NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES
3 3433 07605472 9

ETHEL OPENS THE DOOR

DAVID FOX

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google
Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

ETHEL OPENS THE DOOR

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

ETHEL OPENS THE DOOR

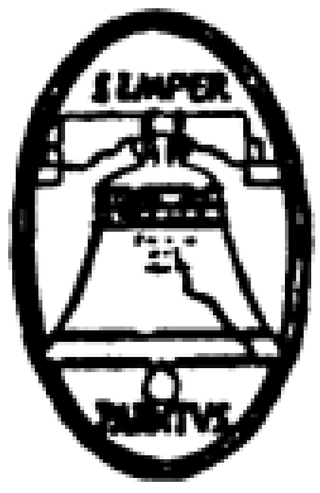
AN EXPLOIT OF THE SHADOWERS, INC.

By

~~DAVID FOX~~ Fecud.

Author of "The Man Who Convicted Himself"

I. E. Ostrander



NEW YORK
ROBERT M. McBRIDE & COMPANY
1922

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
129210B
ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R 1941 L

Copyright, 1922, by
ROBERT M. McBRIDE & Co.
New York

PROPERTY
OF THE
NEW YORK
SOCIETY LIBRARY

Digitized by Google
Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CONTENTS

I.	Robert Brings a Card	1
II.	A Refractory Client	19
III.	Phineas Sneed's Invention	34
IV.	"O-Four-Two-Six"	47
V.	The Man Across the Hall	59
VI.	The Sound Unheard	74
VII.	Concerning the "Gull"	91
VIII.	An Inside Job	106
IX.	Red Jim's Daughter	116
X.	Blocked Trails	133
XI.	Phineas Sneed Comes Across	151
XII.	The Man in the Case	167
XIII.	The Second Threat	181
XIV.	Twenty-four Hours	195
XV.	The Open Door	211
XVI.	The Shadowers Lose a Client	227
XVII.	And Gain a New One	240
XVIII.	Conspirators	254
XIX.	The Empty Box	265
XX.	It Was Not I	277

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER I

ROBERT BRINGS A CARD

"THOSE handsomely engraved circulars which we sent out seem to have been bloomers, except for the Punderford case, Rex." George Roper, ex-confidence man and now member of the unique band of former criminals, who had organized a discreet detective agency under the name of 'The Shadowers' turned lugubriously to their chief. "As long as we are not interfering with the authorities in their own particular field and none of us are—er—'wanted,' don't you think we might be a trifle more open in our method of soliciting clients?"

"You must admit, George, that the Punderford affair was highly profitable," remarked Lucian Baynes defensively as he twirled his small, blond mustache. He looked more like the fastidious, dapper, rather innocuous man of fashion than the most astute smuggler who ever kept the customs officials of more than one country on the qui vive, and who was one of the greatest art connoisseurs and jewel experts of his time. "Surely we can afford to wait awhile for other fish to come to our nets."

"Of course *you* are satisfied, Luce, for that was your special case and you covered yourself with glory in it!" Phil Howe, one-time safe-breaker sighed and his merry but

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

furtive eyes clouded. "I wouldn't mind a little action myself, and if I hadn't given Rex here my word not to turn another single trick—?"

He paused suggestively and glanced at the well-built, aristocratic looking man of forty-five, who sat at the head of the council table, but Rex Powell's level gray eyes were fastened upon the high-bred, sensitive face of the eccentric individual opposite, who sat reflectively stroking the rather weak chin to which a black mustache and goatee had so recently lent distinction with long, slender, tapering fingers; those fingers which until he had joined The Shadowers and had become a handwriting expert had turned out the cleverest forgeries and counterfeit bank notes of the decade.

"What do you say, Cliff?" Rex Powell asked at last. "It's true, of course, that only one case has come our way as yet and even though we succeeded in solving it—or rather, Luce did with our co-operation—it is bound to be a waiting game at best. Punderford is grateful, but naturally he will be wary about recommending us lest it arouse awkward questions, and wild horses couldn't drag from anyone else connected with that affair an admission that they had ever heard of our organization. Are you, too, becoming discouraged?"

"Not by a long shot!" Clifford Nichols responded stoutly. "Aside from the fact that the association with you fellows has given me a new lease of life since you dragged me from that Bronx flat where I was brooding myself into neurasthenia over my last—er—enforced retirement, this game is bound to liven up on the average of percentage if

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

for no other reason. Let me see, Rex; you sent out five hundred circulars to as many society women, did you not?"

Rex nodded without speaking and the other pursued:

"As I remember you suggested that if the lady who received the circular found herself in need of any discreet, strictly confidential investigation by a private corporation of gentlemen, not blackmailers nor inefficient bunglers, she should send her card to us; that we were not connected with any so-called private detective agency, gave no information to the press, permitted no publicity and never carried our results to the authorities unless requested to do so by our clients. Is that right?"

"Absolutely," Rex replied. "I particularized by mentioning the fact that we undertook no divorce evidence, nor investigation of a scandalous or trivial nature, but if any jewels or valuable documents were missing, if the personal safety of anyone were endangered, or forgery suspected, or blackmail attempted it would be well to communicate with us. I sent five hundred other letters differing slightly in tone, to financiers, both active and retired, all over the country."

"Exactly," Cliff summed up. "Don't you think that of the four hundred and ninety-nine matrons and five hundred magnates a certain percentage of them are bound to come to us sooner or later with delicate matters which they would not take to the authorities for worlds and yet could not handle by themselves? I'm not wasting my time; those books on reading character by handwriting which you installed in my private library will merit months of study

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

still. This may be a waiting game, old man, but I'll sit tight and play with what I hold."

The sixth and last of the regular members of The Shadowers had taken no part in the discussion. He was an exceedingly fat, exceedingly bald man of perhaps fifty, with a round benevolent face which had been peculiarly suited to his former vocation of manufacturing and selling fake medicines. A chemist of no mean ability, Henry Corliss might have risen high as a toxicologist by reason of his profound researches into the lesser known poisons, but the lure of the easier way had long ago proved too much for his easy-going nature, and he had placidly administered innocuous cures to hypochrondriacs for many years, interrupted only by certain periods spent as an involuntary guest of the outraged and exasperated authorities. Now, as a medical expert, he had already proved himself a valued adjunct to the organization.

When their leader turned inquiring eyes upon him he chuckled and rubbed his plump hands together.

"Oh, I'll trail, with Cliff," he announced. "Of course it had to be one of the dames who rose to our bait first; men are more cagey, and it would be only as a last resort that they would nibble, but once they do we'll have them hook, line and sinker, to make use of Luce's metaphor. Did you know that the small office just across the corridor is rented at last?"

The room in which they were seated was hexagonal in shape and almost spartan in its simplicity, but the Jacobean table, the massive chairs and rugs of obvious antiquity all

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

bespoke the quiet elegance of a gentleman's study rather than the sanctum of the head of a detective firm. In each of the six sides of the wall was a panel, five of them leading into the respective labratories and studies of the five other regular members, but the last connected with the anteroom which was presided over by the only feminine association of the organization. She was a fluffy, golden-haired young person with guileless blue eyes and a diffident expression of girlish innocence which had proved her salvation on the one unfortunate occasion when a relentless store detective had haled her to court on the well-grounded charge of attempting to "lift" a two-hundred-dollar lace collar, and the fatherly judge had left her off on her own recognizance because, as she once informed Cliff without braggadocio, she had 'buffaloed him with her baby stare."

Only one other person had ever detected her at work and that was Rex Powell. With the plan for organizing the Shadowers in mind he had approached her tentatively but finding her totally lacking in ethics of any sort and unregenerate in her attitude toward society he carefully concealed the real purpose of the association from her and led her to believe that they proposed to work a novel and stupendous scheme of graft and crime. With all the small boy's worship of the train robber of fiction, Ethel Jepson had been proud to cast her lot unquestioningly with theirs, and the result had already manifested the wisdom of Rex's choice.

Now while the Shadowers discussed the probabilities of

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

the future she was sitting behind her desk, which immediately faced the entrance door of the suite, unconcernedly masticating wintergreen gum and reading the latest thriller in best-sellers, when the door opened. Ethel glanced up and without change of expression she closed the book and one hand slipped beneath the desk's edge while with the other she touched a bit of inlaid wood upon its top.

Thereafter several things happened almost simultaneously in the council chamber. At Henry Corliss' abrupt question Rex had asked quickly:

"Do you mean the office that has been vacant ever since we opened up here? I wonder what kind of business is going to be conducted from there, and what type of man is running it? Did you get a look at him? It is important for us to know."

"On the possibility that someone might be shadowing the Shadowers, eh?" suggested George Roper.

It was at that precise moment that Ethel, in the outer office, closed her book and as though in answer to the query of the ex-swindler and confidence man something clicked faintly and Rex Powell with a warning gesture to the rest, touched the invisible spring concealed under the edge of the table.

Instantly a masculine voice came to their ears.

"Excuse me. There is no name on the door and I was unaware that this office was occupied." The tones were strong but oddly hesitant. "May I ask what firm this is?"

"Confidential information bureau." A faint ticking mingled with Ethel's glib response as she gave the defini-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

tion of their organization which the Shadowers had agreed upon for anyone who ventured within their precincts ignorant of their real purpose.

"I thought that I might find a spare window pole in here." The voice continued still somewhat uncertainly. "I'm the new tenant in the office across the hall and I rang for the superintendent but my bell seems to be out of order."

The eyes of the listening Shadowers were fastened upon the panel which gave into the outer office, when close beside it a tiny slit like those in a slot machine, appeared in what had seemed to be the solid wood and through it a narrow tape of paper curled. At a nod from Rex, George Roper's lank, funereally clad form disengaged itself from his chair and gliding noiselessly over to the slit he tore off the tape at a point where its tiny typed characters gave place to a blank space, and returning to the table he spread it out before the others.

"'Big young man tanned store clothes good quality looks like movie Westerner,'" they read. "'Think window pole stall try vamp what dope I can.'"

The message from the diminutive, silent keyboard which Ethel held concealed upon her lap had scarcely been grasped by the sextette when her voice came to them, its accents provocatively lowered.

"That's too bad! I'm sorry, sir, that we haven't a window pole; that is, I don't think that we have, but I am new here myself. Shall I ask one of the clerks?"

"Oh, no, don't bother, please." The intruder's tone be-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

trayed a shade of nervous impatience which was as quickly controlled. "I presume one of the elevator men can get the superintendent for me. Sorry to have troubled you."

"It isn't any trouble, sir. If you've just taken that office perhaps you are looking for a stenographer? I know one I could recommend you who's a wiz—I mean, very quick and accurate, if personality and—er—looks don't count."

"Thank you." He spoke drily. "I do not need a stenographer yet. What sort of information does this firm of yours supply?"

"Search—that is, I really couldn't say." Ethel's voice was bland and silky, but the little tape reeled off disgustedly through the aperture in the wall:

"Dont vamp worth a cent just nosey."

Aloud she continued: "I don't know their clients' business. I only receive them and show them in to one of the firm. The clerk might be able to tell you—"

"It doesn't matter." The man interrupted her hurriedly. "I'll get the superintendent now. Thanks."

The entrance door opened and closed with a thud and the dapper little expert on safes remarked ruefully:

"Another false alarm and it looked like a prospect at last! Book agents, solicitors for ads. or charity and now our new little playmate across the hall. Nothing stirring and all our grand talent going to waste!"

"Perhaps we'll have better luck next time, Phil. It's too bad, though, that she didn't find out what our neighbor's own line is, since he was so curious about ours."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Rex picked up the receiver of his desk telephone, and spoke into it. "Come in for a minute, Ethel, please."

The panel slipped aside and Miss Jepson presented herself, complacently patting the blobs of yellow hair which adorned her ears.

"Did I pull it off all right, Mr. Powell?" she asked. "He is just a kind of a boob, I guess; I gave him a nifty little opening to say something pretty to me and then I could have kidded him along, but it went 'way over his head. He looks as though he was more used to ridin' a range, anyway, than sitting cooped up in an office."

"Then you don' think he might be a plainclothes man trying to investigate our game, my dear child?" George queried.

"Who, him?" Ethel's small nose wrinkled in fine scorn. "He's no dick! Whatever business he's starting he'd better look sharp or the wise ones of this burg will pick him clean. He has got nice eyes, though."

"That will do, Ethel. You had better go to lunch now," Rex said hastily, adding as the panel closed behind her: "It is perhaps as well for the secrecy we have maintained that our neighbor did not prove susceptible to Ethel's rather elemental blandishments."

"Oh, she is a loyal infant, I'll say that for her, although I admit that her form of speech grates on one's sensibilities at times." Lucian Baynes shuddered fastidiously. "I have no doubt that in her secret soul she is wondering why we do not turn another trick but she has faith enough in us to wait without question. I think I will get a bite

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

myself and then stroll up to the Lejune galleries; they have an exhibition of etchings on including a Whistler that I once endeavored to remove from the collection of Sir Algernon Lennox but without success. I should like to have a look at it again for old times' sake."

Cliff Nichols rose also.

"Rex, lend me a ten-spot, will you? It is too late to go to the bank now, and look at what some shop or other handed me yesterday!" he displayed a crisp, new ten-dollar bill. "Fancy anyone shoving the queer on me!"

"Of course, old man, but is that actually phony?" Rex pulled out his wallet. "It looks good to me."

"Perhaps, but to an experienced eye there is just a shade of difference between the engraving on it, and that on the product of the Mint. I shouldn't care to attempt passing it, with my record." Cliff shrugged. "So are the mighty fallen!"

