



THE DEATH LADY

by
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There she stood—that enigmatic murder smile welded on her lips—waiting to clasp her victims in a death embrace. What was this horror-creature who cast her torture shadow over the House of Cranford—whose lightest caress meant bloody mutilation for those she wooed?

CHAPTER I THE MAN WHO KNEW FEAR

GLEN KELSEY, feet stretched over his desk, swivel chair tilted back, smiled ruefully as Mr. Peebles, his assistant, appeared unobtrusively in the office doorway. "Well, Peebles, I suppose you want to go home. O.K. The day is over, and what a day! If business keeps up like this they'll be carting away the little furniture we have!"

Mr. Peebles adjusted the spectacles on his thin nose, and coughed. Mr. Peebles was bald, near-sighted, and very clerkish—the direct antithesis to the young, broad-shouldered Kelsey, whose blue eyes, with their humor wrinkles, showed the lust for adventure.

"Begging your pardon, sir—" Mr. Peebles said, mildly. "No, don't. Don't tell me what's wrong. I know it was a mistake to try to build up a reputation as a private dick on the strength of my trustworthiness. 'Honest Glen Kelsey'—the man you can trust—three years with the Department of Justice, *etcetera, etcetera*. But who cares?"

"But sir, what I want to say," this time Mr. Peebles boldly rushed on, "is that there's a gentleman to see you—and he says it's frightfully urgent, sir!" He laid a card on the desk.

KELSEY'S swivel chair jerked forward with a squeak. Hope fought against a cruel doubt on his features as he glanced at the card. "George Cranford," he read. "Never heard of him. If he's one of those damn instalment men—"

But he wasn't, though he did come in hugging a bulging briefcase under one arm. He was a man whose clothes showed opulence, a man apparently in his late thirties. Once he had been well-built, but he had aged prematurely. He looked flabby, his face was almost pasty, his chin weak and receding. Kelsey's first impression was of a man who would be so much putty in the hands of any stronger individual. His second impression was that George Cranford was in the grip of some nameless terror which was driving him toward utter panic. It showed all over him. His nerves were obviously on edge; his eyes haunted.

"I've come to you, Mr. Kelsey," he said immediately after they had shaken hands and Peebles had discreetly withdrawn to the outer office, "because I'm convinced you are one man I can fully trust." His voice had the huskiness that betrayed lack of sleep, and there was a peculiar tremor in it that made the words jerk. "I picked you after investigating every agency in town. Was so impressed by your past record that I—I intend to give you my full confidence."

Kelsey mentally patted himself on the back; here at last was balm to all his doubts. But his humorous, light manner had vanished now; he was sober, attentive, alert as Cranford took a chair holding the briefcase on his lap with a sort of fierce clutch.

"No doubt you are a busy man, Mr. Kelsey—but I hope I can persuade you to take this case. I shall try to make it worth your while. . . . Perhaps I'd best begin by telling you something of myself."

This he did, cursorily. He had come down from Connecticut, where he lived with his elder brother, Stephen Cranford. The two had retired from various business enterprises about which he was somewhat vague, but from which they had amassed considerable means.

"We have become what you might call country gentlemen," George Cranford explained. "And since we've settled up there our life has been stainless; our reputation in the town is unimpeachable. But unfortunately," his voice faltered, "there is something in the past, something which Stephen and I—Lord, I had hoped it was buried. But the past always comes back. Mr. Kelsey—the past always comes back. I was just beginning to forget—and then, only last week,

came the first of the threats. Threats, Mr. Kelsey, from somebody my brother and I were both certain had died years ago—somebody," his voice was a shaky whisper, "who has returned as if from the grave—from the dead—"

He paused, and his haunted eyes jerked around. Twilight gloom was creeping in through the windows—from below came the faint hum of rush-hour traffic.

"At first both my brother and I refused to believe it—it was too incredible. Besides, the threats came by telephone. But then, last night—" Suddenly he looked straight at the private detective. "Mr. Kelsey, do I seem to you the kind of a man who, when wide awake and in control of my faculties, could suffer from—hallucinations?"

Kelsey looked at that face—pasty, haggard, frightened. Weak it was, but yet it was sane—terribly sane. The young agent shook his head. "Offhand, I would say no."

"Then you will understand why I am so shaken! Last night, Mr. Kelsey, I was walking up one of the paths to our house. It was dark—and cold. I don't know just when it was, I had been lost in thought. But suddenly I saw it!" Beads of sweat broke out on his face. His voice rose shrilly. "It was there—in the bushes! I could see the arms and chest—naked—naked and full of those horrible red gashes! The mutilations! Gashes—scores of them all the way through the body! I knew then! I knew!" he was almost screaming "I didn't have to see the face! There was only one thing that could have made those horrible mutilations—if I told you, you wouldn't believe—you'd say we are living in the Twentieth Century, not in medieval times, in the days of horrible practices and barbarism!"

A STRANGE shiver tingled through Glen Kelsey, and he found that he was sitting rigid, every muscle tense, every nerve taut. Vague though Cranford's words were, the man's sheer hysteria had conveyed a sense of something so horrible that Kelsey was stunned. His mind bristled with questions, but it was his policy to listen to a client and let the latter do the talking until finished. Afterward he wished fervently that he had asked those questions, demanded their answers.

"My—my brother Stephen laughed at me." Cranford regained control of himself with an effort. "He said I was seeing things. But I knew it was no ghost. That's why, despite my brother's objections, I was determined to come to you, Mr. Kelsey. Telling no one else, I slipped away this afternoon and came down here by train. Even

so I fear I may have been followed. I can't stay long—I must get back before my absence becomes suspicious. The only reason I came was to entrust something to your care—and to employ your services. I want you to come out to my house tonight—say about ten-thirty. The best way to get there is to drive out—trains are scarce after eight. Naturally you have an automobile?"

"Naturally—" Kelsey said, somewhat dubiously, for the finance company had threatened to confiscate his coupe only today. But then George Cranford, rising, drew out a wallet and counted off ten crisp bills which he placed on the desk—ten bills which made Kelsey's eyes bulge, for they were centuries. "Yes, I have a car all right," the young detective said with conviction now. But then he frowned. "However, Mr. Cranford, it's only fair to tell you I can't promise success without knowing just what I'm to tackle. All that I've gathered so far is that this is some kind of blackmail business—"

"Blackmail?" Cranford's laugh was harsh, bitter. "If only it were just that, Mr. Kelsey! But it is far more serious! And as a matter of fact I've told you more than I should have in this office—I was upset, I'm afraid. As I said, I came here only to entrust something in your care. But by the time you come to my house tonight I will have found out the—the thing that still forces me to keep my lips sealed. You will hear the whole story then—every ghastly word of it! Yes," there was a strange, determined expression on that weak-chinned face now, "even if it costs me my life—for my life doesn't matter now. It is someone else that matters—my niece, Ellen. That girl is like a daughter to me, Kelsey—and it is for her sake that I want the slate cleaned—she is innocent and must be safeguarded!"

"She is your brother Stephen's daughter?" Kelsey asked, to get his bearings.

"No—his niece too. There was a third brother, Richard—he was killed in the World War. But you'll learn all about our family when you get out there. Now," he said hurriedly, glancing at a watch, "I must leave—I'll just make the six o'clock train." He gave Kelsey detailed directions as to how to reach the place—then, lifting up his bulging briefcase, he extracted an oblong, paper-wrapped package, laid it on the desk. "That is what I came to leave with you, Mr. Kelsey. You see, I trust you implicitly. No doubt the contents will surprise you, but please catalogue it and put it in a safe place. It is of—of unheard of value, as you will readily see. But don't examine it until I am safely gone from here—in case I've been followed—"

"Don't you want a receipt?" Kelsey asked.

"No—I don't want anything—and I don't want to see that package again! Just take it for granted until you see me and get my full explanation!"

And with this George Cranford took his hasty departure.

"Peebles," Kelsey said, as his mildeyed assistant answered his ring, "you should be fat—we're bloated plutocrats! But I feel queer about this case. Anyway, I want you to witness the opening of this package—in case there are any questions later."

He turned on the desk lamp and his dextrous fingers undid the cords of the paper-bound parcel. Within was a box of plain cardboard. Kelsey's heart beat strangely as he lifted the lid.

Then he gave a gasp of blank astonishment—and even Mr. Peebles' mild, eyes popped from behind their spectacles.

For the contents, which George Cranford had said was of such unheard of value, proved to be a score of worthless, sharp little stones—just a lot of ordinary gravel such as could be picked up on any road!

CHAPTER II THE BODY BY THE DOOR

THE SECTION OF CONNECTICUT country where the Cranfords lived was not a pleasant spot to arrive at by night. Glen Kelsey hit it about ten-twenty, after a tiring two-hour drive. The night was dark, and up here winter had already come. Hunched over the steering wheel, Kelsey sent his little coupe bouncing over the last stretch of lonely dirt road which stemmed from the Boston Post. His mind was still burning with the vexed bafflement he had felt on opening Cranford's amazing package. That, added to Cranford's haunted terror—his guarded statement about a dead person coming back to life to threaten him and his brother—his hysterical outburst about the mutilated apparition—was enough to confuse a brain even as razor-sharp as Kelsey's.

But, he comforted himself, very soon he must know the answer, for here, revealed by his headlights, was the private branch road which turned into the Cranford estate. He swung the wheel around hard, and sent the coupe up the narrow incline. He was nearing the top when he thought the car gave a slight jerk—

That was when it happened.

An immense shadow, blacker than the night itself, keeled toward the coupe from the side of the road. For an instant absolute horror paralyzed Kelsey; his throat went dry. For the shadow was a huge, toppling tree—it was falling across the road, coming down with a momentum and force which would crash the roof of the coupe like an eggshell and crush Kelsey like a trapped rat!

Somehow Kelsey kept his presence of mind. One foot jammed down on the clutch pedal; the other one on the brake. Then he released the brake and instantly the car rolled backward down the incline. Kelsey ducked back instinctively, even as the huge trunk, missing the edge of the coupe's roof by inches, descended on the engine hood. There was a rending, twisting crash—the little car was jerked to an absolute stop as if a giant hand had clapped down over it. The headlights were smashed to blackness. Spider-web cracks patterned the shatter-proof windshield.

Kelsey climbed out, shaken to the pit of his stomach. He got out a flashlight—and sent its beam stabbing toward the fallen trunk. The engine of the coupe was so much crushed junk. Kelsey examined the base of the tree where it had broken. He saw that the wood was rotten all the way through—yet it seemed to have been sawed too. It might have been an accident. But on the other hand—

He glanced around, his hand close to the gun in his shoulder holster. There was no sign of any marauder. A pale disk of a moon gleamed coldly from a wintry sky. The wind howled through the branches. Close ahead bulked the Cranford house, huge, shapeless, with trees standing like gnarled, twisted dwarfs around it. Though other residences were near the effect was one of utter desolation.

He steeled himself and leaving the battered coupe where it was, walked with shut teeth against the wind to the Cranford house. The great veranda, white-pillared in the old Colonial style, was dark and desolate as Kelsey climbed its steps and crossed to the front door, he found the bell, pushed it.

Almost immediately the door opened.

IN THE dim-lit vestibule between this door and an inner one stood a tall dignified man with thinning dark hair shot with gray and piercing black eyes. He didn't look like a servant, on the other hand he looked nothing like George Cranford.

