded Westchester country, with just a few isolated houses. On one side of the road ran a trolley line. There was a trolley car stalled on the tracks, and in front of it, illuminated by its headlamp and by the chill gray dawn now filling the windy air, just to one side of the tracks, was the smoking corpse!

A corpse whose very clothes seemed to smoulder as it, sprawled there. Again there was the gleaming electrode on the leg, the copper headpiece.

The wire from the head, a naked copper wire, had been thrown over the single high-voltage trolley line high above. A weight held it down on the other side. The wire from the trouser leg was fastened to the "ground" rail of the tracks, completing the circuit. There was a switch, nearby.

DRAKE'S lithe body was hurtling forward toward the huddled, smoking corpse. He heard one of the Westchester police speaking to the commissioner and Inspector Kerry.

"We phoned to have the current turned off, but the car company said that it would have to be done at a nearby circuit-breaker. They're supposed to send men. We've been waiting, and meanwhile the corpse is burning away!"

Drake acted swiftly. In a tool chest inside the trolley



car he found a pair of gloves insulated by rubber linings.

Treading carefully on his rubber soled shoes Drake moved directly to the switch which connected the body to the trolley wire. All eyes were tensely watching him as he reached down and pulled the switch. A blue sizzling spark leaped across the opening gap as the current was cut off from the body.

But there was still danger as long as the wires were connected up. With his rubber gloved hands Drake now removed the gleaming coppers from the corpse, detaching the hideous electrodes. By that time a repair truck arrived with a high platform which enabled men to remove the still trailing wire from the overhead trolley.

Drake, the commissioner, and the other police peered down at the corpse, then. They had learned that it had been discovered by the motorman of the trolley car. Cars here, after midnight, ran at infrequent schedules—almost three hours apart, this being a little-used spur.

It was clear that the corpse had been here for a long time, yet it had been placed at this spot at least two hours after the murder at Bank Street, for the last trolley before this one had passed this place at 4 a.m. and the corpse had not been here then.

The long passage of high voltage had done gruesome damage. Where Rushmore's features had been mottled red, the face of this man was darkly purple. The eyes were lusterless. The lips were swollen and black.

As more authorities, including a county coroner, arrived, facts were revealed. The corpse was searched and even more identifying objects were found than had been discovered on the body of Jefferson Rushmore. There were initialed handkerchiefs, an expensive monogrammed watch, a wallet containing a number of large bills, and with a name on it as well as on some beautifully engraved cards.

The name was David Bradwill.

The commissioner shook his head, looking at the Westchester police, to whom the name also seemed to mean nothing.

Drake's eyes were narrowing, as if he were trying to remember something.

The commissioner's voice broke into his thoughts. In the cold gray dawn which threw an eerie light on the death scene, he faced the worried police official.

"Another electrocution murder!" The commissioner's voice was tight. "It's worse than we thought, Drake. It's a chain of murders! No doubt we'll find this Bradwill

is another wealthy man when we check up, and they've used another regular source of electric power to kill him. With hundreds of such places to draw from it's no wonder they can flaunt their crimes in our faces!"

A helpless, inchoate rage threaded his tones. A rage which Jonathan Drake also felt, though his cold, thoughtful eyes did not show it. Even upon Drake the second murder had broken with all the effect of a stunning blow.

To all appearances, devilish criminals were out on a murderous rampage!

Yet Drake's keen, analytic brain refused to be overwhelmed by the sensational magnitude of the crimes. Indeed, he was seeking to sharpen the blurred focus, to narrow things down as much as he could.

He had been searching his memory, for the name of David Bradwill seemed to have a strangely familiar ring to him. He looked again at the finely engraved cards and then something clicked into place.

DRAKE possessed an extensive knowledge of the various realms of art and culture. He collected paintings and etchings. Now he remembered that recently he had seen some bad paintings but some fine etchings by an artist named David Bradwill.

Once tapping that memory, he remembered that David Bradwill had been reputed to lead the life of an eccentric, a recluse in a hide-away studio apartment out in Brooklyn Heights. There were people who might be able to tell him just where that apartment was located.

But more strikingly important to him was the knowledge that although well-to-do, Bradwill had certainly not been a man of great wealth such as Rushmore.

The commissioner had surmised wrongly about that. It was the one flaw in his grim chain of reasoning. Yet Drake did not tell him so. Much of what Slade said might be true, but Drake was exceedingly doubtful about the kidnap angle.

He was inclined to cling to the theory that this, too, had been murder for revenge. For once again here was the grim mockery of a legal execution—a death chair murder without the approval of the law.

But if these two men had been killed for revenge, then there was some definite tie-up between the two crimes, a connection which Drake felt he might be able to learn by delving into the past histories of these two men. Somewhere their lives had connected, and if he could find that connection he would find the clue he needed.

With the sun now coming up Jonathan Drake squared his shoulders despite an already sleepless night, his eyes gleamed with grim purpose. Hurriedly he drew the stern faced commissioner aside once more.

Unconsciously they had moved close to the spot where the dead man had been wired to the track and they stood there as they talked.

"I take it you'll leave Inspector Kerry in charge here for the Manhattan police, Commissioner," said Drake. "Of course he'll look for clues. There's a chance he may find some, for this seems like a deserted section." The detective was staring down at the dirt at the side of the track as he spoke. "Look!" he exclaimed.

Clearly outlined in the dirt were two lines that formed the letter X.

"Bradwill tried to leave some message when he found he was going to die," said Drake grimly. "Must have drawn that X with the toe of his shoe, hoping whoever killed him would not see it in the darkness."

"You're right, Drake," exclaimed the commissioner excitedly. "But what does it mean? What could he have been trying to tell us by that X?"

"Just what we've got to find out," said Drake. "I have no doubt that it means something that will have a definite connection with the case; but just what I haven't the faintest idea as yet."

At a word from the commissioner, who had called the rest of the police, Inspector Kerry ordered his men to work. A police photographer was making shots of the X marked in the dirt, and the other men were going over the wires and electrodes for fingerprints.

"Guess there's nothing more for me to do here," said Drake to the commissioner. "Meanwhile I'm going to see what can be done elsewhere!"

A few minutes later Jonathan Drake was driving away in a car borrowed from a nearby resident whom the police were still questioning.

Back toward Manhattan, Drake drove, his blue eyes grim, strong face set and stern. He knew he had little to work with, but he must make it bring results.

The burned corpses of a broker and an artist, both of whom had been killed by electrocution within a short space of time, and whose murders had been so identical that there was no doubt they had been planned by one diabolical brain. An X that had been scraped on the ground as a last desperate message from a man who had realized that he was about to meet his death. Drake felt it was little enough to work on, but at least it was something.

Somewhere, he thought, there must be people associated with Rushmore or Bradwill who might know of some link between them, some connection between their similar, bizarre electrocutions. Eventually the police would ferret out all such people but Drake could not wait for that.

He wanted to get Tommy Lowell and the rest of his staff working on this angle. To tell them of the second murder by electrocution.

"I think I'll do a little investigating of the Bradwill end of it myself," he said aloud as he drove swiftly toward the city. "I want to know that tie-up as soon as possible!"

## CHAPTER VI FOUR MEN—AND DEATH

**A**S THE MORNING BROKE full and sunny, thousands of people were reading the news of the murders in newspapers, getting reports of them over the radio in the news flashes, hearing of them from gossiping friends. Where the news had been filled with wars and rumors of wars, labor troubles and various other items now it exploded with this shocking, gruesome double murder by electrocution, which, because of the use of such familiar apparatus, was all the more spine-chilling.

But out of all these thousands who were shocked by the crimes, there were four men in different places, in various positions of life, who were affected in a more personal manner by the publicized news.

The first of these was Peter Bearing. He closed a Trenton newspaper, put it down on the green-upholstered Pullman seat beside him. The crack Miami-New York flyer was nearing the end of its journey, pulling into Newark, its streamlined locomotive hissing to a stop.

Bearing settled his corpulent frame in the seat, his heavy face working to hide from fellow passengers the sudden ghastly pallor that had erased any evidence of sun-tan from his features. To the world at large Bearing was known as a shrewdly successful promoter of various amusement enterprises, everything from pin-game emporiums to Jai Alai matches.

Bearing finally managed to control the momentary terror that had apparently caught him off guard. He sat back. There was a slight jerk to the train, another lurch, sounds of coupling breaking and being refastened as the steam locomotive was replaced by an electric engine. The train began to move smoothly forward again.

There was, Peter Bearing noticed, something different about the sound the train made now. At first he didn't quite realize what it was. Looking out the window he saw a huge, streamlined steam locomotive backing on a switch-rail. He saw some other engines standing, as if waiting, but they were electric.

Passengers, in the next instant, were amazed to see all composure leave Peter Bearing. He slumped in his seat, looking sick, heavy jowls gray and shaking like jelly, stark terror in his eyes.

He knew it was crazy, but the fear had enveloped him like an overwhelming miasma. He was thinking—an electric engine on the train, a high voltaged third rail underneath one side of these cars, making the train rush forward. Electricity—electricity—

"Pardon me, Mistah, is somethin' wrong?" It was the Pullman porter, solicitous near the end of the trip.

Peter Bearing waved a flabby, nerveless hand.

"No," he blurted. "Nothing—nothing—"

\* \* \*

The second man was Branston Gordon.

"For God's sake stop that damn thing!" Harshly the words burst from his lips as he strained forward at the breakfast table, his food untouched.

Opposite him in the sunny breakfast room of the luxuriant Greenwich, Connecticut, house Gordon's pretty nineteen year old daughter stared at him with concerned amazement her blue eyes following his to the bubbling coffee percolator—the electric percolator plugged in by a wire to a wall socket.

"Why, Dad!" she exclaimed. "What's come over you this morning? You're not yourself at all. That percolator's been going every single morning."

Branston Gordon seemed to pull himself together. He was a big, powerful man, rangy of build, with shaggy gray hair. He had come out of Wall Street in time to escape the crash, and since then had lived in retirement, working only at his hobby of stamp collecting, and devoting himself to his beautiful home and his daughter who, since his wife's death, was his sole concern.

"Sorry, Marion," he said gruffly, with an

affectionate glance at the pretty, auburn haired girl. "Guess I got out of bed on the wrong foot."

He made a pretense of eating his breakfast, of smiling, of talking. But throughout he still heard the hissing, bubbling percolator, and now and then his eyes glanced darkly, yet with a strange light in their depths, at the wire which snaked from the gleaming percolator's base to the wall-plug, drawing the vital electric current. . . .

\* \* \*

THE soundless doors of the elevator opened on the ground floor of the exclusive Colton Hotel. A well-set man in a Chesterfield coat and Homburg hat strode out into the lobby, puffing at a choice Havana which gave forth an aroma of opulence.

The hotel employees jumped to attention as he appeared, for this man was the owner of the hotel, inherited from his father. This was Charles Rawling.

Striding across the lobby toward the entrance doors, Rawling was an impressive and striking figure. He had a hard, keen face and his hat covered hair which, though streaked with gray, was still richly dark. Yet withal there was a certain flabbiness about his mouth, and the chin that was concealed by a smart Van Dyke beard was slightly recessive.

Charles Rawling strode on across the modernistic lobby, toward the chrome-framed glass doors that gave onto the vestibule and were one of the modern features of the place.

They were "robot" doors. Operating from both sides by a photo-electric cell whose ray, scarcely visible in the daylight, would be broken by anyone passing it.

Rawling glanced at the ray. Then suddenly, just as he was about to cross the tiny light-line, he stopped dead in his tracks with a visible start of fright. The cigar fell from his loose lips to the floor.

Everyone in the lobby saw it happen and stared. A bell-hop captain started to come forward solicitously. Although he must have been conscious that he had become the focus of attention, Rawling's reactions only became more pronounced. He stood there and a gasp of shuddering terror came from him. For a moment he seemed paralyzed, afraid to step across that electric ray.

Then suddenly he shrugged. His shoulders braced and he walked on. His well-built body cut the ray, the robot doors swung magically open.

Charles Rawling strode out, pushed open outer doors, and walked down the street. Certainly if he



had felt any emotions he either forgot them now or repressed them admirably. Another moment and he was climbing coolly into his waiting limousine, and as he settled back in the rear cushions his eyes were shrewd, calculating.

The liveried chauffeur started the car, and Rawlings sped through traffic to keep an appointment with his banker.

\* \* \*

Last of the four men was Samuel Twill, who looked, and was, a man of regular habits. Every morning on the way to the prosperous book store he owned and managed he crossed Fifth Avenue at the same place—the corner of Twenty-ninth Street, from East to West.

This morning was no exception. The traffic officer on duty recognized and greeted the slender book dealer. Twill was dressed simply in dark clothes that gave him an almost clerical aspect. His pale face was made studious by a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles which helped overcome his near-sightedness.

Samuel Twill stepped off the curb as the friendly officer stopped traffic. He took his usual route across the street. Suddenly he felt metal under his shoes. He looked down intently through his glasses, saw a manhole cover beneath him.

A strange and startling change came over Samuel Twill. A frightened, croaking cry burst from his lips. Wildly he jumped backward to get off the manhole cover. In his agitation he didn't seem to realize he was leaping into the very path of an automobile starting to cross the intersection behind him.

Brakes squealed. The traffic officer rushed forward, grabbed Twill, pulled him out of the way. The car went on, its driver white-faced.

Samuel Twill quickly recovered himself. Carefully he brushed off his coat, smiled wanly at the traffic officer.

"Thanks, Officer," he said. "Very absent minded of me."

The book dealer went on across the Avenue, down a side street, continuing his customary route toward his store. But apparently he changed his mind. He stepped

into a corner cigar store, entered a telephone booth, carefully deposited a nickel and dialed a number. Presently he heard the number being rung. There was no answer. He dialed again as if to make sure he hadn't called a wrong number. Again he listened. No answer.

A look of decision came over his spectacled face as he left the booth. A smile that was both shrewd and hopeful curved his lips.

## CHAPTER VII LETTERS OF DOOM

**H**ALF AN HOUR LATER Samuel Twill alighted from the taxicab that had borne him speedily across Manhattan Bridge. Paying the fare and adding a parsimonious tip which made the cabby's lips curl contemptuously, the book dealer strode down a side-street occupied mostly by old brownstone houses.

He rounded a corner onto the driveway which overlooked a view of the East River from a high vista with the skyline of Manhattan on the opposite shore. Here on the driveway were buildings of modern appearance.

Apartments and hotels, Samuel Twill's step became strangely cautious for one walking in broad daylight. He studied passersby suspiciously. Finally he paused before one of the houses, an apartment building of some seven stories.

Twill walked quickly into the foyer of the apartment building, stepped into the elevator. He told the operator to take him to the sixth floor. Getting out on the sixth he waited for the elevator doors to clang shut behind him and then took a service stairs to the top floor. It was a long climb because each floor was double the height of normal apartment stories because of the high ceilinged duplex flats.

Samuel Twill came finally to a metal door. It was locked, he found after trying it cautiously, then



*Samuel Twill*

listening at it. He glanced over his shoulder and assured himself there was no one else in the corridor. Then he did a strange thing. He took out a penknife, inserted it into the crack between the door and the catch-lock and forced the lock open as if he had had some experience in such matters.

Twill then entered the apartment.

It was a large and comfortably furnished place. The lower part of it formed a living room and studio. Overhead was the balcony to which a stairway led, and off which were the other rooms of the duplex apartment.

Samuel Twill looked around, his eyes furtive as they strained through their glasses. One hand was in his coat pocket now, clasping a small flat automatic that nestled there.

The apartment showed signs of disorder. Ashes were scattered in the fireplace. Papers were strewn over a table and on the floor. A cabinet was open, revealing peculiar, surgical-like tools.

The walls of the room were covered with prints and etchings. The balcony itself, partially in the shadow, was lined with huge life-sized oil paintings in heavy gilt frames that reached to the floor. Twill's nearsighted eyes could just make them out—a smiling girl, a gentleman at a masquerade, a standing man, a soldier, some landscapes.

Twill gave a grunt of disgust and walked on through the living room. He began a hurried but thorough search. The open cabinet, with its surgical-like tools, the scattered papers, drawers in a table. In a corner he came upon a desk which seemed to contain in its open top only a litter of junk and refuse.

Hastily Twill went through the stuff. He opened the desk drawers and found them empty, but something about the bottom drawer drew his attention. He tapped it with his knuckles, then his penknife worked again, pried up a piece of snugly-fit board.

Beneath it lay a long white envelope on the front of which had been marked an X in red crayon. Samuel Twill snatched up the envelope and opened it swiftly—the flap had not been sealed. He nodded as he read the brief typewritten message it contained.

"Better let me have that!"

At the sound of the challenging voice the book-dealer whirled with a cry. Twill's hand snatched out his gun. His face was suddenly livid, eyes desperate behind their glasses, as he found that he could see no one.

"Drop that gun!"

The automatic clattered on the floor as it fell from

Twill's hand, and the envelope with its message inside fluttered down on a throw rug. Twill turned, his gaze going in the direction of that crisp voice. His eyes became as glary with horror as the glasses over them.

Right before him one of the huge oil paintings on the balcony was coming to life!

IT WAS the painting which he had thought to be a standing, man. Now steely eyes gleamed in a lean strong face. A .45 automatic jutted out of the picture in the hand of the living portrait.