When he, too, had taken his departure Henry Corliss gazed inquiringly about at the other three.

"What do you boys say to a planked steak around the corner at the Hilliard?" he suggested, his small eyes twinkling in anticipation. "They serve a good thick one with oodles of vegetables—"

Phil Howe shook his head in mock regret but a sly grin played about the corners of his close-shaven lips.

"I've got a date, so I suppose it will be cold lobster and peach short cake for mine!" he mourned. "That's the trouble with a skirt; they may be all there with the looks

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

but when it comes to ordering regular food for a white man—!"

"Hush!" Rex held up a warning hand once more. "Someone is rapping on the entrance door. Don't you hear it?—George, go and see who it is and if you think it is worth while for us to listen in, press that small inset of lighter wood on Ethel's desk."

"And if it isn't worth while I'll give the intruder a bawling out that no bally-hoo of my early circus days could equal!" George promised darkly as he got up again from his chair, and then with a comical return to his ministerial manner he added: "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick and the temper short, my brethren!"

Rex touched the concealed spring beneath the edge of the table once more and Phil halted on the way to his study, while even Henry forgot his appetite momentarily. It was evident that George had pressed the spring in Ethel's desk in passing so as to take no chances, for they distinctly heard the opening of the door and his unctous tones inquiring:

"You were looking for someone, my good man?"

"Yes sir, I—I must have been mistaken, but I was quite certain that this was the right number, sir." A quavering, elderly voice replied. "If you'll excuse me—"

"Perhaps I can help you if you will tell me whom you want to see." George's tone had grown more business-like. "Come in."

The door closed and then the elderly voice came again more tremulous and uneasy than before.

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"It is very good of you, sir, but the matter is a—a confidential one, in a manner of speaking. I have a message from my employer for a certain corporation whose circular read that they had an office in this building. I—I have brought a card."

Behind the panel Phil gave vent to a little yelp of exultation which he smothered by clapping his hands over his mouth as Rex glared at him. Henry's rotund form had stiffened with attention.

"Your employer's visiting card?" George asked smoothly. "Are you by any chance looking for the Shadowers?"

"Yes, sir, that was the name." The man's voice rose eagerly.

"Then you have come to the right place. We are the Shadowers," announced George. "Give me the card and sit down. Our secretary is out at present but I myself will see if the president of our firm is in his private office. —Ah, Mr. Phineas Dilworth Sneed?"

He raised his voice as he read the name from the card and Rex moved over to the files in the tall case and ran hastily through them.

"I am his butler and valet. Mr. Sneed is very much upset, sir, and I was to ask that someone would come at once to consult him."

Rex had found what he sought and now he took a card from the index file and laid it silently before his colleagues. They read:—

"Phineas Dilworth Sneed. 60-65. Retired capitalist, rated at over a million. Residence, Burlingame Hotel.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Widower. Collector of curios. No clubs. Associates unknown."

"What hunch made you select him as one of the five hundred to whom to send a circular, Rex?" murmured Henry. "The result proved that you made a good guess, all right, but there is nothing in those notes to suggest that he might have a skeleton in his closet."

"Isn't there?" Rex responded in a whisper. "Take the last three items. Half of the pleasure any collector takes in his possessions is in exhibiting them to his friends, not merely in hoarding them up to gloat over in secret. As far as I was able to gather the man is practically a recluse. Think it over."

The voice of George Roper came to them once more from the outer office.

"A consultation would be a mere waste of time until we know the nature of the affair which is troubling Mr. Sneed. We have experts for each separate line of investigation. Did your employer take you into his confidence?"

"Yes, sir, to a certain extent." The man coughed deprecatingly. "My wife and I have been with him for a great many years, and as he is all alone—"

"Go on." George was plainly giving his leader time to look up the data on their prospective client. "I understand. What is it Mr. Sneed wishes us to investigate for him?"

"It's a matter of—of an anonymous letter, sir." The butler spoke in a low, shocked tone as though the mention of such a thing in connection with his employer savored of

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

outrage. "Mr. Sneed would have paid no attention to it, I am sure, but he has many valuables in his apartments and he could not be certain that the letter was the work of a crank. He thinks that in some way his safe has been tampered with, too, but we don't see how that could be, my wife and I, for one or the other of us are always at hand."

"The safe!" Phil Howe ejaculated under his breath. "I can see where one dame gets a stand-up for luncheon!"

"An anonymous letter, and Cliff off the job." Henry shook his head. "Let's have a look at the old retainer out there, Rex."

As he spoke the panel leading from the outer office was pushed aside and George entered, carefully closing it after him.

"You heard?"

Rex nodded, switched off the dictaphone and put away the card which he had taken from the index file.

"Bring him in," he said. "Henry, it would be as well for you not to appear in person until we know whether there will be anything in your line in this case or not. You can listen from your laboratory."

Henry reluctantly edged his plump body through the aperture leading to his sanctum and the panel had scarcely closed when George ushered in their visitor. He was a very old man, almost totally bald, and his bent form shook as though with palsy, but there was a shrewd gleam in his faded eyes as he glanced from Phil to his older companion.

"This is the head of our firm, Mr. Powell. You must

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

tell him what you have just told me." George added: "The other gentleman is our expert on safes, and you may speak in the strictest confidence for your employer."

"You come from Mr. Phineas Sneed about an anonymous letter which he has received, I understand?" Rex came to the point without preamble. "What is your name?"

"Robert, sir, Robert Frost." The old man bowed tremulously.

"Sit down, Robert. When did this letter come?"

"In the morning's mail, sir. I put it beside Mr. Sneed's plate at breakfast along with his newspaper and I never gave it another thought until I saw his face as he opened it. It fairly gave me a turn!" He caught himself up and added hurriedly: "Mr. Sneed has been quite uneasy lately about his safe, and I think he is afraid that the letter has something to do with a robbery, sir."

"H'm! A thief doesn't usually advertise his coming," Rex observed. "Did your employer show you the letter, Robert?"

"No, sir. He'd finished his fruit and I was just pouring his coffee when he picked up the envelope and slit it with his knife. My eyes aren't as good as they used to be," he added ingenuously. "I could only see that there was more than one page to it and the writing was large and sprawly. Mr. Sneed made a queer little noise in his throat as though he was choking and he put one hand up to his neck. I—I was afraid he was going to have a stroke for his face got all gray, like, and I had to speak to him two or three times before he heard me."

"What did you say?" Rex asked.

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"I hardly remember, sir, I was that upset myself at seeing him so." The butler passed his hands nervously about the brim of his hat which he held between his knees. "He just waved me away and sat there reading the letter over and over, and after a while he got up and went in his room and shut the door. He never touched his coffee or the rest of his breakfast. I waited, but Jane—that's my wife, sir,—Jane said I ought to go and speak to him and see if anything was the matter. When I knocked he came out with the letter still in his hand, but he looked all right again. He went to the safe and put the letter away and got out your circular."

"Ah, yes, I believe he was included in the list of those to whom they were sent." Rex nodded, with a side glance at George.

"And very angry he was when it came." Once more the old man checked his garrulous tongue. "I—I mean, sir, that he must have thought someone was trying to play a joke on him, for Mr. Sneed has had no need of—of detectives in all the years we have been with him until now. He told me that the letter he got this morning was unsigned and threatening, and he thought it must be the work of some crazy person but he wasn't sure. I was to come to you and tell you that money would be no object if you would find the person who wrote it and see that Mr. Sneed was protected from further annoyance. Those were his words, sir."

"But Mr. Sneed is not sure that it was written by a

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

crank." Rex paused. "You said something about his fear of a robbery—?"

"Well, sir, Mr. Sneed has a safe that was built to order for him and he thought no one else could work it but himself. He's got an idea lately, though, that somebody has been tampering with it. He didn't say anything about it this morning but I could see it was on his mind." The butler rose as though fearful he had said too much. "He can tell you all about it himself, sir, if you will come. I have a taxi downstairs."

"Mr. Howe and Mr. Roper will accompany me," Rex said as he took up his hat and stick. "It is unfortunate that our handwriting expert is not in, but when he returns I will see that he is sent on to us. Your employer still resides in the Burlingame Hotel?"

"Of course, sir!" Robert looked his astonishment at the question. "He has the whole top floor remodeled to suit him and he has lived there for more than ten years."

"George, you and Phil go down to the taxi with Mr. Sneed's man," Rex directed in an undertone. "I have some instructions to leave here for the others when they get back."

"I suppose this means that I am going to be left behind!" Henry emerged from his seclusion as the others departed.

"Nothing in it for you, old man, nor for Lucian either, as yet," Rex responded. "Tell him to stick around, though and await developments, but send Cliff on to the Burlingame as soon as you have given him an outline of the case."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Humph! It doesn't look like much of a case to me," grunted the other. "Some crank must have picked on the old guy and driven him into a blue funk, that's about the size of it."

Rex shook his head.

"Don't be too sure, Henry," he said. "Sneed is not in his dotage by any means and there is more back of this than the butler has told, or his employer would never have sent for assistance from outside. There may be work for all of us before the case is finished."

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER II

A REFRACTORY CLIENT

THE Burlingame was one of the oldest and most exclusive hotels in the city and the upward march of trade on the Avenue had not succeeded in dislodging it from its original site, a few blocks below the Park. Although small in comparison to the huge caravansaries which had sprung up seemingly overnight in the heart of the metropolis it held its place in history and if its former glories were somewhat dimmed the clientele to which it had catered for three generations were staunch patrons still. Phineas Sneed with his ten-year occupancy of the top floor was a comparative newcomer and Rex Powell wondered as the taxi sped uptown what inducements he could have offered to the proprietor to permit the remodeling of his apartments, for the house was as famous for its mid-Victorian architecture and decorations as for the excellence of the cuisine.

As they entered the lobby a gray-haired clerk with the dignity of a bank president looked up from behind the desk and an elderly waiter paused with uplifted tray at the door of the dining-room, while the portly, middle-aged captain of the bell-boys—none of whom appeared to be under fifty,—stepped forward inquiringly.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Sneed's butler drew him aside for a moment and Phil Howe whispered irrepressibly to Rex:

"Some swift place the old boy lives in! I'll bet they never had anything more exciting here than a G.A.R. convention!"

The man whom he and the rest of the Shadowers knew as Rex Powell made no reply. For a moment his associates, the case upon which they were just embarking, and the daring adventures and vicissitudes of his self-chosen criminal career had faded from his mind and he was once again a small boy treading the same tesselated marble floor of the lobby in the wake of a tall, slim, aristocratic woman whom he had called mother, on the occasion of more than one formal visit to some cousins.

He aroused himself from his reverie with a start as George Roper's voice sounded in his ears.

"Robert has evidently satisfied the major-domo that we are the proper sort of people to enter these sacred if somewhat musty portals, for he is leading the way to the elevator. Ah, my friend, if he had only an inkling of our former vocations!"

The clerk had bent once more over his ledger and the bell-boy captain returned to his station, but the elderly waiter still stood in the dining-room door as they passed with his tray upheld upon a knarled, rheumatic hand.

"The elevator stops at the floor below Mr. Sneed's apartments, sir," Robert volunteered as they began a slow and dignified ascent. "He had a special stairway built in when his rooms were remodeled."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Were the alterations very extensive?" Rex asked.

"Oh, yes, sir. The employees of the hotel all sleep in the annex and the top floor was cut up into small suites for the guests, less expensive than those lower down. Mr. Sneed had it all thrown into one.—But here we are, sir."

He preceded them down the corridor to a small door in which he inserted a key. It opened upon a tiny square hall from which a narrow staircase led up to an anteroom as limited in size as the private entrance just below, but furnished with two heavily carved chairs. The door which faced them was massively carved also and adorned with an antique brass knocker which Robert lifted twice and let fall resoundingly before he produced a huge, quaintly fashioned bronze key.

George Roper uttered a slight exclamation which he as quickly changed into a cough, but Rex did not heed. He was gazing up at the single small window high in the wall at the stairs' head through which a tiny ray of sunlight gleamed.

"You said, Robert, that Mr. Sneed occupied the entire floor here? This hall and staircase must be about in the center of the area upon which the hotel is built," he remarked. "That window up there cannot look out upon the yards in the rear of the private dwellings on the side street."

"No, sir." The key rattled in the lock beneath the guidance of the butler's tremulous hand. "Mr. Sneed left a square inner court open to the sky when he planned the alterations and the rooms are built all around it, but it is

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

so ugly that he had the windows put up high like that so he wouldn't have to look out on it."

The key turned and the great door swung inward disclosing a reception room with wide windows at the farther end which looked out on the Avenue. It was furnished austerely, with the chairs backed against the wall and a plain mahogany table in the center, upon which stood a bronze lamp of ancient design.

That was the only touch of the ornamental which the room contained save for two mediocre pictures which hung one on either side of the bare marble mantel surmounted by a huge gilt mirror that reflected the bent, palsied form of the butler as he moved to a door which stood ajar in the right wall and knocked upon it.

A high, thin voice bade him enter and as he did so, closing the door noiselessly behind him Phil started to speak, but George held up a warning finger. Utter silence reigned, however, and after a long minute Rex strolled over to the window and stood gazing down upon the double line of motors crawling along the Avenue. All at once he uttered an exclamation of surprise and his hands flew to the sash, only to fall again to his sides, and he turned with a baffled expression to George, who was regarding him quizzically.