Kelsey spoke guardedly. "I've come to see Mr. George Cranford—"

"Yes, yes, you're Mr. Kelsey, the private agent," the other broke in to his surprise, and quickly he was ushering the detective in through the foyer to a warm hall beyond. Here, under brighter light, Kelsey turned to look at him. He discovered that the man's dignity was partly due to his severe clothes, especially his collar, which was high, almost clerical.

"My name is Harvey—Curtis Harvey," the man said then. "I'm a guest here—an old family friend and—"

"Here, who is it? Who is it, I say?" A new voice boomed through the hall. A big, heavy-set man appeared from a doorway off the corridor—a man whose hand rested against one pocket of his coat where there showed a suspicious bulge. This man bore a marked resemblance to George Cranford, but he was older, and obviously of harder mould. His face was heavy-jowled, and his eyes were too red over dark pouches. From the start Kelsey did not like Stephen Cranford, even though he saw that behind that hard-boiled mask lurked a fear almost as raw-edged as that of the weaker and younger brother.

"So you're Kelsey are you?" The red-shot eyes were far from friendly as they swept to the detective, and Stephen Cranford's hand still hovered close to that side pocket. He cursed abruptly: "Damn that man of mine—Carlos—why didn't he answer the bell? That's right Harvey," he boomed, "close the outer door—you left it open! And bolt it, Harvey, bolt it!"

Harvey had already returned to the foyer—the outer door slammed, the bolt clicked. The inner door was also bolted. Without a word or invitation for Kelsey to remove his coat, Stephen Cranford strode down the hall. They all passed into a big living room, brightly lit, and bleak and cheerless despite a low-burning hearth fire.

There were two women standing in the room. One was gaunt, angular, dressed in black with a stock around her neck. Her face was rigid as carved stone, her eyes glacial. Close by her, making a strange contrast, stood a girl who could not have been more than twenty. The pallor of her face gave it a startling beauty, gave a lustre to her dark, wide eyes.

There was a silence, during which Kelsey felt they were all regarding him with hostility. Stephen Cranford moved heavily across the room then, straight for a half-empty decanter on the table. As he leaned over, he growled: "It's the private detective George sent for."

So they all knew about it! The gaunt, angular woman spoke without moving. "A fine pass!" her voice

was shrill and harsh. "Detectives coming into our own home! A fine pass!"

Stephen Cranford made a noise in his throat, poured a tall drink and gulped it down thoughtlessly, not offering one to anyone else.

Curtis Harvey made a futile attempt to relieve the situation by formally presenting Kelsey to the two women. The girl proved to be Ellen Cranford—the niece George Cranford had mentioned—daughter of the third brother, Richard, who had died in the World War. The gaunt woman was her mother, Sarah Cranford.

The girl gave the detective a faint smile; the mother remained rigid.

Kelsey, impatient, broke the silence which followed. "Where is Mr. George Cranford?"

Stephen Cranford's voice rose, almost surlily. "He's not in."

"But you expect him?"

"Of course we expect him—he lives here, doesn't he?" Stephen Cranford snapped. He took another drink. "He came back from New York at eight and then he went out again."

"And he hasn't returned?"

"No, he hasn't. Look here, Kelsey," suddenly Stephen Cranford's face had an ugly flush on it, "my brother was a fool to come to you! To be perfectly frank, you're not needed here, and what's more," he added bluntly, almost nastily, "you're not wanted!"

GLEN KELSEY'S innate sense of humor had a habit of cropping up at the most unexpected times. "So I gathered," he said, with an almost pleasant smile, "when that tree on your private road wrecked my car and all but killed me."

It was a bombshell all right. Even Sarah Cranford, the gaunt widow, gasped—the girl, Ellen's eyes went wide with startlement—Curtis Harvey gave an exclamation. But Stephen Cranford demanded truculently: "What are you talking about?"

Kelsey told him. Cranford's face darkened. "Oh, that tree? It's been threatening to fall for months—rotten all through. We should have attended to it. An accident—that's all. I'll pay for the damages."

The way he said it, as though it completely dismissed the whole affair, struck Kelsey like an open insult. Suddenly the detective's eyes blazed. "Look here, Cranford," his voice was hard now, clipped, "I came out here only because your brother hired me. I don't care whether you like me or not, but damned if I have to stand for your insults!"

Stephen Cranford flushed, his face ugly, his hand again near his side pocket. Then suddenly the girl, Ellen, stepped forward impulsively, put a hand on Cranford's arm. "Mr. Kelsey is right Uncle Stephen." Her voice was low, strained. "The least we might do is be civil, try to make him comfortable." Her dark eyes went to Kelsey, and he detected a certain friendliness in them, as if they begged him to understand. Stephen Cranford growled—and then the gaunt, angular woman stepped forward, shrilling: "Ellen, you must keep out of this! You ought to be getting to bed anyway. Come upstairs with me."

And almost like a hawk she swooped upon the girl. Evidently the girl was dominated by her rigid-faced mother, for she did not resist, but suffered herself to be led from the room. But from the doorway she turned, and again her glance went to Kelsey—friendly, almost pleading.

Silence returned to the living room then. Stephen Cranford sulked. Curtis Harvey stood immobile, stroking his chin and still remaining an impartial onlooker. Then Cranford picked up the decanter, found it empty, cursed: "I'll go for another bottle—that man Carlos never does anything." And without a word to Kelsey, he strode out of the room.

Kelsey turned to Harvey, as the two were left alone. "Is he always like this—or is he drunk?"

Curtis Harvey was embarrassed. "I—I'm afraid he has been drinking a bit too much. Something seems to be worrying him—and George too, but they haven't told me. That's strange, too, because usually they have confided in me fully." He explained how for three years he had been a crony of the two brothers, ever since he had retired from the iron foundry he owned and settled in a neighboring house. Before long Kelsey found him an insufferable bore. Stephen Cranford had not returned with his bottle—and George was still absent. Disgusted, the detective could not stand it any longer.

"Look here," he said with sudden decision, "it's no use my staying where I'm not wanted. Where's the nearest hotel?" Harvey named a place. "All right, I'll go there. I'll stay the night. When George Cranford comes you can tell him he can call me there when he's ready for me."

Harvey, making only feeble protests since this wasn't his house, accompanied him to the foyer, unlocking the doors for him. The outer door closed and the bolt clicked again—Kelsey was out on the cold, dark veranda. Pulling up his collar he stepped forward—

And stopped—as his foot contacted with something softly solid!

He stared. Then it was that the hair rose from his scalp, while a chill sensation of horror drove icy needles into his spine.

HIS first shout brought out Curtis Harvey, who had just been going back through the inner door. And Harvey stopped and stared—and a hoarse cry broke from him. “Good God!” Simultaneously he found the light switch in the foyer—and the veranda was suddenly lit up like a stage.

Full in the glare of the electric lights, sprawled before the very threshold of the door—where Kelsey himself had stepped as he crossed the veranda less than ten minutes ago—the body of George Cranford lay in a pool of blood.

And that whole body, from the neck down, was mutilated by huge, jagged gashes which had obviously pierced all the way through clothes and flesh. It looked as if a score of huge spikes had been driven clean through the man—forming a strange, almost symmetrical pattern.

Through Kelsey’s shocked mind came remembrance of that fearful, bloody apparition this dead man had described just a few hours ago—an apparition which he now matched in every detail! Those horrible gashes—

There came a sudden blood-curdling scream. A man’s scream. In the doorway, looking almost as ghastly as the corpse itself, stood Stephen Cranford. His eyes were bulging, his face was pasty and bloodless. He was staring transfixed, as if paralyzed by a nameless primitive terror at the cruel pattern of gashes on his dead brother.

“God!” he shrieked out, and went completely to pieces, “Oh, my God!”

His screams must have gone through the house. In a moment there was another step in the foyer—Sarah Cranford, the gaunt, angular sister-in-law, appeared, a wrap flung hastily over her black dress. She stared at the mutilated corpse. For a moment her granite face blanched—then her mouth clamped into a hard line.

“Well, I always knew he’d come to no good end, Richard used to say so himself!” She pointed a lean, bony finger at the quivering Stephen. “You too!” she shrieked. “You too! Richard was the only decent one of the lot, and he said neither of you would come to any good! He—” she stopped abruptly as through the foyer the girl, Ellen, came running, her pale face startled, surprised, questioning.

“What has happened?” she was asking. “I heard the noise down here and—”

Sarah Cranford displayed an almost feline maternal instinct. The gaunt woman all but leaped to the foyer and turned off the veranda lights before the girl could clearly see the gruesome corpse. “Ellen, darling—” the mother’s shrill voice had softened—“something has happened to Uncle George. An—accident. I want you to go across and get Doctor Saunders—he’s home, I believe.”

THE girl gave a little gasp, then obeyed—she put on the coat she had flung hastily over her shoulders, and after her mother had guided her off the porch on a route which carefully avoided the body, she hurried across the grounds, her slim legs flying.

Glen Kelsey straightened to his feet in the cold darkness. A steely hardness came over him. His voice rose with authority. “Put up the lights!”

Harvey turned them on. The detective at once became the center of that illuminated stage. His tall, athletic figure stood out from the rest—his manner was dynamic, compelling. He began to give crisp orders.

“You, Harvey—” He waved a hand that looked strong and big at the dignified man. “Go in and phone the local police. And—”

“No—no police, do you hear?” the voice of Stephen Cranford rose shrilly. “Damn you, if you bring them in I’ll—” He took a step forward, and suddenly his trembling hand whipped out the ugly automatic from his side pocket. “I’ll handle this, Kelsey! I’ll—”

“You’ll shut up and do as you’re told!” Calmly Kelsey snatched the weapon from the trembling hand, shoved it back into Cranford’s own pocket. He sent Harvey on to the phone, then grabbed Cranford by the arm as if the latter were an unruly child. “Now look here, Cranford,” he bit out. “A client of mine’s been murdered almost under my nose. If you think I’m going to have my reputation ruined, you’re mistaken. I’m going to break this case—and break it fast! And I’m not taking any more gaff from you or anybody else. Now answer me, quick—have you any idea who murdered your brother?”

The crisp, almost hammer-like words were enough to break down the strongest resistance. Cranford shifted, his voice weak. “Good God, if I knew don’t you think I would have told—”

“All right. You don’t know. But after your brother came back from New York he went out. Where did he go?”

Cranford hesitated, then, "He—he said he was going down to our shack on the lake—we use it in summer, it's closed now. But he—he said he had to check up on certain evidence he had hidden there—"

"Where is this shack?" Kelsey demanded. Cranford told him. At this moment a burly figure in a chauffeur's uniform appeared in the veranda doorway. His face was swarthy, almost olive-skinned—he had piercing black eyes which looked even blacker as they stared at the gruesome body. Kelsey whirled on him promptly. "Chauffeur, eh? How long have you been here?"

The olive-skinned man, whose name proved to be Carlos, replied in a voice surprisingly soft for one of his size, a voice with the slightest trace of Spanish accent. "I have been here—it is now one week," he said, still staring at the body.

"One week." Kelsey was interested. He recalled that George Cranford had said the threats from the "dead person returned to life" had begun just a week ago.

CHAPTER III

THE SHADOW OF THE INQUISITION

CURTIS HARVEY CAME OUT with the announcement that the sheriff was on the way just as the girl, Ellen, returned with the neighboring doctor. This time her gaunt mother could not prevent her from seeing the body. The girl burst into sobs—but insisted on remaining on the porch. Her mother comforted her.