As Twill stood paralyzed, a slender man stepped coolly forward from where he'd been standing in front of a landscape, creating the impression that he was one of the portraits to the near-sighted gaze of the book dealer.

Still covering Twill the man came swiftly down the stairs, walked toward the frightened man.

"I assure you that I'm quite alive," said the crisp voice.

"Who—who are you?" demanded Twill.

"It's you who must identify yourself. As for me—I'm a detective; Jonathan Drake is my name."

"A detective!" gasped Samuel Twill.

Did the knowledge that he had been surprised by a detective who worked for law and order instill fresh terror in Twill, or was his reaction only one of surprise, of a natural guilt at being caught searching for something in David Bradwill's apartment?

These were the grim questions that Jonathan Drake was asking himself as his keen eyes probed the face of the other man, a stranger to him.

"I advise you to identify yourself and explain your actions," said Drake sternly. "Perhaps you'll find it less embarrassing to deal with me, a private detective, instead of the police!"

Twill's spectacled face flinched. Then a sigh of surrender came from him. He drew himself up and assumed a more dignified air.

"My name is Twill," he stated. "Samuel Twill." He fished out an engraved card and handed it to Drake. "My card."

Drake glanced at the card, saw that it read:

SAMUEL TWILL

Rare and Fine Books—Prints  
West 29th Street, N.Y.C.

Drake's gun lowered and he seemed to relax, but that only made his next question come with more surprising and crisp effect.





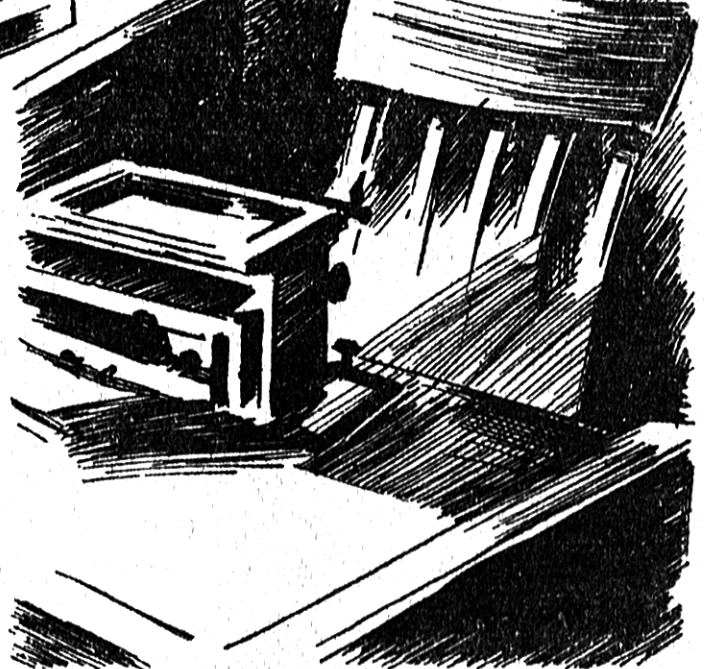
*The walls of the room were covered with prints and etchings*

"Mr. Twill, what excuse can you offer for breaking into this apartment and searching the property of David Bradwill, the second victim of a ghastly murder by electrocution?"

Twill stiffened. His lips worked, his eyes shifted behind their glasses. He made no effort to hide the fact that he knew about the murders which were already public news.

"Because of that," he said, nodding toward the envelope on the floor. "I wanted to see if Bradwill—" His voice trailed off as he shuddered.

Drake leaned down and picked up the envelope. His eyes narrowed as he saw the red X marked across



it. Was this what the second murdered man had been trying to indicate when he had traced those marks in



the dirt before he died? The detective suspected that it had been.

He drew out the single sheet of paper that the envelope contained. There was just one sentence typed on the sheet, all in capitals:

REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED  
TO THE BIG GUY

"A threat?" Drake demanded looking at Twill.

"Yes." The book-dealer nodded. He reached into an inside pocket and produced an envelope similar to the one that the detective held. "I received one just like it yesterday—this is it. That was why I came here today. I had to try and learn if Bradwill had received one, too." Twill's voice shook. "If that was why he was—electrocuted!"

"So you first phoned to see if the apartment was empty," said Drake so matter-of-factly that Twill nodded, only to stare at the man who seemed to know everything. "And then came here to look for this death warning?"

"That's right," said Twill. "But how do you know all this?"

DISCREET inquiries had enabled Drake to learn the address of the murdered artist and he himself had surreptitiously entered this duplex apartment in Brooklyn Heights and had spent some time searching the place. His investigation of the premises had been interrupted by the ringing of the telephone.

His first impulse had been to answer it, but shrewd second thought had restrained him. Why, he reasoned, should anyone be calling the apartment? It couldn't be the police, who didn't even know about the place as yet. Either someone didn't know Bradwill was dead and was trying to call the artist, which seemed unlikely since the murder had been in the morning papers, or someone merely wanted to make sure the apartment was empty.

Acting on his hunch that the caller would show up in person Drake had lurked in the shadows of the balcony.

"If you came here to see if Bradwill had received a death threat similar to the one you got, then you must know who sent it—and why Bradwill and Rushmore were murdered," said Drake.

Twill's eyes shifted as he stammered an answer: "No, I don't—that is—I—" Even as his keen ears heard the furtive creaking sound that had made Twill pause, Drake whirled, gun ready in his hand.

He heard a squeaky cry from Twill behind him but his eyes did not turn. Then he dashed up the balcony stairs.

Down the balcony flooring a shaft of sunlight had suddenly widened, only to be blackened out. Drake saw the sky-light in the ceiling which had been forced open, saw one figure dropping through it, another following.

The first man landed cat-footedly on the balcony floor, snatched for his gun as he saw Drake at the end of the stairs with the automatic in his hand. A second man thudded down behind the first. The faces of both of them were hard and sinister.

The man in the lead came charging forward, his thin face with its slashlike mouth contorted into a grimace of rage. The second man was fumbling in his pocket for his gun, having trouble in drawing it out, the sight had caught on the lining of the pocket.

"Stop!" snapped Drake. "Don't come any farther or I'll shoot!"

"Git him, Crasher!" shouted the man behind the slash-mouthed thug.

Drake's gun roared as he sent a bullet whistling past Crasher's ear. The detective had not fired to kill or even wound, merely to warn these men that they had better stop.

But the slash-mouthed man didn't stop. He hurled himself bodily at Drake; the gun in his hand swung like a powerful club in a vicious arc. Drake ducked his head with quick, dexterous instinct. The gun fanned past his face, making the air whistle in his ear.

Crasher's free left hand caught Drake's right wrist, dug into the flesh as the slash-mouthed man tried to twist the weapon out of the detective's grasp.

As they struggled Drake saw that the second man was waiting, gun in hand for a good chance for a shot, but Crasher's body prevented Drake from being a good target at the moment.

"Hold him!" shouted the second man. "Swing him around this way. Crasher! I'll finish him all right!"

Drake's antagonist sought to tighten his wrestling grip. He had Drake's gun arm tied up, and had dropped his own weapon in order to get a better grip on the detective. Drake found that the man fighting him was exceedingly strong, and wrestling like a professional.

Crasher sent a knee into Drake's stomach with such force that it made the detective gasp. As he tried to change his position he found that his adversary had him pressed against the wood railing of the balcony.

The frail balustrade began to creak ominously under the combined pressure of their two struggling bodies. It was giving, splintering—

DRAKE put all his weight on the balls of his feet. With a sudden trick of balance derived from mastery of jiu-jitsu he whirled, swinging his surprised opponent clear around. Simultaneously he freed his left arm. It snaked up and forward in a curving hook, hand doubled into a ball of iron. The blow was as powerful as it was fast. There was a crunch of knuckles against flesh-and-bone.

The slash-mouthed man was half-lifted off his feet, sent staggering backwards with terrific momentum. His body crashed against the already splintering balustrade. The impact broke the rail as if it were matchsticks. Backwards Crasher toppled through the gap, hurtling down twelve feet to crash with a thud on the living room floor, where he remained, motionless.

Breathing hard, Drake leaped back against the balcony wall. Some portion of his faculties made him aware that Samuel Twill was no longer present at the scene. But the second thug was present in every sense of the word!

A cry of enraged alarm had burst from him as Crasher was knocked through the breaking balustrade. Then, realizing the detective was now an unimpeded target, he raised his automatic, his finger tightened on the trigger.

One deep detonation crashed through the duplex flat, and that detonation came from the gun that was still in Drake's right hand. All during the struggle he had managed to keep his grip on it. Now it leaped into aim with sleight-of-hand rapidity. Flame spat from its muzzle as Drake fired in self-defense.

A strangled cry ripped from the thug. His own gun flew from his hand, unfired as his fingers clawed at his chest, blood spurting crimson through his shirt. Then his body crumpled, he pitched to the balcony floor, lay where he fell, a huddled heap.

Grim-eyed Drake stood holding his smoking gun, gathering his breath. He moved forward so he could look up through the open skylight. No one else there. He glanced over the balcony rail at the tall form of Crasher that was an inert huddled heap.

Twill was gone all right, for there was no one else in the place. Had Twill run away in sheer fright during the hectic commotion? Certainly he had not gone to notify the police or they'd be arriving by this time.

Drake smiled grimly, as he still stood there getting

back his breath. The two long envelopes containing the death threats still lay on the floor of the living room below the balcony.

## CHAPTER VIII A FRESH TRAIL

**B**UT ONE GLANCE was needed to assure Jonathan Drake that the thug he had shot was dead. Nor could he feel much regret over it, the man had obviously tried to kill him first.

Drake dropped his automatic into the side pocket of his coat and descended the stairway to the living room. He picked up the two envelopes, thrust them into an inside pocket and then examined the other thug. He stooped, felt the hairy wrist. There was a slow but steady pulse. Crasher was unconscious, but breathing normally. Closer examination convinced Drake that the slashmouthed man had not been seriously injured by his fall.

But though only stunned, this man would be out for some time, Drake estimated, unless he were brought around sooner. Drake searched him. He found plenty of cartridges, some cigarettes, a worn wallet that contained twenty dollars in small bills—but no identification. Tucked in one corner of the wallet was an old newspaper clipping. The single column head on the item read:

### TRICONI EXECUTED Head of Famous Chicago Mob Dies in Electric Chair

Drake frowned as he read the brief news story that was dated five years ago. Then an eager expression crept over his strong face.

"That must be it," he murmured. "I was right about the revenge motive. It's beginning to tie up!"

That there was a definite connection between the electrocution murders of Rushmore and Bradwill, the note that the artist had received asking if he remembered what had happened to the big guy, and the death of the leader of the Triconi mob in the electric chair five years ago, he did not doubt.

He hurried up the stairs with the intention of searching the bedrooms of the apartment. There were

two of them; the first was apparently a guest room; the second had been where the dead artist had slept. His clothes were still in the closet, and his things were scattered all about the place.

Drake drew open the top drawer of the bureau. The first thing that caught his eye was a bank book. He picked it up and scanned the pages. There were a number of good sized deposits, but nothing in the way of particularly large withdrawals. The passbook had been issued by the Empire National Bank in Manhattan.

Jonathan Drake decided to have a talk with the officials of that bank. There were a number of points in the case which he hoped that they might be able to clear up for him. He picked out a bundle of personal letters and papers that were also in the drawer. Dropped them in his pocket to examine later.

He hurried back out onto the balcony, stopped suddenly, his hand reached for the automatic in his pocket. The dead man was still sprawled just where he had fallen, but Crasher had disappeared!

Drake's gaze swept the living room and studio below him. There was no place in which the slash-mouthed man could be hiding, and the detective saw that the door of the apartment was now standing half open. Crasher had regained consciousness and escaped; there was no doubt of that in Drake's mind.

He shrugged his shoulders, picked up the phone and called police headquarters. When he had Slade on the wire he told him what had occurred at the apartment, and suggested that the police be on the lookout for Crasher, and pick up the body of the dead man.

Commissioner Slade listened with interest, elated over the fact that Drake had given the police a few definite angles on which to work.

An hour later Jonathan Drake entered the private office of George Stinson, president of the Empire National Bank. Stinson was a tall man with a strong face and a deep voice.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Drake?" demanded Stinson when the slender dark haired man had been seated across from the president's chair at the big

ornate desk. "You said it was in regard to the murder of one of our depositors, David Bradwill, I believe?"

"I did," Drake nodded. "I would like to know if Jefferson Rushmore also had an account here?"

"Why, yes." The bank president looked surprised. "I thought the police already knew that."

"POSSIBLY they do," said Drake. "I'm a private investigator working on the case with the full approval and cooperation of Commissioner Slade. I hadn't learned that Mr. Rushmore was one of your depositors as yet. What I would like to know is: did either of these men make any large withdrawals during the past month or so?"

"I can't tell you off-hand," said Stinson, picking up a phone on his desk. "But we can easily find out." He spoke a few crisp words into the phone and then placed it back on its cradle. "We'll have the information in a few minutes."

"Is Samuel Twill also one of your depositors?" asked Drake.

"Why, yes, I believe so," said the bank president.

"Could his account also be checked?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it could." There was a note of doubt in Stinson's tone. "Though of course it would have to be absolutely confidential." The banker again picked up the phone and issued an order.

"Do you happen to know if these three men are financially associated in any way?" asked Drake as Stinson put down the phone.

The bank president frowned as he gazed at the detective.

"If I did possess such knowledge I would not be at liberty to divulge it," said Stinson.

"Sorry," Drake smiled. "I shouldn't have asked that question, Mr. Stinson. Naturally, it would not be ethical for you to answer."

A bank runner appeared and placed some papers on the president's desk. Stinson glanced through them quickly.

"Nothing here save the deposits and withdrawals that would be normally expected to be made by men of means," he said finally as he glanced at Drake. "I



*George Stinson*



gather you had an extortion or blackmail angle in mind?"

"It did seem a possibility," answered Drake as he got to his feet. "Thank you very much, Mr. Stinson."

"Glad to do all I can," said Stinson with a smile as Drake departed. "Good morning, Mr. Drake."

Jonathan Drake yawned wearily as he left the bank and hailed a taxi. He had not slept for twenty-four hours or more and he was very tired. He decided that what he needed was a little rest before continuing on the case, so gave the taxi driver the address of his Fifth Avenue home.

Late that afternoon, thoroughly refreshed by five hours sleep and a good meal, Jonathan Drake again sat at the desk in his huge library. The waning sunlight that came through the windows gleamed on his strong face and brought out the sheen of his hair.

In front of him was a pile of afternoon newspapers, but there were also many other things on the desk. The two notes in the X marked long envelopes, the things which he had taken from Crasher's pockets, including the clipping about the execution of the head of the Triconi mob, the collection of letters and private papers which he had found with the bank book in Bradwill's bureau drawer.

It had been these letters which had interested him greatly after he had gone through them, for from them he had learned a number of things. First not only had Jefferson Rushmore, David Bradwill and Samuel Twill been friends, but there were three other men, Charles Rawling, Peter Bearing, and Branston Gordon with whom they had been closely associated, from the friendly tone of letters in which all six were mentioned.

"So you still think that a revenge motivation upon the part of the old Triconi gang is back of the whole thing, Chief," said Tommy Lowell as he sat close to the desk, an expression of keen interest on his freckled face. "Those typewritten messages sure look like it. But where does Samuel Twill fit into the picture? Is he to be the third victim, do you think?"

"I don't know," said Drake. "I hope not. I'm interested in all four of those men whose names we found among Bradwill's papers. Twill, Bearing, Rawling, and Gordon."

"Yes, I know. I phoned your friend who has charge of the morgue on the *Morning Blade* like you told me to do," stated Tommy. "Ask him to send us all the clippings they had on those six men. He said he would do it, unofficially, as a favor to you."

"Did they arrive yet?" asked Drake.

"Yes, they're over there on the table," answered Tommy. "Quite a few of them."

"Let's take a look."

DRAKE drew a chair up to the table and Tommy seated himself nearby. For a time they poured over numerous clippings, both old and new, every printed reference that could be found to any of the six names. The detective was using a pencil and lined notebook as he jotted down the facts in shorthand that Tommy could easily read. Facts which would later be transferred to the huge volume which was the Black Book of Jonathan Drake.

This was what Drake jotted down:

Jefferson Rushmore—Facts already learned: Rushmore first appeared as name in brokerage business in 1932, apparently possessing unlimited capital. Was a very rich man. Married but with no children. Owns an estate on Long Island. Nothing else here as yet. What connection with Triconi angle?

David Bradwill—Achieved some "intellectual" recognition within the past six years. More or less of a recluse, but possessed a substantial bank account. Apparently little known of his past. Not a first rate painter, but etchings showed a great deal of promise.

Charles Rawling—Inherited the exclusive Colton Hotel from his father. Has evidently done a good job in running the place. Seems to have a good bit of money.

Samuel Twill—Has had book store for about five years. Makes money from bibliophile activities. Apparently rich but stingy. What was his real reason for searching Bradwill's apartment? To learn about threat note as he said? A bachelor.

Peter Bearing—Has been very successful with promoting Jai Alai games in Florida. Also been known in his field for about five years. Lives in New Rochelle. A bachelor.

Branston Gordon—Retired from Wall Street in 1934. Rich man. Lives in Greenwich, Conn. with his daughter. Noted philatelist; big stamp collection.