"What the——" he began, but got no further, for Robert reappeared and taking their hats and sticks ushered them into the room from which he had just emerged. It was large and lofty-ceilinged, with windows facing on both the avenue and side street, and through an archway in the

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

third wall could be seen another fireplace flanked by tall bookcases. Huge davenports and deep-cushioned leather chairs stood about at comfortable angles to the many side brackets of modern electric fixtures which were placed at regular intervals in the walls, every other available space of which was covered with arrangements of keen-bladed weapons of every country and period grouped with no regard to their kind or age. Broadswords hobnobbed with African spears, slender Italian rapiers with short, ugly-looking dirks and over a desk in the corner a scimitar was crossed with a machete.

A little old man, weazened and shrunken but dapper almost to the point of effeminacy had risen from before the desk and now stood glancing in quick appraisal from one to the other of them through gold-rimmed pince-nez, from which a long loop of black ribbon was suspended. His gaze passed over Phil and George and rested unerringly upon Rex Powell.

"You are the head of the firm known as the 'Shadowers'?" His voice was reedy and piping. "Robert did not grasp your name, but he is needlessly upset."

"My name is Powell, Mr. Sneed, and although I am nominally the president of our organization our various cases are taken in hand by those of our experts whose training has best fitted them for the investigation of each particular problem. We are practically an association of specialists," Rex replied. "This is Mr. Roper and Mr. Howe."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Sneed nodded and motioned with one claw-like hand to chairs.

"I am glad that you were at liberty to come to me at once, gentlemen," he said. "I trust, though, that Robert has not made a great to-do about what after all will probably prove a very simple matter. I own that I myself was agitated when I first opened the letter this morning—Robert has told you that it is because of an anonymous letter that I sent for you?"

"Yes, Mr. Sneed. Our handwriting expert will follow us here shortly." Rex drew his chair closer. "Before we undertake this case let me remind you of the promise we made to our prospective clients in our announcements, one of which was sent to you, of absolute secrecy and discretion now and in the future. In return for this, however, we must have the unreserved confidence of our clients. They must be candid with us and withhold no fact or even suspicion that might aid us in the investigation, for we cannot work in the dark."

"That is quite understood!" A dry cackle broke from the lips of their new client. "You call yourselves specialists, gentlemen; if I were ill enough to require the services of a medical specialist would I not defeat my own ends and practically throw his fee in the street if I were to withhold from him the true symptoms of my case? I am placing myself unreservedly in your hands."

"Then, Mr. Sneed, will you tell us whether you have the slightest inkling or not as to who might be the author of the letter?"

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"I have not, sir." The old gentleman drew himself up with an air of dignity. "It seems like the mere rambling denunciation of a lunatic and if I had not feared that it would be but the fore-runner of further annoyance and perhaps an attempt at personal violence I would have destroyed it and thought no more about it. I am at a loss as to why it was addressed to me for its contents are wholly unintelligible, but because of another incident of the past few days I decided to place myself under the protection of someone more discreet than the average police detective, and more intelligent. My safe, which I thought impregnable, has recently been tampered with. It is not that which gives me so much concern, for the attempt was unsuccessful, of course, but the fact that an intruder could have invaded my privacy without detection is most disturbing. We all have our little idiosyncrasies, I suppose, and mine is the not unnatural one of desiring seclusion in my own home."

His lips had drawn to a thin line and his withered jaw set like a steel trap. George Roper hitched forward a little and spoke in his drawling sanctimonious tones.

"Most assuredly, my dear sir! But was there any reference made in the letter to the safe or the fact that someone had forced an entrance here? Have you any reason for connecting that incident with this anonymous threat other than your inability to account for either of them to your satisfaction?"

Sneed regarded him through narrowed eyes for a moment and then replied:

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"There was no reference to the safe or to the intruder, but there was a vague, ridiculous accusation that I was unlawfully possessed of something which the writer claimed and a threat to take it away from me. The accusation is false, needless to say, but the creature who penned it should not be at large to persecute respectable citizens, much less break into their homes." Sneed rose. "I will get the letter now and you shall judge for yourselves.—I will bring the letter to you here."

He added the last pointedly for Phil had risen, too, with the expectation that he would be permitted to examine the safe, but their client's meaning was unmistakable and the discomfited mechanical expert sank back again as Sneed moved with a peculiar sidling gait to the archway leading into the library and the heavy portieres fell together behind him. Phil turned to Rex, but George forestalled him.

"It is singular that Mr. Sneed should have been selected at random for the attack of a crazed brain." He spoke obviously for the benefit of the man in the next room. "It may be that he chose the name from the register and there will be a flood of anonymous letters sent to patrons of the hotel."

"The fact that the safe was tampered with puts a different complexion on the affair, though." Rex followed his lead. "If there is really any connection between the two, the safe will be the starting point of our investigation, since the attempt upon it was made before this letter came."

Phil held up his hand suddenly and rising, tiptoed over to the curtain at the side of the archway and peered cau-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

tiously within just as there came a sharp click followed by a subdued whirring and a thud. To the uninitiated the sound was not unlike that of a crane hoisting and depositing some soft but heavy object, and Phil's face was a study as he returned to his chair, evading the inquiring gaze of the others.

A metallic clang and the rustle of paper came to their ears and then Sneed reappeared holding an envelope gingerly between thumb and forefinger as though its very touch were contaminating. Drawing from it the two sheets of paper which it contained he held them out to Rex.

"'Phineas Sneed,'" the latter read aloud. "'The dead sometimes return. You thought you had beaten me when you robbed me of my greatest treasure and had me sent to a living death, but I have come back and lies and treachery will not save you now if you try to stand in my path. You are dealing with one who knows you and your devilish schemes and who will stop at nothing for revenge. For every hour spent in that hell you shall suffer! If harm has come to that which you stole from me you shall pay! Old man, take warning, for I shall come to claim my own!'"

The silence which followed as Rex handed the letter to his companions was broken by Sneed himself. He had not resumed his seat, but stood by the desk plucking impatiently at his pendulous under lip.

"Well?" he demanded. "What do you think of it? The creature is unbalanced, of course, but that is where any possible danger could lie. If he has got some crazed no-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

tion that I have something in my safe that rightfully belongs to him, and with the cunning of the insane has managed to gain access to my apartments I shall not feel at ease until he is safe under lock and key."

"Are you quite sure that you can recall no one who might have such a fancied grievance against you, Mr. Sneed?" George folded the two sheets together and laid them upon the table. "In the financial world in which you were a prominent figure not many years ago a man cannot climb very high without making enemies, however unconscious he may be of them. Have you thought well since that letter came this morning?"

"It is a tissue of lies, sir!" Sneed's face was convulsed with sudden rage and he brought his fist down sharply upon the desk. "That lunatic not only accused me of robbery but of being responsible for sending him somewhere, for which he threatens vengeance. There is nothing in my safe nor in my possession that is not lawfully mine, but the writer of that letter, whatever kink he has in his brain, may have conceived some cunning plan to rob me, or be the tool of others."

"In that case, Mr. Sneed, before we can proceed further it will be absolutely necessary for our expert here, Mr. Howe, to examine your safe and to know the exact circumstances under which you discovered that it had been tampered with," Rex said firmly, but their client shook his head.

"Not at all! I have told you that the attempt made was unsuccessful; it was bound to be! No one can open the

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

safe for there is not another like it in the world. It was constructed especially for me after an idea of my own and no one could enter it who did not know the secret. I do not propose that anyone shall!—It is not a matter of distrust, gentlemen!" he added hastily as he noted the quick flash in Rex's eyes. "The mechanism which controls my safe has nothing to do with the letter upon which I have consulted you. Find the man who wrote it and see that he is put away; that is all I require of you and I am willing to pay—"

"You cannot pay for our professional reputations which are at stake if we fail in a case, Mr. Sneed, and we cannot undertake yours, as I warned you, if you do not give us your full confidence," Rex retorted. "We must be the best judges of what is or is not pertinent to our investigation. You say that the safe was your own invention and especially constructed for you. The men who built it, therefore, must know the secret of its mechanism and it is possible that they have adapted your idea and made others like it. Have you thought of that?"

Once more a dry cackle broke from Sneed's lips.

"It was a matter not so much of construction as of installation, and I am quite certain that no other was built like it for the man whom I employed died soon afterward and I had made it to his interest to keep the details of my invention to himself. The intruder who broke in here may have learned of its location, but he could not gain access to it."

"When was the attempt made to break into it, Mr.

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Sneed?" George interposed quickly before Rex could speak again.

"Sometime between last Saturday morning when I took some papers from it to my vault at the bank just before the closing hour and the following afternoon," Sneed replied. "I went to it then to compare some accounts with those I had in my desk and I discovered unmistakable indications that an attempt had been made to open it. That is immaterial, however, except as it may have some bearing on this letter—"

The harsh whirr of a buzzer interrupted him and he crossed to the door by which they had entered and opened it an inch or two, just sufficiently to reveal Robert's face in the aperture. As the latter addressed his employer in an undertone Phil turned in appeal to Rex.

"For the love of Mike, old man, let me get a flash at that safe!" he implored. "Don't take this bird's word for it that the case depends only on that letter!"

"I am not," Rex responded. "Don't worry, Phil, your turn will come, for we will see that safe or drop the case."

"What is your handwriting expert's name?" asked Sneed from the doorway.

"Mr. Nichols. Has he come? We left word for him—"

"Show Mr. Nichols in, Robert." Sneed left the door ajar and returning to the table he took up the letter. "Now perhaps we shall make some real progress."

Phil flushed and even George frowned, but Rex sat seemingly unmoved and only those who knew him well would have detected the slight hardening of his jaw or

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

sensed the unalterable determination which it portended. His tone was still suave when he presented Cliff Nichols on the latter's appearance, but he added:

"It has not been settled yet that we will accept this case. Mr. Sneed agreed to place himself unreservedly in our hands, but we differ as to the relevancy of a certain detail. If we may not examine the safe we had best not take up any more of his valuble time nor our own."

He rose, but Sneed put out a nervously clutching hand.

"I am perfectly willing to show you how the attempt was made to tamper with it!" he exclaimed. "I am naturally jealous of my invention and do not wish it disclosed to the world, but I had decided to trust you before I dispatched Robert with my message. If you insist your expert is, of course, welcome to examine the safe, but I prefer first to hear what this gentleman has to say about the letter."

He extended it to Nichols as he spoke and the latter after a glance at their leader accepted it and read it with a casual air.

"Quite so." Cliff reached out for the envelope and slipping the letter into it he placed it in his pocket. "There is nothing extraordinary about this, my dear Mr. Sneed; it is quite in the usual run of anonymous letters sent by cranks to prominent men who may or may not have incurred their personal enmity. With your permission I will examine this more fully at my office. From the information I found awaiting me there I understand that it came in the ordinary mail this morning and your butler

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

according to custom laid it beside your plate."

"Yes, but—but have you nothing to tell me about the sender of it?" Disappointment made the old man's thin tones shrill. "What does the handwriting indicate? Surely if you are an expert in this—er—branch of your profession you must have gained some facts from just a first reading!"

"I have nothing to tell you now, Mr. Sneed." Cliff smiled but his mild, near-sighted eyes snapped at the half-incredulous sneer. "At this stage of our investigation we ask questions, we do not reply to them before we have sufficient data and time to study and reflect upon it. This writing is disguised, of course, but is there not a letter nor a stroke of the pen which is familiar to you, however vaguely? Have you compared it with any specimens of other handwriting which you may have among your papers?"

"Certainly not! It never occurred to me to do so!" Sneed disclaimed vigorously. "That would imply that I had a suspicion as to the identity of the author and as I have repeatedly assured your associates here I am as much in the dark as they are. The contents of the letter is sheer nonsense to me, the raving of a creature of unsound mind, and the writing itself is like none other that I have ever seen to my knowledge."

"Yet you considered it of sufficient importance to call us in." Cliff spoke meditatively as though to himself and their client retorted hastily:

"It is of sufficient importance to me, sir, that my peace

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

of mind and perhaps my personal safety be not endangered by a crank! Then, too, my safe—!"

He paused biting his lips but George interposed.

"As Mr. Nichols can do nothing further until he has had an opportunity to study the letter privately I might suggest that you show us your safe now and then we will return to our headquarters."

Sneed glanced at each of the four unyielding faces and shrugged.

"Very well, but remember, gentlemen, that the safe is a mere detail, of minor importance. I should never have gone to the trouble of consulting you about it. I require your services only in regard to the letter and the sender of it!"

There seemed to be almost a note of warning in his tones and George glanced meaningly at their leader as they followed the old man to the curtained doorway, but Rex was watching Phil. Since the glimpse which the former safe-cracker had taken through those curtains when their client went to procure the letter an unusual preoccupation had settled upon him and over his weak, goodlooking features an expression of amazement mingled with incredulity had spread.

Now as he halted in the doorway only Rex was close enough to catch the involuntary exclamation which escaped him.

"Good Lord! The Super-swing!"

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER III

PHINEAS SNEED'S INVENTION

THE library was a square room almost as large as the one they had just left, with two windows opening on the side street and a third deep and high up in the opposite wall, which evidently gave upon the inner court. The lines of bookcases that reached from floor to ceiling on all sides was broken otherwise only by the fireplace and beside it at an angle across the corner of the room, a safe.

It was of medium size and solid-looking, differing in no wise at a casual glance from those ordinarily seen in offices, and its half-opened door disclosed a double row of small drawers and pigeonholes stacked with an orderly array of papers. Ledgers and account books filled the lower space and the bulk of a black japanned tin despatch box could be discerned in its innermost recesses.