Doctor Saunders knelt over the body. He seemed rather a young man with a cold, almost poker-like face. But what was most striking about his appearance was his hair which was prematurely white.

"Any idea of the weapon, Doctor?" Kelsey asked when Saunders had completed a preliminary examination.

Doctor Saunders looked up with cold eyes. "Not the faintest. I can't conceive of any instrument which could make wounds like this—much less a man strong enough to wield it. But I can tell you this. However the murder was done, it was rather a bungling job. Man who did it didn't know his anatomy. None of these wounds in themselves would have been fatal—they all miss the vital parts of the body by inches. It is from the total effect and the loss of blood that the victim died. And though he's actually been dead only a short

time he'd have been as good as dead anywhere back to two hours ago." A shudder coursed through Kelsey. A slow, lingering death! Yet it opened a new angle. The fact that the body was still warm had given him the impression that the murder had taken place after his own arrival. Now he saw that if it had taken place hours ago the body, in a state of coma, could have been hidden nearby—then placed on the porch after the detective was in the house. His head jerked up.

"Are there other doors to this house?"

It was the gaunt Sarah Cranford who answered frigidly: "There's a back door and a cellar door. Why?"

"Want to see if it could have been an inside job," Kelsey clipped frankly. "Harvey—you were with me since I came, so you're alibied. But Stephen Cranford, Mrs. Cranford, and even Miss Cranford all left the living room while I was there." He let it go at that, not adding that any of the three would thus have had time to slip out and put the body on the porch.

He turned back to the doctor, brow furrowed. "You say the murderer didn't know his anatomy, Doc. Strikes me just the opposite—if a person could make so many wounds and yet miss the vital parts wouldn't it show a thorough knowledge of anatomy—and of surgery too?"

"Eh?" the doctor's tone showed a slight impatience. "Nothing of the kind! I'm a surgeon myself—and I'd be ashamed to bungle like this!"

The local police arrived, noisily, in a dilapidated car which had skirted Kelsey's wrecked coupe on the private road. The sheriff, whose name was Boker, was a pompous, corpulent man who seemed pleased to be faced with a genuine murder case. He remained pleased until he saw the body, then he deflated somewhat, looked a little sick, and listened to Kelsey's terse explanations—the latter having presented his credentials.

"One of them Hawkshaw guys, eh?" the sheriff said then, a bit acridly. "Well, from now on you can just kinda step out of this—we can wash our own dirty linen in these parts." He called his deputies and a couple of constables and put them on guard around the house. Kelsey, impatient to get into action, waited only until the local medical examiner, a be-whiskered little man who was frankly shocked at the condition of the body, gave his preliminary report. It tallied with that of Doctor Saunders in all but one significant point. "Feller who did this," said the medical examiner, very thoughtfully, "certainly had a good groundin' in advanced surgery!"

Kelsey's glance went to Doctor Saunders—but the latter only shrugged now. "A matter of opinion," he said. "But I'm afraid I don't agree with you, Doctor—"

"No doubt about it," the country examiner was didactic. "Look how the wounds just miss the left ventricle and the pulmonary arteries—"

Kelsey did not listen to the technical debate. The sheriff was now herding everybody into the house for a preliminary grilling. But Kelsey, jaw set, whirled from the veranda, pulling up his collar, and hurried out into the night alone. He must get to work while the case was still hot!

THROUGH the wintry darkness he moved briskly. He went first to the private road where his battered car still stood beneath the fallen tree. This time he examined it thoroughly, with new purpose. And very soon a gleam came into his eyes. For he found what he had overlooked before—a broken piece of steel wire, attached to a small, stout log which lay nearby. It was easy, all too easy, to understand what had happened. Somebody had cut the rotting tree so it was ready to fall—then had propped it up, over the road, with the loose log. A wire, attached to the prop, had been stretched across the road to another trunk. The thin strand had been invisible in the darkness—and when the coupe had hit it, the jerk had dislodged the prop—the tree, without support, had promptly fallen across the road.

Which meant that any of these people Kelsey had found in the house could have planted this contraption. Someone, doubtless the same someone who had done for George Cranford, had wanted badly to keep Kelsey out of this! Why? Had George Cranford already told Kelsey enough to make the agent dangerous—

Heart pounding, the detective now set out to find the winter shack where George Cranford, according to his brother, had last gone. He had some difficulty finding it—Cranford's directions had been hazy. But at last, after traversing a lonely, wild path, he came to the shore of a small lake, already beginning to freeze over. And on the shore he distinguished the shack—a small, squat building.

He hurried to it. As Stephen Cranford said, it was boarded up—but to his surprise the door was unlocked. Kelsey danced around, furtively. No one in sight. He drew out his thirty-eight, gripped it, then pushed open the door.

It was pitch black inside. He entered cautiously—

with his left hand he got out his flashlight, sent its beam sweeping around. The place was unoccupied all right. His flash picked out an oil lamp on a rickety table—he turned up the wick and applied a match. The lamp burned, glowing with pale yellow light.

The four walls and a rafted ceiling were illuminated. The place was full of fishing tackle and old clothes—here and there a few pieces of furniture. A thick coat of dust had accumulated over everything. But the dust on the floor had been recently disturbed—though Kelsey could find no footprints other than his own. Someone had evidently obliterated them by sliding a shoe over their surface.

He began to scout around systematically. But for a long time he could discover nothing except normal summer equipment—fishing paraphernalia, old pipes, paddles, boots . . .

Then, suddenly, as he was delving behind a pile of old sweaters, he felt something solid, squarish. He had to use his two hands to pull it out.

It proved to be an immense, leather-bound book.

He looked at it. It was obviously an ancient tome, its cover peeling, its paper yellow and aged. And it was not an English book. The words in it were foreign.

Spanish, he decided at once. He scanned the title page. Three words struck him immediately.

"INQUISICIÓN DE ESPAÑA."

He did not know Spanish, but those words were so much like English that a child could have comprehended their meaning.

Inquisition of Spain.

This was some kind of book about that infamous institution of torture which had grown out of the Dark Ages and spread to all corners of the Christian world during the Fifteenth Century.

Tensely curious, the detective continued to finger it. Could it have bearing on the murder? The fact that it was on such an unusual subject; and that it had been obviously hidden here, seemed significant.

The Spanish Inquisition!

Carlos, the new chauffeur, was apparently Spanish. But there was a much more gruesome implication. Through Kelsey's mind swept the terrified words George Cranford had spoken in his office. "—only one thing that could have made those horrible mutilations—if I told you you wouldn't believe—medieval times—the days of horrible practices and barbarism—" Could it be that—

Suddenly a paper fluttered out from between the

pages Kelsey was flipping—a paper which seemed to have some kind of drawing or diagram on it. It fell to the floor, face down. Kelsey stooped quickly to pick it up.

HE DIDN'T hear anything. It was only the sudden cold draught from the door which warned him at all—and then, even as he jerked up with an alarmed curse, and before he could turn—the lamp on the table flickered in the chill breeze, and sputtered out!

The shack was in pitch blackness.

And Kelsey knew he was no longer alone. He knew, even though he couldn't see or hear a thing. He had dropped the book and was standing erect, a clammy coldness on him, his every nerve taut as his right hand whipped up his gun—and his left which still clutched the paper tried to shift it so he could get his flashlight.

But at that moment a solid, leaping form collided against his shoulder with an impact so terrific it sent him sprawling backward across the floor. The paper, simultaneously, was ripped out of his left hand. He tumbled against the wall, jarring his head, slipping—but still clutching his gun. He thought he caught a glimpse of something moving in the darkness—a black, shadowy something. He raised his gun and fired blindly—flame stabbed the gloom in a livid spurt—the report shattered the confines of the shack. But like an echo came the slam of the door, followed by the sound of a key turning in the lock—from outside!

Kelsey, cursing, stumbled to the door in darkness. He hurled himself against it, but it would not give. He put his revolver to the lock and pulled the trigger. Wood splintered—the lock was ripped from its bearings—and Kelsey burst out of the shack, running and looking in all directions. But there was not a soul in sight. Only the darkness, the cold sheen of the lake, the trees.

He realized that his unseen assailant had had plenty of time to make a safe getaway, delaying pursuit by locking the shack door. A groan escaped Kelsey. He should have been on his guard! Why had he let himself be taken by surprise? Why?

The answer came home to him with a shock. The reason was that he had been working on the hunch that the criminal was one of the people he had left at the Cranford house. He had felt safe in the shack because he had known the police were not permitting anyone to leave that house.

Which indicated that if the person who had attacked Kelsey was the criminal—and somehow Kelsey felt it was—then the criminal was an outsider, who had not shown himself at the scene at all!

A sudden surprised exclamation broke from Kelsey—for in that moment he made a discovery which caused him to forget his conjectures about the criminal. For, until now, he had not realized that his left hand was still clutching something.

A corner of that paper the unknown assailant had ripped from his fingers! He had retained a tiny piece of it in his grip.

Hope surging through him once more he returned to the shack and relit the lamp, this time holding his gun ready. The book, of course, was gone. He examined the little scrap of paper, keeping a corner of his eye on the door.

It was the middle half of what was obviously meant to be a human face. It was crudely drawn in black, and only the lower part of the eyes, the nose and lips showed. The rest had been torn off. The features were almost squarish and lacked proper perspective. He couldn't tell whether this was the face of a man or a woman. And certainly he couldn't recognize it as a portrait of any of the people he had seen. Far from aiding him toward a solution this scrap of paper with its crude-formed face only added to his utter bafflement. Like the package of worthless stones, it seemed to fit nowhere!

Nevertheless, he tucked it carefully in his wallet and put it away for future reference.

Then, leaving the shack after failing to find anything else, he made his way back to the Cranford house.

EVEN as he was moving up the path to the veranda he got a surprise whirl made him gasp. For he almost collide with a hurrying figure who was coming down the path. The figure stepped back—in the darkness he recognized the young but prematurely white-haired Doctor Saunders.

Kelsey stared at him. "I thought," said the detective, slowly, "that the sheriff was not letting anyone leave the house."

Doctor Saunders smiled coolly, and gave a ready explanation. It seemed that the sheriff, if not so efficient, was at least quick. He had grilled everybody with lightning rapidity, told them they were all under suspicion since he had no idea who could have done it, and then gone off together with the medical examiner—taking the mutilated body of George Cranford for an autopsy in the village morgue. That had not been more than fifteen minutes after Kelsey had left—and before he could even have reached the shack. Two constables had been left to guard the house,

but evidently the ban on leaving the place had been lifted, for the constables had permitted all to come and go as they pleased.

"And so I'm on the way home, Mr. Kelsey," the doctor finished. "I'm rather tired—and upset," and he walked off toward his own house.

Kelsey, his mind whirling, climbed to the Cranford veranda, now relieved of its gruesome burden, though the bloodstains were still there. Again, Kelsey told himself, his fine calculations had been upset. For if anyone could have left the house at will during his absence—anyone might have slipped out and hurried to that shack in time to wrest the book and paper from him.

But, thank God, there was a constable at the door. From him at least Kelsey might verify the time anyone did go out—also he could find if Doctor Saunders had just left now or had actually gone out much sooner! Hopefully, he strode to the constable.

And then once more a groan of frustration broke from him. For the constable was sprawled back in a chair, snoring in peaceful bliss. And when Kelsey roused him, the man, somewhat of a yokel, yawningly said he didn't remember just when he had fallen asleep, nor did he know who had gone out. Kelsey gathered that he didn't care either.

His young face a mask of bitterness, Kelsey strode into the house. In the living room, where the fire had long since gone out and the air was like an icebox, he found Curtis Harvey dozing in a chair. The dignified ex-iron manufacturer started up, then smiled. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Kelsey. Everyone seems to have gone to bed, but with the constable at the door I didn't know whether I had the right to leave or not."

Kelsey made a wry face. "You can leave if you want—nobody'll stop you."

Curtis Harvey sighed, heavily. "It's been a terrible business, hasn't it? Have you found anything?"

Kelsey answered the question with another. "What do you know about Doctor Saunders?"

Harvey looked shocked. "But surely you don't suspect him! He's a bit cold, but he's really a fine sort. He's lived here a year and we all like him. I can't connect him with anything as horrible as this! They say his hair turned white when his wife died—and he's quite young. Well, good night, Mr. Kelsey—and good luck."

Kelsey, left alone, threw off his coat and hat, as if he didn't realize the coldness of the living room—and sank into the easy chair Harvey had vacated. The light

annoyed him. He turned it off and sat down again. In the darkness his mind groped. He had tackled many cases, but never one with such crazy complications as this. If only George Cranford could have unsealed his lips before his horrible death!

HIS brain aching, the detective sank back, closed his eyes. He fell into one of those half-dozes in which the mind alone keeps functioning and everything else is shut out. How long he dozed he did not know— But suddenly he was wide awake, sitting up with a jerk, his senses acutely alert.

He blinked his eyes in the cold darkness, strained to peer through the gloom. His breath caught, as dimly, he saw a figure—a furtive, shadowy figure, moving across the room. Kelsey did not move, but his hand slowly drew out his gun. He held his breath while his heart thumped against his ribs. Certainly, with the constables at the doors, asleep but nevertheless easy to rouse, the criminal wouldn't dare—

The shadowy figure moved on, making a sort of swishing sound as of soft-soled slippers against the carpet. Kelsey, still motionless in his chair, watched, waited. But the dim form didn't cross in his direction at all—evidently it was unaware of the detective's presence in the dark room. Crossing the parlor, the figure passed through a doorway to an adjoining room, leaving the door ajar. There was a faint click, and a light went on within, slanting out through the cracks of the partially opened door.

Kelsey rose then and, stealthy as a cat, moved to the door. He peered in.

He saw Stephen Cranford, clad in a low-necked dressing gown and pajamas, rummaging madly in a big secretary, pulling out drawers, emptying cubby-holes.

Evidently some sixth sense warned Cranford of the detective's presence then, for of a sudden he whirled from the desk, his face going from white to alcohol-flushed red, his hand darting toward his dressing-gown pocket.

"Don't you think a good night's sleep would do you a world of good, Mr. Cranford?" Kelsey, who had made no effort to conceal his presence now, stood smiling in the study doorway, the light of the desk lamp on his face.

Cranford's red-shot eyes flamed. The man had evidently drowned his former terror in drink and now was more truculent than ever. "So you're still playing snoop-dog, Kelsey? Well, I'm going to give you

some good advice. Take your nose out of this affair." There was a threat in his voice now. "It's none of your concern. I'm taking care of it, and I'll handle it."

Kelsey's smile became slightly acrid. "And I suppose you gave the worthy sheriff the same advice?"

Cranford scowled. "Don't be wise. You can take it or leave it. But if you stay you're staying against my will—understand that. I don't want you, and I'm not offering you any room in my house."

"The perfect host," Kelsey sighed. "But I don't want a room. Your chair in the living room is comfortable enough."

Cranford made a noise that sounded like "Bah!" but he glanced back at the desk, almost longingly it seemed. Then he cursed fluently, pulled down the roll top of the secretary and locked it, put out the desk lamp, and strode reluctantly from the room. Kelsey went back to the easy chair in the living room. Cranford passed into the hall and ascended the steps, his slippers shuffling, his voice still cursing.

CHAPTER IV KNIFE STUFF

KELSEY WAITED for quite a while to make sure Cranford had abandoned his furtive errand. Then the detective rose, slipped into the study, and relit the desk lamp. The lock of the secretary occupied him not more than two minutes—his penknife pried it open. Rolling up the top he commenced to emulate the former movements of Cranford. Only instead of rummaging frantically, he conducted a more systematic search. He found letters, papers—but they did not have any interest for him—they all related to simple and obvious business matters which neither had bearing on the crime nor on the life or conduct of the two Cranford brothers. But he continued to search knowing that something of importance should be here—otherwise why had Cranford sneaked down like a thief to rifle his own desk, and why had he left it so reluctantly? Cubby-hole after cubby-hole, drawer after drawer he went through, examining each scrap, looking—

Suddenly he stiffened upright, his ears intent.

Outside the study door, which he had purposely left

open just a crack, he could hear a furtive movement. Not to be taken off his guard, he quickly slid down the roll top, moved to the door and opened it. Then he stared.

Standing there, peering at him with wide startled eyes, was Ellen Cranford. The girl wore a dark kimono over her negligee; her slim ankles were bare over pointed, high-heeled slippers. Her dark hair fell to her shoulders in curled ringlets. She had been crying, her face showed lines of suffering and strain.

Kelsey, flushing guiltily, turned to face her. He felt foolish and at a loss for words.

It was the girl who spoke. "I—I wanted to see you alone, Mr. Kelsey," she said, low, tense; and did not question him about rummaging in the desk. She came forward, into the study. "I tried to sleep but I couldn't. When I thought of poor Uncle George—" Her lips quivered, her eyes grew large and luminous behind fresh tears. She steadied herself, came closer. She was really quite pretty. "I—I think you are someone I can trust, Mr. Kelsey. Uncle George wouldn't have picked you otherwise. What I wanted to tell you is that there is something in my possession which—which I might want to entrust to you, say for safe-keeping. Could you accept it without—asking questions or being too curious?" She put a hand on Kelsey's arm, impulsively. "Could you?"

Kelsey stood, looking at her keenly, almost detachedly. After a moment he said: "Yes."

"Then—if I give it to you, you will understand. I cannot explain yet. I must wait until it seems absolutely necessary—and safe. You see it is a—a package and—"

"A package?" The detective's brow went up in wrinkles, and something clicked like the fitting piece of a jig-saw puzzle. Once more he saw a bunch of worthless pebbles on his desk in New York. His keen brain was racing as he spoke slowly to the girl. "I'm not going to question you—you probably have your own good reasons for wanting to keep the thing a secret. But there's one thing I wish you would tell me. Does anyone know about your having this—this package, except you?"

"Yes," the girl nodded unhesitatingly. "My Uncle Stephen knows—but—but he mustn't know I spoke to you."

"He won't. And be sure you don't mention it to anyone else." The detective's cheeks bore a strange flush of excitement. "Don't you think it might be wisest to give me the package now?" he asked.

"No." Her eyes looked frightened. "Not now! Tomorrow. But now, I can't—"

He patted her hand. "All right. You run along and get some sleep. You can give me the high-sign any time."

Her fingers curled over his, gratefully. Then she was gone.

KELSEY stood for a moment, brows contracted. Then he went back to tackle the desk, resume his search. And at last he found it; knew at once it connected. It was just part of an old, faded newspaper clipping—but it was from a Spanish newspaper!

He glanced at it under the desk lamp. On top he saw a date: *14, Abril, 1919*. He scanned the lines of Spanish words. His eyes soon gleamed. Yes, there it was again—not three words now, but only one: *Inquisición*. The Inquisition once more! Wishing he knew more than just a stray word or so of Spanish, but feeling that at last his luck was beginning to change, he pocketed the clipping and—

Against the nape of his neck he felt something hard, cold and sharp. Something that prickled the flesh and sent little shivers down his spine.

"Do not move," came a soft yet menacing voice, a voice which held a slight accent. "I am most adept at this, you understand. And the knife, it is sharp."

Kelsey stood still, flesh on his neck taut against the menacing pressure of the blade. Without turning his head more than a trifle, he could just glimpse Carlos, the burly, olive-skinned chauffeur, standing there behind him, in an undershirt now as he held the ugly stiletto. A knifer, this Spaniard! And a mean one—the dark eyes showed the willingness, if not the eagerness, to draw blood.

Again a rage against himself gripped Kelsey. He had forgotten that in going out, the girl, Ellen, had left the study door wide open—so that Carlos had been able to slip in without disturbing the door and thus caught Kelsey by surprise.

With a sudden curse he kicked one foot back and his heel caught the Spaniard's shin. The knife dug into the back of his neck—then it wavered and dropped as Carlos gave a grunt of pain and half doubled.

"Stop it, Kelsey!" came another voice, all too familiar in its thick, ugly bass. "I've got you covered—and I mean business!"

In the doorway stood Stephen Cranford, his ugly automatic leveled. His face was black with rage. Obviously he had reenforced himself with still more liquor. He was disgustingly drunk, but there seemed to be no physical limit to his capacity—his hand which

gripped the blackmouthed automatic was perfectly steady. But his eyes looked crazed—and it was those eyes which told Kelsey that in his present state the man was capable of murder, ready enough to pull that trigger.

"Put your hands up, Kelsey! Put them up!"

Kelsey obeyed. Cranford came in, walking without the slightest stagger, closing the study door behind him. Carlos, his face swarthy, recovered his knife and menaced the detective from behind. Cranford stepped in front of Kelsey, revolver leveled.

"Now, Carlos?" It was a question.

"I keep watch as you said," the Spaniard replied. He nodded toward the open desk with its pried lock. "I found him there—something, I think, he took."

Cranford turned to Kelsey, his red-flamed eyes vicious. "Just what did you find in my desk, Kelsey?"

Kelsey shrugged. "What would I find?"

Cranford took a step forward. "Damn you, Kelsey, I told you to keep your nose out of my affairs. You'd better come across now. You're in a tight spot. For two cents I'd let you have it—" His finger tightened impulsively on the trigger.

Kelsey, nerves taut, tried to awake reason in the surly drunkard. "With the constables outside?" he reminded.

"This study is almost soundproof with the door closed as it is," Cranford's smile was a blighting leer. "And Carlos can always use his knife!"

Kelsey grinned, wanly. "A nice pair, aren't you? What is Carlos, really? A bodyguard—or just a heel?"

Carlos growled. "Shall I kill him, Mr. Cranford?"

Cranford took another step toward the detective. "Kelsey, you got something out of my desk. You're going to give it to me if I have to strip you naked. And then, damn you, I'm going to put an end to your meddling! Maybe Carlos will take you to some nice lonely place in my car—if we can get you out without waking those yokel constables. If not we've got a cellar downstairs where you can rot before anyone finds you! Anyway, you'll be put where you can't snoop around any longer."

"And why?" asked Kelsey, mildly. "Afraid I might find out who murdered your brother?"

CRANFORD'S face went livid. His eyes seemed to get closer together and their gleam was berserk. "You dirty—I've a mind to put you out of the way right here and now! I hate your guts, Kelsey! I've hated you ever since you first poked your dirty nose into my house."

"Well," Kelsey conceded, "I wouldn't exactly climb the highest mountain for you either, Cranford!"

"Get funny! But see where it lands you! Here, Carlos, put up that clumsy knife—cover him with my gun. If he tries anything let him have it. I'm going to search him."

Carlos took the gun and covered Kelsey from behind. Cranford stepped close and his hands felt over the detective's clothes. Kelsey hated the pawing, but remained rigid, silent. Cranford found the detective's thirty-eight and he also found the little twenty-two Kelsey always kept secreted under his vest for emergencies. He took both guns and then searched Kelsey's inside breast pocket and drew forth the detective's wallet—the clipping was not there, Kelsey having put it in another pocket. From the wallet, however, Cranford extracted the torn scrap of paper the detective had retained in the shack—the paper with the partial, crude-drawn face on it. Cranford looked at it, and then Kelsey got a new shock of surprise.

For at the sight of that partial picture Cranford's eyes bulged—again sheer, stark terror blanched his heavy-jowled face—a visible shudder went through him.

He jerked out: "Where did you get this? Where, damn you?"

Kelsey countered the question with another. "Who is it—friend of yours?"

Cranford's rage returned, but he was still shaky as he thrust the scrap of picture in a pocket and stepped forward to resume his search again. This time Kelsey was ready. He had seen his opportunity, and now he took it. Carlos was still standing behind, automatic leveled at Kelsey's back. Cranford was starting to paw over the detective's clothes again.

Like a streak, Kelsey's arm shot out. Before the shaken Cranford knew what was happening, Kelsey had seized the collar of his dressing gown and wrenched him around completely, his own body pivoting—so that Cranford was swung before him into a line with the surprised Carlos' revolver. Kelsey struck Cranford once then, hard across the jaw. The blow made a sharp jarring crack. Cranford sagged with a grunt, went down—and out.

Carlos leaped to one side so he could bring his revolver to bear. But Kelsey, grinning now, sent the Spaniard's gun arm up with a swift right thrust, then jabbed a left flush to the chauffeur's jaw. The big man was sent half off balance, his gun clattered to the floor,

but the blow only jarred him—his jaw was apparently of iron. Staggering to the wall, he cursed lividly in Spanish. His knife flashed suddenly and whizzed through space. Kelsey ducked and the flashing blade all but grazed his face and imbedded itself in the top of the secretary. Then the detective, still grinning, stepped forward and met the chauffeur with a crashing left swing. Again Carlos shook off the blow, but now, without his weapons, his nerve oozed—suddenly he cowered and cringed. And Kelsey jerked him up by his undershirt, big as the Spaniard was.

The detective's voice was almost disarmingly cordial. "How would you like to be charged with attempted murder?"

The chauffeur's olive skin became a dirty gray. He cowered. "But I did not do it!" he protested. "I did not kill George Cranford—I do not even know who killed him!"

"Shut up! I didn't say you killed him. I'm talking about what you tried to do to me. Now you can take your choice. Either you'll come along with me where we can talk, or I call one of the constables and tell him about your knife-throwing talents—which, incidentally, you ought to practice up a bit—your aim is punk. Well, what is it to be?"

Carlos decided it was not to be the constable. Kelsey bent down over the prone and unconscious Stephen Cranford to recover his revolvers and the scrap of picture. "Your employer will be out for a while—more from the drink than from my friendly jab. Let him repose here in peace—we'll find another cosy spot."

THE kitchen proved to be the place where there was the least chance of interruption. The first furtive light of dawn showed outside the window as Kelsey forced the cowering Carlos to sit opposite him at the kitchen table.

"You've been here a week," Kelsey began crisply. "Right?"

A sullen nod.

"And you were hired as a bodyguard—chauffeuring is just part of your duties. Correct?"

This time Carlos hesitated, but finally nodded once more.

"And from whom were you supposed to protect Cranford?"

Carlos shook his head. "I was not told. It seems, he and his brother, they were threatened by something. But I was told just to protect them, and be on hand."

"Spaniard, aren't you? Well now—" Kelsey suddenly

drew out the clipping he had taken from Cranford's desk, and thrust it before the chauffeur. "Translate this for me."

Carlos shifted. "W-what is it? If it is anything you took from Mr. Cranford, I—"

"Translate it!" Kelsey leaned over the table, eyes narrowed. "Or else, by God, I'll try a revolver butt on that Gibraltar jaw of yours!"

Carlos translated it. He proved to be fairly well educated, for he gave a smooth performance. Nor could he have been faking it—he gave it too quickly, and by following the Spanish words and finding an association here and there, Kelsey knew he was getting it all—without deletions or changes. He took it down word for word in a notebook he carried.

The clipping turned out to be only the continued column of an article. Whatever had gone before was missing, and though the date, April 14, 1919, was on the top, the first line of the clipping started in the middle of a continued sentence.

and was unconscious when found.

Farrar underwent another blood transfusion in the Madrid hospital today, but the physicians express doubt that he can last the night. Although dying, he has been charged with the theft of the Rodriguez collection. In his delirium he has spoken continually of having been tricked and has uttered vows that he will be revenged.

The robbery itself will be remembered as the most daring ever to take place in this city. The Rodriguez collection, containing the most rare and valuable jewels of that historical heirloom, was on exhibition for a single night at the Museum of Historical Curiosities of Madrid. The well-known Inquisition exhibit was moved to a rear storeroom to make space, for though the jewels occupied but one small case, the crowds were great in number. During the press of people the jewels were audaciously snatched before the eyes of the guards, the robber then mingling with the crowd. Immediately the museum was surrounded by the police, and every person was routed out and forced to undergo a search as he left. But though Farrar was among those who had been in the museum the jewels were not found on him, and it was only today when he was brought to the hospital that he was identified as a famous international jewel-thief.

The jewels have not been recovered, though the reward has been doubled.

Twice Kelsey read the translation, his heart pounding, his eyes scarce concealing their excitement. Here, unless he was mistaken, was the key for which he had waited! Only, part of it—perhaps whatever had been in the other column—was missing. But it was a real lead, at last!

While these thoughts rushed through his mind, Kelsey was studying Carlos, covertly. But if the strange, partial story had any significance to the Spaniard he concealed it well.

Again Kelsey leaned across the table. "What part of Spain do you hail from?"

"Barcelona," came the prompt reply.

"But you've been to Madrid?"

"Never!" It was emphatic.

Kelsey now drew out the partial picture of the face which he had found in the shack, and which had produced such terror in Stephen Cranford. He thrust it under the Spaniard's face. "Ever see this?"

Carlos looked at it. No recognition came to his dark-skinned face. He shook his head. "I have never seen any person who looks like this. And this, it does not look like a human face at all."

"Bum artist drew it, I guess," Kelsey grunted, still puzzled by it. He took it back and replaced it in his wallet.

At this moment there were sounds from the front part of the house. Steps, voices—one voice which rose booming above the rest, raised in infuriated protest and complaint. Kelsey rose, a grim smile flickering over his lips. "Sounds like your good-natured employer has come to—and also that the sheriff has returned. O.K. Carlos, you can go now, but hereafter I'd advise you to suppress that knife-throwing habit of yours—they hang people for it in this state."

Kelsey went out to the living room, Carlos retiring to his own quarters to put on a shirt.

CHAPTER V "THE—WOMAN—"

IN THE EARLY MORNING the living room looked bigger and bleaker than ever. In the middle of the floor stood Sheriff Boker, arms akimbo. Two deputies flanked him. And before them, hair disheveled, dressing gown rumpled, one hand expostulating wrathfully and the other rubbing his jaw tenderly, stood the infuriated Stephen Cranford. At the sight of Kelsey the man almost went berserk once more. He pointed to the detective and roared in his thick bass: "There he is! He knocked me down, I tell you! In my own house! He tried to rifle my

desk—I demand his arrest! How do I know he didn't kill my brother? He came up here and it was right after we found my brother dead!"

Kelsey sighed. "So it's come to this. Am I under arrest, Mr. Sheriff?"

The sheriff was pompously officious. "Young feller, you're too—flippant," he got the word out proudly. "You better be ready to give a good account of yourself."

"I will, after Cranford tells you how he tried to put me out of the way."

Cranford choked. "I demand that he leave my house this instant!"

The sheriff shook his head: "Nothin' doin'. He's stayin'—he's under suspicion now."

Kelsey grinned maliciously. "Next time you want to get rid of me, Cranford, just tell the sheriff I'm an angel."

At about nine A.M. the sheriff summoned everybody, including Curtis Harvey and Doctor Saunders, for what he called a preliminary to the inquest, which was scheduled for the next day. The grilling, which left the country police official as baffled as ever, took the entire morning, and was interrupted only by a late breakfast served in the living room. Forced to remain with the rest, Kelsey was soon almost beside himself with impatience. What he wanted more than anything else now was to make a phone call, but not here where everybody could listen!

Meanwhile he occupied the time as best he could. More than once he contrived to maneuver close to Ellen Cranford when she was apart from the others—so she could have a chance to tell him whether she wanted to hand over the "package." But she didn't mention it at all. On the contrary her dark eyes avoided the detective's. Kelsey finally let the idea drop, and went out to the white-pillared veranda to examine the floor and walls in the revealing sunlight—looking closely at the bloodstains which were now a dull, rusty brown. He was thus engaged when the investigation ended at last. Immediately, anxious to get to the nearest telephone outside the police-filled house, Kelsey approached Doctor Saunders. The young, white-haired doctor was dressed this morning in a rough, low-necked flannel shirt and corduroy trousers. Evidently he had intended to take a hike.

"You live right across the way, Doctor, I understand," Kelsey said. "I've got to make a long-distance call—privately. Mind if I use your phone?"

"I'd be glad to let you," the doctor's tone was apologetic, "but unfortunately my phone is out of order."

Kelsey cursed, grunted a laconic "O.K." and turned again to complete his examination of the porch.

"Pardon me, Mr. Kelsey—" It was Curtis Harvey, formal as ever in his sedate clothes and almost clerical collar, who had approached timidly, "but I overheard you asking the doctor about using a phone outside this house. Why not use mine—I can assure you of privacy."

Kelsey turned eagerly. "Thanks—a lot."

HARVEY'S residence was just a stone's throw past Doctor Saunders', which itself was opposite the Cranford mansion. The retired iron manufacturer lived quite modestly in a little, trim, two-storied house. He kept only one servant, an old woman who came in by day.

Ushering Kelsey into a modest but comfortable living room, he showed the detective the telephone, and then discreetly withdrew to wait on the porch.

Kelsey put in a call for his New York office. And in a few minutes he was talking tersely to Peebles, his faithful, clerkish assistant.

"Peebles, I want you to get right to work. First, get hold of the Passport Bureau—or even call my old department in Washington if you have to. Find out if the Cranford brothers left, or could have left Spain some time shortly after April Fourteenth, Nineteen-nineteen. Check it carefully."

"Yes, sir." The great thing about Peebles was that he never questioned orders and, better yet, never had to have them repeated.

"When you've done that, Peebles, get hold of Bradstreet's or Dun's. See what you can find out in a general way about the Cranfords' former business affairs. What business they were in, what their standing was—you know, the usual dope."

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"Nope. But call me back the minute you know. I'll wait." He gave the number, hung up.

It was well into the afternoon before the answering call came. Kelsey had been stretching out on a sofa in the corner, tired from lack of sleep and bored by the idle talk of his polite host, Harvey. At the sudden continuous ring which indicated long distance the detective literally sprang to the phone—then, when Harvey had once more withdrawn, "O.K., Peebles—shoot!"

Peebles' report was a model of terseness. "The Cranford brothers were discharged, honorably, from the A.E.F. in France, January, Nineteen-nineteen. They did not return to America until May Tenth of the same

year. No record where they spent the intervening time. They sailed from France, but could have crossed the border from Spain after the April Fourteenth date you mentioned. Will that do, sir?"

"Do?" Kelsey's voice could hardly conceal his elation. "Peebles, remind me to give you a raise—if there's any money left. But now the other question—"

"Both brothers retired from active business several years ago. They were mixed up mostly in various speculations, some of which appear to have been rather shady. There was some trouble about income-tax evasion—some money they couldn't account for. Of the two, George Cranford seems to have the best record—he conducted a brokerage business and had good standing. But Stephen Cranford seems to be on the shady side."

"Peebles, the raise is hereby doubled. And unless something happens to me, I'll be seeing you very, very soon!"

He hung up, his face flushed with excitement. He hurried out of the room—found Harvey patiently waiting on the porch, thanked him, and took his departure.

His stride was determined, brisk, as he went back to the Cranford house. He was ready for the next step now. And that was to have a little interview with Stephen Cranford.

STEPHEN CRANFORD was not at the house, however. He had gone out for a walk, with the permission of the police. Kelsey learned what direction he had taken, and hurried that way. He caught up with Cranford as the latter was plodding along a path through the woods, obviously trying to walk off his hangover.

Cranford was alone; no bodyguard with him now. At sight of Kelsey he whirled like an infuriated bulldog, and gave a growl. As always his hand began to move toward a pocket. But Kelsey's first words checked him strangely.

"Cranford," the detective's voice was just as cold as the steel of any revolver, "when I'm finished talking you'll thank me for coming to you instead of to the sheriff. Because, unless I'm wrong, what I've found out is something you wouldn't exactly relish having broadcast. At least I'm giving you your chance—"

Cranford's body seemed to stiffen as he walked—a look of apprehensive fear showed under the truculent mask of his features. His growl lost its conviction, and his voice failed to conceal a note of something far more than just curiosity. "Well—" he demanded.

Kelsey had fallen into step beside him. "This case is clearing up, Cranford. It's almost open-and-shut now as far as I'm concerned."

"You mean—you've found the murderer?" His tone was growing more and more tense.

"I'm not saying that. But I've found the motive." Suddenly, unexpectedly, the detective's right hand snapped over Cranford's arm like a clamp of steel, and the grip made the heavy-jowled man wince. "Cranford—why did you change that package?"

In a way it was pathetic then, how Cranford's face got all flabby and gray and old. It was pathetic how he said, in a trembling voice so far from convincing: "What package?"

"Oh, cut it, Cranford," Kelsey sighed. "You're a punk actor. I've got you dead to rights, and you can't squirm out of it. You know your brother came to my office with a package. A package of worthless stones—"

"I—I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

Kelsey flung down the other's arm with a curse of exasperated impatience. "All right, I'll refresh your memory for you. You're not going to like it, but you're going to hear it anyway. First of all, your brother George was not your kind, and you knew it. He had a streak of conscience—some strain of decency. But you, Stephen Cranford, you're rotten through and through. It's only on account of your brother's last wish—the welfare of your niece Ellen—that I'm wasting any time on you. You're just a rat, and now that you're cornered you'll begin to squeal like all rats. I know, Stephen Cranford—deny it if you dare—I know that you—"

He never finished that accusation. This time there was no warning. All he knew was that something solid crashed against the back of his skull with stunning force—his brain reeled in a kaleidoscope of dancing lights—then the lights went out, and he sank into darkness and knew no more—

THERE was a vile taste in his mouth. That was the first thing Kelsey knew. His eyes blinked and because they met darkness he thought he was still out. Then he saw skeleton tree branches, a wan moon, a few cold stars. It was night. He writhed—and his head began to jump with pain as if a hammer were beating against it. He found that he was lying in the same spot of woods where he had last been walking with Stephen Cranford. His hat, which had fallen off, was lying battered beside him. He felt with tender fingers at the base of his skull. There was a bump the size of an egg. He sat up with an effort and felt through his pockets,

and was surprised to find nothing missing. Both his guns, the clipping, the scrap of pictured face, and his notebook, had been left intact. He had not been searched. He struggled to his feet, his knees wobbling, his brain groggy.

He staggered through the night back toward the Cranford house, the chill air and a sort of inchoate rage the only things that gave reviving strength to his muscles. When he reached the estate it seemed the whole world had turned upside down. Constables, deputies, were rushing around the grounds like chickens without heads—lanterns bobbed. Everybody was out. And Kelsey almost collided dizzily with sheriff Boker himself.

"Kelsey!" the sheriff's eyes popped. Then his voice became an ominous challenge. "Where have you been? They said you went out to meet Stephen Cranford—you were the last to see him!"

"The last to—" Kelsey's groggy brain was trying to comprehend.

"We're searching for him. Don't take no Sherlock to figure that an innocent man doesn't run away. We've got a warrant for Cranford's arrest—for the murder of his brother!"

"So he disappeared—" Kelsey's faculties were still slow, dull. He swayed.

The sheriff stared at him in sudden surprised alarm then. "Hell, you're hurt!" The official's tone became almost contrite. He pulled out a flask from a hip pocket, grunting: "For emergency police purposes." A good healthy swig did a world of good for Kelsey, took that awful taste from his mouth and cleared his groggy head.

"I—I took an awful wallop on the bean," he explained in answer to the sheriff's question. "In fact, I think it was intended to kill—but my skull is thick." He added ruefully: "Too damn thick!"

He volunteered no more information but instead extracted some from the sheriff. A posse had been organized. Roads were being blocked. Cranford would never go far. "Better go inside and lie down," the sheriff advised Kelsey then. "I've got to direct the boys. We got to spread out—make a net like. A what do the papers call it—"

"Cordon," Kelsey grunted, and moved toward the house. But he did not go to the house. Instead, shaking his head to clear off the last clinging veils of dizziness, he began to conduct a private search of his own. The police were spreading far from the house and grounds. Kelsey, on the other hand, followed a different hunch

and remained close to the Cranford house. He scouted around, peering particularly into trees or heavy brush. His head was still throbbing, but a desperation guided him on.

And then, as he was skirting a fringe of heavy shrubbery, something—a faint rustle or a movement, caught his attention. He stopped, his eyes straining through the gloom. And then a startled cry burst from his dry throat.

There, moving through trees and brush, he saw what at first he thought must be some trick of his still groggy eyes. It looked like some grotesque, shadowy animal—a hunched thing which crawled, snail-like, across the ground. Kelsey jerked out his gun and, with uncanny chills coursing through him, lurched forward. And even as he lurched he saw the thing for what it was. It was a human figure, bent beneath some tremendous burden carried over its shoulders. That was what gave the animal-like effect.

Kelsey burst through bushes which scratched his cheeks, and was trying to bring his gun to range. But as he came out of the brush he cursed in cold frenzy—for the figure with its burden had vanished completely! Kelsey scouted, gun ready now, nerves tense. But he saw no sign. His coming must have been seen by the figure—which had escaped, escaped and—

Then it was that, as he stepped backward this time, his foot once more contacted with something softly solid.

HIS heart seemed to stop altogether. He whirled, as if shot. His flashlight came out—its beam flashed down.

A man lay sprawled on the ground in a pool of widening blood. A man hideously mutilated—his torso pierced by huge, bloody gashes—gashes arranged in an identical pattern with those that had been on the body of George Cranford.

Stephen Cranford had met his brother's horrible fate!

The lowered part of his trousered legs was still partially covered by something. An oilcloth-lined sack. It had obviously been used to carry him—then he had been dumped partially out of it. That was why there was no blood trail.

It was only then that the horrified Kelsey realized, with still more of a shock, that Stephen Cranford was still alive!

The gashed chest was rising and falling spasmodically—and from the graying face, twisted

in an expression of inhuman agony, two eyes, half open, were staring up horribly but unseeingly at Kelsey. Kelsey yelled in a hoarse voice for help. His shouts brought the sheriff and several deputies still on the grounds. They carried lanterns, and the scene in the brush was weirdly illumined. The sheriff, dumbfounded by the turn of events, applied his flask to the prone Cranford's lips. Someone rushed off to hunt up Doctor Saunders.

A paroxysm shook the bloody body of Stephen Cranford. The eyes fluttered—from somewhere in the back of the throat came a sound, a rattling, gurgling sound. It was Kelsey who, in the dim lantern light, saw those bloodless lips moving. The detective bent down.

"Cranford—do you understand me? Who did it? Who did it?" He hurled the reiterations at the prone figure, trying to pierce through that growing coma. "Answer, Cranford—try to answer. Who?" The lips moved. Again came gurgling sounds. Then words, vague because they lacked breath.

"The—woman—"

Kelsey's brain was stunned—his eyes bulged. "What? The woman? A woman did this, Cranford? No—you don't know what you're saying—"

"The—woman—" Again an incoherent gurgle.

"Horrible—spikes— The same—" Then again—"The—woman—"

A sudden exclamation of understanding burst from the horrified sheriff. "By God, I know who he means! I know—that mean-faced one! She had the motive too—her daughter gets their money! Where is she?"

"Here I am!"

The shrill voice rose right behind the sheriff, making him whirl. There, at the fringe of the little group, a coat thrown over her, stood the gaunt, angular Sarah Cranford. Her face was more grim and stony than ever. "If he said I did this to him he's lying! I don't know a thing about it! I was walking and heard the rumpus!"

Kelsey was not listening to her. He was bending over Cranford. For the lips were moving in a last effort. The light was fading from the dying man's eyes, but then, as if the horror he had experienced fanned some last spark of life through him, his voice suddenly came louder, though still gurgling. "I told—" he gurgled. "I told—about the elm—in back of the house—the stone! But I lied—I lied—I lied—"

Another paroxysm shook him, he gave a sort of rattling laugh. His body twitched and lay still.

CHAPTER VI THE DEATH LADY

DOCTOR SAUNDERS had not yet shown up but there was no need for him now. The sheriff turned grimly to Sarah Cranford, and began to question her, ready, it seemed, to make an arrest.

Kelsey, however, whirled immediately and though still somewhat groggy, dashed toward the Cranford house with desperate speed. He reached it, skirted around it, and came to the rear peering into the darkness for signs of a huge elm tree. Almost immediately he saw it—unmistakable because it stood out from the rest with its inverted-wine-glass shape.

And at the same time he saw something else.

At the base of the tree, where a big boulder had been rolled aside—bent a shadowy figure! A shadowy figure who was digging frantically into the earth with a short trowel.

Kelsey's gun whipped out, leveled. His voice gritted: "Up with 'em! I've got you—you devil!"

The figure whirled, going rigid. It was cloaked from head to foot, and masked in a long trailing black mask. Two eyes glared at the detective.

Kelsey was stepping forward. "Now let's have a look at you! Let's—"

At that moment the moon disappeared behind a heavy cloud. The night suddenly became pitch black.

Kelsey's revolver blazed as the figure leaped backward in the sudden darkness. The detective pursued, cursing, firing—but the darkness made accurate aim impossible. The figure made for a clump of heavy trees and brush. Kelsey leaped after. He heard bushes crash to his right. He plunged for them—then found that he had been decoyed—the unknown had merely thrown his trowel here. Raging, Kelsey swung about—

A body fell upon him. An arm gripped his neck with almost spine-snapping force. Another hand knocked the gun from his fingers. His assailant proved to be amazingly strong, and Kelsey, still weak from that bump on his head, could not put up a decent fight—was unable to free his fists from the other's gorilla grip. He heard the other's panting breath, felt a hand

closing over his throat, choking him. His brain began to reel again—his eyes blurred. In utter desperation he clutched with wild fingers at his assailant—his hands caught part of the cloak—there was a rending, ripping of cloth as the cloak tore in a wide rent. At the same instant, the moon came out of its cloud again illuminating the night.

And Kelsey felt a shock of sheer primitive horror. For there, revealed in the moonlight, exposed by the gaping rent in the clothes, was the naked chest of his adversary. And that chest was full of hideous red scars—scars whose symmetrical pattern was identical with those on the two murdered men!!

The face of the unknown was still masked, and Kelsey had no chance to see it. He wouldn't have had a chance anyway for, even as he stared in his horror, the fingers closed on his throat. With a terrific lunge he was sent tumbling to the ground, where he lay stunned, almost completely out again. And as he struggled blindly to his feet, he knew the gashed figure was gone—knew that already he had gotten well away.

Kelsey found his gun and shook his head like a dog, again fighting off dizziness. Then something began to prod his consciousness. The girl. Like a hammer the thought beat against him. The girl, now—the girl!

Desperately, prodded by that thought, he was lurching toward the Cranford house again. He reached the veranda, staggered up the steps. It was Sarah Cranford who met him—she was in the doorway, rigid, alone. Evidently the sheriff and constables were still at the body.

"Where's Miss Cranford?" Kelsey jerked out. "Miss Cranford—Ellen—"

"She's not here," came the chill voice.

"Where is she?" In his haste he clutched her arm. She began to look frightened.

"She went over to Doctor Saunders'. He called her up—said he must see her or something. She went—"

"When? When?"

"Just about three minutes before you came."

"The doctor! Wait, are you sure?" The detective's face showed its horror. "God!" he cried. "When I think of that girl—that girl—"

HE WHIRLED, panic lending him fresh strength and putting wings on his leaden feet. He rushed, stumbling through the night. He did not go to Doctor Saunders' house, but hurried past it, hurried until he came to the next residence—the trim, two-storied house of Curtis Harvey.

He climbed the porch, and now his movements suddenly became surreptitious, stealthy. He slipped to the front door, tried it. Locked of course, and bolted. The front windows were also locked. He went around to the side, tried windows there. One was not locked—he got it open, slid it up quickly, and climbed in. He was in a dark room. He got out his flashlight, held it in his left hand while with his right he gripped his gun. He commenced to go through the house, searching, looking everywhere, even opening closets. But the house seemed to be empty. After having gone through every room he descended to the cellar—it was musty, full of rubbish. But it was also empty. A sense of panicky despair and doubt racked him. Had he been wrong, after all? Was it all a mistake?

He turned to leave the cellar, and then—

His nostrils twitched suddenly. A faint, almost imperceptible odor had come to them—an odor at once acrid and sweet.

Chloroform!

His keen nose tried to trace it. It seemed to come from a coal bin to the side. He went to it, light flashing, gun ready. The coal bin was empty. Still he smelled the odor, stronger now. Somewhere around here—the floor; that was where it seemed to come from!

He bent down, but was on his guard now every instant. And then he found it—a square panel in the floor. Hinges—a folded metal handle. It was a trap door! Cautiously he tried it—and it yielded to his first pull. He got it open, slowly, slowly. His pulses were rioting as he peered through the open trap. But he saw nothing but blackness below. He poked his gun through, leaned down.

"I've got you covered," he gritted. "No use trying any tricks!"

Stone walls ricocheted his voice eerily, sending it back to him. But otherwise there was no response. He sent his flashlight stabbing down through the trap, swept it around. He saw no sign of a living soul. There was an iron-runged ladder, however, dropping from the trap. Kelsey started to climb down it—one hand only on the rungs, the other gripping his gun. His flash went cold as something soft swished over his face. A cobweb. Then he was at the bottom of the ladder, on a floor of stone below. Again his flashlight was sweeping its beam around—

Bare but jagged walls of stone, an old keg, junk—it was just an ordinary subcellar. His flashlight swept past another wall—and then stopped suddenly, even as Kelsey's scalp bristled. And there came over him

a wave of eery horror that made him gasp and stare, transfixed.

For there, shining metallicly in the ray of his flashlight, standing upright next to the wall, was the most ghastly object he had ever seen in his life!

Actually it was a hollow statue, made of heavy iron. Its form, crude and thick, was that of an immense woman—with iron-wrought features.

The features were the same crude-drawn ones Kelsey had seen on that scrap of paper!

But had it just been a statue Kelsey wouldn't have looked on it with such horror. It was far more than any mere piece of sculpture! As if drawn hypnotically, the detective came up to the statue.

THE whole front section of the iron body was in reality a great metal door. Kelsey, with cold fingers, pulled at it. It swung out like a vault-door on silent, oiled hinges. And then, peering within, Kelsey went white.

For the inside surface of the solid iron door was full of enormous, protruding spikes—spikes arranged in a neat pattern. Spikes still sticky with blood!

And beyond the spiked door, the hollowed interior of the statue looked like the inside of a great sarcophagus—curved to fit a body—and also full of bloodstains.

And he knew then with shuddering realization, how two men had met their horrible, lingering deaths! Here, before him was one of the oldest and yet most hideous devices of torture and death ever devised by man. Originally invented in medieval Germany, it had been retained and improved by the famous Spanish Inquisition!

It was known as the Iron Maiden!

There was nothing complicated about its working. The victim was forced inside of the hollow interior—the door was closed—and those horrible spikes, skillfully placed so as to miss the vital parts of the body by inches and bring slow death, would pierce the unfortunate wretch through! Knowledge of surgery? Only for the ancient inventor who had designed it. But any fool could operate it!

But to find such a ghastly medieval device in the secret cellar of a house in a civilized country and in a civilized age—this gave the whole thing the lurid quality of a nightmare. And yet Kelsey could see that this Iron Lady was not actually one which had been preserved from ancient times. No, it was a replica—doubtless matching its original model in every detail—but made of modern iron and recently constructed!

It was all clear, gruesomely clear. The “woman” Stephen Cranford had blurted about while dying—this was She! And the “one thing which could have made those gashes” that George Cranford had mentioned in Kelsey's office—here it stood!

A sudden stifled scream made him whirl. But again, in his half-groggy condition, he was too late! Before he could whip up his gun something soft pushed wetly against his face. He choked as the sweet, yet acrid stench of chloroform dizzied and stifled him. A mere whiff of it in his condition was enough to knock him out completely. Once more blackness closed on him. But not for long. The ammonia sting of smelling salts revived him—his eyes blinked open. He began to struggle mechanically—

And felt a sharp, pricking pressure on several parts of his body!

And the realization of his predicament revived him completely, shocked his senses into hideous acuteness.

BOTH hands bound with tight cord before him, a strap across his chest, he was jammed upright in the sarcophagus-like interior of the Iron Woman! And pressing against him, razor-sharp, were the spikes of the door, which was just closed enough to pin him in without quite piercing him! Nor could he apply any pressure on the door—he would simply be pressing himself into the hideous spikes.

And outside the door, holding it easily against Kelsey with just one hand, was Curtis Harvey!

The trap door in the ceiling had been closed. The sub-cellar was illumined by a single dim beam of light coming through a barred aperture.

And nearby, bound hand and foot but not gagged—obviously this sub-cellar was sound-proof—lay Ellen Cranford, white-faced from fright and shock.

Curtis Harvey no longer looked dignified and sedate. He was smiling, but his smile was horrible—and in his eyes was a cold light of murder, as he held the door of the Iron Woman against the trapped detective.

“So now we have brought you round again, my friend! It did not occur to you that I have a little alcove room next to this sub-cellar for emergencies—” he indicated the barred window—“and that is why you did not see me with—” he nodded toward Ellen—“the dear young lady!” With which he pushed the iron door ever so slightly—it required very little pressure from outside since the heavy hinged thing was made to gravitate inward. The sharp-toothed spikes began

to press through Kelsey's clothes. The detective, still groggy, was trying to shake off the sickening effect of the whiff of chloroform. As Harvey moved, Kelsey caught, through the crack of the door, a glimpse of something in a pocket of his torn cloak—something wrapped in tissue paper but partially uncovered—enough to reveal the dazzling, glistening contents.

"So you got the jewels, too!" Kelsey's voice was hoarse.

It was the girl who moaned: "I had them. I was going to give them to you tonight. But he—he chloroformed me while I was on my way to Doctor Saunders' house, and brought me here—"

Curtis Harvey's satanic smile was fixed, immobile. "Yes, I brought you here, and now, my dear Ellen, you can watch your friend die—die even as your uncles died!" His immobile face turned to the crack in the door of the Iron Woman. "No doubt, Kelsey, you think me a madman—"

Kelsey shook his head within the spiked interior. "No," he gritted. "I know that you are quite sane—Farrar!"

CHAPTER VII BEHIND THE SPIKED DOOR

AT THE SUDDEN UTTERANCE of that name, the other man stiffened, his face suddenly flushing with surprise. His hand pressed the door a little harder—the spikes began to tear Kelsey's clothes—he felt the cold metal on his skin. "So you know that too, Mr. Kelsey? You are clever—far more clever than those two Cranford brothers. And may I ask if you know still more?"

His face was attentive, almost eager. A sudden wild, fleeting hope came to Kelsey. If he could stall—stall and get back his ebbd strength. For now he had made a discovery. His body had become conscious of a small flat bulk under his clothes. His little twenty-two—Harvey had taken his outside gun but had neglected to find this secreted weapon. Yet, with his two hands bound, and those spikes already pinning him, what chance did Kelsey have of even hoping to get at the gun? Nevertheless, like a drowning man clutching a straw, he began to talk crisply, hoping to delay that closing door by occupying Harvey's interest.

"I've got just about the whole story, Farrar. There are only a few gaps. It started in Madrid, didn't it? That's where you, an international thief, ran into the Cranford brothers. You sold them both on the idea of lifting the Rodriguez collection which was to be exhibited for one night in the museum. The three of you pulled it, but the police immediately surrounded the place. Since you went out and the Cranfords must have gone too—and since the jewels were found on nobody—you must have hidden them in the museum. And my guess, based on subsequent facts, is that you hid them in the storeroom into which the Inquisition exhibit had been moved to make way for the jewel display."

"That's true," Harvey, or rather Farrar, assented. "We hid the jewels, Kelsey, in the original Iron Woman—which was one of the exhibit curios. No one dreamed of looking in such a place for them."

"Makes it still clearer." Kelsey had already regained some strength now, his bound hands began to work surreptitiously, moving, moving close to one of the sharp spikes. "But when you went back, after the hub-bub had died, to take the jewels from the hiding place—something went wrong. I don't know just what happened—but there was an argument, a fight—which you lost! And the Cranford brothers left you for dead and took the jewels. And now, I can guess, they must have put you in that Iron Woman!"