Finishing these notations Drake looked up at his assistant.

"So far there isn't much to go on," he said. "Only the fact stands out that these men all seem to have achieved wealth and prominence in their respective fields within recent years. Before that they were unheard of and—" He broke off, for at that moment Tommy, who had been poring over other data, uttered a sudden incredulous exclamation.

"Chief!" he said. "Look at this!"

He handed Drake a clipping. It bore a 1932 date, and was a business news report:

GRAPHIC ARTS CONVENTION  
MEETS IN CHICAGO

The story went on to tell how from all over the nation various representatives of the “Graphic Arts” industry—printing, engraving, lithography, had come for this big conclave of speech making and exhibitions.

A full list of the representatives of the various printing and engraving houses followed, a list of hundreds of names. But the thorough *Blade* men in the “morgue” had checked off six of those names scattered among the rest.

Six names, with their trades and companies listed. Names which Drake had been reading and jotting down until they were no longer fresh to him.

Rawling, Bradwill, Rushmore, Gordon, Twill and Bearing were on that list as men in the engraving and printing business. Rawling represented a paper house. Bearing was a “processing” man selling tools for engraving. The rest were bonafide engravers from different corporations.

“It can’t be a coincidence,” said Tommy. “Not with all six of them there.”

There was a puzzled expression on Jonathan Drake’s strong face. The keen blue eyes were still gazing at the names that had been checked.

“So this is where these big men, now in such widely different fields, were before the last six years,” he said thoughtfully. “Engravers, or connected with that business. What made them leave those businesses? How did they all become rich so rapidly? David Bradwill alone stuck more or less to engraving, becoming an artist, an etcher. And Twill went in for books, an associate business. Gordon saved stamps. But the rest dropped their former type of work entirely.”

“That convention was in nineteen-thirty-two,” said Tommy Lowell. “Say, Chief, wasn’t that about the time that Bert Triconi was the king of the bootleggers in Chicago, and making his final cleanup before Prohibition was Repealed?”

“It was.” Jonathan Drake smiled. “I’m going to pay a couple of visits. I’ve seen Twill. Rawling lives here in town, so he will be easy to contact. That leaves Bearing and Gordon. I want to talk to those two men!”

CHAPTER IX  
A DARK ROAD

**S**ICK TERROR GLEAMED STARKLY from the eyes of Peter Bearing. It seemed to envelop his whole corpulent figure that was hunched in a wheel-chair in the brightly lighted living room of his mansion on the outskirts of New Rochelle.

“I don’t know why you came to me, Mr. Drake,” he croaked hoarsely, fingers gripping the wheel-chair’s edge. “I tell you I know nothing about this. I’m a sick man; under a doctor’s care. You have no right to plague me with questions!”

As he stood there Jonathan Drake was conscious of the fear that was visible in every word that Bearing spoke, in the way his gaze moved always to the windows as the night wind rustled the branches of a tall oak tree outside the house. Here was a man whose terror had grown so great that it had made him an invalid.

“I’m sorry if my questions upset you, Mr. Bearing.” Drake’s voice was low and soothing. “Surely you must realize that I’ve got to get at the truth of these two crimes. Rushmore and Bradwill were both murdered by electrocu—”

“No, please!” interrupted Bearing. “Don’t mention that word! I can’t stand it! I can’t, I tell you!”

“And yet you claim that you did not even know these men,” went on Drake. “How can you say that? What do you hope to gain by doing so, Mr. Bearing? I found letters in David Bradwill’s apartment that mentioned your name.”

“Well, maybe I’ve met them once or twice, but I certainly did not know them intimately.” Bearing’s restless eyes were searching the shadows beyond the windows, and he seemed to be listening even as he spoke.

Drake found himself wondering what the invalid was waiting for so anxiously, what he expected to happen. Was it a fear such as this that had hung over Rushmore and Bradwill before they had gone to their deaths? Had they known just what they might expect in the hands of those who had killed them?

“But you once sold processing tools for engraving,” said Drake.

For an instant Peter Bearing did not speak, did not even appear to have heard the detective's words. He was still listening for something.

The house was very quiet, so still that Drake grew conscious of the ticking of a Grandfather clock that stood in the hall. Peter Bearing had dismissed his servants for the night but a male nurse was still on duty to attend him, waiting upstairs while Drake held this private interview with the amusement promoter.

It had taken Drake an hour to drive to New Rochelle and find Peter Bearing's residence, and now he was beginning to wonder if his mission had been a fruitless one. It was obvious that Bearing was afraid to talk.

"You once sold engravers' tools," repeated Drake.

Bearing turned his head and looked at him. The amusement promoter seemed to again grow conscious of the slender dark haired man who faced him.

"Maybe I did," said Bearing slowly. "I've done a lot of things in order to earn a living. A man has a right to get sick of one business and go into another."

"Naturally," remarked Drake. "And you've been very fortunate in becoming so rich in only six years time."

"What do you mean—why, look here." Bearing leaned forward in the wheel chair, his heavy face working. "I was in Miami at the time those crimes took place!"

"Were you?" interrupted Drake. "Well, I was on the train coming back from there. You can check up on that. I had just returned from attending the opening of the new Jai Alai matches down there. That let's me out."

"I'd hardly say that." Drake's tone was cold. "It seems very strange to me that the fact you have become rich in the past six years should be associated in your mind with the murder of Rushmore and Bradwill!"

Bearing's stout form trembled, he licked his dry lips with his tongue, and the knuckles of the fingers that clung to the arms of the wheel chair whitened.

"I didn't say that," he muttered hoarsely. "You are trying to bluff me, make me say things that are not in my mind, Drake!"

"No, I'm not," said Drake. "The association of ideas between your being rich and the murders was obvious." His tone grew stern. "And it has made me wonder if the shock of something you received, or perhaps found here when you returned home has not been what has made you ill."

"Something I found?" he said.

"I mean a long white envelope that was marked with a large X," said Drake. "An envelope that contains

a message that reads, 'Remember what happened to the Big Guy.'"

A LOOK of startled confusion swept over Peter Bearing's heavy face. Drake's last statement had struck him with stunning force. The fear in his eyes was stark and horrible in its intensity.

"You—you know?" he found difficulty in voicing the words, they seemed to stick in his throat. "Did the others receive the same message that I did?"

"The others?" Drake pretended to be puzzled by the question.

"Yes, Rushmore and Bradwill. Did they also get the message?"

"Bradwill did," said Drake quietly. "I haven't found out yet about Rushmore. Perhaps he received one of those typewritten notes also."

"And they both died by electrocution!" Bearing's voice rose. "God, Drake, I'm afraid! Electricity! It's everywhere, burning in the lights in this room! There was an electric engine pulling the train that I was on this morning, the current coursing through the rail, through those lights. Just like it went through Bradwill and Rushmore's bodies! I'm not afraid to die. I tell you I'm not! But I don't want to go that way! That's why I'm sick with fear. You see, I admit it."

"There's no danger of your dying," said Drake. "I'll see that you have police protection at all times, that no one can possibly get near you to harm you if you will tell me all you know."

"Would you really?" Bearing spoke like a child who had been offered some long desired gift. "And then I'd really be safe?"

"Not the slightest doubt of it," Drake assured him. "Now tell me just why the old Triconi mob should seek revenge against you six men."

"Triconi mob!" exclaimed Bearing. "You even know that!" He glared at the detective. "What are you, some necromancer, do you have the powers of divination?"

"Hardly that," said Drake dryly. "But I seem to be right. Now suppose you tell me the rest of it."

"All right," said Bearing. "It all goes back—"

From the door leading into the hall came the roar of a gun. Peter Bearing shuddered as the bullet caught him in the chest.

"Triconi—stamp—" he muttered with his last dying breath, and then grew very still.

Drake had snatched out his automatic. He fired as there came a second shot from the doorway that had been aimed at him. He had leaped to one side as he



*The second bullet tore out a chunk of plaster as it thudded past Drake*



saw the arm holding the gun come up, as it extended around the edge of the door.

The second bullet tore out a chunk of plaster as it thudded into the wall behind Drake. The hand in the doorway drew back hastily as the slug from Drake's gun struck the woodwork of the door casing.

Feet pounded in the hall, the front door slammed and Drake heard the roar of a starting motor. Upstairs the male nurse was shouting excitedly.

Drake reached the hall, raced along the corridor, flung open the front door and peered out into the night. In the distance he saw the red glow of the tail light of a swiftly moving car.

He glanced back as the nurse came rushing down the stairs.

"Phone the police!" snapped Drake. "Tell them that

Bearing has been murdered! I'm going after the killer—he just got away in a car!"

Before Bearing's startled attendant could even answer, Drake had leaped down the steps of the porch. He dropped his gun back into the side pocket of his coat as he settled himself behind the wheel of his coupe.

He turned the switch and jammed his foot down on the starter. With a whine it turned the motor over. Then Drake was speeding out onto the road. As he reached it the red light ahead disappeared in the distance.

"Not much chance of catching him now," muttered Drake as the coupe sped swiftly along the road. "I've got a hunch that I had better drive up to Greenwich at once and try to see Branstons before something happens to him!"

MINUTES later, with the fast little coupe purring smoothly, he was on the main highway to Connecticut. And it was here, on a part of the thoroughfare still lighted by township lamps that Drake's keen prescience told him he was being followed!

He glanced back. There were several cars on the road, but even as he looked one with bright headlights was passing the others. A fast machine, though he could not see it clearly.

Had Peter Bearing's murderer doubled back on his tracks? Was he now following Drake in the hope of getting the detective who might have seen too much about that house in New Rochelle?

Drake's foot went down on the accelerator. He wasn't certain the car was after him, but he intended to take no chances. If he could get ahead, find a side road, turn any tables that were being set it might enable him to capture the murderer.

The coupe streaked forward. The macadam highway grew darker, lights no longer illuminating it and dark trees fringing either side. Drake glanced back again. He saw only tiny fading pin-pricks of headlights. He was losing them all right!

Drake's car dipped precipitously, reaching a long steep down grade, hurtling down like a missile. The darkness became dangerous. Clouds hid the moon and stars and there was mist in the air. Drake hastily turned the light switch from dim to bright. The set of dim bulbs promptly went out, but the bright bulbs did not come on!

Instead, the headlight went entirely dark, and simultaneously the dashboard lights in front of Drake went out, too. All in that split second as utter blackness closed around the car he instinctively switched back to "dim," but nothing happened. The fuse must be blown.

The coupe was hurtling through utter, opaque darkness without a single light! Drake was as good as blind. He could not see the road; could only see a few feet through the mist dampened windshield.

All in that instant while one foot lifted from the accelerator, the other jammed on the brake-pedal and one hand groped for the emergency brake Drake realized the peril of his predicament. This was much worse than any attack from a pursuing car. He did not know where to steer, whether he was in the middle of the road or on one side, in what direction the car was heading.

He was doing the only thing he could in that black, misty void. Trying to bring the car to the swiftest possible halt. Its downhill speed frustrated any hope of an immediate stop.

He could hear the tires squealing as the wheels locked. He smelled the brake-linings burning. The retarded motor did not help much, though it was holding the car back a little.

But the coupe was still tearing through that dense blackness. Fiercely Drake strained his eyes through the windshield, trying to see.

Then with a gasp he gave the wheel a mad tug to the right as he saw a dim white fence leaping toward him from the gloom, sensed rather than saw the sheer drop of an embankment beyond.

The slowing, skidding car responded sluggishly to his tug at the wheel. The white fence seemed to swing from its front, but leaped toward it side-wise now.

In the last instant Drake abandoned his futile efforts at the wheel, and with the speed of lightning got the side door open. His body half-slid, half-leaped clear out of the vehicle as the splintering crash resounded in his ears.

He landed on the embankment, rolling down its steep incline. He twisted his lithe body as he saw the dark shape of the car which had crashed sideward through the fence and was rolling toward him. Just in time Drake squirmed out of the way of that tumbling Juggernaut. It somersaulted past him, crashed in a heap below with a rending sound of twisting metal and shattering glass that indicated it had been wrecked to sheer junk.

In the next instant Jonathan Drake was struggling to his feet at the bottom of the embankment, bruised, shaken, but unhurt.

A FLASH of light from above, the sound of a braking car, then before Drake could move three flashlight beams stabbed down out of the gloom. Their sweeping rays, grotesquely illuminating the whole embankment and jutting trees, revealing him where he stood.

"Get him, guys!" Crasher's voice coming but of the darkness. "He's still alive!"

With swift instinct Drake hurled himself prone on the ground as livid flame leaped from the top of the embankment and the staccato chattering of a tommy-gun split the night! A hail of bullets sprayed down the embankment. Turf leaped close to Drake, who was wriggling his prone body, trying to get out of the range of their groping lights.

At the same time he dragged out his automatic, which had remained in his pocket despite his hectic tumble. He raised the gun, eyes straining against the

lights, trying to catch a glimpse of blurred figures. He fired blindly.

"Look out!" someone yelled. "He's shooting!"

The tommy again burst into vengeful chattering, and the other guns barked with it. The air above Drake became filled with flying, screaming lead. Then as he worked his way behind the shelter of a rock grimly determined to battle this through to a finish despite the odds against him, a new sound pierced the night over the clattering of the tommy-gun.

Wailing sirens, a raucous bark of command. Another cry from the gangsters, this time of alarm. The tommy ceased, the flashlights went out. There was the slam of a car's door, a hasty grinding mesh of gears.

Drake dashed up the side of the embankment, gun still in hand. He reached the top, climbed through the broken fence onto the highway. He saw the tail-light of a car streaking into a branch-road, apparently at the foot of the hill. Then, as he looked in the opposite direction, bobbing white headlights loomed individually and three New York State Troopers astride motorcycles hurtled to the scene.

"Gangsters escaping!" he shouted as the motorcycles slowed with an effort on the hill. "A sedan, into that branch road there!" He pointed.

Something in his tone compelled at least partial obedience. One of the troopers raced on. The other two stopped, leaned their machines against the broken fence and came challengingly toward the detective, their hands on big holstered .45s.

Drake's eyes had become so accustomed to the gloom now that he could see the brims of their braided campaign hats flapping in the chill night breeze.

"Jonathan Drake, eh?" said one a moment later, as the detective quickly identified himself. "What happened? We heard a lot of shooting around here."

Drake hastily told them what had happened to him and of the murder of Peter Bearing in New Rochelle. Then worried about one trooper chasing the gang car, he gave a description of Crasher, the only one of the gangsters he knew by sight. A second trooper raced off to join his companion. The remaining state officer spoke hopefully.

"Don't worry," he said. "They'll get them, all right. We'll soon have plenty more men to send after 'em."

But Drake, having seen the speed of that gangster car, felt that the criminals had probably made their getaway. On a gloomy night like this they could easily elude pursuers by stopping in some secluded side-road

and darkening their car.

"Lend me your light a moment," Drake requested.

He took the powerful flash and went down to the wreckage of his coupe. One headlight was completely smashed, together with the whole side of the hood and engine.

Drake unscrewed the dim and bright bulbs from their places; they were not damaged. Nothing was wrong with the dim light or its socket, but the bright bulb was a different matter.

Drake surveyed the two contact points of the bulb, where he could just see a trace of melted, burned tinfoil. As he had surmised, the blow-out of his fuse had been no accident. A simple but hideously clever bit of tampering had been done to his car, obviously during the time he had been talking to Peter Bearing. It would take a matter of minutes for someone to have unscrewed those "bright" bulbs, put them back with tin-foil on their contacts. The tin-foil would cause a short circuit, blowing out the fuse and the whole lighting system.

He was trying to figure out just how the trap had been laid. The gangsters must have followed him to Bearing's. One of them had lurked in the hall, listening to his conversation with the amusement man. When Bearing had been about to reveal too much the man outside had killed Bearing and then made his escape with the others who had been waiting outside in the car.

Drake frowned as he went back up the bank and joined the trooper on the road. He still felt that it was urgent that he see Branston Gordon.

"Know where a man named Branston Gordon lives around here?"

"Sure," was the answer. "About half a mile beyond the foot of this hill." The trooper started toward his motorcycle. "Come on, I'll ride you down there. Nothing more can be done here now."

## CHAPTER X ANOTHER VICTIM

**T**HE SPACIOUS HOME of Branston Gordon loomed eerily in the mist as it was dimly visible in the center of the broad expanse of well-kept lawn. Boxwood hedges were long black blotches that blended with the



shadows. The branches of the stately trees scattered about the place rustled in the breeze.

As Jonathan Drake walked across the grounds he was just a darker shape in the gloom, the shadow of his snap-brimmed hat shading his face. He moved swiftly but cautiously, clinging to the sheltering blackness beneath the trees, his right hand on the butt of the reloaded automatic in the side pocket of his topcoat.

Ever since he had left the state trooper out on the highway in front of the house after thanking him for bringing him to his destination Drake had been conscious of a feeling of danger. He did not intend to visit Branston Gordon as casually as he had arrived at Peter Bearing's house in New Rochelle.

The details of the murder of the amusement promoter were still vivid in his mind. He could still see the ghastly expression of pain and horror that had been on the big flabby face of Peter Bearing as the murder bullet struck him. He realized that Crasher and the rest of the old Triconi mob were still at large. There was no telling when they might strike again.