Yet to the trained perceptions of Rex Powell there seemed to be something odd about the position of the safe. It jutted out into the room taking up more space than its dimensions appeared to warrant and the panelling in the angle where the two sides of the wall met to form the corner just above and behind it showed a faint tracery of cracks in the dull varnish. Looking closer he noted that upon each side of the safe there were short, claw-like pro-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

jections of steel from which stout rods ran back seemingly into the wood, and Sneed's unguarded admission that his invention pertained more to the method by which the safe had been installed than to that receptacle itself returned to his mind.

George and Cliff Nichols stood regarding it critically while Phil with a mere glance at its contents ran his hands down the rods at either side, gazed up at the wall and then with a nod as of satisfaction abruptly turned his back upon it and began a slow circuit of the room. Sneed, who had taken his stand on the hearth with a supercilious smile uttered a low exclamation and plucked nervously at the wrinkled skin about his sharp jaw, his small shrewd eyes following every measured step of the mechanical expert, but he said no word until the latter turned.

"Mr. Sneed, the installation of this safe was your own idea, you say? What suggested it to you in the first place? I know, of course, that it slides back into the wall at the touch of a concealed spring, but that is not alone its unusual feature. You have made a study of hydraulics?"

"Only a superficial one," Sneed replied with elaborate carelessness. "A movable wall safe is not unique and one which I had seen suggested this to my mind. I drew a rough plan without practically any working knowledge of how it could be constructed and informed myself upon it later. The man I employed found no difficulty in following my instructions."

"How long ago was it installed?"

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"A little over four years, nearer five to be exact, but I cannot see what bearing that may have—?"

"And who constructed it for you?" Phil persisted. "What firm supplied the man?"

"None," Sneed replied shortly. "He was a foreigner, a skilled mechanic, as you may have judged for yourself, but without ideas of his own. He was sick and out of work when I ran across him and gave him this commission. Naturally I would not take my unpatented invention to any established manufacturers and permit them thereafter to turn out replicas by the wholesale!"

He shugged again impatiently and moved toward the windows as though he considered the interrogation a superfluous bore, but Phil went on doggedly:

"How did you happen to run across this foeigner? What was his name and what country did he come from?"

"Really this is irrelevant!" The other's asperity was uncontrolled. "The fellow performed his work to my satisfaction and the price I paid him enabled him to return to his home in France before he died. His name was Jules—Jules Dumois or Dupuy or something like that; I have forgotten, and it is immaterial! I know that he is dead and I am convinced he told no one of this method of installation."

"You kept track of him, though, Mr. Sneed, didn't you? You must have, to be so sure of his death."

"His widow wrote begging me to pay the funeral expenses; that is how I know, but the man was practically dying, anyway, when he left this country. I tell you this is a sheer waste of time!" Sneed turned in exasperation to

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Rex. "If you people are trying to make a complicated affair out of this you are mistaken! The crank who wrote that letter is the one I want found and put away and he may have had nothing to do with the attempt upon my safe last week!"

"Yet that such an attempt was made, and that the letter virtually accuses you of unlawful possession of some 'treasure' of evident value to the writer are two rather significant points, you will admit," Rex replied as patiently as he could. "Will you tell us of your movements from Saturday noon until you discovered on the following day that the safe had been tampered with?"

"I went to my deposit vault at the bank just before noon with the papers which I told you I had taken from the safe." Sneed had sidled back to his former position on the hearth and his irascible temper seemed to have subsided. "I had shut it carefully and tested it, as I invariably do more from habit than anything else, for of late I have kept nothing here of value to anyone but myself. I lunched downtown and went to a curio shop or two which I frequently visit, then returned to dine at home. I retired early as usual without another thought to the safe and nothing disturbed me or my servants during the night. Sunday I motored out of town to look at some property and it was late afternoon when I returned. I began to figure up some accounts and it was then on going to my safe that I found someone had tried to break into it, as I will explain to you, gentlemen!"

From the beginning of his speech when he had again

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

stationed himself with his back to the fireplace Sneed had apparently made no gesture or movement, yet now there came to the ears of the four Shadowers the same subdued whirring sound that they had heard before and a section of the walnut panelling which met in the corner receded a few inches and then rose smoothly behind the upper part as the safe at the same time rolled back into the aperture thus formed. There was a sharp click and the sliding section descended noiselessly once more, fitting with perfect exactitude into its place. Save for the minute cross cracks in the surface of the panels, which might easily have been laid to a defect in the grain of the wood, no outward indication was left of the recess in the wall and what it contained, and Sneed rubbed his shrivelled hands together and chuckled in almost childish pleasure.

"Rather neat, eh?"

"It's one of the slickest—!" George Roper had momentarily forgotten his present status and his slaty gray eyes lighted with enthusiasm. "For a spook cabinet it has everything else skinned—I mean that it is far superior to the crude mechanism employed by some fraudulent spiritualists whom we have had occasion to investigate lately! —But I do not see any marks except those barely discernible fissures where the panels join the upper wall."

"There are none, but anyone having known or guessed that a safe was concealed here would naturally have sought for a sliding panel and the spring or lock that controlled it, realizing that mere force would not cause it to open. The first thing that I noticed last Sunday afternoon was

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

the blur of fingermarks with here and there the imprint of a whole moist palm where it had been pressed all up and down the panelling, showing as clearly on the satin finish of the wood as though it were a mirror." Sneed paused. "He must have suspected a system of leverage then and looked for the handle or pivot that would start it in motion, for this loose brick here in the hearth was pried out of place, several of the volumes in the book-cases on either side of the movable panels were disarranged and there were fingermarks again, dusty this time, all along the carving in the white marble of the mantel."

"I wish we had been called in before those finger prints disappeared," Cliff Nichols remarked. "Did you observe their general outline, Mr. Sneed? Was there any peculiarity about the shape of the palm which impressed you particularly?"

"Only that they were large and powerful looking—I noticed the print of both palms, and the fingers were thick and square at the ends, and rather curiously bent."

"Spatulate." Cliff nodded understandingly. "Those of the average safe-breaker are, unless he is an artist in his line."

He cast a guileless glance at Phil as though for corroboration and that young man grimaced and thrust both hands hastily in his pockets. George Roper's mellifluous tones broke the momentary pause.

"Remarkable presence of mind, my dear sir! You must have been greatly disturbed at the evidences of an intruder, yet you were sufficiently collected to note the im-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

print of *both* palms! I would be too much to hope, I suppose, that one had left a plainer impression than the other?"

"It did not, Mr. Roper, but I understand what you imply." Sneed accepted the diplomatic tribute with patronizing modesty. "I observed, however, that where the dust marks of all five fingers appeared on the mantel those of the left hand were more numerous than those of the right."

"That is something to go upon, at any rate," remarked Rex. "The marks upon the woodwork would have disappeared by themselves a few hours after they were made and if one of your servants had dusted this room in the morning surely the imprint of dirty fingers on that white marble would have been noticed had they been made during the night. You questioned them, of course?"

Sneed shook his head slyly.

"Only as to their movements while I was out and whether or not they had heard anything during the night, and before doing so I myself removed all traces of those finger-prints. I keep only two servants, old Robert and his wife Jane, and although they have been with me for a number of years and I have always found them faithful I preferred to hear their story without disclosing how I knew that an intruder had entered my rooms. They could throw no light upon the affair, however. Both had been at home all of Saturday and on Sunday Jane had been out from ten o'clock until three, but Robert had remained at home. I myself returned shortly after four."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Had you occasion to enter your library yourself before going out that morning?"

"No. I arose later than is my usual custom and the car was waiting while I breakfasted. I have told you all I can of the matter and it is in your hands now, gentlemen, but once more let me impress upon you that my sole object in sending for you was to protect myself from the writer of that letter. If he proves to be the same man who attempted burglary here, so much the better, but if not it is reasonable to suppose that my visitor will not trouble me again since his first effort was unprofitable."

Sneed moved toward the other room as though to signify that the protracted interview was at an, but Phil held doggedly at his heels.

"Just a minute, Mr. Sneed. From what you've told us there is nothing to show that the Frenchman you employed couldn't have welched on you before he died;—told the details of this invention of yours to somebody, or sold them. You haven't told us yet how you ran across him in the first place."

"I tell you the fellow is not a factor in this case!" The old man's irascible temper flared up once more and his small eyes flashed like twin points of steel. "I do not wish to discuss my invention any further! It was more a whim on my part than anything else; I wanted to see my idea take practical shape and form, but I had no definite plan to that end until this fellow came to me and I learned casually during our interview that he was a mechanical engineer. I sounded him and he was glad

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

to accept my terms and conditions. That is all there was to it."

"Why did he come to you? Did he hear that you were interested in mechanics?"

"No. Some curio dealer had told him that I was making a small collection of swords and other weapons and he had brought an old Moorish knife to sell to me.—But all this is totally beside the point! I want the writer of that letter!"

"We will do our utmost to find him for you," Rex assured him as they followed him back into the corner room once more. "By the way, your man tells me that your apartments occupy the entire upper floor of the hotel here and that they are built all around a square open roof-court in the center. What is back of the library? I saw no connecting door."

"There is none. All along the back are store-rooms and the servants' quarters, including my private kitchen where Jane prepares my especial diet whenever I have one of my attacks. At right angles to it, parallel with this side street are my own personal apartments; my bedroom, dressing-room, dining-room and study. The latter reaches to the Avenue on the other side of the reception room and completes the square.—I cannot see, however, that the arrangement of my apartment can have anything to do with the matter I have called you in to investigate. That letter came in the ordinary mail!"

He had spoken with nervous haste and his thin voice had taken on a rasping quality as though he found it diffi-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

cult to breathe. A dull, angry spot of color had mounted, too, in his wrinkled cheeks and his fingers worked restlessly on the high chair-back on which he had leaned. The excitement of the morning and his own ungovernable temper seemed to have brought him to the verge of one of the attacks he had mentioned, and Rex ignored his expostulation and remarked:

"We will get to work on it at once, Mr. Sneed, and communicate with you as soon as we have made any progress. In the meantime, should we require further information one of us will call upon you."

"You will find me here." Sneed pressed the bell in the wall beside his desk. "I am not in the best of health and rarely go out except on business. I prefer that you come to me personally with what future questions you may wish to ask, for Robert is a garrulous old fool and Jane exaggerates, I find, like all women! The letter itself furnishes the only real data in the case and I have done all I can to assist you when I placed it in your hands.—Robert, show the gentlemen out."

He did not accompany them into the reception room and George, the last of the quartette to file out, glanced back to see him sink once more into his chair, his head with its scanty white hair bent forward in meditation and his fingers drumming upon the desk.

Robert closed the living-room door behind them and went for their hats and sticks and Cliff Nichols observed disgustedly:

"There may be some interesting points in connection

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

with this letter but as far as our new client is concerned I cannot say that I for one am entering upon this case with any undo amount of enthusiasm. Of all the boorish old reprobates—!"

George held up a warning hand.

"There is an old saying, my dear Cliff, that walls are sometimes provided with ears. I would suggest that we defer our discussion of this matter until we have—"

He paused for a door at the left of the fireplace opened and a woman started forward into the room. She was about fifty years old, broad of hip and shoulder, with heavy beetling brows and a dark line of down upon her upper lips. For a moment she gazed at them with a surly air, then her sharp eyes fell and with a muttered word of apology she crossed to the door on the other side of which Sneed sat and entered without knocking, closing it behind her with a definite slam.

"Whew! If that is Jane, I don't wonder Robert wore a henpecked air!" Rex shrugged and spoke in a careful undertone. "Were you serious about that ear, George?"

George Roper's lank countenance remained immobile and no movement of his lips was perceptible, but his unmistakable voice replied laconically:

"Electric light button beside door is dummy. Look close!" He turned with sudden urbanity as Robert reappeared. "You and your wife must take excellent care of these rooms. We were just observing that they do not look as though it were all of ten years since they were done over."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"It isn't, sir." The butler's face lighted with a pleased smile at the praise. "Mr. Sneed lived in an apartment on one of the lower floors until five years ago when he took this and remodelled it as I told you before, sir. I—I hope you'll be able to help him."

He added the last in a half-whisper with a deprecatory glance toward the connecting door and handed them their hats and sticks in ill-concealed haste. Then he escorted them out into the entrance hall and down the stairway to the private door, which he unlocked for them.

No word passed between the four Shadowers after taking leave of him until they had descended in the elevator and crossed the echoing lobby to the street. Phil Howe, ordinarily the most garrulous member of the organization, had not spoken since they left the presence of Sneed and now he pushed his Panama a trifle back upon his curly head and whistled softly as he strode along.

"Why so pensive?" George demanded. "Our client is a rum old bird, I'll admit, but why in time you pestered him so about the man who built his safe for him and then neglected to find out the most important thing of all is beyond me. You took the cross examination into your own hands and I only interfered when it was necessary to pour oil on the troubled waters, otherwise I should have demanded myself that he show us how he worked the mechanism of that invention of his."

"Oh, that?" Phil asked airily. "He wouldn't have shown you if his life had depended on it, and anyway it doesn't

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

matter. I saw how he worked it, or rather I guessed when I rubbered at him through the curtains."

"Sneed is right, though; this letter is the key to the main problem." Cliff patted his pocket complacently. "I saw nothing so very remarkable about that contrivance. The mechanical devices which Rex had rigged up in our offices are far more amazing to me."