"They did—the swine!" Memory brought a blighting savagery to Farrar's face. "Yes, I will admit I tried to cross them—we were to meet in the museum store room at dawn the next day to recover the jewels—we knew no one would be there. I went earlier, intending to slip the stuff away myself—why split with fools? But they suspected, and came just as early. There was a fight. Stephen Cranford was crazy drunk—he pushed me into the Iron Woman and made his brother help him! They left me there—took the jewels. But I did not die—I was found unconscious—but I fooled even the doctors! The Iron Woman was worn and rusty, centuries old as it was, the door did not close all the way as this one does and the spikes were not so sharp. I lived, in spite of the blood poisoning—I escaped before they could put me in prison—I fought my way back to health and strength—and there was a plastic surgeon who—"

"Fixed your face so that even the Cranfords would never recognize you . . ." Kelsey took up the tale. Sweat was beading the detective's forehead as his cramped arms began to work, his bonds now over the sharp

spike, trying to shred the stout cord, cut it on the steel, and at the same time striving to keep Farrar distracted. The bound girl, meanwhile, listened in stunned amazement and horror.

“YOU came to America, Farrar—and you lived for two purposes. To avenge yourself on the brothers and to try to recover the jewels—if they still had them. You had never known their real names but luck was with you—you found them up here, recognized them unmistakably. And that was where you were really clever, Farrar. Yes, I’ll grant you that. It was a devilish stroke of genius to settle down here and wait three patient years before pulling your plans. And, better yet, to get yourself in as a friend and confidant of the two brothers—a friend of the two men you intended to torture and kill! That’s what had me stumped, because from the start I was looking for someone who had arrived just recently on the scene—someone ‘come back from the dead.’ You had those three years of friendship in your favor. And during them, you learned enough from the brothers to encourage your schemes. You guessed that they had only disposed of a few of the jewels—and had gotten into trouble with their income tax over the money they failed to account for. Frightened, they had hidden the rest of the loot. But on that score they were tight-lipped, even to you who had wormed yourself into their good graces. You waited until the time was ripe—until you knew you had an air-tight set-up. Then you began to call them up, pretending to have just come on the scene—in your identity of Farrar. To convince them, you appeared with your scarred chest bared in a lonely path, when George Cranford was walking one night. He was stricken with fright, and conscience. He resolved to give up the jewels and make a clean breast to me. But his brother Stephen was of a different mind. Stephen Cranford, after all, had not seen the ‘apparition’—you with your scars. He was not sure Farrar was really alive. Also he was avaricious enough to keep those jewels. When he couldn’t persuade George Cranford to abandon his intention of coming to me, he changed the package of jewels for a package of stones. And he secretly entrusted the real gems to the safekeeping of Miss Cranford—”

“But I never dreamed—” Ellen Cranford sobbed, writhing helplessly in her bonds—“I never dreamed where those jewels had come from—”

“George Cranford came to me—” Desperately Kelsey was still rubbing his bonds over that spike. And

now, at last the cords were beginning to shred—the steel was cutting them! “And Cranford suspected you, Harvey. While at your house, no doubt, he had found that huge book—on the Inquisition. You had secured the book, also the diagram in it, so you could construct this replica of the original Iron Woman. No doubt the idea had occurred to you when, in trying to give yourself an air of respectability, you had spent your money gained from thievery on an iron-foundry, where you conducted an honest business. It was simple for you to cast the Woman in parts, unknown to anyone—then assemble it here.

“George Cranford hid the book in the summer shack, then, after summoning me, he went there to look at it and find out its content. That’s when you caught him, chloroformed or slugged him, and brought him here. You tortured and killed him in this—but he would not tell you where the jewels were. Actually he thought they were safe with me. Stephen hadn’t yet told him he had changed them. As for you—you knew from Stephen that George had hired me to come out, but it never even occurred to you that he would have dared to bring me the stolen jewels. You were just plain lucky there. If Stephen hadn’t been avaricious enough to substitute the package you’d never have it now!”

CUTTING, cutting—those cords now. Frantically the detective went on. “You carried George Cranford’s body back to the veranda in your oil-cloth sack, which left no blood trail. You hid the corpse in the shadows of the porch behind a chair. Meanwhile you had fixed up that tree on the private road for me—you didn’t know just how much George Cranford would have told me but you resolved to take no chances. But were you daunted when I showed up alive? Far from it—you promptly decided to use me for your iron-bound alibi. You opened the door for me and didn’t put on the veranda lights. When Stephen Cranford met me in the hall, you went back to the foyer to close and bolt both doors—and calmly you seized the body from behind the chair and dragged it across the threshold. Simple, but there was your alibi—you were careful to remain with me every moment I was in the house.

“Later of course it was you who followed me to the shack and got the book and most of the paper from me. You stole back past the sleeping constable into the parlor, where you pretended to be dozing when I returned. Let’s skip until this afternoon when you heard me ask for an outside phone and offered

yours. Of course you did—because at the time I was examining the bloodstains on the porch—the bloodstains which told me how you had hidden the corpse the night before! And of course you were too clever to attack me while I was in your house here phoning—everyone knew I had come here, and you wanted to keep free of suspicion. For you were not through with your work yet—you still had to deal with Stephen Cranford, and try to get the jewels.

“But when I left your house and was walking through the woods with Cranford you saw your chance. You blackjacked me from behind and left me for dead—then spirited Cranford here. You gave him the spikes—but he lied to you, telling you the hiding place from which the jewels had already been removed. That’s where I found you, digging. Failing to find the jewels there you did some quick figuring—and deduced that Miss Cranford must have the gems, or at least know where they are since she was so close to her uncles. So you called her up pretending to be Doctor Saunders. I knew at once he couldn’t have made that call—because he had said his phone was out of order and, since by then I knew he was not the criminal, I knew it was just a further trick on your part to throw off suspicion.”

Farrar nodded, his face immobile again with its hideous smile. “A most interesting and accurate story, Mr. Kelsey. And now that you have finished—” Again he leaned against the door, started to push. And Kelsey had all he could do to keep from screaming but—those spikes were punishing him now, hurting like hell! But at the same time, with a sudden twist, he loosened the cut cords on his hands at last—he was getting his hands free.

Sweating from head to foot With the effort and the torture, he stalled desperately for more time. “And of course you realize how I found out you were the murderer, Farrar.”

And again, just as he had hoped, he caught the man’s curious egocentric interest—again Farrar paused. “To be truthful, I do not understand how you found out at all, Mr. Kelsey. Why couldn’t you just as well have suspected Doctor Saunders—or Carlos?”

“For one reason alone. True, at first you had me fooled—although I didn’t like that too-perfect alibi of yours. But when I ripped your cloak off tonight and saw those scars on your chest—then I knew. Knew that the criminal was the man I had known as Curtis Harvey. Why? Because I had seen all the others with at least their lower necks bare—Carlos in his shirt-sleeves, Doctor Saunders in a rough, low-necked

flannel shirt, and even Cranford, who by then was out of the picture, in a low-necked dressing gown. But you, Farrar—throughout you were the only one who kept the upper part of your body completely covered with that high collar of yours! That was how I knew!”

“I congratulate you, Mr. Kelsey—you are really amazing! You leave me disillusioned—you have spoiled for me what I thought was a perfect crime. And it is sad that, simply because you know so much, you must die . . .” The door began to close faster now, the spikes pierced deeper, the pain increased. “You will die as the others died—as I almost died. And,” he added purring, “as Miss Cranford will die too—for she also knows too much!”

THE horrified girl drew a sobbing A breath, writhed anew in her bonds. But Kelsey’s hands were free now. He could not push the door with them between the spikes—for he had no chance of resisting both the gravity of the door and Farrar’s pressure on the smooth outer surface. But he was working his right hand upward, between the spikes—toward the twenty-two beneath his clothes . . .

“Farrar,” he gritted desperately. “I take back what I said about your being sane. You’re not. This obsession of revenge has gone to your head—the taste of blood has given you a mania. But you’re a fool—what have you to gain now? Don’t you know there’s a posse out—sooner or later they’ll come here—”

Farrar’s laugh was contemptuous. “They will never find this sub-cellar—they are not all as clever as you, my friend. And even if they should stumble on it later on—by then I shall be out of the country—with the jewels. But what you say does persuade me that there is no sense wasting more time . . .” With which he moved from the crack in the door, got directly in front of it, and began to push with both hands now. At the same instant Kelsey managed, almost by an act of contortion, to worm out his little twenty-two. He had the gun in his grip. But already he knew, with cold despair, that he could not use it now! For with Farrar directly in front of the door instead of outside the crack, the detective could not send a bullet in his direction. He could only shoot out through the crack—and that would miss by inches! The door of the Iron Woman made a complete shield for the criminal outside.

And the door was closing, closing . . .

Then, even as the spikes began to dig deeper into him, a last desperate hope rose in Kelsey’s heart. For

now he saw that in the center of the door, on a level with his own head, was a small, squarish hole—doubtless a peephole so that the torturer could watch his victim within. But with the door at its present angle Farrar was not yet in front of that hole—a bullet through it would also miss him. Yet, the closer the door swung, the nearer Farrar's head was coming toward the opening. If Kelsey could only hold on—hold on—

Sweating in agony, the detective cringed back in the sarcophagus-like interior—his chest and stomach muscles trying to shrink from the cruel, jabbing spikes. He felt blood beginning to flow from a score of places now—he gritted his teeth, but as he heard his own flesh tearing, an involuntary yell of pain broke from him. And it was then that the horrified girl across the room gave a scream, and fainted—passing into merciful unconsciousness.

Inch by inexorable inch the spiked door closed as Farrar kept pushing, pushing. Overcome by the pain, Kelsey once more felt his head swimming . . . a red haze danced before his eyes . . . he was going out . . . he couldn't stand it. It was the end—the end!

And then, through the haze, he saw that black square hole—swinging toward him—he saw something move slowly across it like a picture into a frame—the murder-lit face of Farrar—

And in one mad effort the detective wormed up his little twenty-two, poked it at the hole, and knowing that to miss meant instant death—pulled the trigger.

He did not hear the report of the little gun—it mingled with the roar in his ears. But he saw the face drop from outside the hole—and he knew Farrar was going down. And then he realized he was in a new peril—for he had seen enough to know that Farrar was toppling straight toward the door of the Iron Woman! In another second the weight of his falling body would slam that door shut—the spikes would do their work even with their master dead!

But in that last split second Kelsey put forth a final super-human effort—his two hands went to the door between the spikes and—with just gravity resisting him now—he managed to push the door partially open—open just enough to squirm out, though the spikes tore and scratched him. Stumbling through the crack he leaped aside—even as Farrar fell heavily against the door—and it slammed shut with a ringing clang.

KELSEY, bleeding but with the wounds fortunately not deep enough to be serious, hurried over to the bound, unconscious girl. He revived her by rubbing her wrists, slapping her cheeks. He untied her and helped her to her feet.

The two looked at one another then, as if to ask whether the gruesome nightmare was over. Their glance went to Farrar alias Harvey, sprawled in a heap beneath the terrible Iron Woman he had constructed. Reaching into the dead man's pocket, Kelsey took out the jewels.

"Take them away," Ellen pleaded. "I—I never want to see them again!"

"You won't!" Kelsey promised, wrapping and pocketing them. "What's more we're going to keep you out of this—I'm still going to carry out your Uncle George's wish. We're not going to tell the sheriff the true motive for the murder. Just let them think this Harvey was cracked, a homicidal maniac. He was, in the end. And they won't delve into it—your name will be kept clear of the Madrid affair."

Her dark eyes shone with gratitude. Suddenly her voice became anxious. "But are you sure you are all right—you're not badly hurt?"

"No." Kelsey looked at his ripped upper clothes, ruefully. "But I sure do need a new suit!"