Drake's keen eyes searched the shadows as he drew closer to the house. He frowned as he looked up and saw the wire that supplied the electric current to the house. It was little more than a long black line in the mist but as he gazed at it he again became conscious of the electrocution angle that had been the motif of the first two murders. The thought of those burning bodies sickened him, and made him grimly determined to prevent anyone else from receiving the same fate, if that were humanly possible.

He paused and surveyed the mansion. Darkness made most of the windows black squares that were darker than the night, but two faint oblongs of light were visible near the rear of the ground floor. A room was illuminated, with shades drawn, windows tightly closed.

As Drake looked he saw two indistinct, changing-sized shadows silhouetted against the white window blind. One was obviously a man. The other was vague, some sort of loose drapery on it. A woman possibly. The shadows made jerky motions as if they were excited, agitated.

Drake knew he couldn't see what it was from outside, nor would he be foolhardy enough to try and slip open one of the windows and risk detection. He would enter unannounced.

He soon found a mode of entry that suited him—French windows overlooking a garden in the rear. Warily he approached them, a long-bladed clasp-knife

in his hand. It was a simple and silent matter for him to lift the inner catch which locked the casement windows.

Another instant and his soft-soled shoes were treading within the house. He was in a dark drawing room, but the lighted room adjoined it. A faint gleam came through the crack of a door that was not quite tightly closed.

From the room beyond came the rumble of voices, the sound carrying in the silence that shrouded the house. Drake moved stealthily toward the door and paused close to it. From the other side of the thin wood came a worried, frightened voice.

"But who are you? Why have you come here?"

"They sent me, the members of his old gang," came a second voice that was harsh with a peculiar metallic note and there was something ominous in its rasping cadence. "They call me the Executioner!"

"The Executioner!" There was shrill fear in the voice of the first speaker. "That's why you are wearing that hood, why your face is hidden?"

"Death has many faces," said the grim voice. "You know that, Gordon. Men die in many ways—from illness, from bullet wounds, and sometimes in the electric chair!"

"The electric chair!" exclaimed Gordon. "But we had nothing to do with that—nothing, I tell you! It wasn't our fault that he was caught and convicted."

"His men believe otherwise." The voice of the Executioner was cold and ruthless. "But you do not need to cringe, Gordon, to look at me with fear in your eyes. I have not come here to kill you, not now. If you should die it will be as did the others who wronged him!"

DRAKE was bending to the crack of the door, not missing a single word, his hand tight on the gun in his pocket. He had intended to force his way into the room and confront the murdering fiend who called himself the Executioner, but he had changed his mind when he had heard those last words.

The Executioner had assured Branston Gordon that he did not intend to kill him, and Drake realized that here was his opportunity to learn all that he could regarding what was back of the three murders. *Then* he would reveal his presence to the two men in the room, and not before.

"But if you have not come to kill me, why are you here?" demanded Gordon.

"Perhaps I am here because I am an instrument

of Fate," said the harsh, metallic voice. "The hand of vengeance!"

"Why? I don't understand!" protested Gordon. "True, all of us did that job for Triconi, and it was successful. But we did not betray him. We didn't do it, I tell you!"

"You seem more willing to listen to reason than were the others," said the Executioner. "That was their fatal mistake—they rebelled." The grim voice grew suave. "It might be that I am in a position to assure you that your life will be spared."

"What do you mean?" Gordon sounded puzzled.

"If I were to receive fifty thousand dollars from

you it is just barely possible that you would not suffer the same fate as did Rushmore and Bradwill," said the Executioner.

"Blackmail!" exclaimed Gordon.

Jonathan Drake frowned as he listened tensely. The words of the Executioner placed a different light on the whole case. No longer did the murders appear to have been crimes of revenge, of retaliation upon the part of the Triconi mob against the six men that they apparently believed had sent their leader to the electric chair.

This was out and out blackmail. An attempt upon the part of the man who called himself the Executioner to extort money from the three remaining men of the



*"They call me the Executioner!"*

original six who had once been connected with the Triconi gang in some way.

"It's blackmail, that's what it is!" repeated Gordon from the other side of the door.

"Life insurance would be a better term," stated the Executioner grimly. "And the sooner you supply me with that fifty thousand the safer you will be, Gordon!"

"But what you ask is impossible," protested Gordon. "I simply haven't got that much money!"

"The more you protest, the higher the price," came the harsh voice. "Now I demand eighty-five thousand dollars!"

"That would leave me absolutely penniless!" said Gordon.

"Just as I thought!" The Executioner uttered a cruel laugh. "You have just admitted that you do have more than fifty thousand dollars. Eighty-five thousand dollars, then, it must be!"

"And if I refuse?" demanded Gordon.

"You won't, not when you stop and remember what happened to the others."

"The others! Oh, no! Not that! I can't get you that much money. I have had a lot of expenses; my bank balance is low. True I have money held in trust, but I can't touch that now."

"Interesting thing, electricity," said the hard voice of the Executioner. "Without it the modern world would be lacking in so many comforts—light, heat, the telephone and radio. Yet even the current in this room could be used for things—even death!"

Drake could sense the ominous atmosphere in that room. It was as if something were going to break loose at any moment. His hand moved to the door. He must look into that room! If he could inch the door open a little more. . . .

His palm flattened against it. Gently he began to push and the crack started to widen. Another inch now and he would be able to see—

"Come away from that door!" a voice whispered behind him.

DRAKE whirled, hand streaking for the automatic in the side pocket of big coat. Facing him in the gloom of the living room was a ghostly white shape—a girl in a white hostess gown. He caught the glint of metal and saw that she had a small revolver in her hand, was covering him with it.

His keen ears had failed to hear her approach owing to their absorption in the loud voices still wrangling in the closed off room.

Now, dimly making out the youthfulness of her pretty features, the taut whiteness of her face, and the fright in her wide eyes, Drake did not draw his automatic as he might have done in that swift moment.

Instead, he stepped away from the door, started to raise his hands as if in surrender. Then abruptly he leaped forward, a long leap that carried him to her side. His right arm shot out, his fingers caught the gun and snatched it from her before she could pull the trigger, had she had the nerve to do so.

"Dad!" Her scream split through the dark echoing room.

There was the crash of an overturned chair in the adjoining room, a harsh oath, scuffling feet. Then the shattering sound of breaking glass. A man cried out in pain.

As Drake whirled from the frightened girl, the door of the room beyond whipped open, revealing a lighted study. Through the doorway dashed a strange, bizarre figure.

Enough light now streamed into the living room to reveal him clearly. A tall man, his head completely encased in a close-fitting hood that reached to his shoulder tops and was tied around the base of his throat. There was a flowing black cloak hanging down from those shoulders that completely concealed the rest of the clothing beneath it. He was flourishing a gun in his right hand, and his eyes glittered evilly as they peered through the holes in the hood.

"Out of my way!" he snarled, in a harsh, metallic voice.

Drake had thrust the girl aside. He knew that he was seeing the archmurderer who had been instrumental in killing three men and plotted the deaths of several others—the Executioner!

"Step back!" The hooded man's voice was indistinct, panting, as he waved his gun at the detective.

Drake met the order by leaping toward the man, catching his gun-wrist. His strong fingers tightened, twisting the Executioner's wrist, but the man did not release the gun. Instead, he cursed harshly, struggling with ferocious strength.

His left hand lashed out, smashed against the detective's jaw and knocked Drake's head back. It broke Drake's clutch, however, and the Executioner suddenly broke free. He didn't try to use his gun. Instead he catapulted through the open French windows with a snarled cry and dashed out into the rear gardens of the estate.



Gun in hand, Drake was after him like a streak. He hurtled out into the garden, saw the caped figure ducking behind a statue and lost him for an instant. He dashed forward. A shot split the night, a bullet whined over Drake's head.

He saw the caped figure dart out again, crossing the grounds. Drake whipped down his automatic and fired a hasty, blind shot. The Executioner gave a cry as though he might have been hit, rushed on headlong into some shrubbery, losing himself in the shadows.

Drake advanced swiftly, his rubber-soled shoes sliding over the damp grass. At any instant he expected to see flame lance the night, to again hear the bark of the gun in the hand of the hooded man, but he went on.

He tore through the bushes, found them deserted, and continued through a newly planted vegetable garden.

Drake again raised his gun. The black clad figure loomed in the mist ahead of him, running across the garden!

Another figure appeared and dashed toward the hooded man. Drake held his fire, not wanting to risk hitting the new arrival who appeared to be trying to head off the murderer.

The Executioner's gun roared, once, then again. The man who had dashed toward him dropped. The hooded man ran on, heading toward a clump of trees.

Drake felt the bulbs of some of the vegetables crushing beneath his feet as he followed. Then his right toe caught in one of the furrows and he fell. He regained his footing as the Executioner disappeared behind the trees. From that direction Drake heard the whirl of a powerful motor, the crashing of gears as a car streaked away. He realized any further pursuit was useless.

Cursing, he moved back to the huddled heap, right hand still holding his gun ready, left drawing out the flashlight he had retained from the trooper.

A man was revealed in the light's glare. A young man, hatless, but wearing chauffeur's livery and puttees.

Blood was pumping from a ghastly wound in his chest. The movement and flow of blood told Drake the man still lived, though he was practically gone.

Drake stopped, dropped the light, got one hand under the man's head.

His mouth was close to the chauffeur's ear as he spoke.

"Any idea who shot you?" demanded Drake.

The man's lips worked. Gasp, scarcely coherent

words blurted from them with bloody spittle.

"Hood—cloak—don't know."

He finished with a hacking cough which blended into a death rattle. The man's body jerked and then he grew still, his eyes glazing.

Drake gently placed the chauffeur's head back on the grass. The blue eyes of the slender dark-haired man were like ice as he stood erect.

"The Executioner," he muttered, "is going to make one slip, one error, that will prove his own death warrant!"

## CHAPTER XI SIX GUILTY MEN

JONATHAN DRAKE realized that the mist was thinning as he stood for a moment gazing down at the dead man. He glanced up and saw there was a widening patch of blue in the sky; the heavy clouds that had cast a dark mantle over the night were swiftly drifting away.

He looked toward the house, decided that he had better go back and interview Branstons and his daughter. He went through the garden, careful to keep from tripping over any of the furrows, or stepping on the vegetables that were ready to be picked.

When he reached the mansion he saw that the French windows were wide open and bright light now flooded the living room. With his automatic in his hand Drake stepped in through the windows and found a tense scene before him.

The girl who had tried to hold him up was sobbing on the chest of a tall gaunt man whose clothes were disheveled, and his wrist stained with blood.

"All right, honey," he was gruffly comforting her. "It's all right."

The girl lifted her head and saw the detective striding in, gun in hand. A cry of alarm burst from her lips.

The gaunt man released her and whirled. He started to draw out a heavy automatic as he saw the intruder.

"I wouldn't," said Drake grimly, covering him with his gun. "Put that away. One killing is enough here. I assure you I'm no criminal!"

"Then who—?" The gaunt man blurted, letting the automatic drop back into his pocket as Drake put away his gun.

Drake told him who he was, watching their reactions when they learned that he was a detective.

"And I stopped you when you might have caught that horrible creature," the girl said bewilderedly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Drake, I didn't know—"

"All right, Marion, never mind," the gaunt man interrupted. "You run along upstairs to bed." He kissed her cheek affectionately. "You've been through enough tonight. I'll straighten this out."

"All right, Dad."

She went reluctantly, and her father's eyes followed her as she ascended the stairs with a look of deep anxiety that Drake did not miss.

"You are Branston Gordon." It was a statement rather than a question that Drake voiced as the gaunt man faced him.

"Yes," Gordon nodded. "But what's this you say about a killing?"

"A young man, evidently your chauffeur, was shot and killed by the Executioner as he made his escape," answered Drake. "Of course the police must be notified. However, inasmuch as the murderer escaped, that can wait. For I think you might first wish to clarify matters to me." Drake nodded toward the door of the room beyond. "You see, I overheard that conversation in your study."

Gordon's eyes had been hardening, but now a dull look came into them.

"I have nothing to tell you, I'm afraid." He spoke slowly, cautiously. "What you saw and heard, of course, I do not know." He frowned. "The man whom you call the Executioner pushed me against the window when he heard my daughter cry for help. Glass cut my arm as you can see. I was stunned and he rushed out the door before I could stop him."

"I'm here to investigate the murders of Jefferson Rushmore, David Bradwill, and Peter Bearing," stated Drake.

"Bearing!" exclaimed Gordon with horror in his voice. "They got him, too? How—when did it happen?"

"Tonight," said Drake. He swiftly related what had happened at Peter Bearing's house.

Gordon listened tensely and in silence until the criminologist had finished.

"Horrible!" he muttered. "Poor Pete—but at least he did not die by electricity."

"Do you really feel that these killings have been deeds of vengeance upon the part of Triconi's old mob?" asked Drake.

GORDON frowned and hesitated a moment before speaking. He dropped into a chair and motioned Drake to another close by. The slender dark-haired man seated himself and waited patiently for Gordon to speak.

"I did until that fiend who calls himself the Executioner came here tonight," said Gordon finally.

"I heard him trying to blackmail you," remarked Drake quietly. "You can speak freely, Mr. Gordon. I believe I overheard the entire conversation." On his way back to the house after leaving the body of the chauffeur Drake had been thinking swiftly. From what Gordon had said to the hooded man it was obvious that Gordon was one of the six who had done some sort of a job for Triconi and his mob. Since Drake was sure that the job had been done before these men had gained the positions of wealth that they held now, he decided that the work must have been done during the time they had all been in the engraving business.

That would put it just before Repeal, and so Drake felt there was some connection with their work and Triconi's vast bootlegging industry.

"That is a relief," said Gordon with a sigh. "Since you know so much I feel at liberty to speak freely."

"Good!" exclaimed Drake. "The first thing I'd like you to tell me is the nature of the job that you did for Triconi back around nineteen-thirty-two. I strongly suspect it was some type of engraving, since all of you were in that business then."

"You are right, Mr. Drake," said Gordon. "The job we did was counterfeiting liquor revenue stamps—dated pre-war." He rose to his feet. "I have one or two of them hidden away in my study. I'll show them to you."

A few minutes later Drake was examining the two stamps that Gordon had produced from a secret drawer in his desk. The detective smiled as he viewed the revenue stickers, for he was well versed in every aspect of philately. These were not genuine U.S. Government stamps. Even their coloring was wrong.

"You engraved stamps like these for Triconi's bootleg mob?" asked Drake.

"Yes, thousands like these. All six of us worked on them." Gordon spoke frankly, apparently realizing that Drake knew too much for him to do otherwise. "It's a simple story. Back in nineteen-thirty-two we were just a bunch of engraving men, working for companies not doing too well. While we were at the convention in Chicago, representatives of Bert Triconi made us a proposition. It looked like easy money. We fell for it. There was a demand for such Government labels."

"I know," Drake nodded. "During Prohibition people thought they were getting real pre-war stuff if it was in genuine-looking bottles, with the old labels and stamps on them."

"While we were doing something crooked," said Gordon. "We didn't keep it up very long. A legitimate engraving job turned up for us and we cleaned up on it. But to get back to the Triconi angle—

"Six months later somebody tipped off the coast guards on the lake that Triconi was bringing in a liquor shipment. The revenue men caught him. Triconi fought it out with them. He killed one and wounded another before they got him, after trailing him all the way from Chicago to New York. Later he got the electric chair."

"Why should Triconi's mob seek revenge against you six men for that?" asked Drake.

"Because one of the mob, a man named 'Crasher' Quinn, claimed that we had tipped off the coast guards, and finally sent Triconi to the death chair," said Gordon. "At the time we apparently convinced them that they were wrong. But during the past month they have again been on our trail." He shuddered. "And you know what's happened."

"Did you ever hear of anyone connected with the Triconi mob called the Executioner?" asked Drake.

"No," Gordon shook his head. "And that makes me wonder, particularly since he came here tonight and made that demand for fifty thousand dollars."

"He raised it to eighty-five thousand," said Drake mildly. "Odd sum." He smiled. "What did you do with the money that you all received for that legitimate job you mentioned?"

"Formed a trust fund," remarked Gordon casually. "But to get back to the Triconi angle. It seems strange that they should suddenly seek revenge after keeping quiet for over six years. And why were Rushmore and Bradwill killed—electrocuted?"

"That's what's been puzzling me," said Drake. "Have you ever considered the idea that this blackmailing killer might be one of you three men who are still alive of the original six?" A startled expression swept over Branston Gordon's gaunt face. He began to pace the floor.

"You're right, Drake!" he exclaimed. "It might be one of us. But which, Rawling or Twill?"

"There's still a third party to be considered, Mr. Gordon," said Drake as he started to leave.

"A third party?" demanded Gordon. "What do you mean?"

"You," stated the detective grimly. "But that's impossible!" said Gordon. "You know that the Executioner was here; you heard him talk to me, saw him."

"Yes, I know that the blackmailer who calls himself the Executioner was here," said Drake. "But I don't know yet that he was the one who actually arranged the death chair type of murders for Rushmore and Bradwill. He might have been bluffing about that as part of his extortion racket. So, you see, any one of the three of you might be guilty."

Before Branston Gordon could say anything further Drake had stepped out through the casement windows in the living room and disappeared into the night.