"No. I fancy that safe works on a different and unique system," Rex said thoughtfully. "One thing is sure. There is more mystery connected with Mr. Phineas Sneed that he does not wish delved into than that which he has called upon us to solve."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER IV

'O-FOUR-TWO-SIX'

"SUPPOSE we take the letter into consideration first, for after all as Cliff says, it is the main key to the problem," Rex suggested. They were seated once more about the council table in his private office and to Lucian Baynes and Henry Corliss, who had joined them, had been recounted the gist of their conversation with their new client. "We can compare notes afterward as to any curious facts which may or may not have come under our individual notice and then decide which of us is to assume charge of the case."

"That goes without saying, doesn't it?" Henry glanced at Cliff as the latter produced the letter, and taking it from the envelope he spread it on the table before them. "Hope I'll get a look in as alienist when Cliff finds the nut who wrote that letter. Read it to us, old man."

Cliff complied and then observed:

"I'd like to know what you all think of it before I express an opinion. I want to see if one peculiarity about it strikes you as forcibly as it does me."

George Roper shook his head.

"I've worked every graft and played every con. game going in my time and I flatter myself that I've learned to

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

be a pretty fair judge of human nature. Off-hand, I wouldn't say that the fellow who wrote that was altogether a nut. It is worded in a hifalutin style, but people are sometimes unconsciously dramatic when they are laboring under strong emotion, and there's another way to look at it, too. What if he had wanted to make it read like the work of a crank in case it fell into other hands than Sneed's, but was convinced that the old man himself would know very well what it meant and who had sent it? I'm confounded if it don't ring true to me, as though the writer were sincere, however he might have been mistaken in bringing his accusations and threats against Sneed."

"Did the old man smoke while you were there?" Henry asked as he took up the letter and sniffed it audibly.

"No. There wasn't the slightest odor of tobacco in his rooms," Rex replied quickly.

"Then our letter-writing friend must have a varied and inconsistent taste," the chemical expert declared as he passed the letter to Lucian. "You're rather a connoisseur, Luce. You can't escape that smell of rank Virginia tobacco; it is stronger on the envelope than on the sheets of paper, but the whole thing is permeated by another blend, too. It's something more delicate and yet quite as penetrating. Do you get it?"

"My olfactory sense may not be as well developed as yours, but I certainly do get it, Henry!" Luce made a wry face as he dropped the envelope and held the inner sheets gingerly to his nose. "Yes, by Jove, it is the pur-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

est Russian and of a grade that I thought couldn't be obtained nowadays! The chap probably kept a box or two of rare cigarettes in the same drawer with this writing paper, but by preference smoked that other unspeakable stuff.—Hello!"

His eyes had fallen upon the handwriting and he read the letter carefully twice through to himself while the others watched him. At length he glanced across the table at Cliff.

"Here is another inconsistency. I wonder if this is what you meant, my dear fellow? The bottom of the page ends with the sentence: 'For every hour spent in that hell you shall suffer,' and the word 'suffer' is repeated at the top of the next page. That is one of the fundamental rules of our English cousins in commercial correspondence and is as essentially national a touch as is the peculiar formation of some of the letters, particularly the 'e', yet the phraseology is distinctly American. I should say that the writer was an Englishman, educated over there but long enough in this country for our form of speech to have become second nature to him. Was it that to which you referred?"

Cliff smiled.

"You and Henry have both approached it and by clues which I hadn't discovered, but your final conclusion is wrong, I think," he replied. "There isn't necessarily any inconsistency between the phraseology and the form of writing, or the two widely different kinds of tobacco.—

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

George, would you say that the letter was composed by some whining old dotard?"

"Hardly!" George chuckled drily. "All the sentences are clipped short except the second one, in which the thought of his real or fancied wrongs ran away with him. He may have stuck in a phrase or two at the end to make it appear to others than Sneed like the work of a crank, but the letter as a whole wasn't studied and I should say it had been written on the spur of the moment by some strong-willed fellow in a violent passion."

"Exactly!" Cliff crowed exultantly. "I admit that I am still a good deal of a tyro at deducing personality from handwriting, but unless all the signs in those books on the subject which Rex got for me are wrong these words were written by an elderly man to whom penmanship was rather a task."

"And you claim there is no inconsistency—?" Henry was beginning, but Rex cried:

"I see, Cliff! You mean that letter is the work of two people, an elderly man who wrote at the dictation of a younger, stronger one!"

"That would account for the tobacco, of course," Henry agreed. "Say that the young fellow smoked the Russian cigarettes and the old man the common domestic variety."

"I wonder that didn't occur to any of us but Cliff!" exclaimed Luce. "The writer was English and the other American. It is just a supposition but if we assume that some young man of Sneed's own social position keeps an English valet and prevailed upon him to write that letter

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

we will have a working basis even though it is a trifle too much to take for granted."

"No. That was my idea. Do you see how the pen fairly plows through the paper on the upward strokes and how wavering and uncertain it is on the downward ones?" Cliff pointed to a line here and there as he spoke. "That is not the free hand of one lately accustomed to much clerical work and yet the formation of the characters is typical of the old-fashioned London clerk, as Luce says. Following the theory he just brought forward, let us say that this valet has formerly occupied a superior position but had fallen in some way upon evil days.—Don't smile, George!"

"Oh, I'll grant you that an Englishman wrote that, elderly if you like and a former clerk, but why the valet? You'll be saying next that he wrote it under compulsion!"

"Something very like it!" Cliff retorted. "He wasn't exactly forced to do it for the writing doesn't indicate fear, but it does show hesitation and reluctance and a certain amount of emotion. Manservant or not, I think he was influenced by the younger, stronger character and persuaded against his better judgment."

"Well, we are agreed on one point, at least," observed Rex. "Two had a hand in this affair, one dictating and one writing. Henry has told us their taste in smoking tobacco and Luce deduced their respective nationalities, while from the phrasing of the letter George claims that the American is young, strong, impetuous and of violent passions, and from the chirography Cliff has found that

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

the Englishman is elderly, emotional and of weaker will. So far so good, but we haven't heard a word from you, Phil. What is on your mind?"

Phil roused himself with an effort from his own train of thought.

"Oh, I heard what you fellows have been saying, all right, and I know from the last case we handled that it isn't bunk, by a long shot, but when it comes to a guessing game like that you'll have to count me out! I couldn't tell from that letter whether one guy or ten had a hand in writing it and if you had their photographs in front of you where would you go from here?"

"Gad, but you are a pessimist—!" Cliff was beginning but Rex interrupted him.

"Nevertheless, we've all had the floor and it is Phil's turn. I have been observing this unusual concentration of his and I think he has a suggestion to make. Out with it, Phil!"

"No, it's just a request." The younger man leaned forward earnestly across the table. "Whichever of you fellows take charge of this case, for the love of Heaven let me work on it in my own way until I have satisfied myself about something. It is a point no one could handle but me, and I don't even see any definite connection between it and that letter as yet, but it couldn't be just coincidence! Unless I'm away off, old Sneed is the biggest liar and fraud in creation and he has made an enemy who, as that guy says, would 'stoop at nothing' to get

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

back at him. And Sneed knows it, too! You can laugh, but I tell you that old boy is in fear of his life!"

"Oh, come, Phil, that is a bit too much!" Luce drawled. "He wouldn't have come to a practically unknown organization like ours if the affair were as drastic as that. Granted that he wants to avoid notoriety, any man would chance it by going to the authorities for protection rather than be murdered in his bed!"

"Not if it would put him deeper in Dutch himself than the guy would be who is after him!" Phil objected. "Mind you, this is only a wild guess on my part and if it should turn out to be right that enemy of his may have misjudged him, but you haven't seen that apartment of his, Luce. Rex can tell you that it is protected like a fort!"

Rex nodded.

"There were several unique features about it. George got a few of them but I wondered if you and Cliff did, Phil."

"I'm not blind, or deaf, either!" the expert on safes retorted. "I might as well have been, though, for any word that could be heard from one room to another of that apartment and for a very good reason; the walls were padded! Did you notice how thick they were? When we were talking to Sneed and Cliff came, Robert sounded a buzzer in the livingroom to announce him, but the old man didn't call out 'come in,' for he knew his voice wouldn't be heard with the door closed; he crossed over and opened it, and he was careful to find out that Cliff was really our handwriting expert before he ordered the but-

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

ler to admit him. He told us about the attempt to rob him but he wouldn't let us see the safe until Rex threatened that if he didn't we would throw up the case."

"I discovered, too, that the walls were padded when I looked out of the reception room window at the stream of traffic on the Avenue and realized that not a sound rose from it. I tried then to open the window but it couldn't be done; the sash was sealed tight," Rex remarked. "George discovered later that there was a dictaphone concealed in the wall of that room, behind a fake electric light button."

"I found out something else that may have escaped you fellows, before we entered the apartment itself." George chuckled reminiscently. "Lord, how it took me back to the good old poolroom days! When Robert showed us up to that private entrance hall and stopped to unlock the door he sounded the knocker twice. It couldn't be heard within, of course, with the walls padded, but I think it had some electrical connection that announced our coming for Robert purposely fussed a lot with that key before he got the door unlocked and in the meantime I saw a perfectly good peephole open in the carving on one of the panels and an eye appeared, the woman's, I think. Rex was too much interested in that little window high up in the wall and what it looked out on to notice—!"

"It didn't 'look out on' anything, if you remember," Rex interjected. "That and the one in the library which opened on the roof court—if Robert is to be believed,—were for purposes of ventilation and light only. If the

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

old chap kept a harem the zenana couldn't be more carefully secluded! Robert got nervous, too, when I asked him about that first window; his hand trembled so that he could scarcely unlock the door, and Sneed wasn't any too pleased later when he learned that Robert had explained to us the way in which the apartment was laid out. He as much as ordered us not to question his servants any more.—By the way, Phil, did you ever in your late profession come across a safe that was installed like his?"

Phil shook his head.

"No." He spoke with an odd repression. "I've heard, though, that a similar mechanical contrivance was possible, but put to a far different use.—Don't ask me any more now, you fellows! Let me work in my own way and you can go as far as you like with that letter—!"

His speech ended in a gulp and he sat staring with protruding eyes at the envelope of the anonymous letter which he had picked up idly as he talked and was turning over and over in his hands. They clenched now until the stiff paper crumpled between them and suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"I've got it! It wasn't a coincidence after all!—Look here, I told you fellows a minute ago that I didn't see any definite connection between the letter and the point I wanted to investigate, but I see it now! I've got the proof! Sneed's enemy didn't write that, if Cliff guessed right about his age and character, and he couldn't have dictated it, not in that language, but the warning comes

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

from him all right, or somebody who has taken up the grudge for him!" Phil hesitated, his eager face flushing, and then he burst out: "Gee, I know this sounds like awful nerve when you all think I am just a roughneck yegg, good enough perhaps to crack a crib but not there with the headwork,—will you give me a chance to boss this job? Luce got the dope on the last case from a lump of dried mud, because he was the only one who knew where it came from and what it was used for; now I am the only one of us who stands a show of finding the guy for whom that letter was written, and I could use nearly all of you and save time right from the start! Will you give me my chance?"

"What do you say?" Rex asked slowly as he looked around the table. "Phil knows we don't think he is a roughneck, he is just as expert in his line as any of us are in ours."

"More expert than I am in mine," Cliff said generously. "I don't want the leadership in this case but I would hate to give up working on this letter now—."

"I wouldn't want you to!" Phil cried. "If you would stick to it and tell me every hint you can dope out of it I wouldn't ask any more of you!"

"You all took my word for it in the last affair when I told you I was the only one who could handle it, and you were willing to follow my directions blindly," Luce reminded them. "Phil even went away out of his line to get some information, and he did as much if not more than any of us. Now if he can tell us what connection

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

there is between the attempted robbery and the anonymous letter, and what made him so sure all of a sudden that such a connection existed I am ready and willing to take my instructions from him."

"And I." George nodded. "I am beginning to understand now, Phil, why you were so insistent about finding out who built that safe and what had become of him. You had heard of Sneed's invention before, hadn't you? The letter speaks of the dead returning; maybe you have reason to suspect that this 'Jules Dumois' or 'Dupuy' is a pretty lively corpse!"

"Henry?" Rex turned to the rotund medical expert inquiringly, and the latter shrugged.

"Oh, let Phil take the ship, by all means! He thinks he knows what he is getting at, anyway and as he says, where do we go from here if we depend solely on what can be deduced from the letter? It won't give us the names and address of the two men who concocted it, and from what you have told me Sneed isn't likely to give you any more information than he can help for fear of giving his own hand away. We can't go through the city with a fine-toothed comb looking for a young American with an elderly English pal, or advertise for them, and if Phil can locate them by going at the case from another angle, let him tackle it."

"But are you sure that you can?" Rex turned doubtful eyes on their colleague. "You said that you had absolute proof—?"

"I have." The careless, happy-go-lucky note was gone

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

from Phil's voice and he spoke with grave seriousness. "I am not going to tell you why, or how I came to know about it, but there is a certain—well, call it a code number, that came into my mind the minute I caught a glimpse of the mechanism which controlled that safe of Sneed's. Whether he has ever heard that number or not I don't know, but somebody evidently thinks that he has, and the letter must have been too vague to suit them. They wanted to make sure he would know who was on his trail and that it wasn't any bluff, so before the letter was mailed they jotted this little reminder down in the corner. It is so faint that you can hardly see it and I only noticed it myself a few minutes ago. Sneed was probably too upset to get it and it might not mean anything to him if he did, but I—I know the code!"

He smoothed the envelope flat upon the table and pointed to one corner. There, so lightly pencilled as to be barely discernible appeared the number: '0426'.

"It is agreed, then," Rex said after a pause. "Phil, the case is yours!"

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER V

THE MAN ACROSS THE HALL

"IT'S mighty fine of you boys to give me this chance!" Phil looked with sparkling eyes about the table at his fellow Shadowers. "I needn't tell you that I will do my level best to make good and prove that you didn't pick a bloomer when you trusted me to run this investigation. Of course, I don't know how much of a hand I'll be at telling other guys what to do for I worked alone in the old days from the time that I turned my first trick, but if you will all just work with me and advise me when I get in a hole I am sure we can't fail!"

"We won't!" George asserted confidently. "I don't suppose you have thought out yet any special work for each of us to do?"

"You're just the fellow for one lead I want followed up," Phil replied. "You were once in the show business, weren't you?"

"'Show business?'" George repeated in surprise. "I ran a shell game game with a circus in my early days, and worked the carnival circuits with every fake device for enticing kale from the pockets of hayseeds that was invented at that time. But why—?"

"Coney Island closes for the season at the end of the month, but there are bound to be some busted concessions

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

down there that would be glad to sublease right now and get out from under," Phil remarked. "You ought to be able to pick up a fortune-telling booth or something of that sort for a song. I wish you would, and get in with as many of the show people in the amusement parks as you can. I want to get a line on a woman known as 'Jen' who used to be in the carnival business,—slack wire stuff was her specialty, I think. She had a husband called 'Cap' who worked the same circuit with her but I don't remember what his graft was if I ever heard. Try to get track of them, will you?"

George's ministerial features lighted with a smile.

"My son, you have given me a stunt after my own heart!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "I don't think I have lost any of the old patter, and the sound of the barker's spiel will be music to my ears again! When do I start?"

"Go down this afternoon and look the ground over; mix with the bunch and locate a concession as soon as you can. When you're fixed let us know where and what kind of stunt you are pulling, and if you do get on the trail of the woman and her husband 'phone Ethel right away."

"'Cap' and 'Jen'," George ruminated. "Are those the only names you know them by? What do they look like?"

"I don't know them; never saw them in my life, as a matter of fact, I've only heard them spoken of." Phil seemed to be choosing his words with unusual care. "They

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

are a pretty decent, hardworking couple, I gathered, and the woman especially is the open-hearted kind who would take anybody in who was sick or in trouble. That's all I can tell you about them, and I know it is mighty little dope to go on, but I don't want to pass up any chance, no matter how slim."

"If they're still in the game you needn't worry. People in that line of work whether it's circus, carnival or amusement park are all like one big family and I am almost sure to find someone who can put me on their track." George rose. "If I am going to do this thing in character I will just have time to climb into some clothes fit for the part and get down there and look about a little before the afternoon rush starts. Any further instructions?"

Phil glanced half-deprecatingly at Rex, but the latter shook his head smilingly.

"No, this is your show. I haven't any suggestions to offer, but on the contrary I am waiting to take my instructions from you, my dear fellow!"

"It seems like rotten cheek, when you brought us all together in this organization! You're the real leader." Phil flushed again. "If you don't feel like doing what—what I thought of asking you to do later, Rex, why don't mind giving me the office."

"No, I'm playing the game all the way through.—Going, George?"

"Yes. You will hear from me as soon as I have arranged to take up my new vocation. I'll wager I coin

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

money at it, too, so even if Sneed doesn't show the proper appreciation for our efforts in his behalf I at least will not be out of pocket! See you later."

"I wonder how he deduced that Sneed was a miser," Cliff remarked when the panel had closed behind the other's attenuated figure. "Of course, George had an opportunity to study him at first hand longer than I did this morning, but I would like to see a specimen of the old boy's handwriting."

"I meant to bring you one," Phil declared. "I think I have about got his number, but if you can dope out anything more from his hen-tracks I'll be mighty glad."

"Then I'll get to work on this letter at once." Cliff moved toward his own office. "I want to study it in connection with some of those reference books of mine and you'll find me here whenever you bring the other specimen."

With a nod to the rest he disappeared and Lucian Baynes stirred in his chair.

"When Henry told me who had sent his card to us in my absence, Rex, I took the liberty of looking in your files before your return and I found that you had listed Sneed as a collector of curios," he observed. "None of you who called on him have mentioned such a collection. Does it really exist?"

"Yes, of a kind, but I doubt whether it comes within your scope, Luce. The walls of his living-room are covered with weapons; not firearms, but swords and spears and knives. There is no attempt at arrangement and

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

from a casual glance I should not say that any of them were of especial value. I fancy he picked up here and there whatever struck his eye. Odd sort of taste for a feeble old man who seems to be anything but blood-thirsty, to say the least."

"It is just an example of atavism I suppose." Luce drawled with a shrug. "That arch-murderer Bennington had a hobby for hunting and classifying butterflies, if you remember, and Mrs. Neil who wrecked all those banks, put most of her money into a collection of embroidered church vestments.—I would like a peep into that living-room of Sneed's, but I don't suppose you have planned any course of action for me yet, Phil?"

"I have, though, and one that you ought to take to like a duck to water!" Phil chuckled. "For the time being you are not a member of the Shadowers but a gentleman of leisure, travelling for your health. That English accent of yours will come in good if you can keep it up! Go to the Burlingame, engage a suite of rooms and get in solid with the management. You know what I mean, live quietly but tip everybody like a prince and scrape acquaintance with the proprietor if you can. I want to know all about those rooms of Sneed's being remodelled, what excuse he gave for leasing that whole top floor for himself alone and whatever you can find out about the installation of that safe. Do you get me?"

"I do!" The drawl was gone from Luce's tones. "I might even ingratiate myself with Sneed. I think I see a way—"

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"You won't have a chance to meet him!" Phil stared. "What do you think he has shut himself up away from everybody for? I don't believe that even the proprietor has been in those rooms since they were fixed over and it would take a fire to smoke the old weasel out, but there's no harm in trying. Get a lot of baggage with fancy labels, think up a classy monaker and sail in with the moss-grown swells over there. Don't 'phone us from the hotel, of course, but keep in touch with us."

"I'm off!" Luce paused in the aperture leading to the outer office. "By the way, Henry's cheerful face isn't known at the Burlingame, either. Couldn't he call on me if you have any further instructions—?"

"Henry is going out of town for a day or so." Phil interrupted, adding as Luce turned to depart:—"This is a mighty personal question, Henry, and I wouldn't ask it if any of the rest of us could possibly get away with what I want done. Rex might swing it because he has never been sent up, but I need him here. In your days of fake medicine did you ever operate unsuccessfully in this state?"

Henry drew his plump form up with dignity.

"My son, I have been the guest of the government at Joilet and various other resorts of the Middle West, if that is what you are driving at, but I never extended my mission of healing to New York. The high-priced specialists had got in ahead of me here at my own game."

"Then you wouldn't be identified up at Sing Sing? There's a new Warden, anyway, and he has changed

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

most of the staff. Do you suppose you could be a welfare worker looking up the record of a former con. for the sake of some dying buddy of his whom you have reformed?"

"Why couldn't I be a relative?" Henry suggested. "I needn't be dying to want to know what has become of my unfortunate brother or son!"

"Because you don't know the name he was sent up under, much less his real one. This pal has lost track of him and only learned that he was serving a term up there about three years ago for burglary." Phil's tone had lowered and he did not meet the eyes of his two companions as he added: "The yeggs he trailed around with called him 'The Gull'."

"Do you happen to know what he looked like?" Henry worked his question delicately. "It might help if I knew his approximate age and a few other little details that his dying pal would naturally have disclosed in talking about him."

"He was young, under thirty," replied Phil slowly. "He had sandy hair and he would have been freckled, I guess, even in stir. There wasn't anything of the hardened crook about him, but he was a dreamy kind of a nut and easily led."

"What if he is there still and the Warden trots him out for me?" Henry rubbed his bald head uneasily. "I'm not much up on this welfare business and if he should swear that he never heard of this buddy he's supposed to have had the Warden might get leery.—Not that there is

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

anything out against me, and I admit it would be a novel experience to visit a pen. of my own free will, but I am not over anxious to bring myself to the personal attention of the authorities."

"The Gull isn't there now," Phil said briefly. "Your reformed second-story man heard that he had been pardoned, and mind, he never knew of any trick the Gull actually turned. He was just in with the wrong crowd and liked to talk as big as the rest of them. That's the line to take, see?"

"His pal may have reformed but he needn't have become a snitcher!" Henry remarked. "I'm going to get real fond of my protégé before I reach the Big House. What does he want to find the Gull for? Is he going to leave him some of his wealth? He must have done pretty well at his game before he turned over a new leaf or a smug reformer like me wouldn't take so much trouble to pander to his last wishes."

"Oh, he could just have liked the lad and wanted to see him once more. That's only a detail. The main thing is to bluff the Warden into showing you the records and to find out if you can what has become of the Gull."

Henry rose somewhat heavily to his feet.

"I am going out first and locate some mission, or whatever they call it, where these welfare birds hang out," he announced. "One or two of them came my way at Joliet but I didn't encourage them. Now I want to see them in their natural habitat and get the line of talk one of them would be likely to hand the Warden. I'll get up there

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

on the first train tomorrow morning and I ought to be able to pull off that interview and return by evening You'll hear from me as soon as I get in."

"Henry is growing cynical I am afraid," Rex remarked when he and Phil were alone together. "It is evident that you know what you are doing, my boy, but I confess I don't quite follow you. Second-story workers and side-show people are queer fish to be in the same net with Sneed. We mustn't forget that he is our client and whatever mystery surrounds him is his own affair as far as we are officially concerned. Don't let your interest in the safe blind you to the main issue."

"I'm not!" exclaimed Phil. "I am only going at it in my own way to find out who wrote that letter. With Cliff working on it now and Luce as close to old Sneed as he can get, I knew I could spare Henry and George to follow up those old leads, but I want you to try something entirely different. We all know that you—well, you don't belong to us. Luce has a classy veneer, all right, and Cliff was a college man, but you've come from the real people and you've still got swell friends. I'd bet that you even know some of the society dames and financiers to whom you sent the Shadowers' announcements!"

Rex laughed.

"I was careful to choose people who wouldn't know or recognize me in case they required our professional services! But I don't want to use any of my old acquaintances if I can help it, Phil. I *do* belong to you of my

PROPERTY OF THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

own choice, and I've turned my back on them and their world."

He was still smiling, but there was a note of pain in his voice and the younger man flushed.

"I didn't mean to bring up anything I shouldn't, Rex, but it struck me that if you wanted to—to appear again in your old crowd you might be able to find out a little more about Sneed and the kind of life he must have led before he shut himself up like this. A man with all his money wouldn't have buried himself alive the way he has without some good reason and I want to find out what that reason is. I am dead certain it isn't only because of the enemy I told you about, it goes back further than that. I want to know everything I can learn about his life during the past—well, say ten years. Even if he didn't go in for society his wife may have done so when she was alive, and anyway among the men who butted up against him in the financial world there ought to be one or two who knew him more or less intimately. Do you understand?"

Rex nodded.

"I'll have to go after the old codgers, for if he has been out of the game for a decade or more the younger element won't recall him. The financial as well as the social world has a short memory, Phil. You won't expect to hear from me for a day or two?"

"No. Take your time; I may not show up here at the office again before you have all reported, but I'll com-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

municate with Ethel or whoever else happens to be in, of course. When can you get on the job?"

"At once." Rex took up his hat and stick. "I suppose it is no good to ask you what your own program is?"

"I'm not sure, myself!" Phil replied candidly, with a laugh. "It all depends on what I run into.—Good luck, Rex."

Yet when he was alone the smile faded from the young man's lips and an introspective look took its place as he rose and with hands thrust deep in his pockets paced rapidly to and fro. It would seem that his thoughts boded ill for someone, for his face darkened and now and then he muttered wrathfully to himself, but when at last he strode to the panel leading to the anteroom and slid it aside he called out in his usual cheerful tone:

"Hey, Ethel!"

The little secretary shifted her wad of gum.

"Anything doing?" she asked with interest. "When I got back from lunch Mr. Corliss told me he thought the ball had started rolling again, but when I asked Mr. Powell just now he said I should take my orders from you. I'll sure be glad to do something besides stall book-agents!"

"We have another little job on hand and I am supposed to be running it, but I don't know how it will pan out," Phil responded. "There is something you might be able to do, but I don't want to get you into any trouble or draw the attention of the bulls to our organization.

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

When you were caught with the goods that time they didn't take you downtown, did they?"

"Police headquarters, you mean?" The blonde head shook energetically. "No, and I'm not afraid they will now, no matter what you want me to pull off for you, Mr. Howe. Just give me the dope and you needn't worry about my dragging you people into the line-up!"

"You're quite certain no one down there would spot you?" Phil insisted somewhat uneasily. "You see that is what I want you to do, Ethel; pay a little visit to headquarters and make some inquiries for me. Think you could make yourself look homely and shabby and sickly?"

"I don't know about the sickly part but clothes'll make the difference in the rest," Ethel replied in matter-of-fact honesty, but she looked a trifle startled, nevertheless. "I wasn't mugged that time and I don't see how any of the dicks in Centre Street would know me, but what's the lay? I'm game for it, only I want a straight story if I'm going on the carpet before the main guys."

"You'll have to have more than that; you will need an address and not a phony one, either. Where are you living now?"

"With an old dame Mr. Powell found for me when he got me out of Lefty Jane's hands. She goes out sewing by the day—"

"What does she think you do?" Phil interrupted.

"Address envelopes, piece work for an advertising concern. Mr. Powell didn't want her to get wise that I was

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

working for him. We've got a dinky little flat down in the Chelsea district."