## CHAPTER XII SINISTER TRUST

**N**EXT MORNING AT NINE-THIRTY Jonathan Drake was again in the private office of George Stinson, president of the Empire National Bank. It had been close to two a.m. when Drake again reached his Fifth Avenue home upon returning from Greenwich, Connecticut.

He had gone back to the station of the state police after leaving Gordon's place. Here he had given them a description of the hooded man who called himself the Executioner and told them of the murder of Gordon's chauffeur.

A state trooper had finally driven him to the railroad station in a car and Drake had caught a train back to New York. After an hour spent in relating the adventures of the night to Tommy Lowell, who jotted down notes, Drake had gone to bed and slept the sleep of the thoroughly exhausted.

With the coming of morning he had been able to review the various angles of the case with a clearer brain. Since both Rushmore and Bradwill had obviously been killed before any attempt at blackmail was made, he found their deaths puzzling. Was there more to the whole thing than just the extortion angle? That appeared to be an afterthought upon the part of the murderer. And if such was the case, then Drake felt there was some bigger motive behind the killings.

The more he thought it over the more he was



inclined to discount the idea that the murders had been planned and executed as a revenge upon the part of the old Triconi mob in retaliation for the six men having sent the Big Shot to the chair. In Drake's estimation, in view of what he had learned from Gordon, that was merely a blind to cover up some other reason for the execution murders of those two men.

Not only that, but the way in which Peter Bearing had been shot and killed just as he had been about to reveal some vital factor of the case indicated that there was something which the murderer was very anxious to keep concealed. True, Bearing had merely mumbled 'Triconi—stamp' as he died.

Since then Drake had learned from Gordon the story of the six men having counterfeited the liquor revenue stamps. In Drake's estimation this did little more than reveal their former tie-up with the Triconi mob, and he did not feel that the exposing of this angle was sufficient to have caused Bearing's murder. There was something else, something far more vital.

As he thought it over Drake decided that there were two things which he had heard Gordon say casually that were far more vital than they had sounded at the time. The first of these had been when Gordon mentioned that most of his money was tied up in a trust fund, and he was unable to touch it as present. He had told the Executioner that.

The second was the legitimate engraving job that Gordon had mentioned to Drake. A job which apparently had been so successful that it had enabled the six men to quit Triconi and also the engraving business, and establish themselves in other lines of work.

Drake felt that there was some definite connection between these two things and if so it was highly possible that the trust fund had been established for and by all six of the men involved. It was with this thought in mind that Drake was now in the bank president's office.

He found the gray haired bank president in a friendly mood. He greeted Drake pleasantly and motioned him to a chair.

"What's on your mind this morning, Mr. Drake?" demanded Stinson.

"There is some definite information that I would like you to give me," said Drake. "Of course it is understood that everything you tell me will be in the strictest confidence, Mr. Stinson. But at the same time it is absolutely vital that I learn everything possible connected with the case. Four men have died, two of them horribly. Other lives are threatened!"

"Other lives threatened!" exclaimed Stinson. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I say," stated Drake firmly. He had not the slightest intention of revealing all that he had learned to the bank president, though he was willing to tell Stinson enough to make him feel that the information that the detective desired was vital. "I am not at liberty to explain fully at present. I hope you understand?"

"Naturally!" Stinson nodded. "You would not wish to reveal all you know about this case until you had formed a final and definite conclusion about the whole thing." The bank president smiled. "Now suppose you tell me exactly what you would like to know, Mr. Drake?"

"Well, first, as we know, Rushmore, Bradwill, Bearing, Gordon, Rawling and Twill are or were depositors in this bank."

"And the first three have been murdered," said Stinson as Drake paused.

"Right!" said Drake. "Now suppose you tell me a little more regarding the trust fund these six men established." A startled expression swept over the bank president's face, was gone in an instant.

"Trust fund!" he exclaimed. "Then you know about that."

DRAKE did not reveal by the slightest change in his casual attitude that his mention of the trust fund had been a shot in the dark. From Stinson's attitude it was obvious that his guess had been a good one.

"Yes, the trust fund these men established," he repeated. "I would like to know about it in more detail."

"But that is a confidential matter," said Stinson. "I don't know that I should give out such information."

"You want to see the murderer brought to justice, don't you?" demanded Drake. "And it has been understood that you would answer any questions that I might ask."

"All right," said the bank president reluctantly. "I guess I will have to give you the information you want."

"Good!" exclaimed Drake. "Go on!"

"I suppose you want the whole story so I will give it to you as I have learned it from the six men involved. Back in nineteen-thirty-two they got a joint printing job from a revolutionary foreign government, printing money, stamps, etc., for the new regime. They did the work on the promise of payment of bonds if the revolution was successful."

"The revolution was successful?" asked Drake as Stinson paused.

"Yes, and the new government was firmly established, and has been ever since. I won't mention it by name but it was in South America. The six men found that they had a fortune, a million dollars in bonds with a six-year maturity date. They could have cashed in on them, but there would have been a discount and some delay, so they decided to wait.

"But those bonds were good enough security to enable them each to borrow a hundred thousand dollars and establish themselves in various businesses," went on the bank president. "As you know they were successful in those businesses, and recently have been able to pay off the loans, leaving the bonds held in trust here at the bank. Division could have been made at any time, but they again decided they would rather let the six years pass until the bonds reached maturity and then collect on them in full with interest."

"I see," said Drake. "And what is the arrangement of the joint trust fund?"

"The conditions are such that if one man dies his share reverts to the others," said Stinson with a frown.

"And if five of them should die, or be murdered," said Drake, "one man would receive the whole thing?"

"Naturally," said Stinson. "And while I had not thought of it before that might be a temptation for an unscrupulous man to commit murder!"

"Yes, it would," said Drake. "And what you have just told me puts a different light on the whole case."

"Glad I've been able to give you some help," said Stinson. "Anything else I can do for you, Mr. Drake?"

"Yes," answered Drake. "I'd like you to give me an order so I can have one of your tellers or the cashier check on the exact bank balance of all six of those men." He smiled. "If one of them happened to be a little low it might prove vital. I know we have checked Rushmore and Bradwill's accounts but I would like to be sure about the rest."

"Certainly." Stinson picked up a pen, wrote a few lines, and handed the paper to Drake. "Just give that to the cashier and he will get the information for you."

"Thanks." Drake took the paper and stepped out into the bank.

He found the cashier and gave him the note from the bank president. After a few minutes' wait the cashier reappeared, handed the detective a paper on which was jotted down the balance standing in the accounts of the six men. All of the men had substantial bank balances, but it was the balance of Branston

Gordon that interested Drake the most as he looked them over. It was exactly eighty-five thousand, three hundred dollars and fifty-seven cents.

Jonathan Drake stuck the list of bank balances into his pocket and left the Empire National. He was heading downtown to Centre Street, where he would talk to the commissioner at Police Headquarters. There were a lot of angles to the case that Drake was anxious to discuss with Slade.

He also planned to interview Charles Rawling, for of the six men involved in the case the hotel owner was the only one that Drake had not contacted as yet, in fact had not even seen.

Samuel Twill also interested him greatly, and he wanted to know why the book dealer had really been in Bradwill's apartment.

As he took the subway downtown Drake felt that he had a busy day before him.

## CHAPTER XIII A HOT TIP

FEAR, STARK AND NAKED, gripped hold of Charles Rawling as he realized what was going on around him. The hotel owner felt that the whole thing was impossible; it just could not be happening. Surely this was some weird nightmare from which he would soon awaken.

Yet there was no mistaking the hard eyes and the grim sinister faces of the six men who were clustered about him. A handkerchief gag that had been thrust into his mouth and tied there firmly prevented him from crying out. He could only make muffled sounds that could not be heard more than a few feet away.

His hands and feet were bound, but why had they stripped him of his outer clothing and left him clad only in his underwear?

Questions were pounding through his brain. Who were these men? How had they been able to get into his suite on the seventeenth floor of his own hotel? He had given orders that no one was to be taken to his suite while he was absent, yet these men had been here waiting when he had entered the place tonight.

He heard the sound of water running in the bath tub. Did they plan to place him in the tub, tied and gagged as he was now—to drown him? The

fear in Rawling's eyes grew more intense. He began mumbling, trying to speak through the gag.

These men were going to drown him! He was sure of it. They were going to place him in that tub filled with water and push his head below the surface—hold it there until he died!

He watched the tall vicious looking man with the slash mouth. Crasher, the others had called him. Crasher was picking up the phone on the table beside the bed.

"This is Mr. Rawling," he said over the wire to the hotel operator. He coughed. "I have a slight cold and I don't want to be disturbed . . . You understand? . . . Good . . . Oh, yes, if a Mr. Jonathan Drake calls, have him come right up . . . The door of my suite will be unlocked . . . Thank you."

There was a mocking smile on Crasher's thin face as he turned from the phone to gaze at the helpless hotel owner who was stretched out on the bed.

Rawling shuddered as he saw that smile. It was so cruel and utterly evil! Another figure loomed beside the tall man. They had switched off all the light in the room except the lamp beside the bed. The window shades were tightly drawn.

But it was the other man who startled him. The man named Rudy. His countenance was that of a death's head.

"Ready, Rudy?" asked Crasher.

"Okay," said Rudy. "You can take him in now!"

Rawling writhed and twisted as hands grabbed him, lifted him from the bed. He tried to cry out, but succeeded only in making low, moaning sounds that were muffled by the gag.

They carried him into the bathroom. The glistening white tiles seemed to glare at him malignantly. The modern tub that was built with sides flush with the floor became a strange coffin to Charles Rawling. The clear water was suddenly a sinister hell pool.

A shock shot through his body as the men dropped him carelessly into the tub. Faces loomed about him, leering at him in the bright light.

The man called Rudy had picked up a length of extension wire with a plug attached to one end. He thrust the plug into an outlet built into the wall beside the shaving mirror.

RAWLING saw that there was no socket on the other end of the length of electric cord. The two copper-hued little wires had been scraped, their protecting covering removed for over two feet of the wire's length. The two

strands of wire had been untwisted so that there were two ten foot lengths before they came together near the plug.

"Changed my mind," said Rudy. "Work better if we plug in to the light socket." He pulled the plug at the end of the cord out of the wall connection. "Turn that switch by the door," he ordered. "And some of you guys give me the light of your flashes to work with."

Someone pressed the light switch, plunging the bathroom into darkness. Then the rays of electric torches stabbed the gloom.

Rudy took an end plug out of his pocket, fastened it to the prongs at the end of the wire connection. He removed the globe from the light fixture, the heavy gloves he wore protecting his hands from the heat of the bulb.

In a few seconds the electric cord was in place, no current coursing through it now, but there would be the instant that wall switch was turned on.

With the ends of the wires in his hand Rudy moved to the helpless man who was sprawled out in the water of the tub, his head just above the surface. Swiftly Rudy wound one of the bare wires around Rawling's throat and fastened it there. Then he removed his gloves. With his arms bare he reached down into the water and fastened the other wire around the hotel owner's naked ankle.

"All right, boys," said Rudy, as he wiped his hands on a towel and then picked up his gloves. "That will do it. When that light switch is turned on this guy will die."

"Swell!" growled Crasher. "And Drake will do just that when they send him up here to see Rawling." He laughed evilly. "That's a hot one! Drake commits the third execution murder himself!"

"But suppose it ain't Drake that comes in?" demanded one of the other men.

"Not a chance of that," said Crasher. "You heard what I told the switchboard operator. Nobody was to see Rawling except Drake and that order goes. That telephone girl ain't gonna take a chance of losing her job. Rawling is the big shot around this joint."

"When I tailed Drake into that drugstore a couple of hours ago," said one of the other men, "I was in the next booth when he made a call to his home telling somebody that he meant to visit Rawling at eight tonight and he could be reached here at the hotel. So he'll be here, no worry about that."

"What do we do now, Crasher?" asked Rudy. "Go back and report to the boss?"



"Yes," answered Crasher. "He said for us to meet him at that old wharf at Seventy-seventh street and the river again."

They switched out all of the lights in the two room suite, leaving the place in darkness. Crasher snapped back the catch of the door that led into the hotel corridor with a grim chuckle.

In the hall the men separated, some going down the stairs to the floors below and others ascending. They timed it so that they took the elevator at different intervals and strolled casually out of the hotel one by one to disappear into the night.

Charles Rawling sprawled in the tub, horror nearly driving him mad as he waited for the clicking of a light switch that would mean his own execution.

\* \* \*

At exactly ten minutes of eight Jonathan Drake stepped out of a taxi in front of the Colton Hotel. He paid the taxi driver, then entered the lobby through the chrome-framed doors that opened by electricity as he cut the beam with his body.

When he reached the desk he gave his name and asked for the hotel owner. The night clerk on duty referred him to the hotel operator. Drake went to the operator's booth and spoke to the girl through the window.

"Mr. Drake calling to see Mr. Rawling," he said. "Will you see if he is in, please?"

"He's in his suite, Mr. Drake," said the operator. "Left word for you to come right up when you arrived. It's suite seventeen-sixty-eight. Mr. Rawling said to tell you the door was unlocked and you were to go in. He has a bad cold. Guess he must be resting."

"Thank you." Drake turned away and walked toward the elevators, a thoughtful frown on his face. How had Rawling known that he was planning to visit him tonight? He had not phoned Rawling or made any effort to contact the hotel man until now.

The more he thought it over the less Drake liked the idea. There was something wrong. The whole thing was too pat. That order that he was to just walk into the hotel owner's rooms also had a false ring to it. It smacked of a trap!

AN ELEVATOR carried him up to the seventeenth floor. He got out and walked along the thickly carpeted corridor until he reached the door of suite 1768.

He frowned as he paused at the closed door. Knocked on the panel and then waited but there was no sound

from inside the suite. There was something ominous about that stillness, something that sent a warning of danger through Jonathan Drake as he stood there.

He felt for the butt of the automatic that he was wearing in a shoulder holster. After the attempt on his life the previous night, the wrecking of his car because of the short-circuited lights, and the efforts of Crasher and the rest of the gangsters to get him with the tommy-gun he realized that he would have to be constantly on guard.

He tried the door and found it unlocked. He pushed it open and peered in. The short hall beyond was in darkness.

"Mr. Rawling?" he called.

There was no answer. Nothing but the black silence. He drew out his automatic and stepped into the hall of the suite. Gun in hand he cautiously advanced, moving slowly, ready for any attack.

He reached the end of the hall, realized that he was standing at the entrance to a living room. He felt along the wall and found the light switch, snapped on the lights.

Drake's lean face was hard as he gazed about him, keen blue eyes searching every corner of the room. The room was empty, but beyond he could see through the half open doors that there were two other rooms in darkness.

He advanced toward the nearest door, again pressed a light switch. Rawling's bedroom. The bed was neatly made up, but the spread was mussed, as though the hotel keeper had been lying on it.

Drake's eyes narrowed as something on the floor caught his eye. It was a short piece of strong rope. He picked it up with his left hand, the right still holding the automatic. The rope had been neatly cut as though it had been sliced from a longer strand by a sharp knife.

Something or someone had been tied with that rope. But who or what? He did not know, but he intended to find out. A tiny glittering object caught his gaze as he again looked at the floor. It was a short piece of thin copper wire. There were little pieces of insulating rubber scattered about near the wire as if someone had been repairing an electric fixture.

He examined the wires of the lamp beside the bed and the floor lamp that stood beside a big chair. The cords had not been spliced. Then the electrical repair job had been done for some other reason.

The wires brought an association of ideas into his mind. The execution murders of Rushmore and Bradwill were still etched vividly in his brain. He could

not get away from the thought that his having been told to come up to Rawling's suite was some sort of a trap. Was there something here that would cause his death? Some sort of an electrical gadget?

The lights had been turned off when he entered the suite. That meant he was expected to switch on lights as he went through the rooms. It was the normal thing to do, and he had done it twice, but now he stared at the dark doorway that must lead to the bath, and decided that there would not be a third time!

IF THERE was a short circuit in the bathroom switch, and the floor happened to be wet, he stood a good chance of getting a shock. Drake drew his flashlight out of his pocket as he stepped out of the bedroom and reached the door of the bath.

The white beam of the flash stabbed the darkness, circled around the room, paused as it revealed the motionless figure in the tub.

Horror swept over Drake as he saw the wires that led to the light fixture from Rawling's head and from his leg. He leaped forward, gave the light cord a quick jerk and pulled it from the socket as the connecting ends of the plug parted.

He reached into the bath, wetting his coat and shirt up to the elbows, and lifted the helpless man out of the tub.

Rawling was conscious. Drake placed the hotel owner on the bed and cut the wet ropes that bound him and removed the dangling wires from his throat and ankle.

"Thank Heaven you didn't turn on the light switch," he said a short while later when he had fully recovered from his fright and shock, and was drying himself with a bathtowel and getting into dry clothing. "You're Drake, of course."

"Right!" The detective nodded. "Who tried to kill you?"

"Six men, all tough and hard looking. The leader was called Crasher, and there was another man named Rudy, who took care of the electrical work."

"Crasher, eh?" said Drake. "I thought so. The old Triconi gang is working for the fiend who calls himself the Executioner." He looked at Rawling. The hotel owner had finished dressing and was sitting weakly in a chair, pulling at his Van Dyke beard. "Did they say anything that might tell us where they went?"

"Yes, they did," said Rawling eagerly. "Crasher said something about meeting the boss at the wharf at 77th Street and the river."

"What a lead!" exclaimed Drake. He picked up the phone. "Get me Commissioner Slade at Police Headquarters and try and rush the call through." Drake glanced at Rawling as he waited for his connection. "That mob may meet someone else at that wharf beside their boss if I can get in touch with Slade in time!"

## CHAPTER XIV MURDER!

**W**ET MIST THAT HAD HUNG over the Hudson two nights ago had not risen again tonight, but a bank of thick clouds filled the sky and there was a hint of rain in the air. In the distance cars raced along the new Henry Hudson Parkway below Riverside Drive. The lights of the city twinkled, the buildings growing taller to the southward until they finally towered high in the sky.

The small deserted building on the dock was in deep shadow. The river water lapped at the green scum that clung to the pilings with a soft swishing sound.

Again the members of the old Triconi mob appeared one by one. Furtively they made their way toward the wharf, clinging to the shadows as much as possible, strolling casually when they were afraid they might be seen.

They found the speedy cruiser of the Executioner waiting when they reached the end of the pier. There was no one among the gang who liked this mission. It was still too early for them to feel safe, not more than nine o'clock, and meeting on this old wharf now seemed dangerous.

"Well?" The voice of the Executioner came through an opening in the glass enclosed cabin of the boat. "Crasher, you report. The rest of you stay back in the shadows. It would never do to have a crowd seen on this old pier."

"It's all fixed, Boss." The tall thin faced man stepped forward. "We left Rawling tied up in the bathtub, and the minute Drake touches that switch, he dies."

"Drake?" demanded the strange metallic voice. "What has he to do with it? I told you to place Rawling in the tub and execute him at once!"

"Yeah, I know," said Crasher. "But after Mike tailed

Drake and learned that he was comin' to see Rawling we got a better idea. We fixed it so that Drake would be the guy that gave Rawling the juice."

"You fools!" roared the Executioner. "You brainless idiots! Drake is too smart a man to be fooled by any such childish trick. Now how can we be sure that Rawling is dead!" There was sudden alarm in the voice of the hooded man. "Did you say anything that would enable Rawling to identify you if he lives?"

"Well, mebbe he heard me and Rudy call each other by name." Crasher was frightened. He was remembering how another member of the gang had been ruthlessly shot while standing in this same spot for refusing to obey orders and wanting to know too much. "And—" The slash mouthed man stopped speaking confusedly.

"And what. Crasher?" The low tone in which the Executioner spoke made the harsh voice all the more sinister.

"Nothin'. That's all, I guess."

"You're lying! There is something else, Crasher. Something that you are afraid to admit!" said the man in the motor launch.

"No, no!" protested Crasher. "Honest, it wasn't nothin'."

From the drive came the wailing of a police siren.

"The cops!" exclaimed Crasher. "They're coming. Somebody must have tipped them off. They're wise. Boss—what shall we do?"

A white-gloved hand holding a long bladed knife reached out and cut the rope that held the swift cruiser to the pier. The powerful motor roared.

"Stay here and welcome them, you blundering fools!" shouted the Executioner as the boat began to back out into the water. "You tipped them off by something you said that Rawling heard, you stupid fools! So you worry about the consequence!"

"Stop!" shouted Crasher, snatching out his automatic. "You ain't takin' a runout on us like that." He fired at the cabin, heard a mocking laugh as the bullet struck against the shatterproof glass and merely cracked it.

Then there was a roar of the powerful motor and the swift craft glided away, speeding down river toward the harbor entrance.

"Spread out, guys!" shouted Crasher. "Try to get away—the cops are coming!"

Lights of patrol cars appeared on the old dirt road that ran along for a little distance between the Parkway and the river bank. The members of the old Triconi

mob ran, sheer panic lending wings to their feet. A police positive roared through the night and one of the gangsters stumbled, then sprawled face downward in the dirt, shot through the heart.

CRASHER, Rudy and three other men had realized that it was useless to try to escape by running off the wharf. They had dropped silently into the water and were clinging to the pilings beneath the pier.

Guns roared as the rest of the men tried to fight it out with the police and found it a losing battle. The air was filled with the wailing of sirens as more police prowling cars reached the scene.

Up on the Parkway traffic had come to a complete standstill as the excited drivers watched the spectacular scene that was taking place below them. In a few minutes the battle was over, and the wounded members of the old Triconi mob had been caught by the police. Only two of the officers had received slight flesh wounds from the flying lead.

A black limousine rolled up and Commissioner Slade leaped out. Jonathan Drake was with him, for the head of the police department had picked up the private detective on his way uptown.

"That motorboat we saw getting away when we were up on the Drive," said Drake, "undoubtedly carried the Executioner. Better have the harbour police be on a lookout for it, though there isn't much chance of identifying it."

Drake hastily examined the faces of the wounded prisoners and the five dead members of the gang, saw that Crasher was not among them.

"What's the matter, Drake?" demanded Slade as he heard the detective curse softly.

"A man named Crasher," said Drake. "He was the Executioner's lieutenant. Looks like he got away."

The police searched the wharf, but found no sign of any of the gangsters. Finally the police departed with their prisoners and the morgue wagon disappeared with its load of dead.

A few minutes later traffic was again speeding along the Henry Hudson Parkway and the deserted old wharf brooded silently in the shadows of the night again.

"Now we're getting somewhere, Drake," said Slade as the two men sped back downtown in the Commissioner's car. "We'll make the prisoners talk. They'll tell us who the Executioner really is, I'm sure of that!"

"If they really know," remarked Drake cryptically.



IT WAS shortly after midnight when Charles Rawling's phone rang. "Hello?" he said sleepily, then, as he recognized the voice on the line, "Oh, yes, come right up . . . Sure, I realize it must be important to bring you here at this hour."

He put the phone back on its cradle, picked up his dressing gown and thrust his arms through the sleeves. He was still nervous, though he had slept through sheer exhaustion. He lighted a cigarette, got to his feet as he heard a knock on the door.

He went to the door and opened it, smiling at the man who stood there.

"Come in," said Rawling, turning and leading the way back into the living room. "Glad to see you."

"Are you?" said the other man.

Rawling turned and faced him, surprised at the other's tone.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Nothing." The other man laughed. "Just one of those silly remarks we make without thinking." His tone changed. "Heard you went through a horrible experience tonight."

"Ghastly." Rawling shuddered as he went to a liquor cabinet in one corner of the room and drew out a bottle and two glasses. "Just the very thought of it terrifies me!" He placed the bottle and glasses on a table. "You'll have a drink, won't you?"

"Thanks." The other man watched as Rawling poured the Scotch into the glasses, said, "Enough!" took his drink and downed it swiftly.

"What's on your mind?" asked the hotel owner.

"I came here to correct an error," said the other man.

"Afraid I don't understand," Rawling looked puzzled.

He turned to pick up his glass. As he did so strong fingers caught him by the throat. He felt them tightening like red-hot pokers stabbing into his flesh.

"You—you are the Ex—" he managed to gasp.

Then those fingers tightened, cut off his voice. He grew limp and his face turned purple. The other man waited, assured himself there was no longer any heart beat, no faint throbbing pulse as the body of Charles Rawling dropped soundlessly to the thick rug.

The murderer glanced about him, shrugged his shoulders as he went toward the hall that led to the door of the suite.

The elevator clanged as he stepped out into the hotel corridor. A man and woman in evening dress appeared, walking toward him along the hall.

"Good night, Charles," called the murderer casually over his shoulder as he closed the half open door of

the suite. "See you in the morning." Jauntily he walked along the hall and stepped into the waiting elevator. The door of the car closed. The couple in evening clothes went on along the hall, unlocked the door of a room and then closed it after them as they stepped inside.

In suite 1768 the body of the dead hotel owner was a gruesome sight as it sprawled there upon the floor.

## CHAPTER XV

### PIT OF DEATH

**O**BVIOUSLY STRANGLED by somebody he knew," said Jonathan Drake as he stared down at the corpse of Charles Rawling. "He would not have let the murderer in otherwise. And the glasses and whiskey bottle indicate that it was a friend who was with him."

The bright sunlight of early morning gleamed through the windows of the hotel suite. The body had been discovered when a chambermaid had entered to clean up the rooms. Now the police were at work and Commissioner Slade and Drake were with them.

"Seems horribly ironical that you should save his life, then have this happen," said Slade with a nod toward the corpse. "Drake, do you realize that this makes four of the original six men involved in this case who have been murdered?"

"Yes, I know," said Drake. "There are only Branston Gordon and Samuel Twill left now. You've had men keeping watch on them, haven't you. Commissioner?"

"Of course. There are plainclothes-men detailed to that job at all times."

"Prints on these glasses," said the finger-print expert who had been dusting glasses and bottle with his powder. "Two sets on one of them."

"Good!" exclaimed Commissioner Slade. "What about the throat of the corpse?"

"He can check on that as soon as I get through," remarked an assistant medical examiner.

"Have you checked on the elevator operators?" asked Drake. "They might have remembered bringing someone up to this floor." He glanced at the medical examiner. "About what time would you say he died, Doctor?"

"Close to midnight I should judge."

"I've checked the elevator operators," said a detective. "That is a busy time of night, they tell me. People returning from the theaters. Two night operators are off duty, but I'll check them later."

Drake drew the commissioner aside. The detective smiled as he saw the eager expression on the freckled face of Tommy Lowell. Drake's assistant was reveling in the fact that he had been allowed to be present during a murder investigation.

"Were you able to get the Triconi mob to talk, Commissioner?" asked Drake.

"No." Slade shook his head. "Either they are too tough for us to get any information out of them or they don't really know the actual identity of the Executioner."

"Then I was right," said Drake.

"It certainly looks that way."

"Listen, Commissioner," said Drake slowly. "I've got a pretty good hunch that there is going to be another murder before this is over—at least an attempt at one anyway—and here's what I want you to let me do."

He lowered his voice and talked intently for a few moments while Slade listened closely. The commissioner nodded as Drake finished.

"All right, Drake," he said. "It's risky, and might mean your life, but if you want to try it, we'll do it. You feel that tonight is the best time?"

"I'm almost certain that nothing will happen to either man until then," said Drake. "Remember every one of these murders has occurred after nightfall."

"Then tonight it is," said the commissioner. "There's nothing more that we can do here."

\* \* \*

"No!" said Samuel Twill in his slightly squeaky voice, shaking his head nervously. "I don't expect any visitors, and I don't know why you sneaked in like this, giving me such a fright."

The living room of his home near Gramercy Park was brightly lighted, but every window shade was tightly drawn, and a grim gathering was present.

LED by Jonathan Drake, the Commissioner and some picked detectives had entered the premises in the utmost secrecy. Drake had assumed all responsibility for this irregular procedure, himself gaining entry through a window.

He had let the police in through the front door. Twill had not known they were in the house until they walked in on him in this living room, where they had

found him pacing the floor, watching a grandfather's clock whose hands now showed a few minutes before midnight.

Drake faced the book dealer, the mild-faced spectacled man he had first seen in the murdered Bradwill's Brooklyn apartment. He had faced two other men like this trying to get them to talk. But Bearing had been killed before he could say very much. He had succeeded in getting some definite information from Gordon, however, and this had proved vital. Now he thought he should be able to find a way to make the tight lipped book store owner speak.

"Mr. Twill, unless I'm mistaken, every minute we waste is filled with definite peril to you. That's why I won't mince words. Gordon has already told me how the bunch of you once forged revenue stamps for the old Triconi mob, and of the possible revenge motivation behind the electrocution murders—"

"Gordon told you that?" demanded Twill.

"Well, not entirely," Drake said. "I must admit that I guessed the last part of it—you tipped me off a little when you showed me those death threats at Bradwill's place. But I haven't time to go into all the details of the case with you now. Doubtless you know that four of the group of six, of which you are one, have been murdered. And because of that I want to take your place here. I want to be Samuel Twill for tonight."

"But how can you do that?" demanded the book dealer.

"Drake is a master at disguise," said the commissioner. "He'll prove that to you, Mr. Twill."

Drake did prove it. Twill had watched with amazement as Drake worked with grease-paint and the equipment of a makeup kit that he had brought with him. When the transformation was complete, Samuel Twill felt as though he were staring at his own twin brother.

At five minutes to one bright lights still burned in the living room of Twill's home. But now there was only one man in the room.

The spare, mild-faced figure of Samuel Twill paced the floor, alone, unguarded, waiting. He paused as a wall mirror seemed to startle him with his own reflected image. He surveyed that image, over rather than through the lenses of his glasses. He judged every aspect of it. Only his keen eyes gave him away to himself, for the man who peered into the mirror was Jonathan Drake.

*Bong!*

The grandfather clock chimed the hour. It was exactly one a.m.

Drake kept pacing, but even as the chime echoed, chills tingled through him. He felt an eerie sense of loneliness, but at the same time he was alert to his very fingertips.

He paused, stood listening.

Somewhere he heard a sound, a noise that might be a door being jimmied. Not the front door certainly. His ears strained for some further sound. Steps—they appeared to come from below. The cellar? So it seemed, for the noises emanated under the flooring of this first floor living room. He looked down at the carpet, eyes alert.

“Good evening, Twill!”

The harsh, metallic voice coming from the door of the living room made him whirl, realizing he had been taken unawares. He turned and saw over his borrowed glasses the tall figure that had stepped through the doorway. As he did so he grew tense and wary.

The figure, as he had expected, was that of the Executioner! He was completely clad in a black cowl'd garment that concealed the clothing he wore beneath it. Only his eyes were visible through the holes in the tight fitting hood that encased his head beneath the cowl. Baleful, venomous eyes.

BLACK-GLOVED hand held a .45 automatic trained on Samuel Twill. The other hand of the Executioner gestured, even as Drake's every instinct was to try to draw his own gun. In the next instant he saw what such a move would have cost him.

Men swarmed into the room, stepping to either side of the black-cowl'd figure. They were the six gangsters who had escaped from the police by hiding beneath the wharf, and it was the tall slash-mouthed Crasher who was in the lead.

“You see, I am playing safe, Twill!” came the harsh, metallic voice of the Executioner. “I want to be sure that you have done what I demanded. If not—well, I have brought these men with me. Perhaps they may convince you that it is best to do as I say!”

“I—couldn't raise the money,” Drake simulated the squeaky voice of Twill. He was taking a chance on the Executioner having tried to blackmail the book dealer just as he had attempted to extort money from Branston Gordon. “I have been unable to get it!”

“All right. I know you are lying, but I won't argue with you,” said the Executioner, in his weird, sinister voice. “Perhaps your death will do just as well!”

Drake grew inwardly tense as he heard the words, as he stood there pretending to be the cringing owner of

the book store. His brain was working swiftly.

Rushmore, Bradwill, Bearing, Rawling—they all had been murdered by this fiend in human form. Twill had been safely and secretly removed from his home by the police when Drake had remained here to take his place. That left only Branston Gordon of the original six men. Was this hooded man who faced Drake the retired broker? The idea seemed fantastic; yet it was possible.

Only Twill and Gordon remained alive. Only they would gain through the death of the other men for the share that the four dead men had possessed in the trust fund automatically reverted to these two now.

“No!” cried Drake, in the voice of Twill. “Don't kill me! I'll get the money! I'll get it!”

“Too late!” said the Executioner, in a voice of doom. “Take him, men!” The gangsters closed in on Drake like hungry wolves; hands gripped him, holding his arms. He lunged forward, trying desperately to break free. He wanted to get to the man who called himself the Executioner and snatch the concealing black hood from his head.

The men clung to him and held him back. They appeared surprised by his unexpected strength, for as Twill he looked a weakling, but at the same time they realized that any man will fight desperately for his life.

“Do the job well, men!” rasped the Executioner. “I leave him in your hands!”

Automatic clutched in the black gloved hand he backed out of the door disappearing into the gloom of the hall.

Drake realized that the Executioner was leaving, and felt his hopes of catching the man vanish. He regretted now that he had had the police withdrawn, though he was sure that the criminals would not have appeared had Commissioner Slade and his men still been here.

The six gangsters were cuffing, pounding at him brutally. A hard fist knocked his borrowed glasses off his face, but he kept fighting. Then as they all piled on him at once he realized that further resistance was foolish. Better wait for an opportunity to try to escape that would be more in his favor.

“All right, guys,” snarled Crasher. “Let's get it over with quick!”

Drake was lifted, pushed, dragged by them across the floor. He knew what they had in store for him, yet he was cool, collected, watching and waiting for his chance.

They'd have to take him out of the house, somewhere



into the city and perhaps during that journey, some time before the awful thing happened, he would find a way to trick them. There were plenty of police on the open streets, and power companies now had men of their own at all important circuits.

DOWN steps leading below from the hallway. Using the cellar to sneak him out, the cellar which was dimly lighted by a gleaming oil-burner apparatus. A strange shadowy bulk took up one corner of the place.

That was when Drake got a hideous surprise. For, instead of taking him out through the cellar, he was suddenly thrust into a chair which had been fastened securely to an oil tank by strong wires.

He found that he was being bound to that chair, bound with cords and straps which seared his flesh through his clothing. Adhesive tape was fastened to his lips, catching onto the hardened make-up there. It wasn't needed. He knew a shout in this cellar would never be heard out on the street.

One of the gang had gone down into the cellar ahead of the five who had brought Drake down the stairs. This one was busily at work near the pit where a boiler rested. He stood up and came toward Drake, who sat helplessly bound to the chair. It was a man with a face like a death's head, and he was wearing rubber gloves.

"All right, you lugs," he said. "I gotta test the apparatus now. Hook him up!"

Cold metal clamped down on Drake's head—they were not bothering to shave it as the other first two murder victims had been shaved. And they rolled up his trousers to fasten the electrode there.

Evidently he was being hooked up to the house circuit. Hope soared in him. That meant there was a chance of their blowing out a fuse before they completed the connections.

Then suddenly his hope ebbed as he saw the horribly expert electrical job the man with the death's head had done.

The wires from Drake's head and leg were being hooked to a transformer in the boiler pit! From there wires connected to an open fuse-box, with the fuses "jumped" by copper bars that would cut them out and prevent them from blowing.

Well did Drake realize his predicament, even before Rudy explained to the other questioning gangsters.

"Sure! It's like we're connected right to the main power lines. And to make sure of this bird that transformer's got the current stepped up to over a

thousand volts! Get that? That's why we ain't takin' chances."

"But how do you know all that apparatus'll work?"

"Aw, it'll work. I'll prove it—look!"

Utterly helpless Drake saw him stoop down, a leering grin on his lips. His gloved hand reached the switch near the transformer and pulled it across the arc. Briefly he made the contact, an infinitesimal swift contact, just as quickly broken.

An invisible club seemed to crack down across the back of Drake's neck, to send a thousand other blows through his entire body. He felt his heart speed up as if it must burst, his body jerked in the chair to which it was bound.

His head jerked forward, then back. Dazed, he tried to sit erect again. But even through his daze he knew that something was wrong. He became conscious of a silence. Then he heard a gasp of surprise from the deathfaced man.

"Say, that's not the old guy—not Twill! That's Jonathan Drake!"

He came forward, yanked up Drake's head, ripped off the wig that had slipped forward during that jolting shock. His gloved hands began to smear roughly over Drake's features and some of the make-up came off.

"It's Drake, all right!" Crasher snarled.

Several of the men began cursing.

"Maybe that's why the boss gave special orders on this job," Rudy glanced at the slash-mouthed man.

"You was right, Crasher—good thing we decided to tag along with the Big Guy even if he did take a run-out on us when the cops got the rest of the mob at the pier."

"Sure," said Crasher. "With only six of us left we need the dough that he's promised us. You all know that."

"We better get this over with," snapped Rudy.

NOW he made some other swift arrangements which Drake's grim eyes followed. From the oil burner, which was cold tonight, he took down a dialed instrument Drake recognized as a time-clock which must have been used to electrically start the oil-burner at hours set.

He placed the clock in the boiler pit so that Drake could stare down at its face. He made arrangements, then hooked up the wires to the clock's relay apparatus.

"In twenty minutes this clock will turn on the juice," Rudy announced. "And the current will keep going through Drake until there ain't even any skin

left on him. We won't be here, in case the power house people see anything on their meters. Even if they do, they could never get here in time to save his life!"

He had already switched the clever system of wiring on, the clock was beginning to go the twenty fatal minutes.

"So long, Drake!" snarled Crasher. "Maybe you didn't walk no Last Mile, but you're gonna fry like merry hell."

"You're gonna go out like a light!" said another man.

Then, at Rudy's nod, they were moving away, their mocking farewells receding as they sneaked out of the cellar.

All this time Drake had been straining against the bonds that held him. Now, left alone, with that terrible death-clock silently counting off the minutes, he struggled with every ounce of his strength. He tried to find a weakness in the bonds, he tried to move the chair itself, found that it rocked back and forth a little, but not enough. He tried to jerk the metal cap from its position on his head.

But though he had mastered escape methods almost as well as the late Houdini, he knew that this time he could not break out of those bonds.

He glanced again at the clock that was not more than six feet away. Four minutes had passed—five. Fifteen of them left before he would die!

In his own eyes the dim cellar had assumed the true aspects of the Death House. The heavy wooden chair in which he was helpless had become the terrible Chair of that Death House.

He had sent numerous criminals to that Chair, and now he who worked for the Law was facing the grim penalty that same law dealt to murderers, only it had been dealt to him by lawless gangsters.

Seven minutes were gone. . . .

Drake, seeing he couldn't loosen his bonds or move the chair enough, looked desperately for some other means of forestalling the high-voltaged doom creeping up on him.

The boiler over all that electrical apparatus! If he could only get at it. Its water, flooding into the pit, might possibly short-circuit the whole system.

But it was hopelessly out of reach.

His eyes went upwards. There was a water-sprinkler system across the ceiling. A system that would work automatically when the temperature was sufficiently hot. That, too, could flood the cellar with water. But he saw he couldn't get at it.

He looked at the clock. Nine minutes gone. The minute hand seemed to race toward its goal as though

it were counting off seconds instead of minutes.

Drake's feet were on the cold stone floor, tied to the rungs of the chair. He found that by twisting those feet, pushing against his toes he could edge the chair forward inch by inch.

He moved it closer to the pit, panting from the effort. It seemed hours had been required for the slow work that he was now doing. He was almost afraid to glance at the clock, to learn how many more minutes had passed. Yet he had to know.

Ten minutes left!

The front legs of the chair reached the edge of the pit and slid into space. The chair toppled over as the front legs threw it off balance. Drake went crashing down, heard the grinding smash as one of the heavy arms of the chair hit the face of the clock, stopping it as the wood tore into the delicate mechanism.

Drake shuddered as he found himself in a heap with the chair to which he was still firmly bound on top of him. He realized the terrible risk that he had taken. There had been a chance of his switching on the current as well as stopping it from being turned on when he smashed the clock.

He found that the fall had broken one side of the chair and in doing so had loosened the straps that held his left arm tightly fastened to the chair arm. By moving a little with the aid of his free arm he was able to reach a rough metal bar.

With this he managed to smash the rest of the chair and gradually free himself from his bonds. Finally he stood up, weak and shaky.

## CHAPTER XVI AMBUSH

**G**INGERLY JONATHAN DRAKE removed the metal cap from his head and then quickly unfastened the electrode from his leg. From somewhere far in the distance he dimly heard the wailing of a siren. An ironical smile curved his lips. If the police were coming to his rescue now they would have been too late if he had not been successful in freeing himself of that chair.

Then as the siren grew louder and others joined in the noise Drake realized that the police actually were



*Drake heard sirens wailing*

arriving. Men in plain clothes, and uniformed officers burst into the house.

"Drake?" boomed the heavy voice of Commissioner Slade as he raced through the hall with his men. "Where are you?"

"Down here!" called the detective from the foot of the cellar stairs.

The police pounded down the stairs. They listened with awe as Drake told what had happened, how he had succeeded in preventing his own death by electrocution.

"But what brought you back here, Commissioner?" he asked when he had finished his story.

"The Executioner!" said Slade grimly. "He phoned a few minutes ago. We traced the call, found that it had come from a pay-station in the Grand Central district. One of the old type booths in which you give your number to the operator instead of dialing. There are still a number of those phones around town. No hope of tracing him through it though. We merely found out where the call came from, that's all."

"So he called you," exclaimed Drake. "What did he say?"

"That if we would go to Twill's house we would find the book dealer's double nicely cooked." The Commissioner frowned. "Naturally I sent out an alarm and came here at once."

"And Twill is safe? You are holding him under observation, of course?"

"No. He got away!" said Commissioner Slade. "I was taking him down to Headquarters in my car. He suddenly said that he felt faint and asked if we would stop at a drug store so that he might get some spirits of ammonia in a glass of water."

"You stopped, of course."

"Yes," Slade nodded. "I started into the drug store with Twill. It was on Broadway and there was a large crowd on the street. Suddenly he ducked into the crowd, ran down a side street and disappeared."

"What time did it happen?" asked Drake thoughtfully.

"Shortly after we left you. About twenty minutes of one I should say." The commissioner looked puzzled. "Why?"

"That would have given Twill time enough to get back here," said Drake.

"Back here?" Slade stared at the detective as though he thought he was insane. "Why should Twill come back here?"

"Have you ever considered the possibility of Twill being the Executioner?" demanded Drake.



"Why, that's impossible!" exclaimed the commissioner. "We came here tonight to protect Twill! You even took his place and risked your life in doing so. You told me that the Executioner called you Twill, that his men apparently believed they were arranging the death chair murder of the book dealer."

"Yes, and I believe they really thought that," said Drake. "At least until they discovered who I was when we were in the cellar. But the Executioner is clever. They don't know his real identity. To them Twill was just one of the men they were to kill."

"There might be something to your theory at that," said Slade. "When we broke in here Twill seemed more annoyed than anything else. After all, we were just taking a chance upon his being the next victim."

"Exactly!" Drake nodded. "And when Twill saw me disguise myself as him there is a chance that he felt it was his opportunity to get me out of the way." The detective glanced at the wires scattered about the floor of the cellar. "And he damn near succeeded!"

"On the other hand the Executioner might be Gordon," said the commissioner.

DRAKE didn't answer at once. Then: "What did the check on those fingerprints on the glasses we found in Rawling's apartment show?"

"Set of Rawling's prints on the one glass. Rawling and someone else's on the other. We checked those prints with the ones we found on the two death warning notes you got at Bradwill's apartment."

"And what was the result?" demanded Drake eagerly.

"The prints on the glass are not Twill's. His were on the note he received, of course."

"Gordon?"

"Sending a man up to Greenwich to get his prints in the morning," said Slade.

"Have you tried to find the typewriter with which those notes were written?" asked Drake.

"I have men working on it. By the way, there might be a machine in this house. I'll have someone take a look around." The commissioner called a detective, issued terse instructions. The man hurried up the cellar stairs. "Let's go up," said Slade. "It's not very inviting down here."

They went up to the first floor of the house. Here Drake found the phone and called his home. He talked to Tommy Lowell and told his assistant what had happened since they had left the hotel.

The phone rang sharply a few seconds after Drake had finished talking. He picked it up again.

"Hello? . . . Yes, right here . . . Hold the wire." He looked at Slade. "For you, commissioner."

Slade took the phone.

"All right," said the commissioner, after listening a moment. "We'll come up there at once. Meanwhile, better phone the state police and have them guard the place."

Slade hung up and turned to Drake. "Who was it?" asked the detective. "Sounded like Branston Gordon's voice."

"It was!" snapped Slade. "He just received one of those threat notes telling him that neither he nor his daughter will live until morning! He's scared to death."

"How did he know that he could reach you by phoning here to Twill's house?" asked Drake quietly.

A startled expression swept over the face of the police commissioner.

"That's so!" he exclaimed.

"The Executioner is getting a bit careless," said Jonathan Drake. "But of course you are going to drive up to Greenwich." He smiled. "And I hope that I'm going along."

"Of course!" snapped Slade starting for the door. "Come on!"

Leaving an inspector in charge at the house, Slade and Drake hurried to the commissioner's limousine that was parked in front of Twill's residence. There were three detectives with them and the five men piled into the car.

"The Gordon place in Greenwich," Slade told the driver.

The car shot away from the curb and rolled down the street. The siren started moaning as the limousine gained speed and went tearing through the thinning traffic as it headed uptown.

Not more than forty-five minutes had elapsed before the car reached Greenwich and was speeding along the dark highway at the top of the hill down which Drake's coupe had hurtled.

A motorcycle shot out of a side road and roared up beside the speeding limousine. It was a state trooper and the commissioner's car slowed down.

"Commissioner Slade from New York," said the driver. "On a hurry call to Branston Gordon's residence."

"Okay!" shouted the trooper. "Take it easy going down the hill. I'll lead the way!"

THE motorcycle shot ahead as they reached the crest of the hill and started down. Despite his warning the trooper was moving fast, the headlight bobbing up

and down and casting a jumping streak of white light ahead of him.

Jonathan Drake became aware of a sense of danger as the limousine gained speed. He sat beside the commissioner in the rear seat, his eyes riveted on the man on the motorcycle.

Suddenly the trooper's motorcycle seemed to buck like a wild broncho. The state man flew high in the air, then dropped to the road like a rag doll and sprawled there in a limp heap.

"What happened?" muttered the commissioner. "There was nothing in front of him. The road is clear."

The limousine halted with a wailing of brakes. Drake and the others leaped out and ran to the trooper just as he sat up weakly, cursing a blue streak.

As the commissioner and his men paused, Drake advanced along the highway to the exact spot where the motorcycle had been stopped and been flung back.

Something caught Drake just above his belt, stopped him abruptly. He snatched out his flashlight. The white beam revealed a heavy cable stretched taut across the highway. It was just high enough for the front of a speeding car to hit it just as the trooper's machine had done.

"Commissioner, come here!" shouted Drake looking back over his shoulder.

"So that was it!" exclaimed Slade as he saw the cable and realized its purpose. "They planned to wreck us! Must have known we would have to use this road in order to get to Gordon's place."

"Of course," said Drake. "And if the trooper hadn't warned us to be careful on the hill—if he hadn't gone on ahead—we would have been smashed up badly."

"The Executioner and his gang certainly were mighty anxious to keep us from reaching Gordon," remarked Slade.

"I'm not so sure of that," said Drake. "Having us come up here tonight may have all been just a trap!"

They found that the state trooper had been badly bruised but not seriously injured. The detectives with Slade worked swiftly, unfastening the cable. It had been attached to the embankment fence on one side and wound around a tree on the other.

The state man's motorcycle was badly wrecked. They dragged it to one side of the road and the trooper rode with them as the limousine started down the hill again.

Ten minutes later the limousine paused on the road in front of the Gordon place. They had driven up quietly, lights off. Now, as they moved toward the dark house, each man had his gun in his hand.

Drake was in the lead, automatic ready for instant action. The darkened windows of the mansion worried him. Had something happened to Branston Gordon and his daughter? Were they arriving too late after all?

The French windows through which he had previously entered the place were again standing half open.

"What's the matter?" whispered Slade as Drake stopped, stood staring at the windows.

"Those French windows are open," answered Drake in a low tone. "I don't like it!"

"You think they might be waiting for us inside the house?"

"Look!" snapped Drake.

Both men ducked into the shadow of some shrubbery as a figure appeared, sneaking out through the half open casement windows. They saw that it was a man, but it was too dark for them to recognize him.

"Who is that?" whispered the commissioner.

"Don't know," answered Drake as he watched. "Let's see what he does!"

THE man reached the ground and started across the lawn in their direction. Drake and Slade waited tensely, covering him with their guns. He drew closer, then suddenly turned and began to run.

Drake was after him like a streak. The man glanced back over his shoulder, discovered the pursuit and increased his speed. But Drake was moving faster. He made a dive for the man, dropping his gun as he did so, and bringing his quarry down in a flying tackle.

They were rolling about on the grass, the man writhing and twisting as he tried to escape from Drake's grasp. The detective smashed a hard right into the other man's face, caught him squarely on the chin and he went limp.

Feet padded softly on the turf as the commissioner ran up. His flashlight gleamed down on the pale face of the unconscious man.

"Samuel Twill!" exclaimed Slade. "What the devil is he doing here?"

Drake did not answer as he got to his feet and brushed himself off. That it had been the book dealer who had come sneaking out of the house was as surprising to him as it was to the commissioner.

"Come on!" said Drake. "We've got to find out what's happened in the house."

They turned the unconscious man over to one of the detectives who had seen them and hurried to the spot where they stood.

Drake, Slade and the three other men boldly entered the house through the casement windows.

"No one here," said Drake as he switched on the lights and glanced about the living room. He saw that the door of Gordon's study was closed and advanced toward it. "I'll see what's in here."

He picked up his automatic from the grass. With the gun in his right hand he caught the knob with his left and flung the door open.

The study beyond was dark, but a faint blotch of gray revealed the window blinds had not been drawn.

Drake fumbled along the wall, found the button of the light switch and clicked it on. Light gleamed in the room revealing the desk in one corner, the luxurious furnishings of the place. But the study was unoccupied.

"No one in this room either," said Slade as he stood in the doorway behind Drake.

Drake walked over to the desk. He stood staring thoughtfully at the typewriter that rested on one corner of the ornate flat topped desk. Was this the machine on which those death warnings had been typed, he wondered.

With the modern methods of crime detection used by the police, and with which he was entirely familiar it would be easy to discover if this was the typewriter that had been used. It was possible for them to identify among all of the typewriters in a city the size of New York the one machine that had written the message or document involved.

Drake knew that no two machines write exactly alike. All sorts of peculiarities may develop after a machine has been in use, minute things which are no reflection upon the manufacturer or the machine itself, but which do give it individual characteristics.

Usually the ruled glass method was used in order to determine if a document had been written on a certain machine. A sheet of glass ruled into squares was placed over the letter or document that had been written and then photographed. After which an enlargement was made. This would be compared with photographs of similar specimens typed on various suspected machines. Complete examination would invariably reveal the exact typewriter that had done the job.

"You think that might be the machine on which those death notes were typed?" asked the commissioner as he observed the intentness with which Drake was studying the typewriter on Gordon's desk.

"I'm sure of it," said Drake. "This is the machine all right, if the Executioner is as smart as I think he must be!"

"Then Gordon really must be the man we want!" exclaimed Slade.

"The sooner we find him the better," said Drake grimly. "Your men are searching the house, of course?"

"Yes." Slade nodded. "We should be hearing from them any moment if they find anything."

DRAKE was gazing thoughtfully at the typewriter. It was a noiseless portable model of a well-known make. The criminologist was well versed in dactylography, and was able to examine fingerprints as expertly as did the men who specialized in that type of work for the police departments.

Because of this, the gleaming black enameled surface of the machine puzzled him. He leaned over the desk, keen blue eyes staring at the machine with almost microscopic intentness.

"What's the matter?" asked Slade as he watched.

"There are apparently no fingerprints on this machine," answered Drake. "Can't be sure of it without going over it completely, but it certainly looks that way as far as I can see now."

From upstairs there came a shout from one of the detectives who had been searching the house. Drake and the commissioner raced through the living room into the hall beyond and dashed up the stairs.

The detective was waiting for them in the hallway of the second floor.

"In there," he said nodding to the open door of a lighted room. "Found them both in a clothes closet."

Drake stepped into the room with Slade close behind him. Branston Gordon was seated in a chair, his gaunt face white and his eyes wide and frightened. The ropes with which he had been bound were scattered about on the floor at his feet.

Not far from him his daughter was lying on a bed, her eyes closed and her auburn hair mussed. Red marks on her wrists revealed where ropes had cut into the soft white flesh.

"Fainted," said a detective. "Coming out of it now though."

"He was here," muttered Gordon. "Held a gun at my back. Made me phone you, tell to come at once, that my life and Marion's had been threatened."

"Who?" demanded Drake. "The Executioner?"

"Yes." Golden nodded. "He was disguised and the men with him were masked. I made the call. Then they tied us, gagged us and placed us in that closet." He shuddered. "He said they would be back to kill us before daylight!"



It was easy for Drake to visualize the horror that Branston Gordon must have felt, bound and helpless there in the darkness of the closet. At any moment the Executioner and his men might return, and that would have meant not only death to Gordon, but also to the person that he loved most in the world, his motherless daughter.

True, he had phoned the commissioner in New York and knew that the police were coming, but there was no way of his being sure that they would arrive in time.

"I was growing desperate," said Gordon. "I had struggled and struggled, for hours it seemed, and had just succeeded in getting the ropes that tied me loose when one of your men found us."

"That true?" asked Drake, glancing at the detective who had called them upstairs.

The detective nodded. "The ropes dropped off this guy just as we carried him out of the closet."

Commissioner Slade took Drake by the arm and led him to one side out of earshot of the others.

The girl had revived.

"Do you think Gordon could be bluffing?" asked Slade in a low tone. "He might have tied up the girl himself in the dark and then placed those ropes that it would look like he had been tied also."

"It is a possibility," said Drake. "But what would he gain by that?"

"Plenty—if he is the Executioner," said the commissioner. "His calling us, telling us his life had been threatened, then having us come here and find him and his daughter like this certainly should throw off suspicion." Drake realized that what Slade suggested was possible. Yet there were other things lingering in the detective's mind—things he hoped would lead him this very night to the actual identity of the ruthless murderer.

## CHAPTER XVII NEW CLUES

**L**ATER THAT NIGHT a weary group was gathered in the study of Branston Gordon's house. The detective left outside had brought in Samuel Twill, and the book dealer perched on the edge of a chair peering sullenly

at the faces about him through an extra pair of glasses that he had worn when he had been taken from his home.

Gordon and his daughter were seated on a studio couch in one corner of the room. The girl had completely recovered but she was still pale.

"And you still insist, Mr. Twill, that you ran away from the commissioner on Broadway because you wanted to come up here and warn Gordon that he was in danger?" demanded Drake. "Don't you think that's rather thin? If you had been worried about Mr. Gordon's safety you could have said so to Commissioner Slade."

"I realize that now," said Twill in his high squeaky voice. "I was nervous, excited. I didn't know what I was doing."

"Strange that you should suddenly become so interested in my welfare," said Branston Gordon. "You haven't ever been before, Twill."

"We six have always been friends," said Twill. "At least until all these horrible things started happening. If we hadn't trusted and liked each other we would never have established that trust fund."

"That's more or less true," said Gordon. He was watching Drake who had walked over to the desk and was gazing at the typewriter. "Though we haven't seen each other a great deal during the past four or five years."

"Say, this is a nice machine!" exclaimed Drake. "One of the latest models."

"Yes," said Gordon. "I just bought it a few months ago." He turned again to Twill. "Why did you come here tonight?" he demanded suddenly.

"Why—why I told you," stammered Twill.

Drake smiled faintly as he listened. If either of these two men were the Executioner they were excellent actors. He sensed the undercurrent of fear that seemed to dominate them.

"Yes, I know," said Gordon, "that you came here to warn me!" There was a half sneer on his lips.

"If that was the case," said Drake suddenly, "why were you sneaking out of the house when we caught you?"

THE book dealer cringed as if he had been lashed by a whip. "Because I found the house dark and apparently deserted," answered Twill. "I came up here on the train you know, took a cab right over from the station. I didn't stop to phone, to be sure that Gordon would be home. I dismissed the taxi out on the road.

Then when I came across the grounds I saw that there were no lights. It frightened me. Finally I found the French windows open and came in that way. I called out as I stood there in the darkness, but no one answered. I became alarmed and decided to leave."

"And that was when we caught you," said Drake dryly. He had been watching and listening as the book dealer talked. Observing how carefully the man spoke, as though he were choosing each word. "I still say that your story is thin!"

"So do I!" Commissioner Slade was becoming impatient. "I think we had better take you back to New York."

"No!" protested Twill. "You can't do it. You have no authority to arrest me! We are in a different state—this is Connecticut. You are from the New York police department. I tell you, you can't do it!"

"So that's it!" roared Slade angrily. "You came up here tonight because you thought that if you were in another state we couldn't arrest you, Twill! Well, you are right. But we can turn you over to the local police here or the state troopers and have them hold you."

"It wouldn't be hard for us to get extradition papers for a man wanted for murder!" said Drake coldly.

"Murder!" exclaimed Twill. "You mean you think that I—" He leaped to his feet. "You believe I'm the Executioner?"

"YOU are under suspicion," stated Drake. "Who stands to gain the most through the deaths of Rushmore, Bradwill, Bearing and Rawling? You do, Twill. As a member of that original six who formed the trust fund their shares automatically revert to you. George Stinson, the president of the Empire National Bank, told me all about that."

"It's true," said Twill quickly. "I suspected it might be one of us from the first. That's why I went to Bradwill's apartment after I learned that he and Rushmore had been executed. I hoped that I might find something there—something else besides that typewritten warning. I didn't know quite what, but something that would give me a clue to the identity of the killer if he was one of us."

"What did you expect to find?"

"I tell you I don't know. He might have dropped something—a button, a cuff link, anything that I would have recognized as belonging to one of the other three men." Twill whirled and pointed a shaking finger at Branston Gordon. "There's your Executioner! He's the only one it could be!"

"Why you lying dog!" growled Gordon rising from the divan and starting toward the book dealer. "I'll make you take that back if I have to knock the words down your throat!"

"You see!" shouted Twill. "He—" He broke off with a startled cry as the lights went out suddenly.

Drake heard the commissioner curse, then start shouting orders.

"Don't let anyone out of this room!" bellowed Slade. "Some of you men guard the door and the windows!" Drake was reaching for his gun. He had stepped back against the wall, was using it to guide him as he edged toward the door. He heard the men in the room milling around, stumbling over each other in the gloom. A figure loomed against the faint light that came through the windows. A man was moving in that direction.

"Who's that there by the window?" shouted Slade.

"Kelly," answered the figure.

"All right, Kelly," barked the commissioner. "Stay there."

"Casey at the other window. Commissioner," said a voice.

Drake was still moving toward the door. He was convinced that those lights had not gone out by accident. Some one had deliberately pulled the main switch in the fuse box.

Some one caught him roughly as he reached the door.

"It's Drake," he said. "Let me go."

"Oh!" muttered the man who held him. "Sorry. I'm Martin."

Drake edged past the detective, and went into the living room beyond. His flashlight clicked on, sent a round beam of light dancing around the walls. Chairs, tables loomed eerily in the glow.

He was looking for the fuse box. If he could find it he might be able to again switch on the lights. Out into the hall and on back toward the kitchen he went.

He reached a door and as he swept the light over it he suddenly grew tense. The ray of the flash had revealed the blue barrel of an automatic jutting out from the edge of the door frame.

Drake dropped to the floor just an instant before that gun roared. He saw the flash of flame and heard the thud of the bullet as it struck the wall.

His own gun was in his hand. He fired at the exact spot where he had seen the flash. There was a curse that changed into a death rattle, and then the soft thump of a falling body.

DRAKE rolled over, found the flash he had dropped. He leaped to his feet with the electric torch in his hand. It was still turned on.

"Drake!" he heard the commissioner's voice in the distance, and knew that Slade had become even more excited when he had heard the sounds of the two shots. "Drake? What happened. Where are you?" The light in Drake's hand focused on the motionless form sprawled just inside the doorway. He saw the face that was like a death's head, realized that it was the electrician of the Triconi gang—the man called Rudy. There was a black hole in the center of Rudy's head now. He would never make another of his clever electrical hookups that had brought death to his helpless victims.

Drake stepped over the body. There was no time to answer Slade now, the important thing was to find the switch and turn on the house lights. Then both he and the police could see what they were doing.

He found himself in a big kitchen. The round circle of light swept around the walls, paused as it rested on the metal covered fuse box.

Drake advanced toward the box. It had been built low enough on the wall for him to reach it easily.

He could not dismiss the thought of Rudy from his mind. Why had he been in the house? What had he been doing here? The man had been an electrical expert. He would not have been selected by the Executioner for such a simple task as pulling a main switch and plunging the house into darkness. Unless—

"That might be it!" muttered Drake.

He dropped the automatic into his shoulder holster. With the flashlight in one hand he reached up with the other and caught the cover of the fuse box and found that it swung back like a door.

Inside he could see the two banks of fuses that carried current to the various sections of the house. He studied the main switch below the fuses.

His cold eyes grew hard as he saw that the regular lead-in wires had been disconnected and replaced by others. These second wires were far heavier, and had been brought in through an open window in the kitchen. A man trying to turn on the switch in the dark would not have noticed them.

It was horribly clear to Jonathan Drake. He realized that the house current had been cut off and these wires evidently connected with a high tension line somewhere outside the house. If he had touched the usually insulated handle of the main house switch he would have found it hot and would certainly have been executed by the high voltage.

Drake frowned as he worked to unfasten those heavy wires and replace them with the regular lead wire for the house current. He finally succeeded. Then he threw the switch and the house lights again came on.

"That wasn't planned for me," muttered Drake. "Branston Gordon owns this house. Obviously he has no servants here now. It would normally have been Gordon who would have tried to turn on that switch—and he would have been electrocuted just like Rushmore, and Bradwill."

Drake whirled, gloved hand reaching for his gun as some one came tearing into the kitchen.

"Then you are safe!" exclaimed Commissioner Slade, relief in his tone as he paused, stood breathing heavily as he gazed at the slender dark haired man. "What the devil happened? Who is that man you shot?"

Slade listened as Drake swiftly told him. When the private investigator had finished the police commissioner scowled.

"But neither Gordon nor Twill could have planned this," he said. "We've got them both still safe in Gordon's study. They didn't even try to get away."

"Gordon didn't plan it," said Drake. "But another man did, and Rudy carried out his idea."

"Twill you mean?" demanded Slade. "That's a question I can't answer now," said Drake. "But if you can have Twill and Gordon at your office at Headquarters tomorrow." He smiled. "Or rather today around 11 a.m., I think we may be able to clear up this case."

"They'll be there!" stated the commissioner. "Don't worry about that! Anything else?"

"Yes," said Drake. "I want that typewriter on Gordon's desk brought back to town with us. Have one of the men wrap it in a pillow case, and be sure not to get any new fingerprints on it."

## CHAPTER XVII THE EXECUTIONER

**T**HE ROOM WAS A TENSE SCENE even with the morning sunlight streaming in through the windows. The commissioner sat at his desk. On a chair at one side sat Tommy Lowell watching and listening with interest. Close by stood Jonathan Drake.

Three men shifted tensely in other parts of the room. The tall, gaunt Branston Gordon stood like granite. Samuel Twill was seated in a chair nervously fidgeting with his spectacles. In another chair, watching everything that went on around him with interest, was a spectator. Drake had been speaking, but now paused. Then, abruptly, he began again.

"Naturally when I learned of the previous connection of the six men with Triconi and his mob I considered the revenge motivation. After I thought it over I began to doubt that possibility. Why should the old Triconi mob suddenly seek revenge on the six men after so many years had elapsed? What would they gain?"

"Revenge, that's all," said Commissioner Slade as Drake paused.

"Exactly! And don't forget they were killers—gunmen who worked for hire," Drake said. "Such sudden devotion and loyalty to their old leader was a bit out of character.

"Then when I learned that the Executioner was trying to blackmail Gordon," Drake gazed thoughtfully at Twill as he spoke, and the bookdealer moved restlessly in his chair, "and when I talked to Mr. Stinson, here, and learned something regarding the financial affairs of the six men involved, the fact that they had established a trust fund from the fortune they had received in bonds after doing a job for a foreign government put a different light on the whole affair."

"How?" demanded Gordon. "What do you mean?"

"That there was a possibility that one of the six men who had assumed the character of the Executioner was using the apparent revenge motivation of the Triconi mob as a cover-up and was murdering the others in order to get all of the trust fund for himself. I overlooked one detail in that respect, but I checked up on it this morning." Again Drake paused, his keen gaze sweeping the faces of all the men in the room. Both Gordon and Twill were gazing at him like birds that had been fascinated by a snake. Stinson, Slade and Tommy listened with tense interest.

"Now I have reached the conclusion that there is only one man who could be the Executioner. One diabolical brain who developed the whole fiendish plot."

"Who is it?" asked the commissioner eagerly.

"The man whose fingerprints are on that whiskey glass that was found in Rawling's hotel room after the hotel owner was strangled to death. The man who was smart enough to realize that those death notes could be traced to the typewriter on which they were

written." Drake looked at Gordon. "When did you last use that machine in your study?"

"Why, yesterday morning," answered Gordon. "I wrote a letter to a friend of mine out in California. My daughter uses the machine a great deal also, though I don't know when she touched it last."

"That typewriter has been examined by experts this morning," said Drake. "It is the machine on which the death threats were written."

"That's impossible!" exclaimed Gordon. "I didn't write any death threats, and I'm sure my daughter didn't."

"I'm even more positive than you are," said Drake with a smile. "Because that typewriter we took from your house is not your original machine!"

"What?" gasped Gordon.

"It is another machine of exactly the same make and model," went on Drake. "The Executioner placed it in your study last night after he had tied up you and your daughter and put you in that closet. He was a bit too clever about it. He was so careful that his fingerprints or that of his men were not on the machine that he did not leave any at all. That was when I first realized there was something wrong about that typewriter—and I was right!"

"But who's was it?" asked the commissioner. "Where did it come from?"

"IT WAS the property of the one man who would gain the most if both Gordon and Twill would also die.

"The man who would, according to the trust fund agreement, be the administrator of a million dollars in bonds for whatever few heirs of the six dead men would exist. Motive enough—since it would leave him with practically full control of the funds, which he could manipulate freely. Isn't that so—George Stinson!"

Drake pointed an accusing finger at the bank president. "*You* are the Executioner!" he said, his voice lifting.

"That's ridiculous!" Stinson laughed. "You haven't anything on me! Why do you think—"

"Because the man who came to Gordon as the Executioner demanded exactly eighty-five thousand dollars," Drake broke in. "I later found out that was practically the exact sum that Gordon had in the bank. Who else was in a position to know the exact bank balance besides you, Stinson?"

"He's right!" exclaimed Gordon. "I never told anyone that, not even my daughter. Stinson was the



only one who could have known.”

“What did you do this morning, Tommy?” asked Drake, glancing at his assistant.

“Went to the Empire National Bank,” answered Tommy. “Saw Stinson’s secretary and asked her if he was satisfied with the noiseless portable he had bought lately. Told her I was from the typewriter company and we wanted to be sure that the customers were pleased.”

“What did the secretary say?” asked Drake as Tommy Lowell paused.

“That she didn’t know. Mr. Stinson had taken the machine home to use there.”

“Then what did you do?”

“Got the secretary to tell me the name of the typewriter branch that had sold Stinson the machine. I went there, had them check through their sales records and find the number of the machine. It had the same

number as the one that the police brought back from Gordon’s house, Chief.”

“You planned it well Stinson,” said Drake as he looked at the banker who was glaring at him viciously. “But like all supposedly great criminals your egotism betrayed you. You were careful about everything except those fingerprints on the liquor glass. You must have thought that Rawling would think it strange if you accepted a drink while still wearing your gloves. Besides you felt safe. The police did not have your fingerprints; there was no reason, in your estimation, for them to even suspect you. I had called on you twice and did not even suspect you, in your estimation.”

“Damn you,” muttered Stinson. “You were smarter than I thought!”

“Smart enough to realize that the death chair is the place to send the Executioner!” stated Drake grimly.

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