Phil grinned irrepressibly.

"Must be lively for you, Ethel! Rex will have you going to night school next!"

"And I'll tell the world I'd go if he wanted me to!" Ethel flushed. "If it hadn't been for him I would still be piking along working the shops instead of getting a chance at a swell game like yours, even if I'm not on yet to how you put it over, beyond the fact that we're all phony dicks! I'll take a tip from Mr. Powell whenever he hands one to me!—But what am I supposed to be when I show up at headquarters, and who am I trying to get a line on?"

"Your own name and address will be all right. You are a working girl out of a job and staying with an old friend. You'd better have come from some western city, though, in case you don't put your story over slick enough and they try to look you up. You've got an uncle named Jim Peterson whom you lost track of about six or seven years ago and just lately somebody told you he'd been doing time for smuggling dope, and only got out last Winter. Of course, you are sure he must have been innocent,—you know the old gag, Ethel,—and you would like to find him if they can help you, because he always said he would take care of you. Have you got that straight?"

"If I could think that fast and all new stuff I'd write a book, Mr. Howe!" she exclaimed admiringly. "Sure I've got it and I'll be Little Orphant Annie with bells on!"

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Don't pull it too strong!" Phil warned. "It's only a flier, you know. When you come back on the job here, all I want you to do is to stall an old gentleman named 'Sneed' if he calls up; tell him we are working on his case and will communicate with him later."

"So he is the fall guy now, is he?" Ethel laughed. "All right, Mr. Howe. You can depend on me.—Say, that man who moved into the office across the hall is kind of funny. You know, the one who breezed in this morning for a window pole?"

"How—'funny'?" Phil paused with his hand on the doorknob for there was a puzzled note in the girl's tones. "Have you seen him again?"

She nodded.

"I came up in the elevator with him when I got back from lunch and he bowed real pleasant; not a bit fresh. He kept looking at me and then away again quick as though he wanted to say something but couldn't make up his mind. I took my time about opening the door here and he didn't close his after letting himself in. I could sort of feel that he was looking at me. He sure isn't any dick but he seems mighty interested in us. Want me to kind of encourage him?"

"Not yet until we see what his game really is. Watch your step at headquarters, Ethel. Goodbye."

He had purposely treated as of no moment her information about their new neighbor, but he glanced curiously at the half-opened door of the other office as he passed, conscious of a quick step within. He had reached the

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

elevator when the door behind him closed and the same firm, springy tread followed down the hall just as the car descended. Phil took in the tall, bronzed, broadshouldered figure which Ethel had likened to that of a 'movie' Westerner' in one hasty but comprehensive look and then ostentatiously turned his back, although when the street level was reached he was careful to let the other precede him and noted the free, swinging stride with which he set off eastward.

Phil himself turned west, to the rather dubious tenement quarter near the river where he had rented a room from a former pal for professional purposes and where, truth to tell, he felt more at home than in the dignified bachelor apartment in which Rex had insisted that he install himself. There, as he donned a shabby pair of old trousers and a ravelled sweater all thought of the stranger was forgotten in his plans for the immediate future, but when he issued forth once more some sixth sense borne of the old days warned him of espionage.

In a doorway between two dingy shops across the way stood the broad-shouldered figure of his fellow passenger in the elevator and Phil slunk hastily past. He had plainly not been recognized in his present rough attire, but one fact was certain; as George Roper had hinted half in jest, the Shadowers were being shadowed.

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER VI.

THE SOUND UNHEARD

THE demure young girl in the cheap, black gown and modest straw turban who timidly descended the wide, shallow stairway at police headquarters and ventured out once more into the sunshine was a shade more pale beneath the cleverly applied coating of powder than when she had entered half an hour before. In spite of her vaunted daring Ethel had felt none too easy in her mind at venturing into the very citadel of her natural antagonists and the unexpectedly searching inquiry to which she had been kindly but very firmly subjected by the inspector in charge had not tended to allay her inward nervousness.

Her mission would seem on the face of it to have been futile for there was apparently no record of the further proceedings of one Jim Peterson from the expiration of his term on the previous winter, and vague promises of future aid in her search had been all that was openly vouchsafed to her. Eyes less keen than those of the little ex-shoplifter would have missed the quick, significant interchange of glances between the official and a subordinate at her mention of her 'uncle's' name, and ears less sharply attuned would not have heard the low, peremptory order which was given as she took her departure from the bureau.

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

But Ethel had not spent the last two of her twenty years in skilfully outwitting the authorities for nothing. Whether she had made a favorable impression or not with her story it was evident that the whereabouts of Jim Peterson were no secret and she shrewdly suspected that her claim of relationship might be investigated. If a plainclothes dick were sent to interview him and she could manage to trail along to his destination it would not be necessary to return to the offices of the Shadowers and admit her first failure in their service.

Walking to the corner she crossed the street and halted suddenly before a candy store window as though her attention had been arrested by the delectable display within, but the heavy plate glass reflected as in a mirror the burly figure of a young police detective who had left headquarters in her wake. For a moment her heart stopped with the thought that he might have been detailed to shadow her, but he passed without a glance and plodded off westward with a purposeful air. His brand new suit of civilian clothes sat awkwardly upon him and he bore himself with the unmistakable tread of one still walking his beat.

Ethel sniffed and wrinkled her small nose in contempt.

"He's some green dick!" she murmured to herself. "It ought to be easy."

The plainclothes man did not look back but crossed Broadway, empty of traffic in the Sunday noontide, and continued west to the riverfront and then downward with the slim black clad figure unobtrusively but tenac-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

iously bringing up the rear. A forest of smokestacks towered above the covered wharves on the right and a multitude of odors rose from the heaps of merchandise piled upon the sidewalk behind the screening barricade of which Ethel adroitly dodged when her unconscious quarry showed signs of halting in his pace, for the district was as obviously unfamiliar to him as it was to her.

Finally he stopped before a low, mean shop sandwiched between a warehouse and a fruitstand, its unshuttered, flyspecked window showing a meager display of sailors' supplies, and after a brief inspection he knocked upon the side door. An interval passed during which Ethel discreetly effaced herself behind a stalled truck; then the plainclothes man rapped more loudly and at length the door opened and a girl appeared.

She was a few years older than Ethel and her thin face would have been pretty but for its habitually lowering expression, which did not lighten during the short colloquy that ensued. No word reached the listening ears of the Shadowers' secretary, but she saw the other girl's start of surprise and vigorous shake of the head before she shrugged and turning, disappeared. In a few moments her place was taken by a huge man of middle age whose massive shoulders filled the narrow doorway and whose sandy beard bristled redly in the sunlight.

He gesticulated vehemently and seemed to be working himself up into a rage as he replied to the detective's questions, and Ethel did not wait for the end of the interview, but noting the number beside the dingily lettered 'J.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Peterson' over the door she dodged around the corner and made for the nearest elevated station.

At the same moment Lucian Baynes from a hotel booth not far from the Burlingame was endeavoring to get the Shadowers' office on the wire. Clifford Nichols was alone and deeply engrossed in his study of the anonymous letter when the insistent ringing of the bell at length penetrated his consciousness and with an exclamation of annoyance at the interruption he rose to reply.

"Is Phil there?" Lucian asked.

"No. I haven't heard from Henry or Rex, either, and even Ethel seems to have deserted the shop." Cliff's tone was distinctly aggrieved. "Are you coming over?"

"Cawn't do it, deah old thing!" Lucian drawled with an exaggerated accent and then added, chuckling: "Who said the old birds in that hotel were dead ones? I've been invited to sit in and let a retired Senator and three friends teach me the famous American game of poker! I hope Sneed doesn't kick at the expense account we turn in when this case is over! Incidentally, I have just been smoking a cigar with the proprietor and I've found out several things. Tell Phil that old Sneed is practically a recluse; none of the hotel employees ever enters his apartments except the waiter who takes his meals up from the restaurant, and he receives no callers but a chap named 'Hodge,' who is supposed to be his lawyer. I didn't want to seem too persistently interested, but I gathered that his disposition has only soured during the last few years, since he had his rooms done over and shut

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

himself up in them. The proprietor didn't know I was pumping him, he merely cited Sneed as one of the eccentric characters with whom he came in contact and I flatter myself that I drew him out rather neatly."

"Huh!" Cliff snorted. "I don't see how that is going to help us make any headway! I am at a standstill with the letter and I'm worried about Ethel; I didn't know Phil meant to use her and I only hope he hasn't sent her off on some hairbrained stunt that will land her in trouble. The kid is so plucky she would try anything if she thought it would be helping us. You haven't heard from Rex, have you?"

"No. Tell the rest of the boys, though, that if they want to communicate with me at the hotel they must ask for 'Mr. Lester Ballyntine.' I'll drop around when there is anything worth while reporting, and don't you worry about Ethel! That young woman has a remarkably cool head on her shoulders and she'll come through all right whatever she's up to! See you later."

Shaking his head dubiously, Cliff was hanging up the receiver when the entrance door of the suite opened and a tall, lanky individual appeared in gorgeous array. The handwriting expert had to look twice before he recognized the usually funeral George in a checked suit and startling waistcoat, with a huge, off-color diamond in the center of a crimson tie and a rakish imitation panama in his hand. From the corner of his mouth a fat cigar was tip-tilted and its fumes caused Cliff to back hastily away.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Good Lord! Where did you get that outfit? If you're not a human side-show in yourself—!"

"That, my boy, is the intention!" George interrupted complacently. "Behold Zadkiel the Great! I am blending astrology with astronomy in an effort to rend the veil of the future for the hoi polloi, and I have dropped in for my robes and horoscope charts. Outside of business hours I am a prosperous, good fellow and going strong already with the other show people in Joyland. If you can send me any trade, you'll find me just inside the entrance to that amusement park, in a black-draped booth adorned with the signs of the Zodiac; I've done myself up in style!"

"You have!" Cliff conceded with a grimace. "Fortunately it is Sunday or your connection with our highly dignified firm might give rise to comment among the other tenants in the building!"

George chuckled.

"I was rather an eye-full for one of them; that new fellow in the office across the hall!" he remarked. "Don't know what he was doing there today, but his door was open and he gaped at me like a fish as I passed.—I must hurry and gather my paraphernalia together for my grand opening this afternoon.—"

He had turned toward Rex Powell's sanctum to cross it to his own, but the opening of the door arrested him and Phil entered briskly. He was clad once more in his usual dapper fashion and carried himself jauntily, although

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

his face was drawn and there were tired rings around his eyes.

"Well, fellows, how goes it?" he demanded. "Got any fresh dope from the letter, Cliff?—George, you look as though you had started something."

"I have!" George nodded. "Cliff's refined taste is shocked by the scenery, but as I was just telling him it appeared to make a hit with our new little playmate across the hall—."

"You mean the one who has just opened up that office? You haven't been talking to him, have you?" There was a new note in Phil's tones which caused Cliff to glance sharply at him, but before he could speak George demanded in quick concern:

"No.—Why? He looks all right to me. What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing, except that whatever line he pretends to go in for, it's a blind; his real business is with us."

"What do you mean?" Cliff exclaimed. "He borrowed a match from me in the elevator this morning and seemed to be a pleasant, civil-spoken chap enough. Don't get jumpy, Phil; our consciences are all clear."

"Maybe so, but he tried to trail me yesterday." Phil told of the encounter, and added: "I'm pretty sure he is going it alone on his own hook, and his work is so raw that we needn't worry, only it is important for us to know why he's after us. Be sure you tell Rex about it when he comes in if I am not here.—Say, where is Ethel?"

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Never showed up," responded Cliff. "I've got a message for you, though, from Luce."

He was launched upon the delivery of it when Ethel breezed in upon them. She looked warm and uncomfortable in the shabby black gown and her mop of yellow hair was curling in moist ringlets about her powder-streaked forehead, but she nodded a cheery greeting and then demanded of Phil without preamble:

"Has my uncle got a beard like a house a-fire and a build like a heavyweight champ?"

"He would have, I guess, if he let his beard grow and filled out that big frame of his!" Phil replied. "Bully for you, Ethel! Where did you see him?"

"Where he lives. The main guy at headquarters acted like he fell for my bluff, but he was leery about giving me my uncle's address till they found out the whole thing was on the level. As soon as I made myself scarce they sent a green dick straight down to ask my uncle about this niece who was trying to wish herself on him, and all I had to do was to follow."

"Do you mean to say that you have had the audacity to present yourself at police headquarters on a fake errand and then deliberately trail a detective in broad daylight?" There was a trace of respectful awe in Cliff's tones. "My dear Ethel, is there anything you wouldn't undertake?"

"Not much, but that plainclothes bull was easy," she replied modestly. "It is a good thing, though, that I didn't give my real name and address at headquarters like you

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

told me to, Mr. Howe, for I could see by his actions even if I was too far off to hear what he said to the dick, that Uncle Jim wasn't adopting any nieces; not today!"

She told him in detail of her morning's exploit and gave him the address she had obtained, adding as an afterthought:

"Who was the girl? She had red hair like him and she sure looked as if she had a grouch against the world. If there is any dope you want me to get for you I'll go down tomorrow and make friends with her, if I have to pull a faint in front of her door!"

"I believe you would!" Phil agreed. "However, I'll handle that end of it now that you've found old Jim for me. You just stay on the job here and take any reports that come in. I'm proud of you, Ethel!—You're certainly the goods!"

Cliff had gone back to his study of the letter and George was busily engaged in sorting costumes and appurtenances for his new venture in chicanery from the varied collection in his studio when Phil took his departure.

The door of the office across the corridor was closed and although he paused for a moment listening no sound came from within. The man who had elected to spy upon them must be in dead earnest to have gone to such elaborate detail in order that he might keep them under espionage, but why? In whose interest had he established himself there? They were engaged upon no other case than that of Sneed and it was inconceivable that this

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

stranger could be connected in any way with their eccentric client.

Phil thrust this lesser problem from his thoughts and making his way to the Burlingame he sent up his card to Sneed. After an appreciable interval the bellman reappeared and conducted him up to the private entrance of the suite where Robert received him. The old man's manner was as deferential as before, but there was something almost furtive in his attitude and his faded eyes did not meet those of the visitor.

They proceeded up the stairway to the great carved door leading to the reception room. It was open and as they crossed the threshold Phil looked vainly for the peephole of which George had spoken.

"Mr. Sneed has not received any more anonymous letters since yesterday, has he?" Phil asked.

"Oh, no, sir. There has been no further annoyance." Robert hesitated and then added in a lowered tone: "Excuse me, sir, but you'll be as quick as you can, and you won't excite him? Mr. Sneed is all upset over this and he's apt to get another of his attacks, though he wouldn't like my speaking of it. He's not quite himself today."

Before Phil could reply the butler turned as though afraid he had said too much and led the way to the door of the living-room which he threw open.

"Mr. Howe, sir," he announced and closed the door once more.

Sneed rose from his chair and as he came slowly forward Phil had to check the exclamation which leaped to

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

his lips, for the change in the older man's appearance from the previous day was startling. He had seemed shrunken and frail before, but now his wrinkled face had taken on a grayish pallor and his small, deeply sunken eyes glowed feverishly.

"You have news for me?" His thin voice cracked. "What have you found out?"

"Nothing definite as yet, Mr. Sneed. There has hardly been time, but Mr. Nichols is working on the letter," Phil replied reassuringly. "Has any further attempt been made upon your safe?"

"Certainly not, or I should have communicated with you! If you and your colleagues are still attempting to connect last week's intruder here with the writer of the letter I can only warn you once more that you are wasting your time."

"We are willing to risk that." Phil took the chair which had not been offered and smiled with perfect self-possession at his fuming client. "The head of our firm told you yesterday that we might ask questions which would seem to you to be away off from the affair we are investigating for you, Mr. Sneed, but we have got to get at the facts in our own way. It is pretty evident from what you told us that the person who broke in here did so while you were out of town on Sunday, when only your man Robert was home, and they would scarcely have tried it in the daytime unless they knew your plans ahead."

"Impossible!" Sneed retorted. "No one knew of my plans."

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"You motored, I think you said, and the car was waiting while you had breakfast." Phil did not heed the other's dissent. "You keep your own automobile, Mr. Sneed?"

"I do not, sir! The taxi service is good enough for me, as I leave my apartment so rarely, but when I motor out of the city I engage a touring car."

"Always from the same company, Mr. Sneed? Do you ask for any particular driver?"

"They know that I require a careful one but I have always found them reliable. I fail to see—!"

"The car you had last Sunday was ordered ahead for you?" Phil persisted.

"I ordered it myself on Saturday, but all this is mere quibbling! Undoubtedly the attempt at burglary was made during the night, and Jane forgot to dust the library in the morning; that was why the fingermarks were left until I discovered them." Sneed paused and added pointedly: "Is there anything further that I can tell you?"

"Only whether you noticed or not that there was something more on the envelope of that letter you received yesterday than just the address, stamp and postmark?"

Phil spoke carelessly but his eyes did not leave the face of the elderly man, and he saw the uncontrollable start with which his question was received.

"'Something more?'" Sneed moistened his withered lips nervously. "What more could there be? I thought I had examined it thoroughly—!"

"There were faint pencil marks down in one corner, Mr. Sneed; a series of numbers. I do not pretend to say

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

that they were necessarily made by the writer of the letter, but we wished to know if they suggested anything to your mind." Phil's tone had deepened in gravity. "The numbers are o-four-two-six."

If he had expected any manifestation of surprised recognition on the part of the other he was doomed to disappointment for Sneed merely shook his head and repeated the numbers absently, adding:

"No. They are, of course, not the combination of my safe, if that is the inference you have drawn, and they mean nothing to me. I am at a loss—I"

He caught himself up abruptly and his jaw set like a steel trap while his whole frame quivered with sudden rigidity. No sound had reached Phil's ears but it was plain that the other was listening intently and an expression of mingled rage and apprehension swept his weazened features. Then with an effort he pulled himself together.

"My dear sir, your handwriting expert will have to do better than that." The words came raspingly as he sought to cover the pause. "Those numbers could have been pencilled on the envelope as a memorandum by anyone who handled it either before or after it was mailed. I must confess that I am disappointed at the lack of progress your firm has shown, but I suppose I must be patient. I—I trust you will let me know the moment that any real results have been obtained."

His manner so plainly indicated dismissal that Phil rose.

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"You will hear from us, Mr. Sneed. I hope that I have not detained you?"

"Not at all!" the other disclaimed hurriedly. "Sorry that those numbers—what were they, 'two, six,' something? —are of no value as a clue.—Robert will show you out."

But Robert was long in coming in answer to the summons of the bell which Sneed had pressed, and it was obvious that his impatience to see the last of his visitor was mounting almost beyond his control. Once more that keen, listening look crossed his face, this time with an intensity of apprehension which seemed bordering on inward frenzy and his hand shook as he jabbed again and again at the bell.

"Confound that fellow! He must be in his dotage!" he muttered. "Gets slower and more deaf every—! Oh, there you are at last, Robert! Don't try to make excuses, I've been ringing for ten minutes! Show this gentleman out!"

Robert bowed his palsied head and stood aside silently to allow Phil to precede him from the room, but not before a veiled look had passed between him and his employer that in one revealing flash conveyed an unmistakable message and a warning.

With a final word Phil took his departure but while he waited in the public corridor of the floor below for the elevator he turned over in his mind the curious episode he had just witnessed. Though he himself had not heard it, some sound must have reached Sneed's ears and those of his old servant which filled them with alarm. Surely

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

it could not have come from within the apartment, whose padded walls would have nullified the echo of a pistol shot! What secret knowledge was shared between master and man which the former would not impart even to one of the detectives upon whom he had called for protection and assistance? Did it have any bearing upon the anonymous letter and the attempted burglary or was there a double mystery here?"

Still deep in thought Phil passed out of the hotel, but on a sudden impulse he halted and scanned the faces of the chauffeurs waiting beside their taxicabs in the string which bore the crest of the Burlingame. The first man was the most youthful, with a broad, smiling countenance that promised loquacity, and giving the address of his bachelor apartment Phil entered the cab.

Sneed had purposely ignored his question as to the name of the motor car company he patronized when ordering an automobile for an out-of-town trip, and it had occurred all at once to Phil that the preceding Sunday had been a stormy one. The eccentric old man was admittedly in frail health and left his rooms but seldom. On the occasion of their first interview he had explained his absence from home at the time of the supposed attempt upon his safe by mentioning that he had gone to look at some property, but had that been the sole object of the expedition he would surely have postponed it until a more propitious day. What urgent errand had taken him forth, defying wind and rain?

Arriving at his destination Phil added a generous tip

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

to the fare and at the chauffeur's profuse thanks he remarked with a laugh:

"I'll wager that is more than my uncle gives you, if you ever drive him from the Burlingame! Do you know Mr. Sneed?"

The chauffeur grinned.

"I sure do! He ain't the gentleman to leave a dollar go without it gives him a pain, and that's a fact, if you'll excuse me for saying so, sir."

"Go as far as you like!" Phil was still chuckling. "The boys from that company where he gets a touring car now and then must call it a day when they have him for a fare!"

"The Marlton Service people? One of them had him out for seven hours in the rain last Sunday and all he got was two bucks for himself. He showed it to us fellows in the line, and he sure was a sore guy!—Lots of the fares we get at the Burlingame are like that, though; I s'pose that's why they can afford to live there!—Thank'ee, sir."

The Marlton Service Company's garage was only a few blocks away and waiting until the taxicab had rounded the corner on its return trip to the hotel, Phil hastened there and entered the office.

"Five-passenger touring for next Sunday?" the manager repeated in answer to his tentative inquiry. "Where do you want to go, sir?"

"Over to Jersey," Phil hazarded. "I'll be out about six or seven hours."

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"It'll be around thirty dollars, I guess."

"That's more than you charged my friend, Mr. Sneed, of the Burlingame Hotel last Sunday." Phil took a long shot. "He didn't mention that you made any rate for him, either."

"We don't but that was an easy trip out on Long Island, and he stopped for three hours or more at the Winton Sanitarium. I'll make it twenty-five for you, though, sir, since you've been recommended to us."

Promising to let the manager know his decision Phil left and returning to his rooms, he sought the suburban telephone book. A protracted perusal of the 'W's' listed under the headings of the various townships was unproductive of result until he came to Shoreville. There a line leaped out at him which caused him to drop the book with a low whistle. The Winton Sanitarium for the Incurably Insane!

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER VII

CONCERNING THE 'GULL'

WHEN Rex Powell left the offices of the Shadowers on Saturday afternoon following the conference with Phil his way led far from the path chosen for the others. A warm week-end in early September was not the most likely time to expect to find a highly eligible young bachelor drifting about in town without a houseparty engagement, and it was with small hope of success that he presented himself at an aristocratic apartment in that section of the East Sixties which was immediately adjacent to the Avenue, and sent up to Mr. Gideon Ormsby a card that bore the name of Randolph Pinckney.

But Mr. Ormsby was at home and his smiling little Japanese servant admitted the caller to a cool, spacious living-room, where a huge, young man in comfortable negligee advanced in cordial greeting.

"Thought you were off for the other side two or three weeks ago, Rannie!" he exclaimed as they shook hands. "What keeps you in this blistering town?"

"I might ask the same of you!" Rex laughed. "In fact, Gid, I was ready to give myself odds that you would be dated up for the week-end and it was only on a chance that I looked in."

"Jolly glad you did! I was to have gone down to the

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Prescotts' but Edna had a bad motor spill a couple of days ago and they called the party off. You used to know them years ago, I think?—Matzu, crack some ice!"

"Yes, I knew the Prescotts," Rex remarked musingly. "It's so many years since I have been in this part of the world except for flying visits, though, that I have made no attempt to keep up with the old crowd. I believe you are the only one who even remembers me."

"That isn't true, old man, but it would serve you right if I were, for not settling down instead of gadding off to the ends of the earth.—Here's how, anyway!"

Rex took a long draught of the iced drink which Matzu offered him, and setting the glass down with a sigh of satisfaction he asked:

"What do you say to a little quiet dinner at one of the roof gardens?"

Ormsby grimaced.

"It would be 'quiet' enough except for some blatant cabaret!—How about running out instead to the country club? You've never been there, but we can get a corking dinner and cut the dance afterward if you like. It is infested with a lot of old boys from Wall Street, but I don't mind admitting that I've picked up a tip or two there that was worth while, and we can breeze back to town any time we wish."

Rex, remembering his mission, fancied that he, too, might pick up a worth while tip concerning Sneed if he could meet some of the latter's former allies or antagonists of the Street, and acquiesced with enthusiasm.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

A run of an hour in Ormsby's fast little roadster brought them to a pretty white clubhouse with wide-spreading verandas nestling in a valley surrounded by low, rolling hills, and the voluntary expatriate from society ran the gamut of what introductions were necessary before he found himself seated with his host at a little corner table on the terrace.

"It will be all right out here until they light the lanterns and the mosquitoes begin to gather," Ormsby remarked. "I thought you might have preferred the grill."

Rex shook his head. He was taking a chance of which his companion little dreamed in venturing into this select assemblage among which there might appear at any moment someone who had cause to remember not the scion of the Pinckneys, but the Rex Powell of some nefarious exploit of the immediate past. Better for him the comparative seclusion and semi-darkness of the terrace than the gaily illuminated grill.

The dinner was all that Ormsby had claimed for it and afterward as they sat smoking over their coffee and the tables emptied near them a little circle of older men gathered about the young broker and his guest. At first Rex took little part in the conversation, which from golf and yachting gradually but inevitably turned to the latest market reports. The man next to him, a stout, elderly retired financier, had just described a memorable coup of the old days when under cover of the general hum of comment Rex remarked to him:

"An acquaintance of mine was inside on that deal, as

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

I remember; an odd, old chap named Sneed. Did you know him, sir?"

"Phineas D.?" the other laughed drily. "I have reason to! He nicked me for fifty thousand once! In his time he was one of the keenest operators on the market."

"I hear he has become quite a recluse since he retired, but then he never cared very much about people." Rex felt his way carefully.

"No. He came originally from the Pennsylvania coal hills, you know, and brought his wife with him. She had helped him a lot in the hard, early days, I understand, but she was a plain little woman without any of the social graces and it was fortunate that she had no aspirations in that direction. She died fifteen years ago or more."

"There were no children?"

The financier shook his head.

"No, Mr. Pinckney; I never heard of any. Sneed lived around at hotels after her death and seldom appeared at the clubs where we'd put him up. I'm blessed if any of the old crowd knew what he did with himself outside of trading hours, or cared particularly. He always kept by himself and after one or two rebuffs the other chaps let him alone, but he has dropped out of sight altogether during the past few years.—Hello! Here's Wallie Palliser!"

Rex stiffened and edged his chair slightly away from the glow of the nearest lantern. Waldo Palliser was a millionaire thread manufacturer and one of the five hun-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY