

# The Gray Phantom

Herman Landon



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- [CHAPTER I—A TRAGIC INTERLUDE](#)
- [CHAPTER II—“MR. SHEI”](#)
- [CHAPTER III—HELEN EQUIVOCATES](#)
- [CHAPTER IV—AZURECREST](#)
- [CHAPTER V—PERPLEXITIES](#)
- [CHAPTER VI—THE PHANTOM ORCHID](#)
- [CHAPTER VII—MR. SHEI SHOWS HIS HAND](#)
- [CHAPTER VIII—THE VOICE ON THE WIRE](#)
- [CHAPTER IX—THE HOUSE OF LAUGHTER](#)
- [CHAPTER X—A SHOT](#)
- [CHAPTER XI—AN EAVESDROPPER](#)
- [CHAPTER XII—MR. SHEI STRIKES](#)
- [CHAPTER XIII—A MESSAGE FROM MR. SHEI](#)
- [CHAPTER XIV—THE ELUSIVE MR. SHEI](#)
- [CHAPTER XV—DR. TAGALA](#)
- [CHAPTER XVI—CHECKMATED](#)
- [CHAPTER XVII—DOCTOR TAGALA’S DISCOVERY](#)
- [CHAPTER XVIII—THE FIGURE ON THE STAIRS](#)
- [CHAPTER XIX—A FUTILE SEARCH](#)
- [CHAPTER XX—TRAPPED](#)
- [CHAPTER XXI—MR. SHEI’S STRATAGEM](#)
- [CHAPTER XXII—THE PHANTOM’S RUSE](#)
- [CHAPTER XXIII—THE END OF THE GRAY PHANTOM](#)

## CHAPTER I—A TRAGIC INTERLUDE

Hours afterward, when the tragic spell had broken and scraps and odds of the affair began to throng the memories of those present at the opening performance of “His Soul’s Master,” several persons remembered that a curious hush had preceded the fateful moment.

No one could tell why, but of a sudden all sounds had ceased. Subdued whispers, the creaking of seats, and the froufrou of garments had stopped as abruptly as if a silencing signal had gone through the little auditorium. The spectators had sat motionless, momentarily holding their breath, and even the voices of the actors had faltered for an appreciable second or two. The stillness had been charged with an uneasy tension, and it seemed as though a telepathic whisper of warning had been communicated to the gathering.

Vivian Tennant, as frivolous as she was delicately molded, declared the following day that the silence during those few moments had been so intense that she was positive she had heard a pin drop from the coiffure of the woman on her left. Alex Hammond, forty and cynical, would have ascribed the spell to a touch of necromancy had he been a believer in such childish things. Mrs. Hungerford Cather, a frail little widow with a melancholy disposition, said she felt just as though she were at a séance and a ghost was expected to appear any moment. The others described their impressions with varying degrees of vividness, but all of them agreed in having felt the creeping approach of a silent and invisible horror.

Only Helen Hardwick, whose fresh young charm and frank brown eyes made her seem strangely out of place in that motley gathering of rouged lips, sophisticated banter and gowns suggestive of the Parisian boulevards, was singularly uncommunicative in regard to what she had experienced during the weird interlude when the Thelma Theater became the scene of one of life’s grimly realistic tragedies. And her silence was all the more remarkable because she had seen, heard and felt more than any of the others.

The Thelma, with its walls of common red brick and severely plain architecture, might have suggested anything but the setting of a dark and mysterious crime.

Outwardly the building, located in a section of New York largely given over to tenements, unsoaped children and garlicky odors, presented an air of solidity and matter-of-factness that left the imagination untouched and gave no hint of the interior. The inside was as colorful and fanciful as the outside was unlovely and prosaic, and it was rumored that Vincent Starr, the eccentric owner, had spent a fortune on the decorations.

Like many another rich man, Starr had his hobby. The newspapers and the critics had scoffed and railed when he opened the Thelma and dedicated it to the uplift of dramatic art. He held the Broadway productions in lofty contempt, declaring that they catered only to the vulgar tastes of the rabble. Admission to the Thelma was by invitation only, and the auditorium seated exactly ninety-nine persons, for it was Starr's firm opinion that out of the city's five million only an infinitesimal few were able to appreciate true histrionic art. Members of the daily press were never admitted, and the only critics present at the performances were the representatives of two or three obscure journals who shared Starr's esthetic views.

The owner and director of the Thelma was prejudiced against music at theatrical performances, and where the orchestra pit should have been was an exquisite statue in marble representing Aphrodite springing out of a foaming sea. Along the walls were friezes picturing the nine muses, the work of a famous mural painter, and the domed ceiling showed colorful glimpses of Dionysian festivals. Scattered throughout the auditorium and in niches in the walls were superb vases containing flowers whose fragrance filled the air.

The effect of the whole was sumptuous rather than harmonious, and it was characteristic of Vincent Starr's freakish tastes and clashing impulses. And among the audience at the *première* of "His Soul's Master" there was not one but thought that the brilliant and fanciful setting lent a touch of incongruity to the tragic byplay enacted off stage.

The moment she stepped into the box reserved for her father and herself, Helen Hardwick felt she was in a strange and somewhat oppressive atmosphere. The faces in the audience were unfamiliar, and everybody stared at her in a way she could not understand until she suddenly remembered that among these people she was something of a celebrity. Vincent Starr, who sneered at the biggest dramatic successes of the year, had not only accepted her play for production at the Thelma, but was himself playing the principal rôle, and he was indulging in

much self-flattery over having discovered a budding genius in the author of “His Soul’s Master.” That explained the curious glances turned in her direction.

It was both amusing and bewildering, she thought. Nothing but a whim had caused her to enter her play in the prize contest conducted by Starr to obtain suitable material for his theater, and its acceptance had been the greatest surprise of her twenty-three years. Her only other serious attempt had been a sketch produced by a dramatic society at Barnard in her junior year. “His Soul’s Master” had been a slightly more ambitious effort, and it had been inspired by vague emotions which she herself could hardly understand, but for all that it was a simple, artless thing with a theme as old as the story of the Garden of Eden. It was nothing more than an allegorical fantasy depicting the forces of evil and good struggling for possession of a man’s soul. How a play of that kind could have appealed to an eccentric and highly sophisticated genius like Vincent Starr was beyond her.

But the curtain had been up only a few minutes when she began to understand. In the part of *Marius*, the mortal for whose soul the spirits of light and darkness were contending, Starr had found a rôle that matched his temperament to perfection. The opening monologue, in which *Marius* revealed himself as tiring of a life of refined villainy and roguish adventures, had not proceeded far before she saw that the rôle had so gripped and stirred him that he was living the part rather than acting it. The lines throbbed and sparkled with life and passion, and Starr was completely submerging his own emotions in those of the hero.

It did not take Helen long to see that it was the character of *Marius*, rather than the flimsy fancy woven around it, that had caused Starr to accept her play. She had heard he was vain and egotistical, and no doubt he reveled in the opportunity for self-exaltation that the rôle afforded him. As the play went on from scene to scene, another impression began to take root in her mind. Here and there in the lines she noted an odd cynical twist or a bit of ambiguous phrasing that she was sure had not been in the manuscript. The tempting voices and gestures of the spirits of darkness were more appealing than she had intended, and the exhortations of the spirit of light were correspondingly feebler. She thought she understood why Starr had found excuses for not admitting her to any of the rehearsals.

She was inclined to resent the liberties he had taken with her lines, but again she was carried away by his impassioned rendition of *Marius*. The very lifeblood of

the character seemed to pulse in Starr's veins. *Marius* had seemed very real to her while she was writing the play, but not so real by far as she now saw him on the stage of the Thelma Theater. She leaned forward and watched him with growing interest and wonder. It was as if a being that had existed only in her thoughts and in her heart had suddenly materialized in flesh and blood.

It was weird. Now and then there came a touch of subtlety, an odd turn of speech, or a telling gesture that she instantly recognized, although she knew it was interpolated by the actor. She had heard and seen them all in imagination, but not clearly enough to reproduce them on paper. The gestures impressed her most. She knew and recognized them all, from the slightest to the most elaborate, although she had visualized only a few of them clearly enough to be able to put them into the play. It seemed as though the actor, in expanding and vivifying his rôle, had made use of material that had existed only in the playwright's mind.

Impulsively she reached out her hand and placed it over her father's. Mr. Hardwick, curator of the Cosmopolitan Museum and an authority on Assyrian relics, started as if his mind had been roving among prehistoric scenes.

"Why, child, your hand is cold!" he whispered anxiously. "Aren't you well?"

"Yes, dad. I'm all right." Her large brown eyes avoided his searching gaze. "How do you like my play?"

She scarcely heard his answer. For a moment she had turned her eyes from the stage and let them wander over the dimly lighted auditorium, and of a sudden a face in the last row of seats held her glance. It was a striking face, though Helen would not have called it beautiful. Somehow the curve of the haughtily tilted chin repelled her. The features were perfect in a cold, unalluring way, and the faint curl of the lips and the designing look in the eyes made her think of a Velasquez portrait. The woman sat alone, the seats to right and left of her being unoccupied, and the heavily shaded electric light on the wall at her side drew a thousand flashing tints from the jewel in her hair.

It was not the face that held Helen Hardwick, but rather the fixed, shrewdly scrutinizing look with which the woman was regarding Vincent Starr. She followed his every motion and gesture with the sly persistence of a cat watching a mouse. Now and then she bent forward, and her lips twitched in a knowing

way, as if she were thinking of something that pleased and amused her even while it startled her a little. Helen, studying her with a puzzled look, found herself wondering whether it was the man or the actor that interested the woman so profoundly.

With an effort—for the woman in the rear of the house had already begun to pique her imagination—she once more turned her eyes to the stage. Again she marveled and wondered. She had an odd feeling that something was going on before her eyes which her reason told her could not be quite real. Starr's perfect mastery of the rôle seemed almost supernatural. The slight, quick motions of the hands, the occasional backward toss of the head, the odd habit of gazing down at the finger tips when in deep thought, the set and swing of the shoulders, the minor but characteristic peculiarities of speech and gesture—all belonged to the *Marius* she had seen and known, and Starr's re-creation of him struck her as uncanny.

Of a sudden she felt a little dazed. She shot a quick glance over the auditorium. No one but herself and the woman in the rear seemed to have noticed anything unusual. Again her eyes went back to the stage; and then, as if a hazy idea in the back of her mind had all at once leaped into dazzling clarity, she bent abruptly toward her father.

“Dad—look!” she whispered tensely, tugging at his sleeve. “Don't you see? It's \_\_\_\_\_”

She stopped, shrugged a little, and her hand dropped limply to her knee. The fall of the curtain and the flare-up of the lights seemed to have blotted out an illusion. Mr. Hardwick, gray and lean and looking rather uncomfortable in his full-dress suit, adjusted his glasses on his thin nose, and looked at her gravely.

“My goodness, child! What *is* the matter?” he murmured.

“Nothing, dad. I forgot that—that you wouldn't understand.” She drew the palm of her hand across her forehead. “Isn't the air stifling?”

“Too much excitement for you, I am afraid.” He smiled as if his practical sense had found a satisfactory answer. “Your mother was just like that. Whenever she got a bit wrought up, she always said things that I couldn't understand. Now \_\_\_\_\_”



The hangings parted and Vincent Starr stepped inside the box. Helen gave him a swiftly appraising glance. His face was flushed and he looked tired, as if his last ounce of energy had been spent in the emotional tempest of *Marius*, but a swift look of animation brightened his face as she introduced her father. The first thing one usually noticed about Vincent Starr was his pale, placid eyes. They seemed to give the lie to his magnetic smile, his vivacious manners, and his deep and perfectly modulated voice. As once or twice before in his presence, Helen felt fascinated and repelled.

“You are doing my daughter a great honor,” murmured Mr. Hardwick.

“Not at all.” Starr laughed softly, but Helen thought she detected a slight discord that might have been due to either nervousness or fatigue. “Miss Hardwick has placed me under a very great obligation. Her play is splendid. The last act is particularly strong, as you will see in a few minutes. You must give me your opinion of——”

Helen heard no more. She had glanced toward the rear of the house just in time to see a mysterious smile on the face of the woman seated in the last row. In vain Helen tried to read and interpret it. Presently the woman took a pencil from her bag and began to write on a page torn from her programme. Finally she summoned an usher, handed him what she had written, and nodded in the direction where Helen was sitting. The attendant glided away, and a few moments later he stood bowing before Starr.

“A lady sent you this, sir,” he announced.

Starr murmured an apology to Helen and her father and unfolded the note. His face, dark and almost effeminately smooth—the face of a dreamer rather than a man of action—showed a look of boredom hinting that he was weary of receiving notes from feminine admirers. Then, as he glanced at the writing, his expression suddenly changed. A look of fear crossed his face, but it vanished so quickly that Helen could not be sure she had read its meaning correctly. He crumpled the note in his hand and glanced at his watch.

“It’s almost time for the curtain,” he murmured, quite himself once more. “I hope to see both of you later.”

With that he was gone. Helen stole a glance at the woman in the rear. Her face bore an expression of amusement and sly triumph, but it afforded no clew to

what the note had contained. Then the lights faded out and the curtain rose upon the final act. The scene depended for its full effect on almost total darkness, and the only illumination in the house was a smoldering camp fire in one corner of the stage and the small red lights over the exits. *Marius* stood in the center, almost totally wrapped in shadows, and in the distance were heard the strains of strange, wild singing. The spirits of evil were creeping out of the darkness to make their last sorcerous appeal.

Helen felt herself tingling with suspense. She did not know why, unless it was due to the look of fear she had seen in Starr's face as he read the note. She glanced toward the rear, but the auditorium was now so dark that she could no longer see the mysterious woman, although she imagined her hair ornament was gleaming dully in the gloom.

Of a sudden she opened her eyes wide, straining her pupils against the darkness. She could not be quite sure, but she thought a shadow had emerged from one of the exits and was gliding silently toward the woman in the rear. She sat very still while little shivers ran up and down her back, and she was vaguely wondering at an odd change in Starr's voice. It drooped, grew hoarse and uncertain, and there were pauses between the words. She felt he was trying to conquer a sense of unreasoning dread. A feeling of dizziness seized her, but her imagination formed a picture of a dark shape stealing softly, silently toward where the woman sat.

Acting on an irresistible impulse, she rose and hurried from the box, deaf to her father's mild remonstrance. Without volition on her part, her feet seemed to carry her swiftly up the heavily carpeted aisle. She heard a jumble of noises in her head and felt a tightening at the throat. She rounded the last tier of seats and rushed forward, guided only by a feeble red gleam over one of the exits. A dim shape, a shade darker than the surrounding dusk, was moving a few feet ahead of her.

All at once, as if the hesitancy in Starr's voice had cast a deadening spell over the actors and the audience, an uneasy silence fell upon the house. Helen sensed it as she sped along in the wake of the creeping shadow. A few steps more, and she could make out the woman's figure, vaguely outlined against the gloom, and just behind it stood the shadowy shape whose furtive movements Helen had followed since she left the box.

The happenings of the next few moments were like a swift, horrible dream.

Suddenly she felt limp and cold. Within reach of her arm a hand moved, and the motion seemed to strike a hideous note through the surrounding stillness. A cry rose and died in her throat. She staggered back against a post and stood there motionless while a dark shape brushed past her. She recoiled as a hand touched hers in passing, and she caught a fleeting but unforgettable glimpse of a face.

It was gone in a moment, but the swarthy features, framed by coarse black hair that reached to the shoulders, the flat, short nose, the thick and jutting lower lip, the great eyes with their lambent flames that seemed to send streaks of fire into the darkness, gave her a feeling that something evil and loathsome had passed.

## CHAPTER II—"MR. SHEP"

For a moment longer she leaned against the pillar. Then she heard laughter—laughter that was low and sibilant and edged with the insinuating twang that sometimes characterizes the laughter of a madman. It was soft and gentle, yet she thought it was the most fearful sound she had ever heard. It gripped and shook her, and she knew instinctively that it came from the woman in the rear.

Something urged her forward, but her nerves and limbs rebelled. Others beside herself must have heard that soul-shaking laughter, for the hush that had fallen over the house ended abruptly in a jumble of loud sounds. The curtain descended with a rhythmic chugging, there were exclamations of surprise and horror, and the audience sprang from their seats as the lights went on. With startled faces they looked to left and right and rear, and several of them excitedly inquired what had happened. No one seemed to know, but as if moved by a single impulse, they scrambled in the direction whence the laughter came. Then they stopped, huddled in a half circle, and stared.

What they saw seemed all the stranger by contrast with the flowery scents in the air and the rich and brilliant hues of the surroundings. All eyes were fixed on the woman whose peculiar demeanor had aroused Helen's interest. Her extravagant attire and her wild, gypsylike beauty seemed typical of the oddly assorted characters who made up Vincent Starr's circle of intimates. A filmy drapery embroidered with gold-touched flowers hung like an iridescent fog over her gown of silver tissue. Her bare arm was flung out over the top of the next seat, and her head had fallen back against the elbow.

Murmurs of awe and consternation fell from the lips of the onlookers. Before their eyes the pallor of death was creeping into the woman's face, and her cheeks and forehead were beaded with the perspiration of the death struggle. Now and then her figure writhed with a slow, snakelike motion. A film of gray was gradually dimming the luster of the eyes. Only the lips were still red.

As if to fling a taunt in the face of approaching death, the woman was laughing. It sounded wildly unreal and fantastic, and the spectators stood as if gripped by an unearthly enchantment. It seemed as though the woman's spirit was flitting

away on waves of hysterical mirth.

The sounds grew husky, then ceased. The woman's glazing orbs looked out over the fringe of faces. A fluttering ray struggled with the blinding film before her eyes, and she seemed to be looking for someone who was not there. She stirred as if trying to gather her waning energies. Her lips trembled, a few faint sounds broke on the tense silence, and again her gaze strayed gropingly over the crowd.

"Mr.—Mr. Shei," she whispered.

Those closest to her recoiled as from a physical blow. The name spoken by the dying woman had contributed the final touch of weirdness to the scene. The two words went from mouth to mouth in a succession of solemn whispers. Faces turned rigid and white, and men and women looked at one another with mute fear in their eyes.

Then someone with more presence of mind than the others, suggested calling a physician. A strain of drawling laughter from the dying woman mocked the proposal. It rose to a shrill pitch, then died abruptly in a low sing-song moan that was like a chant of death. The lips were still moving, but the onlookers knew, even without the sagging of the body and the broken light in the eyes, that the woman was dead. A spell seemed to have lifted and an oppressive essence appeared to have gone out of the air.

"Awful!" wailed a woman, edging away from her place in the huddled throng. "I shall hear that laugh as long as I live. And what was that she said about Mr. Shei?"

The name and the prefix were all anyone had been able to make out, but they had been enough to send a thrill of fear and astonishment through the crowd. Of the mysterious "Mr. Shei" little was known except that he was a versatile and very elusive criminal, with a penchant for deep scheming and spectacular tactics, and that so far the police had matched their wits against him in vain. He flashed in and out like a meteor, without leaving trace or clew, and his audacity and impudence were as dumfounding as the magnitude of his exploits.

"Did she mean," inquired someone, "that Mr. Shei was here—that she saw him?"

"What else could she have meant?" The speaker cast an uncertain glance at the

dead woman. The grayness and the rigidity of her features clashed bizarrely with the brilliant coloring of her gown. "Likely as not Mr. Shei murdered her."

"But there is no wound. And she made no outcry. She only laughed. And such a laugh! I can hear it still!"

"Mr. Shei is diabolically clever," observed another, "and he goes about his business in his own way. It would be quite in character for him to kill without inflicting a wound and to let his victim go to her death laughing."

The group fell silent. Helen, who had remained in the background, trying to control her sense of horror while she pondered what she had seen, touched the arm of the woman in front.

"Who is she?" she inquired.

"Don't you know?" The woman, busying herself with a vial of smelling salts, gave Helen a puzzled look. "Why, she is Virginia Darrow. Never attend her studio parties? That's strange. But I forget that you are something of a stranger among us, Miss Hardwick."

Helen smiled faintly, and the next moment her attention was attracted to her father. Mr. Hardwick had joined his daughter shortly after the lights went on, and until now he had been a silent spectator. With difficulty he elbowed his way through the crowd to the dead woman's side, and regarded her closely. Presently he raised her right arm, which had hung limply at her side. Just above the elbow was a small, faint discoloration, not unlike the puncture made by a hypodermic syringe. He nodded thoughtfully and seemed about to speak, but just then Vincent Starr, followed by several members of his company, came up the aisle and wedged a path through the huddled spectators.

He seemed to take in everything at a single comprehensive glance. He was pale, and his fingers trembled, but Helen noticed that he had taken pains to arrange his attire before coming out to ascertain the cause of the commotion. His long and glossy hair was neatly combed, his cravat was carefully adjusted, and just the proper width of cuff showed beyond the edge of his sleeve. She watched him narrowly while he questioned those about him. Somehow she sensed that it was in keeping with Vincent Starr's character to be squeamish about the minor details of his appearance even when face to face with a tragedy. Suddenly, as she heard him issue orders to right and left, she remembered the note Virginia

Darrow had sent him, and she wondered, without knowing exactly why, whether he would say anything about it.

At the same time she was forced to admire his quickness of wits and the ease with which he mastered his feelings. In an incredibly short time the police had been notified of the occurrence and the doorkeepers had been given orders to allow no one to leave the building. Starr, in his habitually suave tones, asked his guests to be seated and expressed his regrets that such an unpleasant affair should have taken place under the roof of the Thelma. There would be an investigation and a great deal of questioning, he explained, but it would be only a formality. If the mysterious Mr. Shei—he smiled queerly as he spoke the name—had invaded the Thelma, he would undoubtedly be caught.

The crowd scattered among the seats in the auditorium and lapsed into the small talk with which one sometimes masks an inward turbulence. Helen, seated beside her father on a lounge in a corner, let her glance roam aimlessly over the scene. She supposed she would be questioned along with the others, and she wondered how much or how little she would be able to tell. Now that she tried to clarify the confusion in her mind, she saw that during the evening she had received two sets of impressions. Both had been equally strong at the time, but now they seemed to clash and quarrel with each other, and one of them had all but vanished with the drop of the curtain. Yet she felt it was the more important one of the two. The other had to do with the face she had glimpsed in the shadows. With the varicolored lights glowing on all sides, her recollection of it seemed unreal and fanciful. It appeared to be a thing of darkness and dreams. Her one remaining impression of it was a sense of malignity and horror. She felt words were inadequate to describe it.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly, as if to banish harassing thoughts, and turned to her father. His face was drawn and a trifle pale, and she remembered the family physician had once said something about an incipient heart ailment and the necessity of avoiding excitement. She tilted her face close to his.

“I’m sorry I got you into this, dad,” she said.

Mr. Hardwick drew himself up. His face brightened with affection and the pride of parenthood as he gazed at his daughter’s figure, straight and slender and strong as the trunk of a young birch. Her simple frock of white taffeta with touches of coral at the waist possessed that subtle individual charm which

fashion designers can only imitate. Her dark, loosely coiled hair, with stray wisps caressing her healthily tanned cheeks, seemed in constant mutiny against the petty tyrannies of hairdressers.

“I might have known something was to happen.” Mr. Hardwick’s tones were gently playful, as if he were anxious to turn his daughter’s thoughts from the tragedy. “Something always happens where you are. You are a storm petrel, my dear.”

“I was born under Uranus, you know. That explains everything.” She smiled whimsically. There was a touch of the child in the firm oval of her face and the smooth curves of mouth and nose, but the deep-brown eyes held a surprising store of worldly wisdom. She quite baffled her father at times. The impulses of April and June seemed to be constantly clashing within her, and they filled his autumnal days with a never-ending round of surprises.

“I wonder,” he said, eyeing her curiously as a new thought came to him, “whether Uranus had anything to do with your leaving the box just before—before it happened.”

“It’s always safe to blame Uranus,” she parried. “He is such a convenient scapegoat. I don’t know what I would do if——”

She was grateful for the interruption that came just then. The law was already at work, and she sat back and watched the swift precision of its mechanism. Two policemen, one heavy and red-faced, the other lean and sharp-visaged, walked into the theater and stationed themselves beside the body with the air of zealots guarding the coffin of Mohammed. She gathered from the few words they exchanged with Starr that a cordon had been thrown around the building a minute and a half after the call reached the precinct station. They were followed shortly by a puffy little man who let it be known that he was a deputy from the office of the chief medical examiner. The latter had barely begun the usual inspection of the body when two other men entered the auditorium.

One of them, barrel-chested and somewhat pompous in his manners, seemed to be a representative of the district attorney’s office. The other, angular and as loose-jointed as a marionette, with lazy, cinnamon-colored eyes and a complexion that seemed to indicate that he drank too much coffee and smoked too many cigars, was recognized by Helen at first glance. Uranus had brought



them together once before. She remembered that his name was Lieutenant Culligore, and that he was attached to the homicide squad of the detective bureau. As his glance flitted slowly over the room, his mind seemed to register each detail without slightest effort. Helen noticed that he gazed at her a trifle longer than on the others, but his face betrayed no recognition.

Then began the questioning, conducted by the stout man from the district attorney's office, while Lieutenant Culligore made an occasional jotting in his notebook. The members of the audience were interrogated briefly and pointedly, and each one in turn was permitted to depart after leaving his or her name and address. Helen marveled at the matter-of-factness of it all. It seemed almost ruthless, this volleying of questions over a body which was scarcely cold, but she recognized the brisk efficiency with which the procedure was carried out. None of the witnesses had much to tell that was significant, and the only important points brought out were the dying woman's strange laugh and her mention of Mr. Shei.

Culligore, as was his habit when impressed, curled up his lip under the tip of his nose when these facts were stated, and the stout man raised his brows and nodded grimly.

"Looks as though Mr. Shei had been up to another of his little tricks," he muttered.

Culligore pursed his lips and chewed a dead cigar. There was a slow twinkle in his eyes which seemed to say that life wasn't quite so serious as it seemed, despite the sordid and ugly affairs with which he came in daily touch.

Helen did not know how it happened, but the house was almost empty when her turn to be questioned came. Her face showed no sign of the trepidation she felt as she stepped forward. She knew, as she turned her face toward the stout man, that three pairs of eyes were watching her with more than ordinary intentness—her father's, Lieutenant Culligore's, and Vincent Starr's.

The stout man gave her a listless look as he inquired her name and address. She fancied he was sniffing inwardly, and that after looking her over he had decided that she probably could give no information beside what had already been brought out. At any rate, his questions were few and perfunctory and gave her no opportunity to practice the evasions she had mentally rehearsed while the others

were being questioned. As she turned away, she saw a mildly reproachful look in her father's face and one of amused understanding in Culligore's.

"Well, doctor?" The stout man turned on the medical examiner, whose rubicund face wore a puzzled scowl. "What do you make of it?"

The examiner wagged his head. Being a man of science, he was strongly averse to forming hasty conclusions.

"There is an abrasion on the right arm that might have been caused by a hypodermic syringe," he announced.

"And the laugh—how do you account for that?"

"I am not accounting for it, but there are certain drugs that produce exhilaration and laughter. Most of them have to be taken into the system by inhalation, however, in order to produce such an effect."

"I see." The stout man looked a bit impatient. "In plain words, then, it's a case of murder?"

"I wouldn't say that. It might prove a far-fetched guess."

"All quibbling aside, don't the scratch on her arm look as though somebody had shot a dose of poison into her with a needle?"

The examiner pondered. "It could mean that, but it doesn't necessarily follow. An autopsy will be necessary to establish the exact cause of death. Why should a murderer use a hypodermic injection when there are so many simpler and easier ways of accomplishing the same result?"

The stout man guffawed. "Mr. Shei never picks the simple and easy way. When he wants to pull off a crime, he always dresses it up in flossy trimmings. And he always plays safe. Now, my idea is that the safest thing in the world to kill a person with is a hypodermic syringe. It makes no noise, there's no smoke, no bullet, no powder marks, no anything, and it don't leave any clues behind."

The examiner smiled skeptically, as if he had his own views on the subject. "The autopsy will tell. What I fail to understand is why you seem so certain that Mr. Shei, as he calls himself, has had a hand in this affair."

“Miss Darrow saw him, didn’t she?”

“She called out his name, if I understood the witnesses correctly, but she did not say she had seen him. It’s possible she imagined she saw him. The same drugs that produce exhilaration and laughter also produce hallucinations. However,” and he pulled a cigar from his pocket and lighted it carefully, “whether Miss Darrow did or did not see Mr. Shei is for you gentlemen to decide. Good-night.”

He strode out. The stout man made a wry face and stroked his chin. Evidently the medical man had given him something to think about. Helen, too, had found food for reflection in the doctor’s statement. She stood beside her father a few feet from the others. She had remained for no other reason than a feeling that Culligore, who had been watching her covertly from time to time, might try to detain her if she made a move to go. She believed the lieutenant had rightly guessed that she had not told all she knew.

Starr, who had unobtrusively slipped out of the building while the late colloquy was in progress, returned with the report that he had questioned the doorkeepers and the watchman, and that they had seen no suspicious looking characters about the place. They were positive no one had entered or left the building either before or after Miss Darrow’s death. Starr ended by inquiring whether it were not possible that the murderer, granting that Miss Darrow had been murdered, was still hiding in the building.

The stout man rather scouted the suggestion, but he instructed the two uniformed officers to make a thorough search.

“If this is Mr. Shei’s job, you can bet your sweet life he’s made a safe get-away,” he grumbled. “He probably sneaked out through one of the fire exits.”

The two policemen withdrew. Starr, gliding about with the softness of a panther, found a piece of drapery and covered the body. Helen’s lids contracted as she followed his movements. It struck her as odd that during the entire questioning he had made no reference to the communication Miss Darrow had sent him a few minutes before her death. She wondered whether he had forgotten it or was deliberately withholding it. In the latter case, what could be his reason?

“How about the motive?” suggested Lieutenant Culligore. It was one of the few times he had spoken since the investigation began. “Know of anybody who could have had a reason for getting Miss Darrow out of the way, Mr. Starr?”

Starr stood for a moment with head lowered, deep in thought. Then he slowly shook his finely proportioned head. “No, I don’t. I knew Miss Darrow quite well. As far as I am aware, she had no enemies. I can’t imagine why——”

He checked himself. Then he gaped, and his eyes widened, and he looked as though an important matter had just occurred to him. Finally, with a sheepish smile, he began to search his pockets.

“This dreadful affair has upset me completely,” he murmured; and then, as if in answer to the question that had flashed through Helen’s mind a few moments before, he produced a crumpled piece of paper. “If I had not been so flustered I should have shown you this at once,” he added.

He smoothed out the message and handed it to the stout man. The latter’s face clouded as he read it aloud:

Mr. Shei, like a fool, rushes in where angels might fear to tread.

V. D.

A pause followed the reading. Culligore’s upper lip brushed the tip of his nose, a sign that he had found a problem to ponder. A blank expression came into the stout man’s face. He looked bewilderedly at Starr.

“What do you suppose she meant by that?” he asked.

“That’s just what I wondered when the note was brought me,” explained Starr, a blend of sadness and self-reproach in his tones. “Miss Darrow was a strange woman, full of subtleties and queer whims. The note startled me at first; then I decided it was only a jest. At any rate, it was time for the curtain, and I dismissed the matter from my mind. Now, in the light of what has happened, I can see it was meant as a warning.”

“Warning?” echoed the stout man.

“Undoubtedly.” Starr gazed regretfully into space. “In some manner Miss Darrow must have become aware that Mr. Shei was in the house, and she chose this method of warning me of his presence. I was a fool not to see it.”

He paced back and forth, running his fingers through his thick hair and muttering

self-reproaches. The stout man looked as if he were trying to untangle a mental knot. Again he read the note.

“If Miss Darrow wanted to tip you off that Mr. Shei was in the house, why didn’t she say so in plain words?”

“Facetiousness,” said Starr grimly. “Virginia Darrow was the kind of woman you would expect to be facetious at her own funeral. Why didn’t I realize that she was trying to warn me? I remember now that she behaved in a peculiar manner all evening. Whenever I happened to look in her direction, I found her gazing at me in a strange way. I didn’t understand then, but I suppose now that she was trying to send me an ocular message. When that failed, she sent me the note. Oh, why didn’t I——”

He made a gesture of distress and self-disgust. Helen, watching his every movement, remembered that it was Miss Darrow’s odd way of staring at Starr that had first attracted her attention to the woman. The recollection started a train of new thoughts, but Culligore’s voice interrupted it.

“If Miss Darrow was right and Mr. Shei was in the house,” he told the fat man, “then you and I might as well hand in our badges and look for new jobs.”

The other jerked up his head. “You don’t think that——” he began in startled tones, then broke off and grinned complacently. “Not a chance of that. Mr. Shei couldn’t have been in the audience. I gave all of them a pretty stiff quiz, and every one gave a good account of himself. Anyhow, they’re the kind that get their names and pictures into the society columns of the Sunday papers. A bunch of harmless nuts—that’s all.”

He looked at Starr, as if realizing that the epithet had been a trifle brusque, but the manager seemed amused rather than offended.

“I think you are right,” he murmured. “The audience was composed of invited guests. I am willing to vouch for every one of them. Furthermore, you have their names and addresses, and you can communicate with them whenever you wish. If Mr. Shei was really in the theater, he came here as an unbidden guest. In all likelihood he stole in while the house was dark during the first scene of the last act, and departed as soon as he had accomplished his purpose.”

It sounded plausible enough, Helen thought; yet her mind was heavy with a

giddy whirl of suspicions and contradictions. She slanted a reluctant glance toward the chair containing the body. With a shiver she turned away, and a look at her father's drawn and tired face warned her that he should be in bed. Then she glanced at the man from the district attorney's office, and finally at Culligore. His face was a mask, but his occasional glances in her direction troubled her. The two uniformed officers had not yet returned from their search, and she wondered what they would have to report.

Once more her eyes flitted over the little group, and then, with a suddenness that choked a cry in her throat, everything was blotted from sight. In a twinkling impenetrable darkness had descended upon the house. Somewhere a door banged. She felt her father's tightening clutch on her arm. The stout man swore. Dark shapes were darting hither and thither. She heard a fragmentary cry, followed by a crash and a succession of thuds. A thrust sent her sprawling to the floor, and her mind drifted into a state of semi-stupor during which she was conscious of nothing but the swift and silent movements of the shadowy shapes.

Voices and the return of light jolted her mind back to consciousness. She struggled to her feet and blinked her eyes at the strange scene. Her father, dazed but apparently unharmed, sat a short distance away, with his back to the wall. The stout man, seemingly unconscious, lay in a twisted heap on the floor. Culligore was staring about him groggily and muttering something about a blow on the head. A policeman, one of the pair who had been sent off to search the house, was helping Starr to his feet.

With the attention to detail that comes in moments of great bewilderment, Helen noticed that Starr made a ludicrous picture. His attire, so faultless and immaculate a few minutes ago, was now in a sorry state of disorder. A streak of crimson stained his shirt front, and he held a handkerchief to his nose. He wobbled drunkenly across the floor, but all at once his figure stiffened and a blank look came into his face. His lips formed unspoken words as he raised a finger and pointed toward a seat in the last tier.

As she followed the pointing finger, things swam in confusion before Helen's eyes. Starr, speechless and crestfallen, was indicating the chair where the body of Virginia Darrow had been. As she stared stonily toward the empty chair, Helen felt an impulse to cry out. She came a few steps closer, then stopped with a shudder and dazedly swept her hand across her forehead.

“It’s—it’s gone!” she cried huskily.

### CHAPTER III—HELEN EQUIVOCATES

Across the breakfast table Mr. Hardwick looked anxiously at his daughter. The wild-rose color that usually flooded her cheeks had faded a trifle since last night, and her eyes were less bright. Most of the time the curator's mind browsed among relics of the past, but his perceptions were amazingly keen where his daughter was concerned.

“Mr. Shei gave us quite a shock last night,” he remarked.

Helen kept her eyes down while she poured his coffee and added two and a half lumps of sugar and the usual portion of cream. Then she stirred it for him, knowing he would be quite apt to forget to do so himself. Despite the half dozen titles bestowed upon him by universities and learned societies, she felt he needed looking after.

“Don't forget that you have a lecture engagement this afternoon,” she admonished as she passed the cup across the table.

Mr. Hardwick nodded and sipped. “It is a most extraordinary case. The murder of that poor woman—assuming that it was a case of murder—seemed wholly unprovoked. I gathered from the conversation among the officers that no motive was in evidence. It looks like a wanton, despicable crime.”

Helen crumbled a piece of toast. “Professor Warburton is coming to see you at three this afternoon.”

“I have a memorandum of the appointment on my desk.” Mr. Hardwick smiled faintly. “Our minds seem to be pulling in opposite directions this morning. This Mr. Shei interests me. He appears to be a remarkable criminal. His audacity and the originality of his methods are unparalleled. I don't know that I ever encountered anything quite so mystifying as the circumstances surrounding the murder last night. How the murderer went in and out without being seen is beyond understanding, and the subsequent removal of the body was the most amazing part of it all. There seems to be neither method nor reason in that. One thing appears certain. Mr. Shei could not have accomplished what he did unless he had been aided by accomplices. What do you think, my dear?”



Helen's head was lowered over her coffee cup. The captive sunlight in her hair gleamed and flashed.

"Your extra pair of glasses are at the optician's," she reminded him. "Don't forget to stop for it."

Mr. Hardwick looked at her helplessly; then carefully, and from force of habit, he folded his napkin.

"I wonder whether the police will ever learn Mr. Shei's identity," he murmured musingly. "So far the scoundrel has contrived to mystify them completely, but some day his egotism and love of self-glorification are apt to cause his undoing. In the meantime, however, he is likely to do a great deal of mischief. The fellow's effrontery is colossal, and his fearlessness and brains render him most dangerous. In some respects he bears a very close resemblance to that other notorious rogue, now reported to be in retirement."

Helen drew a quick breath. She bent her head a little lower over her cup. Her right index finger traced a design on the tablecloth.

"Another cup of coffee, dad?" was her only reply.

Mr. Hardwick appeared not to have heard. "You know who I mean. The man they used to call The Gray Phantom. For several years he was regarded as one of the cleverest and most dangerous criminals the world has ever known."

Slowly Helen raised her head. Her eyes, as they met her father's, were steady and bright.

"That was because the world didn't understand him," she said with emphasis. "The Gray Phantom wasn't really a criminal. He was only a—a sort of human dynamo whose energy happened to be turned in the wrong direction."

"Isn't that a distinction without a difference? A Robin Hood is an enemy of society despite the glamour with which he surrounds himself. However," and Mr. Hardwick's face softened quickly, "I am deeply in The Gray Phantom's debt. He saved your life twice, and but for him I would now be a lonely and heartbroken old man."

Helen nodded eagerly. “And the Assyrian collection, dad. You spent most of your life gathering it, and you were almost overcome with grief when it was stolen. The Gray Phantom risked his life and liberty in order to recover it and restore it to you. He wouldn’t have done that if he had been just an ordinary criminal.”

“True,” admitted Mr. Hardwick. “I shall be under obligations to The Gray Phantom as long as I live. The man has a number of excellent qualities, whatever may be said of his past. On the whole, it is not surprising that you have taken an interest in him.”

Helen’s eyes were lowered again.

There was a mingling of tenderness and worry in Mr. Hardwick’s face as he looked at her. “I know just how you feel,” he said softly. “A man who is trying to live down a dark past always exerts a strong romantic appeal on a woman of your impressionable age. I don’t know why it is, unless it pleases her to think he is doing it for her sake. It makes me think of your play, ‘The Master of His Soul.’ All last night, until the interruption came, I was wondering whether your *Marius* was not The Gray Phantom.”

Helen sat rigidly still for a moment. Then her lips began to twitch. She flashed her father a smile.

“Sometimes, daddy dear, you show a wonderful understanding of things that have nothing to do with Assyriology.”

“I was right, then.” His face sobered. “I hope you realize that, despite The Gray Phantom’s admirable qualities, there is a gulf between him and you. But you are just as level-headed as was your mother, and I have no fear that the impulses of your heart will get the better of your judgment. We were discussing Mr. Shei. There seems to be a striking similarity between his methods and those of The Gray Phantom, except that the latter was never known to stoop to murder.” He paused for a moment and studied her averted face. “You puzzled me last night, dear. You will admit that your conduct was—er, peculiar.”

“It’s getting late, dad,” murmured Helen, a bit confusedly glancing at her wrist watch. “You should have been at your office half an hour ago. And this is the first time I’ve known you to take an interest in a murder case.”

“Once during the evening you gripped my hand and tried to point out something to me,” pursued Mr. Hardwick, heedless of her remark. “You spoke incoherently, and I had not the faintest idea what it was about. Then, a minute or so before the tragedy, you left the box and hurried away. Still later, while the officer was questioning you, I felt you were concealing something.”

Helen, her fingers tightening about a fork handle, shook her head. “I answered every question he put to me.”

“I know, dear. Yet you withheld a secret of some kind from him.”

“Not exactly. I—I merely refrained from telling him something that—that I might have told.”

“Something you had heard or seen?”

She hesitated for an instant. “If I had told all I had seen and heard, I wouldn’t have been telling half of what I knew.”

Mr. Hardwick leaned back against the chair and pondered this cryptic statement. He seemed puzzled rather than hurt by his daughter’s evasive answers. Suddenly she looked up, saw the troubled expression in his face, and impulsively pushed back her chair and ran up behind him.

“Please don’t ask me any more questions, dad.” She put her arms around his neck and tilted her face to his. “It is true I held something back, but at the time I didn’t know why. I merely felt that it wouldn’t do to tell. This morning, after lying awake most of the night, I knew I had done the right thing.” She gave a little laugh. “Isn’t it just like a woman to act first and look into her reasons afterward?”

“I—well, I suppose so. And what were your reasons?”

“Would you be hurt if I told you I would rather not explain them just now?”

“No; I trust you. Experience has taught me that I can depend upon you in spite of your mysterious little ways and madcap pranks. There is one thing I wish you would tell me, though.” He stopped, fumbling for words. “Was your reticence last night prompted by a wish to shield someone?”

“No,” was her prompt reply, and her eyes gazed frankly into his. “What put such a thought into your head?”

“I scarcely know. You’ll think I am an old fool, but it occurred to me that perhaps you had discovered something that led you to think that Mr. Shei and The Gray Phantom are identical.”

“And you thought I was protecting The Gray Phantom? What an idea! But you were wrong, dad—absolutely wrong.”

“Then I am glad.” Mr. Hardwick rose and put his arm around her waist. “My goodness! Almost ten o’clock, and I have been sitting here gossiping like an old woman. You have taken a load off my mind, dear child. I was really worried.”

She laughed, whisked a few crumbs from his coat, straightened his tie, and kissed him.

“And I hope,” added Mr. Hardwick banteringly, “that Uranus won’t lead you into any more foolhardy adventures.”

Again she laughed, but her face sobered the moment he turned away and left the room. A wiser, maturer expression settled over the wide-set eyes and the vivid lips. It seemed as though her talk with her father had left a disquieting impression in her mind. She moved absently about the room, setting things in order here and there, but the far-away gleam in her eyes told that her mind was scarcely aware of what her hands were doing. Presently she stopped before the open window and looked out. A building was going up across the street, and the groaning of derricks and screaming of steam whistles jarred discordantly in the back of her mind. Near the curb a group of laborers were mixing concrete, and a powdery substance was drifting in the air.

She came out of her abstraction with a little start. Her eyes were on the window sill, and she spelled out the characters she had written in the thin layer of dust.

“G-r-a-y P-h-a-n-t-o-m,” she mumbled, puzzled and somewhat annoyed with herself. The faint pencilings in the dust seemed all the stranger because she had not been thinking of The Gray Phantom. Instead, her mind had been occupied by Mr. Shei and what the morning newspapers had said about the tragedy in the Thelma Theater. The accounts she had read had been largely speculation and conjecture. The dying woman’s strange laughter and her mysterious allusion to

Mr. Shei had afforded material for columns of vivid and imaginative description. The medical examiner had reluctantly admitted that Miss Darrow's death might have been caused by a poison administered hypodermically, but he had added that the symptoms were strange to him, and that he knew of no drug producing just such effects. A number of toxicologists had been interviewed, but they had declared that the few facts at hand were not sufficient to enable them to form an opinion, and the disappearance of the body rendered it doubtful whether the cause of death would ever be learned definitely.

Only one thing seemed beyond dispute and that was Mr. Shei's complicity in the affair. The elusive and highly accomplished rogue already had a score of astounding crimes to his record, and the Thelma murder was hedged with all the mystery and baffling detail with which he loved to mask his exploits. Miss Darrow's dying words were scarcely needed to turn the finger of suspicion in Mr. Shei's direction. The absence of clues, the uncertainty in regard to the motive, the audacity that marked the crime itself as well as the subsequent snatching away of the body, all indicated a boldness and a finesse that left little doubt of Mr. Shei's guilt. Even if his own hand had not executed the crime, it seemed practically certain that his mind had planned and conceived it.

But who was Mr. Shei? The whole train of surmises and theories pivoted on that question. Not much was known of him save that he had a passion for tantalizing the public and keeping the nerves of the men at headquarters on edge, and that his achievements had not been equaled in scope or brilliance of execution since The Gray Phantom's retirement. He took a diabolical delight in flaunting his name before the world while keeping his person carefully out of the reach of the law's long arm, and even the name was a challenge to the police and a teaser for the public imagination. Someone versed in dead languages had discovered that the word "shei" was the ancient equivalent of the modern  $x$ , the symbol of the unknown quantity, and it was generally agreed that the name fitted the elusive individual who bore it.

Yet the name meant nothing. It was only an abstraction, for it afforded no clew to its owner's identity. The night before, while she sat beside her father in the Thelma Theater, a vagrant flash of intuition had come to Helen. She had seen the solution of the mystery in a swift, dazzling glimpse. The revelation had stunned and nearly blinded her, and thoughts had crowded upon her so thickly that she would have been quite unable to clothe them in words. The idea carried to her by that intuitive flash had seemed clear and unquestionable. It still seemed so, but

her talk with her father had disturbed her a little and turned her thoughts in a new direction.

Again she looked down at the tracings in the dust. A smile, faint and wistful, reflected her softened mood, and a light of wonder and gentleness flooded her eyes. She reached out a hand to obliterate the telltale pencilings, but something restrained her. Besides, a freshly forming layer of dust was already blotting them out.

The telephone rang in the adjoining room, and she hurried away to answer.

“Miss Hardwick?” inquired a drawling voice which she instantly recognized. “Lieutenant Culligore speaking. I’m at the Thelma Theater. Wish you’d come over right away. I want to ask you a few questions.”

Before she could reply, he hung up. Her face grew suddenly tense. Culligore’s brusqueness piqued her, though she knew it was characteristic of the man, and she felt he had taken undue advantage of her by giving her no chance for argument. She did not wish to see him, yet she knew she could not escape him by merely ignoring his request. Anyway, she reflected as she hastily dressed for the street, it would be interesting to learn Culligore’s theory of the murder.

A ride in the subway and a short walk brought her to the door of the Thelma. On the wall, at each side of the entrance, were posters stating that until further notice there would be no more performances of “His Soul’s Master.” Helen viewed the announcement of the withdrawal of her play without much regret. She had partly anticipated it, and last night’s occurrence had given her weightier things to think of. As she passed through the foyer, a policeman nodded stolidly and in a way that told her she was expected. She passed unhindered into the auditorium.

At first she could see nothing. Every door was closed, and the vast room was full of silence and vague shadows. Presently, as her eyes grew accustomed to the dusk, she glanced toward the chair that had been occupied by Miss Darrow. She looked quickly aside, and saw that she was standing not far from the pillar that had supported her when the creature with the loathsome face brushed past her. The scene, which had seemed dim and immaterial while she was out in the sunlight a few minutes ago, now recurred to her with disagreeable vividness. Of a sudden the air about her felt heavy and oppressive.

A figure was moving up the aisle toward where she stood. The dawdling gait and

the slouchy attitude told her it was Culligore, and she braced her nerves for an ordeal. In a few moments her quickly working wits had found a way of handling the situation.

“Good-morning, lieutenant,” she said pleasantly as he came up beside her. “I suppose you are looking for clues. Any success?”

“Nope,” he replied complainingly. “That’s why I sent for you, Miss——”

“You have found no trace of the body?” she quickly cut in, anxious to maintain the rôle of questioner.

Culligore shook his head. She felt his eyes on her face, though he did not appear to be looking at her. Practicing a trick cultivated by his profession, he was studying her without seeming to do so.

“Don’t you think it strange that the murderer should go to all that risk and trouble to remove the body?” she went on.

“Murderer? There must have been three or four of them, at least. There was some mighty fast work done when the lights went out, and one man didn’t do it all. I’ve got a bump in the back of my head as big as a hen’s egg. Selfkin, the man from the district attorney’s office, is in bed with a fractured skull, and Starr looks as though somebody had hit him on the nose with a brick. One of the gang must have tampered with the switchboard back of the proscenium arch just before the others swooped down on us and carried away the body.”

“But what was the object? Wasn’t the murderer’s purpose accomplished with the killing of Miss Darrow?”

“Hard telling. One thing is sure. As long as the body is missing there can be no autopsy, and I’ll bet a pair of yellow socks that that’s exactly what they wanted. Not that I pretend to understand it all, but it seems reasonable that they didn’t care to have the exact cause of Miss Darrow’s death become known.”

Helen pondered this statement for a moment. “How about the motive for the murder?”

“We’re pretty much in the dark there, too,” admitted Culligore. “I don’t suppose, though, that it was just by accident that Miss Darrow happened to die a few

minutes after she had sent Starr a note warning him that Mr. Shei was in the house.”

“Oh!” Helen gave a quick start. “You think she was killed because she had in some manner discovered Mr. Shei’s identity?”

“Maybe.” Culligore, with legs spread out and hands in trousers pockets, seemed engrossed in a study of Helen’s bright-trimmed hat. “My mind isn’t made up on that point. Mr. Shei’s schemes go pretty deep. Maybe you can tell me——”

Again Helen interrupted him. “Have you discovered how the murderers got in and out of the building?”

“They didn’t leave any tracks behind them, but there is a door in the rear of the basement that they might have used. It’s supposed to be locked, but I satisfied myself a while ago that the spring lock can be picked. That the body was carried out that way is as good a guess as any. But look here, Miss Hardwick,” and something that might have been a grin drifted across his face, “you’re pretty good at firing questions, but it’s my turn now.”

She stiffened, seeing she would have to assume defensive tactics. She sent him a quick glance, but his face, always inscrutable, was even more so in the dusk.

“I asked you to come here, hoping the surroundings would refresh your memory of what happened last night,” Culligore went on in his usual placid drawl. “You needn’t repeat what you said then. What I’m after is the things you *didn’t* say.”

“I don’t believe I understand.”

Culligore’s chuckle sounded like a snort, though she knew it was meant to be good-natured. “Oh, yes, you do. I didn’t do much talking last night, but I was watching you all the time. We’d met before, you know, and I could read you like an open book. I knew you were just as long on brains as on looks. Though you answered every question, you weren’t telling anything. All the while you were holding something back. Isn’t that true?”

She hesitated, having an uncomfortable feeling that Culligore was seeing through her and that any attempt at evasion would be useless.

“What do you want to know?” she asked.



“That’s a lot better, Miss Hardwick. You might begin by telling me where you were sitting when the disturbance began.”

“Why, I—I wasn’t sitting anywhere.”

“Standing up, then?”

“I wasn’t standing, either.”

“Oh, I see. You were lying down?”

“No, not even lying down.”

Culligore gave her a queer look. “If you weren’t sitting, standing, or lying, you must have hung suspended in the air. Was that it?”

Helen smiled engagingly. She had found time for deliberation while quibbling, and now her mind was made up. “I was so frightened I could neither stand up nor sit down. I was leaning against that pillar over there.” She pointed.

“How did you happen to leave your seat?”

Helen told him of the flitting shadow that had caused her to leave her father and run to the rear of the house.

“And what did you see while you were leaning against the pillar?” was Culligore’s next question.

Helen searched her mind for words vivid enough to recount her impressions during the terrible moments just before the drop of the curtain, but she felt her description was both hazy and fragmentary. Her picture of the face that had flashed past her in the dark was blurred and unreal, like one’s recollection of a dream.

When she had done her best, Culligore walked back and forth for a time. Standing in an attitude of strained tensity, she wondered what his next question would be. Suddenly he stopped squarely in front of her, and again she had an uncomfortable feeling that his deceptively lazy eyes were reading her thoughts.

“What else?” he demanded quietly. “What you have told me so far is pretty

good, but you're still holding back the most important thing—the thing you didn't want to tell about last night.”

“How—how do you know that?” she asked.

He gave another snortlike chuckle. “Common horse sense tells me. The reason you didn't tell about the things you saw while leaning against the post was because you were afraid they would lead you on to a subject you didn't want to discuss. You were afraid that if you got started you might get tangled up and wouldn't be able to stop.”

Helen could only stare at him. He had stated the truth far more clearly than she herself could have done.

“What was it, Miss Hardwick? I think you had better tell.”

She stood silent, twisting her figure this way and that, and all the while wishing that he would take his eyes from her. Jumbled thoughts thronged her mind, and she felt her power of resistance slipping from her. Finally Culligore swung round on his heels, and a sigh of relief escaped her.

“The thing about you that puzzles me more than anything else is that your hair isn't red,” he told her. “The rest I can savvy easily enough. I can even tell what it was you were holding back last night. Want me to?”

His tones were soft and teasing. She squirmed, torn between anxiety and despair. His face was expressionless, but she felt he was inwardly laughing at her.

“All right, then,” he said, taking her silence for assent. “You couldn't have had more than one reason for keeping mum last night, and that reason was that you wanted to shield somebody. There is only one man on earth you could have wanted to shield, and that man is The Gray Phantom.”

“No!” she cried. “You're mistaken! I wasn't——”

“Easy now.” All at once his tone changed. “There's such a thing as protesting too much, you know. I don't take much stock in what I read in the Sunday papers, but there's a lot of talk going the rounds about a romance between you and The Gray Phantom. Most of it is pipe dreams, I guess. Anyhow, it's nobody's business, and it makes no difference. All I'll say is that if I was The Gray

Phantom and had a girl like you fighting for me, I'd be willing to go through hell-fire for her every day in the week. You're loyal clean through and——"

"But you're wrong!" she interrupted emphatically. His words filled her with a great fear, but there was a kind of rough tenderness in his voice that warmed her.

"I knew you'd say that, but you have to hear me through. I take off my hat to The Gray Phantom. He always played the game according to the code, even when he cut those fancy didos that put gray hairs in almost every head on the force. I shouldn't say it, but it goes just the same. The Phantom's been lying low now for some time. Nobody seems to know where he is. He's shown himself only twice, and each time he came out in a good cause. They say he's going it straight, and it's rumored that a certain young lady has had a lot to do with his turning over a new leaf."

He paused, and for a moment his eyes rested on her averted face.

"It's hard work for a leopard to change his spots. Some people say it can't be done. The Phantom's human, like the rest of us. Maybe he's got tired of the straight and narrow path and gone back to his old tricks under a new name. Just for the sake of argument we'll say he has. And I've got a hunch that last night you saw or heard something that made you think that Mr. Shei is The Gray Phantom."

The assertion staggered her, though she had known all the time that he was leading up to it. Using almost the same words, her father had expressed the same idea at the breakfast table, and it was the similarity of the phrasing that startled her.

"No—no!" was all she could say.

"Then will you please tell me," said Culligore, his tones both gentle and insistent, "why didn't you come out with what you knew last night?"

She fell back a step, feeling suddenly weak as she realized that his question was unanswerable. A confusion of ideas churned and simmered in her mind. Her lips moved, but no words came.

"You've answered me," declared Culligore. "You think Mr. Shei is The Phantom. Maybe you're right, and maybe you're wrong. What I wanted to know

was what you thought. And let me tell you something.” A foolish grin, one of Lieutenant Culligore’s infrequent ones, wrinkled his face. “I hate my job less whenever I meet up with one of your kind.”

Helen did not hear what he said. She felt as if the swirl of thoughts and emotions within her had suddenly turned into a leaden lump. She glanced involuntarily at the chair in which Virginia Darrow had sat, and of a sudden she fancied she heard laughter—slow, tinkling laughter that sounded like a taunt flung in the face of an approaching specter. She knew the sounds existed only in her imagination, but with a low, long drawn-out cry she turned abruptly and fled toward the door, conscious only of a fierce desire for sunlight and air.

No one detained her. She ran across the street. An idea was slowly working its way out of the turmoil in her mind. She opened her bag and counted her scant supply of bills. Then she looked about her. Half a block down the street she saw the sign of a district messenger office. In a few moments she was inside, hastily scrawling a note which she had addressed to her father. A taxicab was passing as she stepped out on the street. She hailed the driver, and he drew in at the curb.

“Erie station—West Twenty-third Street,” she directed breathlessly.

As the cab started she slumped back against the cushions and gazed rigidly out the window. Despite the bright sunlight, things blurred before her eyes, and there was only one clear thought in her mind.

She was on her way to The Gray Phantom, for she alone knew where to find him.

## CHAPTER IV—AZURECREST

It was growing dark when she reached the end of her journey, and the dusk made it easy for her to elude the little knot of idlers on the station platform. With frequent backward glances she hurried down a path that skirted the edge of a village nestling at the foot of a hill which was outlined against the horizon like a great funnel-shaped cloud. On its apex was Azurecrest, the hermitage of The Gray Phantom.

Helen found the motor driveway that circled its way upward in spiral fashion, for the hill was too steep to permit cars to reach the top by direct route. She had visited the place once before, in the course of one of the perilous adventures she and The Phantom had shared together. The residence, a sprawling structure of stone, tile and stucco, had been built by The Phantom shortly after his retirement, and she had marveled at the precautions he had taken to protect his privacy. The inhabitants of the village understood that the place was occupied by a wealthy and leisurely gentleman who was spending the remainder of his life in ease and solitude on the desolate hilltop. Though consumed with curiosity, they never ventured near Azurecrest, guessing accurately that they would not be welcomed. Occasionally they saw one of the servants, but the owner never permitted himself to be seen except by his most intimate associates.

The tang of late autumn was in the air, and Helen's head cleared as she walked briskly up the zigzagging driveway. The railway journey had been long and tedious and punctuated by innumerable stops, and she had been too distracted to think clearly. Now she began to search her mind for a plan, but she soon saw that planning was impossible. Her trip to Azurecrest had been prompted by one of those sudden impulses that usually dictated her conduct, and she had been conscious of no other motive than to put an end to her fears and doubts. She had thought that a talk with The Gray Phantom would quickly end the suspense.

Reaching the gate in the picket fence that encircled the apex of the hill, she touched an electric button. While waiting she looked about her. The Susquehanna, like a cocoon thread, wound in and out among the hills and valleys in the distance. The moon, shining through a vapory gauze, splashed a misty sheen over boulders and trees.

She heard a dog's shrill bark, and a masculine figure came down the graveled walk toward the gate. As he drew nearer and the pale moonlight fell on him, she saw he was stocky and coarse-featured, and she guessed he was one of the sentinels that were always stationed about the place.

"What do you want?" he asked ungraciously as he reached the gate.

"I wish to see Mr. Vanardy," she announced, using the name by which the occupant of Azurecrest had been known before he became The Gray Phantom.

She thought the man repressed a start, but she reflected that his evident surprise was natural enough, since visitors seldom came to Azurecrest.

"Mr. Vanardy, eh?" He drew an instrument from his pocket and flashed an electric gleam in her face. For a long moment he studied her in silence. "You mean The Gray Phantom?"

"Yes."

He hesitated, still searching her face in the light of the electric flash. It was plain that the appearance of a feminine visitor at the gate of Azurecrest had aroused his suspicion.

"What do you want to see him about?" he demanded gruffly.

"Tell him Miss Hardwick wishes to see him. I think that will be sufficient."

She drew herself up as she spoke and regarded him steadily. As if decided by her cool and level tones, the man lowered the light and turned away, and in a few moments he had been swallowed by the shadows cast by the tall trees. Helen controlled her impatience. She understood that The Gray Phantom was obliged to exercise care every moment of his life. Despite his new mode of existence, he was still an outlaw in the eyes of the police, and a number of outstanding charges made it necessary for him to observe every precaution.

Again the man emerged out of the shadows. This time he said nothing, but peered at her furtively as he opened the gate and motioned her to step through. He closed and locked the gate carefully, then walked ahead of her up the graveled walk. A great shaggy dog slouched at his heels and wagged its tail energetically, as if disturbed by the arrival of a visitor. Helen's guide stopped

under a portico and opened a door. A dim light shone on his face as he turned and told her to enter, and his expression gave her a twinge of misgiving. She tried in vain to analyze it, and the next moment the disturbing impression was gone.

“Wait,” he said, indicating a chair.

Helen felt relieved as soon as the door closed behind him. The room was large and pleasant, and the oak-paneled, cream-colored walls made an attractive background for the furniture and decorations. Each little detail suggested The Gray Phantom’s instinctive taste for beauty and proportion, and it suddenly occurred to her that this was the same room in which he had received her on her previous visit to Azurecrest.

Footfalls sounded in the hall, and all at once she grew confused. She wondered how she was to broach the subject that had been in her thoughts constantly since last night. She started to rise as the door opened, but in the next instant she sat back and swallowed an exclamation of surprise. She had expected to see The Gray Phantom, but the person who entered was a short, slightly humpbacked man of about fifty. He jerked his head toward her by way of a bow, and as he smiled she noticed that his mouth was crooked.

“My name is Hawkes,” he announced in soft, lisping accents. “I am the secretary. I understand you wish to see Mr. Vanardy. Have you an appointment with him?”

A faint touch of uneasiness mingled with Helen’s impatience. The Gray Phantom had never mentioned that he had a secretary, and she doubted whether he was in the habit of making appointments.

“I have no appointment,” she said, mastering her vexation and disquietude, “but I think Mr. Vanardy will see me if you mention my name.”

“Ah! Then you are a friend of his?”

“I have met him several times.”

“To be sure,” said the little man. He rubbed his hands, which seemed abnormally large for one of his sparse stature. “But, if you know anything at all about Mr. Vanardy, you must realize that he has to exercise caution, particularly in

regard to the people he meets.”

Helen rose, a faint flush of indignation in her cheeks. The next moment she sat down again, for she realized that Hawkes’ argument was reasonable. The Gray Phantom’s existence was precarious enough to warrant every conceivable precaution.

“I know Mr. Vanardy will see me if you tell him who I am,” she declared, looking straight into the little man’s eyes.

“Quite likely. But I have orders, and I dare not disregard them. Be good enough to answer one or two questions. To begin with, what is the nature of your business with Mr. Vanardy?”

Helen’s patience was almost exhausted, but her sense of humor came to her rescue. Her lips began to twitch.

“Tell Mr. Vanardy,” she said, “that the subject I wish to discuss with him has to do with a certain Mr. Shei.”

The little man’s eyes opened wide. She fancied his hand shook a trifle as he made an annotation on the pad he carried.

“Quite so,” he murmured, quickly controlling himself. “You have come here on business connected with a certain Mr. Shei. Just one more question. Very few people know there is such a place as Azurecrest. How did you happen to find it?”

“Mr. Vanardy once gave me the directions. But you are exerting yourself needlessly, Hawkes. I am sure all that is necessary is to mention my name to Mr. Vanardy.”

“Perhaps so.” The humpback made another annotation on the pad, after which he put it in his pocket. “I’ll repeat to Mr. Vanardy what you have just told me.” He walked out of the room.

Helen could not tell why, but the silence that fell upon the room as the door closed impressed her uncomfortably. She did her best to muffle a faint inward whisper of warning, a premonition that something was wrong. Hawkes’ questions had left a train of disturbing thoughts in her mind.



She waited a few minutes, then got up and began to pace the floor in an effort to quell a rising nervousness. She glanced at the pictures on the walls, but they did not seem to be the same as those that had hung there on her last visit, and they failed to interest her.

Presently she stepped to the window and looked out. The trees were nodding drowsily in the gentle night wind. The mist rising from the lowlands on all sides of the hill gave her a curious sense of remoteness from the world.

Then she drew back a step suddenly. Someone was passing the window, and she caught a momentary glimpse of a face. For a second or two a pair of large and oddly piercing eyes were fixed on her. Then the figure vanished, but the vision left her white and shaken. A hoarse cry rose to her lips. Unless her imagination had deceived her, the face that had just passed the window was the same swarthy, loathsome face she had seen in the Thelma Theater scarcely twenty-four hours ago.

Seized with a great fear, she ran across the floor and opened the door. The face, with its squatty features and long black hair fluttering in the breeze, had crystallized all the vague misgivings she had felt since she entered the house. For the moment she was unable to think, but an unreasoning impulse to flee drove her swiftly down the long hall. She felt she must escape from Azurecrest at once.

She had nearly reached the end of the hall when she came to a dead stop. She stood rigid, listening. Somewhere a laugh sounded. The staccato accents seemed to fill the house with volumes of hideous sound. Each vibrant note conjured up a fearful picture before her eyes. She staggered back against the wall, stopping her ears to shut out a repetition of the sound, but the echoes of it lingered in her imagination. She knew the laugh well. It was the same kind of laugh that Virginia Darrow had taken with her into eternity.

## CHAPTER V—PERPLEXITIES

Minutes passed, each dragging a train of monstrous fancies before Helen's mental vision. The tips of her fingers shut out all sounds from her ears, but the laughter still dinned and echoed in her imagination. It reminded her of the haunting strains of glee that had come from Virginia Darrow's dying lips. Somehow this laughter was different, but the difference was so subtle that she could but vaguely sense it. It was loud and delirious, in contrast to the gentle, dirgelike notes that had characterized the other.

She could stand the suspense no longer. Sped on by fear, she ran in the direction where she thought the door was. She brought up against a stairway instead. A noise caused her to lift her head. Down the stairs, lurching and sliding, came a woman. Her hair was wildly tousled and her clothing in disorder, and peal after peal of harsh laughter cut through the silence as she scurried down the steps.

Then she saw Helen, and she stopped as abruptly as if she had dashed against a material barrier. Clutching the railing with one hand, she wagged drunkenly from side to side. Her face was ashen, but her skin was clear and smooth as a young girl's. The eyes, unnaturally wide and bright, stared down at Helen with fierce intensity. She had ceased laughing, but the lips were still agape, as if suddenly frozen into rigidity.

Helen forgot her fears as she saw the strange look in the woman's face. She wondered whether it meant madness, terror, or intoxication. It seemed to be neither, but rather a blending of all three. Slowly, with the outspread fingers of one hand pressing against her breast, the woman came down the remaining steps. Her great eyes were still fixed on Helen, but the mad flame in their depths was gradually yielding to a look of sanity.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. Her voice was dry, and she spoke with little hissing sounds, as if each word were exhausting her breath.

Helen winced as the woman clutched her arm. Streaks of gray in the tumbled masses of her black hair clashed sharply with her youthfully rounded face, and Helen guessed that the contrast had been brought about by some terrifying

experience.

“Do you know where you are?” the woman went on, tightening her grip on Helen’s arm.

“This is Azurecrest, isn’t it?” Helen’s words voiced an indefinite doubt that had been stirring faintly in the back of her mind since she saw the face at the window. “I came here to see the Gray—to see Mr. Vanardy.”

“Azurecrest?” The woman’s mind seemed to be slowly struggling out of a daze. “Yes—that’s what they call the place. But there is no Mr. Vanardy here. You have been deceived, just as I was. Those monsters! Do you know what will happen to you if you remain here?”

Helen shrugged as if to fight off a stupor that seemed to be gradually infolding body and mind.

“They’ll inject the fever into your veins,” the woman told her, without waiting for an answer. “The fever that always kills. Sometimes it kills quickly, but most the time very slowly, just as it is killing me. You will not feel much pain. You will laugh and sing and dream strange dreams. Those are always the symptoms. At first, before the fever reaches the last stage, you will laugh loud and hilariously—like this.” She threw back her head, and then came an outburst of screaming laughter that made Helen shudder. “That’s how it sounds at first. But later, when the fever has burned out your strength and destroyed your reason, the laughter will be low and soft and lilting. Then it sounds like this.” She gave a series of low, tinkling sounds that were like a requiem set to laughter.

Helen shivered. Just so had Virginia Darrow gone laughing to her death. The coincidence seemed rather weird. The stark realism of the imitation gripped her, and yet she wondered whether she were dreaming or whether the woman beside her were reveling in the fancies of a maniac.

The other stiffened suddenly. She seemed to recall something which her encounter with Helen had temporarily blotted from her mind. Placing two fingers across her lips, she cast a swift glance up the stairs. For a brief space she stood tense, listening.

“The woman who watches me went to sleep and I stole away from her,” she whispered. “We must try to get out before they begin looking for me. You must

come, too. It won't do for you to remain a moment longer. S-sh!"

Silent as a wraith she stole down the hall. Helen, scarcely knowing what she was doing, followed dazedly. She did not know what to think, but there was an undertow of vague dread in her jumbled thoughts and emotions. What she had just heard sounded wildly fantastical, like the raving of a deranged mind. Yet she had a feeling that something was dreadfully wrong. The strange laughter and the face at the window appeared to give a background of reality to what the woman had said. They seemed to suggest, too, that there was a connecting link between Azurecrest and the tragedy in the Thelma Theater. It was this circumstance, bewildering and almost unbelievable, that clogged the functioning of Helen's mind and rendered her willing to be led along by her guide.

The door was unlocked and they passed unhindered into the open. In a dull and indifferent fashion Helen thought it strange that the woman's loud laughter had not already betrayed them, but then it occurred to her that perhaps such outbursts were common at Azurecrest. After what she had already seen and heard, nothing would have surprised her greatly. She wondered how her companion meant to overcome the obstacles of the locked gate and the high picket fence. Perhaps, in her beclouded state of mind and eagerness to escape, she was not even giving them a thought. Or perhaps——

Her guide stopped so abruptly that Helen, who had been following close behind, nearly ran into her. Out of the mist and shadows came a low, rumbling growl. A huge, black shape bounded toward them.

"The dog!" exclaimed the other. "I forgot—oh!"

The beast, rearing on hind legs, sprang at her throat and felled her. She lay prone on the ground, the dog crouching over her with jaws slavering and forefeet pawing her body. Helen stood motionless in her tracks. The dog's eyes and teeth gleamed menacingly in the moonlight, and she knew that the slightest move would precipitate an attack upon her. Her mind, clearing rapidly under the stress of danger, was seeking a way out of the predicament when hurried footsteps came down the walk.

"Cæsar!" called a gruff voice.

The dog let go its hold as a man came running toward them. He stopped and gathered the fallen woman in his arms, and Helen recognized the individual who

had met her at the gate on her arrival. With scarcely a glance in her direction, he turned and walked toward the house with his burden. Helen feeling the gleaming eyes of the beast on her face, dared not move. As she stood wondering what to do, a shadow fell across the graveled walk and a second man came toward her.

“Back to your kennel, Cæsar!” he commanded, and the dog obediently slunk away. “Excellent watchdog, but a bit ferocious when he is kept on half rations. Won’t you come inside, Miss—er, Hardwick? Hawkes told me about you. I am Mr. Slade. Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

His manner and appearance were pleasant enough; yet Helen felt an impulse to run. The things she had seen and heard since coming to Azurecrest were highly mystifying, and they had left a number of questions and suspicions in her mind. She glanced quickly toward the picket fence, then in the direction whence Cæsar had disappeared. Something told her that a whistle would set the dog snapping and snarling at her heels if she should try to break away. She decided that her hope lay in diplomacy rather than flight.

As if he had read her thoughts, Slade touched her arm and escorted her to the house. She sensed that a trying ordeal was ahead of her, and she was already steeling her nerves for it. She had faced danger many times, and her buoyant nature always responded to the demands of a crisis with a quickening of wits and rising courage.

“I trust Miss Neville didn’t annoy you” murmured Slade apologetically as he opened the door and conducted her down the hall. “A very difficult case of paranoia. She gets quite violent at times, and she is subject to all sorts of hallucinations. To-night she broke away from her nurse and would no doubt have attempted to scale the fence if Cæsar hadn’t interrupted her.”

Helen walked beside him in silence. She had already wondered whether Miss Neville could be quite sane. Oddly enough, Slade’s words almost convinced her that the woman was of sound mind, though perhaps she was suffering from the effects of illness and shock. Helen had conceived an immediate and instinctive distrust of Slade, despite his smooth-flowing speech and suave manners.

He ushered her into the same room she had left so hurriedly upon hearing the laughter, and placed a chair for her. A look at his face in the electric light gave edge to her misgivings, but at first she could not tell what there was about him

that repelled her. According to all standards, he should have attracted her and inspired confidence in her. His personality contained that blend of strength and gentleness which she had liked in men ever since her days of inconsequential hero worship. He had the strong jaw and high forehead that often go with aggressiveness and mental keenness, and he carried his tall figure with the easy grace of a man of the world. His presence would have been quite magnetic if only—— But Helen could not finish the thought. There was an unnamable something about him that eluded her mental grasp.

“Quite a sad case, that of Miss Neville,” he continued. “She was once a very brilliant woman, but her genius was consumed by its own fire, so to speak. I might as well tell you that she is my half-sister. For her own good and to avoid unpleasant notoriety, I am keeping her here under the care of a physician. Her friends believe that she is traveling abroad, and so far I have succeeded in keeping the true state of affairs secret. There is a possibility, though a very remote one, that she will recover.”

Helen made no comment. Though his eyes were lowered seemingly on the floor, she felt he was watching her and wondering whether she believed him. She thought it strange that he should have taken her into his confidence in regard to matters which one usually does not divulge to strangers. There were a number of questions on the tip of her tongue, but she thought it better to hold them back.

“I suppose,” Slade went on in melancholy tones, “that she told you the usual story of mistreatment and persecution?”

“She seemed very excited.” Helen weighed her words with care. “I don’t remember all she told me, but she said something of a fever that was gradually killing her, and she seemed very anxious to get away from this place.”

“Yes, the fever is one of her hallucinations. She imagines that she is suffering from a strange disease. And not only that but she thinks everybody around her afflicted with the same mysterious malady. The idea is firmly rooted in her mind that the disease has been deliberately communicated to her by enemies. No doubt she told you of a queer kind of laughter that is supposed to be one of the symptoms of the strange ailment.”

“She not only mentioned it, but she gave me a demonstration. It sounded a bit—creepy.”

“I can readily believe it. It must have been very unpleasant for you. I take it that she told the story convincingly enough to make an impression on you, or you would not have started to run away with her.”

He smiled as he spoke, and all at once Helen saw the reason for her instinctive dislike of him. The smile was of the lips only. There was no responsive gleam in his eyes. And his eyes, she now perceived, were hard and dispassionate as bits of porcelain.

“She frightened me, and I didn’t know what to think,” she guardedly admitted. “I suppose I followed her on the impulse of the moment. I do most things on impulse, you see.”

“That’s the privilege of youth.” He laughed, but his eyes were as glossy and expressionless as fish scales and seemed to veto his vocal merriment. “Luckily you wouldn’t have got further than the gate, even if Cæsar hadn’t intervened. It would be very embarrassing if Miss Neville should escape from us some night and expose her condition to the world. There is slight danger of that, though. I have taken all necessary precautions. However, your meeting Miss Neville here and noticing the state she is in, makes the situation rather awkward. I should dislike to have the matter get into the newspapers. I have been frank with you, hoping you would see the delicacy of the situation from my point of view.”

“I never gossip about people’s misfortunes,” declared Helen with emphasis.

“Thank you. I know I can depend on you, Miss Hardwick. I hope Cæsar didn’t frighten you. By the way,” and suddenly he seemed to remember something, “my secretary told me you were inquiring for Mr. Vanardy.”

Helen started slightly. For an hour she had been wondering why she had seen nothing of The Gray Phantom and why her request to see him had been met with evasions and cross-questioning.

Slade regarded her with polite curiosity. “I have seen your name in the newspapers, Miss Hardwick. You wrote the play that Vincent Starr produced at his theater. Only a little while ago I was reading of the peculiar tragedy that interrupted the first performance last night. I wonder whether your visit here has anything to do with that occurrence.”

It was a strange question, Helen thought. “I—I would rather talk over my errand

with Mr. Vanardy in person,” she stammered. She was chilled and confused by his steady gaze. “Isn’t he here?”

Slade’s lips twitched. “You know, of course, that Mr. Vanardy is the genial rascal who used to be known as The Gray Phantom. You needn’t answer; I see that you do. It strikes me as rather odd that a young lady of your evident refinement and culture should be associated with a man of that type. Pardon my impertinence. The fact of the matter is that Mr. Vanardy is not here. He left Azurecrest some time ago.”

“What?” Helen half rose from the chair. With a great exertion of will power she steadied herself. “Mr. Vanardy not here? Then where is he?”

“That I don’t know. I purchased Azurecrest from him through a broker. I never had any dealings with the man himself. In fact, at the time I bought the place I didn’t know that it had been occupied by The Gray Phantom. You see, I had been looking for a secluded spot where Miss Neville could live quietly and without fear of unwelcome intrusions. Azurecrest seemed to answer the requirements, and so I bought it.”

Helen stared at him, unable to disguise her bewilderment. Slade’s statement amazed and shocked her. She had not been in correspondence with The Gray Phantom, but at their last meeting he had told her to communicate with him at Azurecrest if she should ever need him. She thought it strange that he had not sent her word of his removal.

Slade was sauntering leisurely back and forth across the floor. Now and then, as he looked at her, his eyes gave her a chill. She made a strong effort to gather her thoughts and master her feelings. Something, she did not know just what, told her that the occasion demanded a cool head and steady nerves.

A motor horn sounded in the distance. Evidently a car was winding its way up the hill. The thought gave her a vague sense of comfort. She sat up straight.

“I told the man who met me at the gate that I wished to see Mr. Vanardy,” she remarked. “Later I told Hawkes the same thing. Neither one intimated that Mr. Vanardy was no longer here. I was asked a lot of useless questions and asked to wait. Then—”

“My dear Miss Hardwick,” smoothly interrupted Slade, “you must understand



that the circumstances under which my half-sister and myself are living here make it necessary for me to be very cautious with regard to visitors. My servants have orders to subject all callers to careful inspection and cross-examination. For instance, how do I know that you are not a newspaper reporter looking for a sensation?"

Helen smiled; the suggestion seemed so absurd. Once more the blare of a horn sounded in the distance.

"And that reminds me," Slade went on in slightly altered tones, "that you have not yet explained your presence here. I asked you a moment ago whether it had anything to do with what happened at the Thelma Theater."

"So you did." Helen's smile, though tantalizing, was the kind with which one masks an inner turbulence.

"I am waiting for your answer." Slade seemed as suave and urbane as before, but his eye was a trifle frostier and his tone carried a peremptory note. Helen glanced at the window. A glare like that of a motor car's headlight was approaching the house.

"Your question is very peculiar," she replied with a haughtiness which she did not quite feel, "and I see no reason why I should answer it."

"No?" Slade had ceased his pacing of the floor, and Helen wondered whether it was by design or accident that he had stopped with his back to the door. "Perhaps the question will seem less peculiar if I word it differently. What did you mean when you told Hawkes that the business you wished to discuss with Vanardy had to do with Mr. Shei?"

Helen felt a tingle of suspense. There was a sneer on Slade's lips and his frigid eyes filled her with a vague dread. She tried to parry the question with banter, but the words would not come. She twisted in her chair, and suddenly, as the door behind Slade's back came open, her gaze grew rigid and a look of consternation filled her eyes. She gripped the arms of her chair and very slowly raised herself to her feet, all the while staring intently at the figure whose arrival had been heralded a few minutes ago by the headlight's glare.

The newcomer seemed startled at first, then he smiled. Slade stepped aside and bowed deferentially to the man in the doorway. Then he noticed Helen's

transfigured face.

“You two seem to have met before,” he remarked.

Helen advanced a step. She drew a long, trembling breath. A staggering realization flashed through her mind as she gazed rigidly into the newcomer’s smiling face. It was the same realization that had come to her with such unnerving force in the Thelma Theater. It had grown hazy and vague during the intervening hours, and the quick succession of events had left her wondering. Now she knew that her first intuitive suspicion had been correct. Her mind seemed to reel and spin. She hardly knew that her lips were moving, but her voice, hoarse and scarcely audible, was uttering a name:

“Mr. Shei!”

## CHAPTER VI—THE PHANTOM ORCHID

Cuthbert Vanardy sat in his library at Sea Glimpse and tried hard to fix his mind on Paxton's *Botanical Dictionary*. Despite his best efforts it was a hopeless task. His thoughts would go gypsying, and every now and then the print would blur and fade or dissolve into fanciful images that had nothing to do with hybridization and cross-pollination of orchids.

A problem had been teasing Vanardy's imagination for months. He had struggled with it in idle moments, while resting from more ambitious experiments. Specimens from his gardens were shown each year at the horticultural expositions in New York and Boston, where they created much favorable comment among experts and caused endless speculation concerning the identity of the anonymous exhibitor, who had private and excellent reasons for remaining unknown. The problem he was now working on, however, was merely a diversion from his more serious work.

He wanted to create a gray orchid. It was to be a particular shade of gray—a dim, mystic gray, like the color of the sky just before dawn or the hue of the sea in a light fog. The novelty of the idea appealed to him and the task was proving difficult enough to give him gentle stimulation. Furthermore, gray always had been his favorite color. And he had almost decided that the hybrid, when once evolved, should be known as The Phantom Orchid.

It was merely a whim, of course—the vagary of a mind so active that it must be working even at play. For the matter of that, he often told himself that of late years his life had been little else than a succession of fancies and dim shades of reality. The gardens he had planted and the products that gained such flattering comment in the horticultural journals had been nothing but a tangible expression of a passionate desire to blot out the past and efface that other self whom the outside world called The Gray Phantom.

In those other days he had gone, like a rollicking Robin Hood, from one stupendous adventure to another. Without thought of sordid gain, but merely to assuage an inborn craving for excitement, he had dipped into a whirl of exploits that caused the public to gasp and hold its breath. The police, bedeviled and

outwitted at every turn, had gritted their teeth and muttered anathemas even while admitting that The Gray Phantom always played the game fairly and that his victims, more often than not, were villains of a far blacker dye than he.

It had been a mad carousal, and for a time it had given The Phantom all the thrills his nature craved. Nearly always his left hand had tossed away what his right had plucked. Mysterious and untraceable contributions had poured in upon hospitals, orphan asylums, societies for the protection of animals, and other philanthropic organizations. Widows, invalids, and paupers were befriended in a way that caused them to believe in a return of the day of miracles. Dreamers starving in garrets and inventors struggling to keep body and soul together were tided over many a trying crisis.

Through it all The Gray Phantom had maintained an elusiveness that confounded the keenest man hunters among the police and wrapped his identity in a mysterious glamour. Simple-minded people wondered whether he were a being of flesh and blood, or a shade on earthly rampage. His one arrest, back in the early stages of his career, had settled their doubts once for all, but an astonishing escape a few days later caused them to wag their heads and speak in hushed tones of a rogue whose feats and juggleries bewildered them.

The Phantom laughed quietly at their perplexity. The performances that awed and puzzled them seemed simple enough to him. He was merely unleashing his imagination and giving free sway to his boundless energies of body and mind. In another age he might have been a sea-roving viking or a builder of ancient empires. At times, when one of his softer moods was upon him, he wondered why his restless spirit and the fires within him could not have found a different and more soul-satisfying outlet. Then his thoughts would go back to dimly remembered days, with their shadowy recollections of early orphanage and the peccadilloes of street urchins, and somehow he thought he understood.

But as time passed his restless moods came back with increasing frequency, and little by little he lost taste for the life he was leading and the adventures that had made his sobriquet known from coast to coast. Then there came lapses between The Gray Phantom's exploits, and finally they ceased altogether. The world, not knowing with what lavish hand he had flung away his spoils, supposed he had collected his treasures and gone into hiding, and the police grimly predicted that he would reappear as soon as he had squandered his ill-gotten gains. No one guessed that The Phantom had built a hermitage on a desolate hilltop where,

surrounded by a few of his art treasures and a small group of faithful followers, he was trying to reconstruct his life in peace.

“Azurecrest” was the name he had given his secluded retreat, and there he had tried to destroy the links that still chained him to the past and to blot out the tantalizing visions of other days. For a time he had almost succeeded; then a restlessness had come upon him for which the desolate hilltop afforded no relief, and he felt that his mountain retreat, with its collection of relics and reminders of bygone times, was too closely associated with the things he wanted to forget. Finally he had disposed of the place through a broker and purchased a narrow strip of land by the sea. He could not analyze the obscure motives and hidden impulse that had impelled him to seek seclusion at Sea Glimpse, a slender tongue of wooded land surrounded on three sides by jagged coast line and in the rear by forest and farm land. But while at work clearing the ground for his garden he had felt a grateful remoteness from things he wished to forget, and a measure of peace and satisfaction had come to him while he put his unpracticed hands to strange tasks or wandered among the trees and listened to the murmurs of the sea. He often wondered whether he would be content to spend his life in this secluded nook of the world where, safely hidden and secure from intrusion, he could devote himself to his hobby and his books.

The question came back to him again as he closed his Paxton and got up to light the reading lamp. For months he had felt that the links connecting him with the past were snapping. The Gray Phantom had emerged from retirement only once, and then he had ventured forth in a good cause. In a little while, perhaps, he would be dead and almost forgotten. The gray orchid, if Vanardy should ever succeed in bringing it out, would be the living symbol of whatever had been good in his other self. The thought more than once had appealed to his imagination and the whimsical strain in his nature.

He turned toward the window, but he had taken only a few steps when he stopped and looked dreamily into space. Memories thronged his mind and a face appeared out of nowhere—a woman’s face. For months it had haunted him in his idle moments, inspiring him with vague and exhilarant emotions. He saw it now, softly radiant among the shadows, an enchanting embodiment of the bloom and freshness of youth that pursued him with the persistence of a delicate scent or the strain of an all-but-forgotten song.

“Helen!” he murmured.

The vision grew a little clearer. Now he could almost see her figure, slim and straight and moving with the easy swing and grace of a young antelope. Echoes of her voice came to him, clear and unaffected and vibrant with joyous vivacity, each melodious note touching an harmonious chord within him. He remembered that her face had given him a curious impression of youthful buoyancy mingling with the soberness of maturity. Her quick intuition, coupled with a strain of subtlety in her nature and a trace of precocious sophistication that was both puzzling and enchanting, had seemed to bridge the years that lay between them. The vitalic sheen and the subtle aroma of her hair had given him a foolish desire to see what sun and wind would do to it if she were to loosen it and romp in his garden.

He sighed musingly. Months had passed since he had last seen her. For a brief, unforgettable moment he had held her hand, and the contact had given him a gentle, all-pervading thrill and filled him with strange and tender emotions. Her eyes, warm and frank, but with a touch of shyness lurking in their depths, as if she were still a little afraid of him, had inspired him with a tingling ecstasy such as The Gray Phantom in his wildest triumphs had never experienced. Twice he had written her since then, once to apprise her of his removal from Azurecrest and once to inquire concerning her well-being, but he had neither expected nor received an answer. He had not forgotten that in the eyes of the world he was still an outlaw, a hunted thing.

Again he sighed. The vision was fading, and little of it remained with him save a misty picture of loveliness. The moon was rising over the tree tops, throwing a white sheen over the landscape and the narrow wedge of water visible between the birches and hemlocks. The old house, purchased by Vanardy in a dilapidated condition and with difficulty rendered habitable, was silent but for the creeping whispers of the wind. For a time the solitary figure at the window stood lost in thoughts. His deep-gray eyes, rather too narrow for perfect symmetry, which had been known to stab and sting like rapiers, were not soft and luminous. Small wrinkles radiated from the outer corners, but the eyes themselves were animated by the slow twinkling gleam that characterizes the individual who sifts all the ups and downs of life through a sieve of whimsical imagination. The sensitive nostrils and the full arch of the lips denoted a penchant for distilling the maximum of thrills and emotions from the magic of existence. Here and there his face was lined and scarred, and even in repose there was a tension about the lean, tall figure that made one think of a cocked trigger.

A knock sounded, and he turned quickly. Through the door waddled a fat man with a woe-begone expression and a multiple chin. He groaned and puffed as if the task of carrying his elephantine body through life was not a light burden. The newcomer was Clifford Wade, once The Gray Phantom's chief lieutenant and now the major-domo of his little household.

"Wade," observed The Phantom, eyeing the fat man with disapproval, "you are getting soft. This easy and carefree existence is demoralizing you completely."

The other placed a stack of newspapers and a few letters on the table, then slumped into a chair and gazed ruefully down at the protruding curvature of his stomach.

"I know, boss. I piled on two more pounds last week. Pretty soon I won't be able to go for the mail any more. If you'd only say the word, I'd round up the old gang, and we'd turn a few more tricks like the ones we used to pull in the good old days. I'd work off this fat in no time."

The Phantom shook his head. "No, Wade. You will have to try some other form of fat reducer. I am through with the old life for good. It was exciting while it lasted, but the novelty has worn off. It was only a sort of emotional eruption, anyhow."

Wade scowled, then delivered himself of a startling exclamation: "Hang the women!"

The Phantom raised his brows in surprise. "What's your grievance against the fair sex, Wade? Hanging is pretty serious business, you know. What atrocious crime have the women perpetrated against you to deserve such cruel punishment? You don't look like a man suffering the pangs of unrequited love. Your heart is intact, I hope?"

"Oh, my heart's all right," Wade complained. "It's yours that I'm worrying about. Lately I haven't been able to dope you out at all, boss. If I didn't know you as well as I do, I'd say you've gone plumb dippy. There was a time not so long ago when you went in for big game—real he-man stuff. There were a lot of men on the police force who used to have a funny feeling around the solar plexus whenever The Gray Phantom's name was spoken. You cut some fancy didos in those days, boss. Now—now you're poking seeds into the ground and talking of reforming." Wade made a gesture of great disgust.

“Granted,” said The Phantom, smiling, “but is that any reason for exterminating the feminine sex?”

“You bet it is. The trouble with you is that you’ve got too much girl on the brain, boss. You were all right until that pretty little skirt with the big baby eyes happened along.”

“Oh, you mean Miss Hardwick?” There was an odd tension in The Phantom’s tones.

“That’s who I mean. She’s easy on the eyes and all that, but she’s sure raised the devil with you. The old kind of life was good enough for you till she bobbed up. It was then you started all this mushy talk about going straight and changing your ways. I know because I’ve been watching you.”

The Phantom was strangely silent. Twice he crossed the floor, then paused before the window and looked out into the shadowy landscape. There was a pensive gleam in his eyes, as if Wade’s speech had turned his thoughts into new channels. Suddenly he laughed, and the new expression that came into his face suggested that he had seen an all-revealing flash.

“I am much obliged to you for that bit of psychoanalysis,” he told the fat man. “You’re right, Wade—absolutely right. I was a fool not to see it before.”

“Not to see what?”

A faint smile flickered across The Phantom’s face. “That Miss Hardwick has had a great deal to do with my determination to change my ways. I hadn’t realized it until you spoke just now. I had been inclined to give myself all the credit. Thanks to your somewhat crude but accurate statement of the case, I can see now that all of it belongs to her.”

Wade’s round little eyes, imbedded in layers of flesh, stared uncomprehendingly at The Phantom. “I don’t get you at all, boss.”

“Then don’t try. Your heart is in the right place, Wade, but you lack imagination and there are some things that you and I can’t view from the same angle. Miss Hardwick’s influence in my life is one of them. Sorry to disappoint an old pal, but my determination to stay on the straight and narrow path is stronger than ever.”



Wade made a wry face. “You’ll suit yourself, of course, but it might interest you to know that another man is stealing your thunder while you’re dancing to the piping of a skirt.” He opened one of the newspapers he had placed on the table and pointed to a black-face caption. The Phantom, looking over his massive shoulders, read:

#### MR. SHEI’S NAME ON DYING LIPS

His eyes narrowed gradually as he read the highly colored account of the tragedy in the Thelma Theater. There was a pucker of perplexity on his forehead when he finished.

“Wonder what Mr. Shei is up to this time,” he mumbled, gazing thoughtfully at the floor. “I’ve been following the fellow’s exploits for some time. This is a bit out of the ordinary—eh, Wade?”

“You said it, boss. And you can bet your sweet life he’s getting ready for something big this time. Unless I’m a poor guesser, the affair at the Thelma last night was only the beginning. Mr. Shei’s schemes run deep, and he never strikes a blow unless he’s got an object in view. There’s something queer about the murder of that woman, boss.”

The Phantom nodded. “Looks as though you were right, Wade. Mr. Shei is out after big game this time, and in all likelihood the Thelma affair is only the prelude. But I don’t see how—”

“There’s another queer thing about this Mr. Shei,” interrupted the fat man. “Maybe you’ve noticed it. I don’t know how many jobs he’s pulled off, but every one of them has shown the slickest kind of workmanship. What’s more,” and Wade’s eyes peered cunningly into the other’s face, “most of them look as though you’d had a hand in them yourself. That’s what I meant when I said another man is stealing your thunder.”

The Phantom started; then a thin smile parted his lips. “Yes, I have noticed it, Wade. I have studied Mr. Shei’s methods as carefully as has been possible from the superficial and distorted newspaper accounts, and I have observed that he has done me the questionable honor of adopting some of the methods and stratagems I used to practice in the past. In a number of instances he has copied my technique so closely that I’ve often wondered whether I’ve been walking in my sleep or whether my old self has come back in a new form. It’s been almost

uncanny.” He laughed musingly. “What do you make of it, Wade?”

“I think you’d better take another fling at the old game before this Mr. Shei gets a monopoly on it.”

“I didn’t mean that. How do you account for the similarity of methods?”

The fat man pondered. “Somebody has studied your tricks and put them into practice. Somebody that’s been close enough to you to watch you in action. Maybe,” and the glow of a sudden idea lighted up his face, “a member of our old crowd. Say, boss, wouldn’t it be a joke on you if Mr. Shei should turn out to be a graduate of your own gang?”

“Worse than a joke,” said The Phantom grimly. He paced the floor with quick, short steps, his hands clenched at his back. “I have given the mysterious Mr. Shei a great deal of thought in the past few months, and I fear you are right. His tactics so closely resemble mine that I suspect he learned them from me at firsthand. In the old days I often took a sort of foolish pride in teaching my methods to the more adaptable ones among the members of my organization. It pleased me to watch their development under my training. I didn’t realize then what I was doing. Now——” He shrugged as if to dismiss a futile regret. “Yes, it’s quite likely that Mr. Shei is a former pupil of mine.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it?”

The Phantom stopped abruptly, gazing at the fat man with a far-away gleam in his eye, as if they were miles apart.

“I thought The Gray Phantom was dead,” he murmured. “It appears I have been mistaken. If Mr. Shei is a product of The Gray Phantom’s brain, then my old self is still active. For every crime committed by Mr. Shei, The Gray Phantom bears responsibility.” He gave a dismal laugh. “And I thought I had destroyed most of the links connecting me with the old times.”

“Well,” said Wade again, this time a little testily, “just what are you going to do about it?”

The Phantom did not answer immediately. He was staring absent-mindedly into space. Presently he looked at his watch; then he nodded thoughtfully.

“Wish you would pack my grip, Wade.”

The fat man started from the chair. “Not going away?”

“Yes; there’s a train for New York a few minutes past midnight. In the morning, bright and early, I shall start a little campaign.”

“Campaign?” Wade’s eyes bulged. “What kind of campaign?”

“The biggest one of my life, I think. I am going out to lay The Gray Phantom’s ghost. In plain words, I propose to go on the warpath against the mysterious Mr. Shei. I fancy it will be quite an exciting little tussle, Wade.”

## CHAPTER VII—MR. SHEI SHOWS HIS HAND

In the dusk of the following morning a tall, gray-clad figure alighted from a train in the Grand Central terminal, glanced cautiously to right and left among the thin scattering of passengers, and with a furtive air traversed the vast concourse and gained the street by one of the side exits. With the habitual vigilance of a hunted man, he paused for a few moments under the canopy and scanned the face of each loiterer and passer-by. A dull, discordant din testified that the city was awakening, and a pale shimmer of dawn was shattering the mists hanging like a gauzy veil over Manhattan. Finally the gray-clad figure moved on, walked a block and a half to the west and, selecting an unpretentious restaurant, stepped in and ordered breakfast.

The Gray Phantom's campaign was on.

Perils lurked everywhere. Though he had changed his ways, he had not yet paid off his old scores. He still had the law to reckon with, for the outstanding charges against him were grave and numerous enough to send him to prison for the rest of his life. The capture of The Gray Phantom, once one of the most celebrated of rogues, would create a profound sensation and confer great fame on the captor. Once it became known that he had emerged from his hiding place, the entire city would be converted into a huge man-trap with claws set to catch the celebrated outlaw.

That was not all. The newspaper accounts of the police inquiry into the Thelma tragedy, which The Phantom had carefully perused on the train, had hinted rather broadly that Mr. Shei and The Gray Phantom were identical. It was pointed out that Mr. Shei's exploits were the only ones in recent years that had equaled The Phantom's as to magnitude and daring, and that there were many points of similarity in the methods of the two rogues. To be sure, The Phantom had never been known to stoop to murder, but this did not necessarily eliminate him as an object of suspicion, and it was significant that the commission of the crime had been hedged in with all the subtlety and mysteriousness that characterized The Gray Phantom's tactics. It was predicted that if The Phantom were apprehended, the mystery surrounding the identity and the movements of Mr. Shei would be cleared up automatically.

The Phantom smiled faintly as he finished his breakfast and walked out. His step was elastic, and his eye held the steely gleam which his former associates had learned to interpret as a sign that their leader was bent on some stupendous adventure. It was still early, and there was only a thin sprinkling of traffic in the streets, and the chances of his being recognized were correspondingly slight.

As yet he had no definite plan in mind. His decision to make war on Mr. Shei had been made suddenly and largely on the impulse of the moment. It was in keeping with his determination to blot out that part of himself which the world knew as The Gray Phantom. The realization had come to him in a flash that the work of his other self was being carried on vicariously by the person known as Mr. Shei. If his suspicions were correct, and if the latter was indeed a disciple of his, then Mr. Shei was a part of the past he had vowed to uproot and destroy. His regeneration would not be complete until this object had been accomplished.

He chuckled a little as he walked along. It was odd, he thought, that Wade should have guessed the motive for his determination to tear his past to shreds. Throughout his striving and reaching for something higher and better, The Phantom had vaguely and instinctively felt that the bright, brown eyes of Helen Hardwick were his lodestars, but Wade's crudely phrased remark had been needed to make the impression clear. He knew it was largely because of Helen's faith in him that he was now attacking the hardest and most perilous task of his career. Vaguely he wondered what she would think when she heard of his latest adventure, and he felt a fleeting temptation to tell her of his decision. He rejected it, however, resolving it would be time enough to make his plans known to her when they were in a more mature shape.

The sight of a knot of curious idlers outside a drug store in Times Square caused him to quicken his steps. He knew the psychology of city crowds and that the merest trifle is sufficient to attract a throng, but this gathering seemed to have been drawn together by something out of the ordinary. As unobtrusively as he could, he wedged his way through the little crowd, consisting mostly of homeward-bound night workers and belated pleasure seekers, and now he saw the object of their interest was a small square of paper pasted to the pane of the show window. A flicker of surprise crossed The Phantom's face as he read the typewritten inscription:

For the diversion of the public and the edification of the police, I beg to announce that my next, and so far, greatest, coup will be directed against

the seven wealthiest men in New York City, whose names I shall take a pleasure in announcing in a day or two. By a unique and sensational method of persuasion these gentlemen will be induced to transfer half of their respective fortunes to me.

Mr. Shei.

A grin tugged at The Phantom's lips as he read the announcement a second time. Mr. Shei, in flaunting his intentions before the eyes of the public and the police, was living up to time-honored traditions of melodrama. It was of a piece with the rascal's erratic and extravagant nature, and the boastful phrasing of the announcement, as well as the incidental taunt flung at the police, was quite characteristic of him. Yet, despite the pompous claptrap with which Mr. Shei was adorning his project, the magnitude of it appealed to The Phantom's imagination. It was fully as great and daring an enterprise as The Phantom himself had ever attempted. If the scheme succeeded—and Mr. Shei's undertakings invariably did—the loot would run well into ten figures.

From remarks dropped by the bystanders he gathered that stickers bearing the same boastful announcements had been distributed during the early morning hours at various points throughout the city. Mr. Shei seemed to have spared no pains in his effort to startle the metropolis. The Phantom was edging away from the throng when a few words, spoken in low and drawling tones, caused him to look quickly aside.

“Pardon, but haven't we met before?”

The Phantom felt a faint thrill of apprehension. Recognition at this point might prove disastrous to his plans. Beside him, with tired and red-lidded eyes peering into his face, stood a tall, gaunt man whose somewhat ludicrous appearance was accentuated by full evening dress.

“I think not,” he said hastily, and started to walk away. The other, refusing to be squelched, fell into step beside him.

“Now, isn't that queer?” he remarked with a wheezy chuckle. “The moment I saw you it occurred to me that your face seemed familiar. By the way, what do you think of Mr. Shei's latest?”

“Quite ambitious.” The Phantom gave his uninvited companion a keen glance,

and the covert scrutiny stirred several shadowy recollections in his mind. The curious individual seemed well past middle age, and his sallow complexion and furrowed face indicated decrepit health. He walked with a shuffling gait and a catarrhal affection of the nose necessitated frequent use of his handkerchief. The Phantom was trying to recall when and under what circumstances they had met before, but his face indicated nothing but annoyance at an unwelcome intrusion.

“Ambitious is the word,” assented the man in evening dress. “Do you know, my dear sir, that if Mr. Shei carries out his threat and annexes fifty per cent of the seven biggest fortunes in town, his net gain will run into the billions? I can only hope that I am not one of the seven selected for shearing.”

The Phantom gave him another quick glance. A gleam of humor relieved the woe-begone expression of the man’s face. Again The Phantom searched his memory. The last remark had carried a strong hint to the effect that his companion was a man of great wealth.

“My name, as you probably know, although you pretend to have forgotten it, is W. Rufus Fairspeckle,” continued the other, taking The Phantom’s arm and turning into a side street. “I don’t know how many millions I have, but I have enough to make me a shining mark for Mr. Shei’s latest offensive. Ah, I see you remember me now!”

The Phantom’s involuntary start had betrayed him. The mere mention of Mr. Fairspeckle’s name had instantly clarified his hazy recollections. He recalled now that, some five or six years ago, he had had a brief and casual encounter with the man. It had occurred in the course of one of The Phantom’s spectacular adventures, and he had almost forgotten the incident that brought them together. Now, as the memory of it flashed back into his mind, he gazed more intently at his companion.

As the man himself had intimated, W. Rufus Fairspeckle was one of the wealthiest men in New York City. Mostly through luck and partly through an inborn genius for speculation, he had amassed a huge fortune. At fifty he had retired from business, declaring that he had worked hard all his life and was entitled to a rest and a little diversion. Then he had promptly proceeded to the enjoyment of the pleasures that had been denied him in his youth, and he had gone about it with an avidity that created a great deal of jocular comment and made him known as a very eccentric individual.

“You have a long memory,” observed The Phantom, glancing uneasily at Mr. Fairspeckle’s formal attire. It drew many amused glances from pedestrians, and The Phantom did not care to attract unnecessary attention. “Now, if you will excuse me, I think I will wish you good morning. I have a busy day ahead of me.”

“Not so fast,” protested Mr. Fairspeckle, clutching The Phantom’s sleeve with his long, bony fingers. “You are coming with me.”

The words had a peremptory sound. The Phantom knitted his brows.

“Why, if I may ask?”

“See that cop?” Mr. Fairspeckle pointed to a blue-coated figure half a block ahead. “He’s a hard-working soul and presumably he is ambitious to obtain promotion. The capture of The Gray Phantom would be quite an event in his humdrum life.”

The Phantom sensed a threat. He glanced about him quickly. The streets were rapidly filling with traffic, and to break away might not prove easy. Besides, he was curious to know the reason for Mr. Fairspeckle’s evident determination to detain him. Deciding to adopt the safer course, he simulated an affable smile.

“Suppose we let the hard-working cop earn his promotion some other way,” he suggested. “Where to, Mr. Fairspeckle?”

“My apartment at the Whipple Hotel. We’re almost there. Glad you are going to be reasonable, Mr. Vanardy. I need someone to talk to. Ever suffer from insomnia?”

“Never.”

“Lucky dog! Insomnia is the bane of my existence. At times, when I can’t sleep, I sit at the club and bore my friends to death. When I have no friends to talk to, I walk. Last night I walked from one end of Manhattan Island to the other and halfway back again. Oh, yes, I’m more chipper than you would think from looking at me. Well, my rambles last night explain why you see me in these togs. I was just about tired enough to fall asleep standing on my feet when I saw Mr. Shei’s notice. In an instant I was wide awake again. Confound the fellow’s impudence! Here we are.”



The Phantom was conducted through the chastely carved portals of one of the quieter hotels in the upper Forties, and a few moments later they were facing each other across the redwood table in Mr. Fairspeckle's library. The apartment, though luxuriously appointed, was a faithful reflection of the eccentric nature of its occupant.

"You are careless, Mr. Vanardy," said Mr. Fairspeckle musingly. The partly drawn shades admitted only a vague half-dawn into the room, and the shadows lent an air of mysteriousness to his appearance. "It isn't safe for a man in your position to walk about without disguise."

"Disguises are treacherous things. I have used them now and then, but ordinarily I feel safer without them. Anyhow, no one but you is aware of my presence in New York."

Mr. Fairspeckle drew a palm across his chin. His red-lidded eyes regarded The Phantom shrewdly. "I wonder what brings you to New York at this particular time—at the very time when Mr. Shei is launching his most ambitious scheme. You will admit the coincidence is rather striking?"

"Some people might deduce from it that I am Mr. Shei," suggested The Phantom, smiling. "They would be wrong."

There was a quiver at the corners of Mr. Fairspeckle's thin lips. His eyes held a suspicious twinkle.

"Perhaps," he commented dryly. Then he fell to drumming the table with his finger tips. "What I would like to know for certain is whether I am one of the seven. You see, I wouldn't object to being murdered by this Mr. Shei. Most people think I'm leading a useless life and ought to be dead, anyhow. It won't be long until an undertaker pumps my carcass full of formaldehyde. What I object to is the idea of being swindled out of my money. No man ever got the best of me yet, and I don't intend that Mr. Shei shall make a fool of me. He can kill me, but I won't hand him a cent. I'll be hanged if I will!"

He thumped the table with his fist. There was something so ludicrous about his grim earnestness that The Phantom could scarcely repress a smile. At the same time he was conscious of a suspicion for which he could not quite account. Mr. Fairspeckle's indignation seemed not quite natural. Even the vehement thump of his fist against the table had an artificial sound. An intuition, flashing

into his mind out of nowhere, held The Phantom spellbound for a moment. In the next instant he laughed inwardly at the absurdity of it, telling himself that he must hold his imagination in leash.

“It will be interesting to see how Mr. Shei intends to proceed,” he casually remarked.

“It will,” spluttered Mr. Fairspeckle. “You can trust him to work some devilishly clever scheme. He always does. Do you suppose,” and he bent his bony frame over the table and gazed searchingly at The Phantom, “that the murder at the Thelma Theater night before last was the first episode in this latest enterprise of Mr. Shei’s?”

“You mean the murder of Miss Darrow? There seems to be no doubt but that Mr. Shei had a hand in it. Everything points to——”

He paused of a sudden. All at once it occurred to him that there was something odd about Mr. Fairspeckle’s question. Immediately upon reading of the Thelma murder, The Phantom had suspected that it was the prelude to another of Mr. Shei’s spectacular adventures, but the suspicion had been wholly intuitive. As far as outward appearances went, there was nothing in the murder of Virginia Darrow to suggest that it was anything more than an isolated incident. It was curious, therefore, that Mr. Fairspeckle should look for a connecting link between the crime at the Thelma and Mr. Shei’s threat.

“Everything points to Mr. Shei as the perpetrator of the murder,” he guardedly went on, “but whether the crime has any bearing on Mr. Shei’s new venture is hard to tell. It doesn’t seem likely. How could he possibly further his scheme by an act of that kind? His plan is to separate seven of New York’s richest men from half of their wealth. How is the death of Miss Darrow going to help him in an undertaking of that kind?”

A sly smile twitched the corners of Mr. Fairspeckle’s lips. “Nevertheless,” he observed, “I think that you and I agree. I am a pretty good judge of faces, and your expression a moment ago betrayed you, Mr. Vanardy. My question seemed innocent enough at first, but on second thought it startled you. Suppose we be frank. Both of us believe that the Thelma affair was the beginning of Mr. Shei’s latest move. We can’t see how or why just now, but we know that his schemes run deep. Isn’t it so?”

The Phantom, momentarily baffled by the older man's shrewd deductions, gazed pensively at the ceiling. A jumble of thoughts and questions shot back and forth through his mind. Did Mr. Fairspeckle suspect that Mr. Shei and The Gray Phantom were identical? Or was it possible that—— He did not finish the thought. The suspicion that had come to him several times during the interview seemed just as unreasonable as it was startling, and it had no firmer foundation than two or three puzzling circumstances and a tantalizing touch of mysteriousness in Mr. Fairspeckle's attitude.

"It's an interesting theory, and I've given quite a little thought to it," he finally admitted. "Strange that the same idea should have come to both of us, isn't it? Especially since there seems to be neither reason nor logic behind it. How did you happen to think of it, Mr. Fairspeckle?"

The other man stroked his lean chin with a self-satisfied air. "What's that old saw about great minds traveling in the same channel? I don't know just how the idea came to me, but I'm glad we understand each other. Now we can talk without quibbling. But first I want a cup of coffee. Hope you will join me. Haiuto!"

He fairly shouted the last word, but The Phantom doubted whether his thin and rasping voice went farther than the walls.

"Haiuto!" Again Mr. Fairspeckle's voice rose to a shrill but inadequate crescendo. "That confounded Jap's pretending he is deaf again. Excuse me, will you?"

He strode irately from the room and slammed the door. A wrinkle of deep perplexity appeared on The Phantom's brow. Mr. Fairspeckle puzzled and intrigued him. Either he was a very slippery individual, or else ingenuousness itself. When he returned and announced that Haiuto would serve their coffee in a few minutes, The Phantom searched his face in vain for a sign of guile. If anything, he was a little more affable than on leaving the room.

"That fool doctor of mine tells me I mustn't drink coffee," he confided. "Tells me it's bad for my nerves and keeps me awake. But my nerves are worn to a frazzle, anyhow, and I never can sleep except when I want to stay awake. What were we talking about? Oh, yes—Mr. Shei."

He clasped his hands across his diaphragm. A queer smile, at once beatific and

diabolical, came over his face.

“Do you know,” he went on in confidential tones, “that I don’t care a rap if Mr. Shei carries out his scheme as far as the other six are concerned. Of course, I don’t know for certain who they are, but it’s a safe bet that they are no friends of mine. I have a hunch that every one of them belongs to the old ring that fought me tooth and nail while I was climbing up in the world. It’s a long story, and I’m not going to bore you with it, but you can see why I have no love for them. I could die happy to-morrow if I could see them lick the dust to-day. I feel different toward you, Vanardy. We had a tilt once, but you fought fairly. The others tried to knife me in the back. They can go to blazes for all I care.”

“Then you and Mr. Shei seem to have at least one aim in common,” The Phantom pointed out. He smiled genially, but his eyes were studying every shifting expression in Mr. Fairspeckle’s face. For once he felt certain that the older man was not dissembling. The glint of wrath lurking in the depths of his weak eyes and the vindictive sneer about his lips told that he had spoken in all sincerity.

“We have,” he declared grimly. “I hope he sends the other six to the poorhouse. But I have no intention of letting him pluck me, you understand. That’s where our aims clash. He can go as far as he likes with the others, but I’ll fight like a drunken Indian before I give him a red cent. I’ll see myself in Hades before I \_\_\_\_\_”

A knock and the opening of the door interrupted him. A Japanese with a face as expressionless as mahogany entered with a tray and served them coffee.

“Queer character, Haiuto,” observed Mr. Fairspeckle when the servant, silent as a wraith, had retired. “I think he would cheerfully commit hara-kiri if I asked him to do such a senseless thing.” He sipped his coffee with an air of keen enjoyment. “Great bracer for fagged nerves, eh? Would you believe that for days at a time I live on nothing but coffee? But let’s get back to the subject. What shall we do with this pestiferous Mr. Shei?”

“What would you suggest?” cautiously inquired The Phantom, lifting the cup to his lips.

A beam insinuated itself in the creases of Mr. Fairspeckle’s face. “Now we’re getting down to essentials. As I said, Mr. Shei can fleece the other six to his

heart's content, but he's got to keep hands off me. When I saw you standing in front of the drug store reading Mr. Shei's announcement, I was turning a little plan over in my mind. Then I didn't quite see how to work it, but I do now."

Again The Phantom brought the cup to his lips. He regarded his companion inquiringly.

"You and I are going to handle Mr. Shei together," declared Mr. Fairspeckle. His face glowed as if a pleasing prospect were warming his soul. "We will put a crimp in his scheme and show him—why, what's the matter, Vanardy?"

The Phantom had slouched down in his chair, and now his head began to wag from side to side.

"Nothing," he murmured dazedly. "I just feel a bit drowsy. Would you mind opening the window? The—the coffee——"

His eyes rolled, then the lids fluttered and closed, and he sagged limply in the chair. With a gratified chuckle Mr. Fairspeckle stepped to the other side of the table and regarded him gloatingly.

"The Gray Phantom isn't half so clever as he's supposed to be," he mumbled. Then his hand went out and touched a button. A moment later Haiuto stood at attention in the doorway.

"Haiuto," inquired Mr. Fairspeckle, "how much chloral did you mix in Mr. Vanardy's cup of coffee?"

"Plenty," said the servant, and this time the ghost of a grin flickered across his face. "He sleep long time."

Mr. Fairspeckle nodded elatedly. "Take him to my bedroom," he instructed, "and make him comfortable."

With an ease which showed that he possessed all the agile strength of his race, Haiuto carried The Phantom into one of the adjoining rooms in the suite, placed him on the bed, and adjusted a pillow under his head. For a few moments he stood peering down into the motionless man's face. Then he silently left the room and closed the door behind him.

A minute later The Phantom raised himself to a sitting posture and blinked his eyes at the sunlight streaming in beneath the drawn window shades.

“You are fairly clever, Mr. Fairspeckle,” he said half aloud, “but you ought to modernize your methods. Drugged coffee has gone out of fashion. Hope I didn’t kill the potted fern at the window behind my chair.”

## CHAPTER VIII—THE VOICE ON THE WIRE

The Gray Phantom lay on his back in W. Rufus Fairspeckle's ample bed and tried to grasp the meaning of what had happened. His host's attempt to drug him savored strongly of melodrama, and it seemed somewhat grotesque in view of the fact that it had occurred in an up-to-date and centrally located hotel. What puzzled him most was the motive behind the attempt. If Mr. Fairspeckle suspected that he was Mr. Shei, why had he not handed his guest over to the police? On the other hand—— But his conjectures in that direction brought The Phantom face to face with a theory that made his thoughts whirl.

His eyes flitted over the room. The color combination was restful, but the decorations, and especially the pictures, bespoke rather extreme tastes. He had gathered, from what little he had seen of the surroundings, that Mr. Fairspeckle was occupying a luxurious apartment consisting of several rooms and that it had been fitted up to suit his individual requirements. Haiuto, the rat-footed Japanese servant, seemed to be his only companion.

An hour passed, and The Phantom's cogitations brought him back to the starting point. Nothing seemed certain beyond the indubitable fact that Mr. Fairspeckle was a highly mysterious individual. The rest was full of vague and hazy surmises. The Phantom waited patiently, wondering what his host's next move would be, for he had decided to play a passive rôle for the present. He explored his pockets and was thankful that his automatic had not been taken from him. Evidently his jailer was depending on the drug to keep him in a harmless condition.

His keen ears detected footsteps approaching the door, and in a twinkling he was lying prone on the bed, simulating the complete insensibility that comes with drug-induced sleep. The door came open, then furtive steps crossed the floor, and The Phantom felt a pair of sharp eyes on his face. His regular breathing seemed to satisfy the silent watcher, for after a little he turned away. As he reached the door, The Phantom flicked open an eyelid and saw Haiuto. Evidently the servant had entered the room to make sure that the effects of the drug were not wearing off.

The door closed almost noiselessly. Again The Phantom sat up. A glance at his watch told him it was a few minutes after two. He slid his feet from the bed and tiptoed cautiously to a window and raised the shade. As he looked out, an undersized figure on the opposite sidewalk instantly caught his eye. As far as appearances went, the man might have been only an idler engaged in the pastime of ogling the feminine passers-by, but The Phantom's practiced eyes saw at once that he was there for a purpose. The stealthy glances which he occasionally leveled at the windows of Mr. Fairspeckle's apartment gave an unmistakable clew to his mission.

The Phantom's brows contracted as he quickly lowered the shade. Was it possible someone had seen and recognized him on his way from the station and later trailed him to Mr. Fairspeckle's apartment. The thought was annoying, for he disliked having his movements hampered by spies. Then, as he turned away from the window, another possibility suggested itself. Perhaps Mr. Fairspeckle, and not himself, was being kept under surveillance of the fellow on the sidewalk. The theory was startling and rather improbable; yet it coincided with the suspicion that had kept flashing in and out of The Phantom's mind.

He examined the mechanism of his automatic and made sure the cartridge chamber was loaded. He sensed a hint in the air that before long he might have occasion to use the weapon. He was in the act of returning it to his hip pocket when of a sudden he pricked up his ears. From somewhere in the apartment came a series of faint, clicking sounds. At first he tried in vain to identify them, but finally it came to him that someone was using a typewriter.

"Typewriter?" he mumbled. The word seemed to hold a hidden significance, but for a while his mind was unable to grasp it. He did not believe that either Mr. Fairspeckle or Haiuto had occasion to use such an instrument, yet he was almost certain that the sounds were coming from one of the adjoining rooms. The clicks were slow and irregular, he observed, indicating that the writer was unfamiliar with the machine and was having some difficulty picking out the characters on the keyboard.

He stole to the door and opened it a crack. The sounds became louder, and the writer's awkward groping for the keys was more noticeable now. For a moment The Phantom stood listening; then his figure grew suddenly tense. A thin smile hovered about his lips as he recalled that the announcements which Mr. Shei had distributed throughout the city had been written on a typewriter.



It might mean little or nothing, but there was a keen glitter in The Phantom's eyes. In itself the clicking of the machine signified scarcely anything, but in conjunction with other circumstances it was fairly suggestive. With noiseless tread The Phantom tiptoed in the direction whence the sounds were coming. Now and then he darted a quick glance about him, as if expecting a rear attack from the Japanese servant, but Haiuto was nowhere in sight. He traversed several rooms before he came to a dead stop in a doorway.

At a table near the window, with his back to The Phantom, sat Mr. Fairspeckle. He was hunched over a typewriter, laboriously poking at the keys with the index finger of each hand. Silently The Phantom approached until he stood directly at the older man's back. Mr. Fairspeckle, all his energies centered on his difficult task, noticed nothing. Leaning slightly forward, The Phantom cast a swift, comprehensive glance at the paper in the machine. Then his twinkling eyes looked downward. On the desk, at Mr. Fairspeckle's elbow, lay a little pile of papers. The topmost one was partly covered with typewriting, and the wording was precisely the same as that on the paper in the machine.

The Phantom had seen enough. He drew his automatic from his pocket, then waited until Mr. Fairspeckle stopped writing and pulled the sheet from the machine.

"You seem to be fairly busy, Mr. Shei," he observed in soft tones.

Mr. Fairspeckle jerked up his shoulders, then sat as rigid as if suddenly turned into a statue. Finally, with slow and spasmodic motions, he turned his head and looked into the muzzle of The Phantom's automatic. A startled look leaped into his eyes and his sallow face turned a shade paler.

"You!" he exclaimed.

"I watered one of your ferns with the coffee Haiuto handed me," The Phantom explained. "A cruel way to treat an inoffensive plant, I'll admit, but there was nothing else handy. Mind if I have a look?"

Lowering the weapon a trifle, he picked up the sheet of paper Mr. Fairspeckle had just drawn from the machine. Watching the older man out of the tail of an eye, he read the typewritten lines:

In accordance with my promise, I herewith announce the names of the

seven gentlemen whom by certain means at my disposal I shall persuade to hand over half of their respective fortunes to me.

Then followed a list of seven names, each one suggestive of untold wealth and vast influence in the financial world, and The Phantom smiled as he noticed that W. Rufus Fairspeckle was one of them. By way of signature Mr. Shei's name was typed at the bottom of the announcement.

"Not bad," commented The Phantom. "By including yourself among the seven victims you make sure that no suspicion becomes attached to the fair name of W. Rufus Fairspeckle. Anyhow, since you are one of the richest men in town, it would look rather odd if your name were omitted. Congratulations, Mr. Shei."

The other looked stolidly into the muzzle of the automatic. The Phantom's sudden and unexpected appearance seemed to have paralyzed his tongue.

"You could save a lot of time by taking carbon copies," suggested The Phantom, riffling the sheets lying beside the machine. "You will need a hundred or more to plaster the town effectively. I understand now why you took that long walk this morning. There's nothing like having a pleasant pastime when one can't sleep. What I don't understand is how you meant to put your plan into effect."

A sickly smile cruised about Mr. Fairspeckle's bloodless lips.

"Oh, I don't expect you to let me in on the secret," The Phantom went on. "With your past performances in mind, I have no doubt you would have executed your threat in a manner becoming your genius. There's only one thing about your achievements that has disappointed me. I don't see why you had to copy my methods so slavishly. For a while I was almost certain that Mr. Shei was one of my former associates, and that's why——" He checked himself on the point of explaining why he had come out of hiding. "Couldn't you have shown a little more originality?"

An inarticulate mumble came from Mr. Fairspeckle's lips. His fingers fidgeted nervously over his knees.

"Well don't try to explain. I suppose the police will attend to that part. There will be quite a sensation when it becomes known that W. Rufus Fairspeckle is the mysterious Mr. Shei. I wonder what drove you to it. You were bored with the life of a gentleman of leisure, I suppose, and then you had a goose to pick with your

old enemies. I take it that was your chief motive. Well, Mr. Shei——”

A dulcet tinkle interrupted him, and he glanced quickly at the telephone on Mr. Fairspeckle’s desk.

“You may answer,” he said after a moment’s hesitation.

Mr. Fairspeckle reached out a trembling hand for the instrument. He put the receiver to his ear and spoke a feeble “Hello” into the transmitter. In the next instant his face went blank. “It’s for you,” he announced, gazing dazedly at The Phantom.

“For *me*?” The Phantom stared incredulously at the instrument. To the best of his knowledge, his whereabouts was known to nobody but Mr. Fairspeckle and the Japanese servant. Quickly gathering himself, he placed the automatic within easy reach and took the telephone from Mr. Fairspeckle’s hand. He started as a voice came over the wire.

“Mr. Shei speaking,” it announced in level tones. “If you value Miss Hardwick’s life, I would advise you to abandon your present plans. That is all.”

Then a click, and the connection was broken.

## CHAPTER IX—THE HOUSE OF LAUGHTER

“Mr. Shei!”

Time and again through the night following her arrival at Azurecrest, Helen’s lips soundlessly formed the name she had involuntarily spoken upon seeing the man in the doorway. She tossed restlessly on her bed, her mind in that curious state on the boundary line between slumber and wakefulness when the imagination forms shadowy images and one’s thoughts reach for elusive realities.

Now and then, as a wild strain of laughter shattered the silence, she sat up and stared into the darkness. A cold tingle would trickle down her spine as the sounds rose to a hysterical crescendo, then fell to a gentle tinkle that made her flesh quiver, and finally died down to a haunting echo. Then, her sense of horror engulfed by overwhelming drowsiness, she would fall back against the pillow and drift into a state of soothing stupor.

Finally dawn broke. Flickering wisps of sunlight fell on the floor, lighting up the dark corners and dispersing the evil host with which her imagination had peopled the gloom. A fresh breeze caressed her hot forehead and cooled the fever in her blood. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. Outside, the sun was glimmering on treetops and long stretches of lawn. The bright, pleasant room afforded a sharp contrast to the strident discords and monstrous visions that had distressed her throughout the night.

Her recollections were still vague. Gradually a train of memories swept upon her. It all came back to her now—her arrival at Azurecrest, her failure to find The Gray Phantom, the strange laughter and the hideous face she had seen at the window, Miss Neville’s amazing story and the intercepted flight, and finally the appearance of the man at the sight of whom she had cried out the name of Mr. Shei.

Again her recollections grew dim. Things had gone dark before her eyes as soon as she had spoken the name. She had heard a jumble of voices, and she believed someone had forced a drink down her throat. A sedative, perhaps, for after that

she had known nothing but the intermittent outbursts of laughter and their accompaniment of strange fancies. She shuddered as she remembered them. Several voices, she felt sure, had joined in the chorus of unnatural laughter. It could mean only one thing—that more than one inmate of the house was afflicted with the mysterious fever so vividly described by Miss Neville.

Her mind was clearing rapidly now. She realized she was surrounded by dangers which she could neither gauge nor understand. Of one thing only could she be certain. Her eyes, while resting on the man in the doorway, had pierced the veil of mystery which had concealed the identity of the mysterious Mr. Shei. The discovery, confirming a suspicion that had first come to her in the Thelma Theater, had shocked and bewildered her, and on the impulse of the moment she had heedlessly called out his name.

Now, in a calmer mood, she reproached herself for her indiscretion. She wondered whether Mr. Shei would dare let her live, now that she had penetrated his secret. If he were as ruthless and unscrupulous as she supposed him to be, he would in all likelihood seal her lips forever. She might promise not to betray him, but Mr. Shei was too shrewd and cautious to rely on promises. He would be more apt to adopt the only course consistent with his safety.

She shivered a little. Physical fear she had never known, for there was a strain of recklessness and audacity in her nature that blinded her eyes to dangers, but the thought of death gave her a chill. She did not know exactly why, but never before had life seemed as enticing as now. A determination to live spurred her mind to frantic effort. She would outwit Mr. Shei by her woman's weapons. She had done some skillful fencing with them on several occasions in the past, and she could use them again. Already she was casting about for a plan. Perhaps, by a little clever acting, she could convince Mr. Shei that her calling of his name had been nothing but a hysterical outburst and without significance. If she succeeded in this, he would have no reason for taking her life.

The thought buoyed her. She turned a smiling face to the door as it opened and admitted a woman carrying a tray. She was thin and slatternly, and she sighed repeatedly while transferring the breakfast dishes to a table which she placed beside Helen's bed.

“Eat, you poor thing,” she admonished, a world of melancholy in her tones.

Helen sipped the coffee. It was strong and fragrant and gave her a needed stimulus.

“Why do you call me ‘poor thing’?” she inquired.

The woman heaved another sigh. “I’m not saying. I can hold my tongue when I want to. That’s how I keep my job in this place. It’s a shame, though—really it is.”

“What is a shame?” Helen, looking into the slattern’s saturnine face, with its ludicrously doleful expression, felt an impulse to laugh in spite of her misgivings.

“You’re so young and pretty. That’s why I call it a shame. Oh, well, we all have to go that way sooner or later.”

Helen, unpleasantly impressed by the innuendo, tasted the toast. “Which way?” she asked in casual tones.

“That would be telling.” A long sigh racked the woman’s scrawny chest. “I hear a lot of things around this place that I never tell. Better eat hearty, dear. It might be your last—— Gosh! I almost said something that time, didn’t I?”

Helen, conquering her forebodings, ate in silence for a time. The slattern’s funereal face and dismal insinuations were casting a spell of gloom over her which she found hard to shake off. Finally she tried a direct question.

“Do you mean that they are going to kill me?”

The woman clasped her hands across her chest and raised mournful eyes to the ceiling. “You mustn’t ask questions, poor dear. You’ll find out soon enough. Anyhow, there’s a better world than this.”

With this piece of doubtful consolation she gathered the dishes and, with another disconsolate sigh, walked out of the room. Helen tried to tell herself that the woman had merely been exercising her imagination and that her doleful hints had come out of thin air. The meal had refreshed her, and her spirits rose while she bathed her face in cold water and arranged her attire. Having finished, she viewed herself with satisfaction in the mirror. Her elastic health and strength had obliterated nearly every trace of her distressing night.

A knock sounded on the door, and Mr. Slade walked in. Helen instantly steeled herself for an ordeal. Slade, she had already guessed, was Mr. Shei's right-hand man. He was smiling affably, but something told her that her life depended on the outcome of the interview.

"I trust you had a restful night, Miss Hardwick?" he suavely inquired after seating himself.

"I slept like a top," Helen assured him with a smile that belied her real emotion. "You see, I was all fagged out when I retired. I have a faint recollection that I was a bit hysterical, too. I suppose it was on account of that affair at the Thelma Theater the other night. I received quite a shock."

"Naturally," assented Slade, regarding her with a mingling of admiration and doubt. "Yes, you seemed somewhat upset last night. You probably have no recollection of it, but you fainted completely away, and one of the maids put you to bed after the physician in attendance upon Miss Neville had administered a sedative. I don't suppose you remember any of that?"

"It's all news to me," declared Helen innocently. "I'm sorry to have been so much trouble."

Slade made a deprecatory gesture. He edged his chair a little closer to the small table at which Helen was seated. She felt his cold gaze searching her face, and to hide her confusion she began tracing figures in the dust that had accumulated on the surface of the table.

"Last night we were discussing The Gray Phantom," Slade remarked, and she started a trifle at the mention of the name. "I regret I can give you no inkling as to his whereabouts. I suppose you are very anxious to find him?"

"Rather."

"Isn't it strange that he did not give you his new address?"

"He may have written and the letter gone astray," suggested Helen. A flush had tinged the healthy tan of her cheeks the moment Slade introduced the subject of The Gray Phantom. Looking down at the table, she noticed confusedly that her hand had been influenced by the thoughts that were uppermost in her mind. In the thin layer of dust she had absently traced The Gray Phantom's initials. It was

a habit of hers, cultivated since childhood, to sketch figures and designs on whatever surface was handy, and she had often told herself she must overcome it.

“Perhaps,” was Slade’s comment. He looked at her in a way that caused her to wonder whether he had noticed the pencilings in the dust, and she erased them with a quick sweep of her hand. “By the way,” he went on, “our conversation last night was interrupted by a—a certain person. Remember?”

Helen knew that the critical moment had come. She made a pretense of searching her memory.

“I was very tired,” she said, carefully choosing her words, “and I recall very little of what happened. I seem to remember, though, that a motor horn sounded while we were talking.”

“Yes, and then?” Slade bent eagerly forward.

Helen’s strained face indicated intense mental effort. “Then—— Isn’t it odd that I don’t seem able to remember a thing after that?”

“It is,” admitted Slade, and there was a subtle change in the quality of his voice. “Perhaps I can refresh your memory. Suddenly a man’s figure appeared in the doorway. You stared at him in a way signifying that you had seen him before. Then you spoke a name.”

“A name?” echoed Helen. “What name?”

“A name that has been on a great many lips of late—Mr. Shei’s.”

“Isn’t that strange?” murmured Helen. “I wonder what on earth made me mention that name. I suppose, though,” she added quickly, “that it was because Mr. Shei’s name had been in my mind off and on ever since that terrible occurrence in the Thelma Theater. Yes, that must be the reason.”

“The *only* reason, Miss Hardwick?”

“What other reason could there be?”

Slade smiled in a way that awoke Helen’s dislike. “Well, it’s conceivable that



you were under the impression that the man in the doorway was Mr. Shei. That would not only have explained your excitement, but also give ample reason for uttering his name.”

Helen opened her eyes wide. “But—but I don’t even remember seeing the man,” she protested artlessly, “so why should I suppose him to be Mr. Shei?”

“The fact remains that you spoke Mr. Shei’s name just before you fainted away. Let’s get at the subject from a different angle, Miss Hardwick. Do you know who Mr. Shei is?”

Helen, having a curious feeling that her life was trembling in the balance, shook her head.

“You don’t know his other name—the name by which he is known to the world at large?”

Again Helen made a negative gesture, and in the same instant she became aware that Slade’s frosty gaze was following the movements of her right hand. Before she realized what was happening, he had left his chair and stepped up behind her, and now he was leaning over her shoulder and looking down at the table.

“So, you lied,” he muttered in tones that sent a shiver through her body, at the same time pointing to the table.

Helen looked down. She gave a violent start. While she had been fencing verbally with Slade, her hand had betrayed her. In her preoccupation she had not realized that another couplet of initials had appeared in the dust. With a sensation of defeat and despair she stared down at the telltale characters—the first letters in Mr. Shei’s other name.

## CHAPTER X—A SHOT

At noon of the same day a scene equally tense, but of quite a different character, was being enacted in the library of W. Rufus Fairspeckle.

Dazedly The Gray Phantom set the telephone down. In tones too low for the older man to catch, he mumblingly repeated the startling message that had just come to him over the wire: “Mr. Shei speaking. If you value Miss Hardwick’s life, I would advise you to abandon your present plans.”

One by one, and in the order in which they had been spoken, the words trickled into his benumbed consciousness. He had heard Mr. Shei’s voice over the wire. He had been mistaken, then, and the shrunken and wizened man seated before him with eyes staring and mouth agape could not be Mr. Shei. Even the evidence of the typewritten slips lying on the desk seemed to mean nothing against the fact that the notorious rogue had just communicated with him by telephone.

“What—what’s the matter?” stammered Mr. Fairspeckle, who, not having the faintest inkling as to the nature of the message received by The Phantom, was at a loss to understand the latter’s demeanor. “Anything wrong?”

The Phantom scarcely heard him. The significance of the last part of Mr. Shei’s message came to him in a flash. In a twinkling his mind was functioning again. His eyes were threatening, like miniature thunder clouds. A new and dynamic impulse seemed to dominate his whole being. He snatched up the telephone directory and found a number. Then he fairly hurled himself at the telephone, frantically jiggled the hook up and down, shouted a number into the transmitter, and waited breathlessly till the connection was established.

A woman’s voice, evidently that of a servant, answered. Miss Hardwick was not in, she explained, and when pressed for further information admitted that she had not been seen since breakfast the previous day. Mr. Hardwick, ill at ease because of his daughter’s absence, was instituting inquiries for her in various directions, and the servant did not know where he could be reached.

The Phantom’s eyes blazed as he set the instrument down with a slam. Mr. Fairspeckle, a flabbergasted look in his bulging eyes, seemed utterly at a loss

to comprehend what was going on. For a moment The Phantom eyed him narrowly, then cast a bewildered glance at the typewritten slips, and finally turned abruptly on his heels and dashed from the room.

No one interrupted him. He suspected that Haiuto was lurking somewhere in the background, but he saw nothing of the sly-footed servant as he rushed from the apartment and, forgetting the existence of the elevator, scurried down three flights of stairs. The ferret-eyed individual whom he had seen from the window was still standing at the opposite curb, but he did not deign a single glance in The Phantom's direction. Block after block, spurred on by a medley of anguishing doubts and suspicions, The Phantom continued his heedless progress, conscious only of the one agonizing thought that something had happened to Helen Hardwick.

Presently he awoke to a realization of the futility and recklessness of his conduct. His fears for Helen Hardwick had blunted his wits and stultified his reason, making him forget his old-time caution and nimbleness of mind. To no purpose he was rushing blindly into a net of dangers. With a mutter of disgust at his childish impetuosity, he drew in his steps and turned into a convenient doorway. A glance up and down the street assured him that, thanks to luck alone, his headlong course seemed to have attracted no attention. He scanned the crowd on all sides, but there was no sign of either espionage or pursuit. He had vaguely expected to be followed by the keen-eyed watcher he had seen on the sidewalk outside the Whipple Hotel, but the man was nowhere in sight. For the present, at least, The Phantom was safe. Now he must think clearly and act coolly.

He could not rid himself of the suspicion that Helen's volatile nature and venturesome disposition had led her into some fearful predicament. He knew she had an infinite capacity for handling difficult situations, but the knowledge gave him scant comfort. He revolved the problem of her disappearance in his mind. She had been missing for more than twenty-four hours. He sensed a dim significance in the fact that she had passed out of sight the morning following the tragedy at the Thelma Theater, and of a sudden he asked himself whether there could be any possible connection between her disappearance and the death of Virginia Darrow.

Several circumstances lent plausibility to the theory. Chief among them was the mysterious warning The Phantom had received from Mr. Shei, the man who was generally believed to have been implicated in Miss Darrow's death. The

Phantom's mind was working swiftly now, leaping barriers and rushing straight to conclusions. It was Helen's play, he remembered, that had been produced on the night of the tragedy, and it was very probable that she had been present at the *première* performance. Knowing her as he did, he thought it conceivable that she had come into possession of some vital facts bearing on the tragedy. Her inquisitive mind, though untainted by vulgar curiosity, was always dipping into mysteries of one sort or another, and it was possible that on this occasion her natural bent had led her into conflict with Mr. Shei.

Almost before he realized what he was doing, The Phantom was in a taxicab, shouting to the chauffeur to drive him to the Thelma Theater. It seemed the logical starting point in his search; at least, he did not know where else to begin, and by visiting the scene of Miss Darrow's death, he might be able to pick up some clew to Helen's movements.

The doors were open, and he thought this somewhat strange in view of the fact that a poster on the outer wall announced that the performances of "His Soul's Master" had been discontinued, but the circumstance did not linger long in his mind. The box office and lobby being empty, he passed unchallenged into the auditorium. For a few moments, while his eyes grew accustomed to the dusk, he stood just inside the door, trying to call back to mind each detail of the tragedy as it had been narrated in the newspapers, and presently there came to him a conviction that he was not alone, but that someone was watching him intently.

He could not account for the impression, for no sound reached his ears, and the interior was only a mass of gently undulating shadows in which he saw no indication of another's presence. The atmosphere was somewhat oppressive, and a multitude of faint scents lingered in the air, hinting that the theater had not been ventilated since the last performance. Glancing sharply into the gloom about him, The Phantom groped his way down the center aisle, then explored the passageways at each side of the house, and finally looked into each of the boxes. His search availed him nothing, and at length he was forced to admit that his imagination had tricked him.

Walking to the rear of the house, he stood with his back against a pillar, and gazed toward the last row of seats to the left. It was there, according to the diagram he had seen in one of the papers, that Virginia Darrow had sat when seized with the strange fit of laughter. Again he wondered what bearing the woman's death might have on Mr. Shei's latest venture. The connection, if there

was one, seemed so remote that he came to the conclusion that Mr. Shei must be at work on a very intricate and deep-laid scheme. Then it occurred to him that his speculations, founded on insufficient facts, were a waste of time. They were not helping him to solve the mystery of Helen Hardwick's disappearance.

As was his habit when he wished to concentrate his mind on a problem, he took a cigarette from his case, then struck a match against the sole of his shoe. Absently he held the fluttering light to the tip of the cigarette, and inhaled. Suddenly he sprang aside, for a sound, all but too faint for his ears to detect, had warned him of danger, and in the same instant a sharp crack and a flash of fire leaped out of the darkness. Then an object whizzed past his head and with a thudding sound imbedded itself in the pillar against which he had been leaning.

In a moment he had extinguished his cigarette. He could see now that its glowing point, together with the match, had made him a target for the person who had fired the shot. The bullet had passed so close to his head that, but for his quick and agile backward spring, it would undoubtedly have killed him. His narrow escape had an exhilarating effect, and he dashed toward the point where he had seen the flash of fire, determined to capture the would-be murderer. It was his impression that the shot had been fired only a dozen feet away, and he did not think the man could have escaped.

In the gloom he could not distinguish objects clearly, and he dashed headlong against a post. The contact sent a stinging sensation through his head, and in the same moment a figure glided silently past him and was swallowed by the shadows at the other side of the house. Again The Phantom rushed forward. A swiftly moving object, a shade darker than the surrounding dusk, was discernible down the aisle leading to the boxes at the right. The Phantom darted after it, but when he reached the point his quarry had disappeared. For an instant he stopped, uncertain which way to turn, and in the midst of his perplexity the varicolored lights along the walls were flashed on.

The Phantom whirled round. Near one of the exits in the rear of the house stood a tall, slenderly proportioned man. His long, glossy hair was ruffled, and even at a distance The Phantom could see that his features, so regularly molded as to give an impression of effeminacy, were intensely pale. He approached swiftly. The two men eyed each other intently before either spoke.

"You are Mr. Starr, I believe?" began The Phantom, recognizing the other from

photographs he had seen in the newspapers.

Starr nodded. His right hand was clutching a revolver. Coming closer, The Phantom noticed that his nose was discolored and swollen, probably the result of the attack that had preceded the disappearance of Virginia Darrow's body.

"I owe you an apology for intruding like this," he went on, "but the formalities can wait. There was a shot fired here a few moments ago, and I believe it was meant for me."

"I was at work in my office upstairs when I heard something that sounded like a revolver shot," explained Starr. "I armed myself and came down to investigate." His voice, at other times perfectly modulated, was a little husky, and he seemed unduly conscious of his disfigured nose. He maintained a tight grip on his pistol while regarding The Phantom with a look of suspicion.

"We ought to search the house at once," suggested The Phantom. "The scoundrel can't have gone far."

Starr readily acquiesced, but from time to time while they went on with the search The Phantom felt the other's stealthy gaze searching his face, and each time he saw a look of dawning recognition in Starr's eyes. He thought nothing of it, for the capture of the man who had fired the shot seemed of far greater importance. Deep in his mind was a faint and remote hope that the fellow, if caught, might be persuaded to tell something of what had happened to Helen Hardwick.

They searched every conceivable space in the auditorium, back of the stage, and finally in the storerooms and dressing rooms down below, but without avail. As they abandoned their quest The Phantom thought he saw signs of increasing nervousness on Starr's part.

"Strange how the scoundrel disappeared," he remarked when once more they stood in the back of the auditorium.

"No stranger than what happened here night before last." Starr spoke with a touch of petulance in his voice and manner. "Mr. Shei and his henchmen seem to have a knack of walking through solid walls. What I object to most is his evident determination to make my theater the scene of his diabolical activities. By the way," and he fixed The Phantom with a look of mingled perplexity and

suspicion, “haven’t you and I met before?”

“Not in person, unless I am mistaken.” The Phantom, alert against the slightest threatening move on the other’s part, smiled faintly. “The newspapers have been kind enough to give me some publicity from time to time, and you may have seen my photograph. Suppose we let it go at that.”

“As you wish, of course,” murmured Starr, his lips twitching, “but we shall be able to talk to better advantage if we first complete the introductions. I was almost certain I recognized you at first glance. You are The Gray Phantom. But don’t get startled,” he quickly added as The Phantom suddenly stiffened. “My interest in life is purely esthetic. I am trying, in my small and humble way, to uplift the drama from the sordid depths into which it has fallen through the stupidity and avarice of managers. The capture and punishment of criminals interest me not at all. To be perfectly frank with you, as between the police and a fascinating rogue like yourself, my sympathies are with the latter.”

He made an expressive gesture, and The Phantom watched with interest the slight, quick and marvelously impressive motions of his hands. Though this was his first meeting with the man himself, the gestures, as well as the characteristic backward toss of the head, seemed oddly familiar.

“I think you are mistaken about one thing,” Starr went on, his nervousness returning. “Is there any reason why anyone should wish to put you out of the way?”

“None that I know of,” replied The Phantom thoughtfully. “I suppose I have enemies, but it didn’t occur to me that anyone was after my life until that shot was fired.”

“And weren’t you a bit precipitate in jumping at the conclusion that the bullet was intended for you? Suppose you give me the details.”

The Phantom told him the meager facts of the firing of the shot.

“There you are!” exclaimed Starr when he had finished. “The fellow couldn’t see your face. All he saw was the match, and he used that as a target, knowing you were holding it directly in front of your face while lighting the cigarette.” He took a few quick, nervous steps back and forth. He clenched and unclenched his hands as if trying to quell a rising trepidation. Suddenly he paused directly in

front of The Phantom. “That bullet was not intended for you, but for me,” he declared emphatically.

“Are you sure?”

“Not sure, but I have the best of reasons for supposing that such is the fact. I have had several intimations of danger in the past few weeks, but it isn’t necessary to go into details. Since night before last I have wondered what prompted Miss Darrow to send me the facetiously worded note hinting that Mr. Shei was in the house. If she were alive I am sure she could tell us several interesting things about—— But what’s the good of supposing? Miss Darrow will never be able to tell what was in her mind when she wrote me that note. Only one thing is certain. She was killed because she had, in some unexplained manner, learned Mr. Shei’s identity.”

The Phantom regarded him narrowly. “Some people seem to be of the opinion that I am Mr. Shei.”

“Rot! The similarity between your tactics and those of Mr. Shei is only superficial. The essential difference ought to be plain even to a stupid headquarters detective. Besides, you never took life or—— But the idea is too absurd to waste breath on. Let us be practical. You have not yet explained why you are honoring the Thelma Theater with this visit.”

The Phantom was about to reply when one of the doors in front was pushed open and the shadow of a masculine figure fell across the floor. After a glance into the face of the newcomer, The Phantom sensed danger and tried to retreat into a corner where the dim light held out a faint hope of brief security. But it was too late.

“Stay right where you are,” commanded the man who had just entered. “Didn’t know The Gray Phantom was back in town. Step out here where I can look at you.”



## CHAPTER XI—AN EAVESDROPPER

The Phantom shrugged his shoulders and stepped forward, concealing his misgivings behind a smiling and carefree exterior. He knew Lieutenant Culligore from past encounters with the man, and he had learned to respect him for his shrewdness as well as his sense of fairness. Now he looked straight into the muddy and deceptively lazy eyes of the man from headquarters. Once The Phantom had assisted him in solving a singularly perplexing mystery, but he knew that Culligore was not the kind of man to let sentiment interfere with duty.

There were times when it was difficult for The Gray Phantom to realize that he was still an outlaw and that several prison sentences were hanging over his head. The poignant fact came back to him now as he gazed into the eyes of one of the keenest man hunters of the detective bureau.

“You sure have nerve,” observed Culligore, a trace of reluctant admiration in his tones. “Don’t you know there’s a warrant out for your arrest?”

“Several of them, I believe,” calmly replied The Phantom.

Lieutenant Culligore took a cigar from his vest pocket and lighted it with elaborate care. Then he turned to Starr.

“Mr. Shei’s gang certainly handed you an awful wallop the other night,” he observed, gazing frowningly at the disfigured organ. “That’s a peach of a nose you’ve got.”

Starr flushed angrily, but controlled himself.

“I’ve got a few words to say to this gentleman privately,” Culligore went on, inclining his head toward The Phantom. Starr, accepting his dismissal as gracefully as his indignation permitted, walked out. Culligore’s small eyes, twinkling humorously through a cloud of tobacco smoke, followed his progress till the door closed behind him, then he slowly turned toward The Phantom.

“Starr is my idea of a perfect gentleman,” he musingly observed. “He can get mad clean through and still keep his coat on. Was the shot fired at you or at

him?”

“Shot?” For a moment The Phantom stared bewilderedly. “How did you know?”

“My sense of smell is fairly good,” said Culligore, sniffing. “I noticed there was powder smoke in the air the moment I walked in. What became of the bullet?”

The Phantom explained. With a listless air the lieutenant examined the point where the leaden slug had entered the pillar. “I’ll bet a pair of pink socks that the rascal who fired the shot is a safe distance from here by this time. What I’d like to know is whether he was aiming at you or at Starr.”

“Starr thinks the bullet was meant for him,” said The Phantom thoughtfully. “He may be right, but I have my doubts. He is the imaginative type that believes he is being pursued by secret enemies and all that sort of thing. On the other hand, I can’t see why anybody should waste a chunk of good lead on me, unless——” He stopped short as an idea suddenly occurred to him.

“Unless Mr. Shei should have a goose to pick with you,” Culligore filled in, and The Phantom marveled at the way the detective had read his unspoken thought. “It’s always safe to look for a shower of bullets whenever The Gray Phantom bobs up. By the way,” and Culligore frowned disapprovingly, “what’s the idea? Don’t you know the climate in this town is mighty unhealthy for a man like you?”

“I am aware of it.” The Phantom’s lips tightened into a grim line. “But I had to risk it, Culligore. I couldn’t sit idle while—— But first let me ask you one question. Some people seem to think that I am Mr. Shei. Do you agree with them?”

Culligore pulled thoughtfully at his cigar. His eyes seemed to be searching every remote corner of The Phantom’s mind. “No,” he said finally, “I don’t. And I don’t see it makes any difference. You’re The Gray Phantom, and that’s reason enough for me to pinch you. There are times when I hate my job, but duty is duty. I wish you hadn’t shown up just at this time. Some of the higher-ups are dead sure you are Mr. Shei, and the whole town is on tenter hooks on account of the notices posted last night. Everybody expects Mr. Shei to strike, but nobody knows where the blow is going to fall. You can see how things are. Why the devil didn’t you stay where you belong?”

“I couldn’t,” replied The Phantom. Then he regarded the lieutenant with a slow, carefully measuring glance. Culligore was one of the few men he had met whom he could instinctively trust. There had been clashes between them in the past, but the lieutenant had always fought fairly. Choosing his words with great deliberation, The Phantom explained why he had come out of hiding to cross swords with Mr. Shei.

“That’s just like The Gray Phantom,” was Culligore’s comment when he had finished. “You stick your head in the noose just because somebody else is copying your tricks. Well, anyhow, I admire your nerve. Too bad you and I belong to opposite camps. We could have a lot of fun tracking Mr. Shei together.” He shook his head as if to banish a pleasing but impossible hope. “No use wishing things were different, though. I don’t exactly like the idea, but I’ve got to take you along to headquarters.”

“You will have to take me in an ambulance, then.” There was a note of challenge in The Phantom’s tones and his figure tensed perceptibly. “You’ll never take me alive, Culligore. It simply can’t be done. And you will have the scrap of your life before you take me dead. I am going to see this thing through if I have to fight the whole police department of New York City. The fact that Mr. Shei is stealing my tactics isn’t the only reason. I learned something this morning that is of vastly more importance. By the way,” and The Phantom fairly jabbed the question at the lieutenant, “have you seen anything of Miss Helen Hardwick?”

Culligore’s lazy eyes opened a little wider. “Not since yesterday morning. She and I had quite an argument about Mr. Shei. We were standing almost exactly where you and I are standing now. She knows how to fence with words. I haven’t made up my mind yet whether she or I got the best of the argument.”

The Phantom smiled despite his impatience. “What did she think of Mr. Shei?”

“How can anybody tell what a woman thinks? You can make a guess, of course, but the chances are either that you are wrong or that you are making just exactly the kind of guess she wants you to make. Miss Hardwick left me pretty much up in the air, but I have a feeling all the time that she had discovered something that led her to think that you were Mr. Shei.”

“Oh,” mumbled the Phantom; then he stood silent for a few moments. “Where did Miss Hardwick go from here?”

Culligore shrugged. "Ask me something easy. She walked out of that door, and that's all I'm sure of. There was another question or two I wanted to ask her, and that's why I dropped around here to-day, thinking she might show up again. She seemed very much wrought up over Mr. Shei."

With an impetuous gesture The Phantom placed his hand on the lieutenant's arm.

"Miss Hardwick has disappeared," he announced quickly, "and I fear she has blundered into the clutches of Mr. Shei."

"Eh?" The mask of listlessness dropped in a twinkling from Culligore's face. He was instantly tense and alert. "What's that?"

"I called up her home this morning. Nobody seems to know what has become of her. A little later I received a telephone message warning me that—— But I see I shall have to tell you the whole story in order to make things clear." Briefly The Phantom related his encounter with Mr. Fairspeckle, the events that had occurred at the apartment of the retired financier, and finally the warning message that had come over the wire. "Now you can understand," he concluded, "why I don't intend to submit to arrest until Miss Hardwick has been found."

Culligore's cigar had gone out while The Phantom was speaking. Now he lighted it again, sent a few clouds of smoke curling toward the ceiling, then peered intently into The Phantom's face. Finally he jerked his head up and down as if he had seen a light.

"The thing to do," he declared, "is to take the shortest route and go direct to Mr. Shei and ask him what he has done with Miss Hardwick."

The Phantom laughed bitterly. "Beautifully simple! The only difficulty is that we haven't the slightest idea who Mr. Shei is or where to find him. Otherwise your suggestion is capital."

A queer smile curled Culligore's lips. "Sometimes The Gray Phantom isn't playing in very good form. But then every man gets a bit foolish when he has a girl on the brain. Your thinking cap isn't on straight to-day, or you wouldn't have let Fairspeckle pull the wool over your eyes the way he did."

"Fairspeckle? You don't think——"

“He acted queer all morning, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but——”

“And didn’t he try to put you to sleep by drugging your coffee?”

“True, but he——”

“And didn’t you see him typing the notices with Mr. Shei’s name at the bottom?”

“But the telephone message?”

“Yes, I know,” said Culligore patiently. “That’s where he duped you to a brown finish. You would have seen the trick at once if your thinking machinery had been in good condition. I don’t know Fairspeckle, but from what you have told me he must be a sharp one. My experience has taught me never to trust a man who can’t sleep nights. It’s a bad conscience that keeps him awake in the first place, and a man suffering from loss of sleep is likely to go in for any kind of devilry. Maybe that’s what happened to Fairspeckle. Anyhow, the way he pulled the wool over your eyes proves he is a slick one.”

“Then you think Fairspeckle is Mr. Shei?”

“If he isn’t, why should he be typing those notices? Just look at it this way. Fairspeckle saw that you suspected him. He didn’t like that a bit. To throw you off your guard, he pretended to suspect *you*. You caught him with the goods when you saw him typing the notices. Right away you started in denouncing him as Mr. Shei. Then, right in the midst of a dramatic moment, the telephone rings. The voice at the other end asks for you. You’re told that Mr. Shei is speaking and that Miss Hardwick will suffer unless you keep hands off. That gives you a jolt, of course, and all you can think of is the girl. You don’t stop to question whether the man at the other end is really Mr. Shei. For all you know he might be Tom Brown or Bill Jones, but you’re too excited to think of that. I don’t blame you. I’d been just as easy if I had been in your place.”

A blank look crossed The Phantom’s face while Culligore was speaking. It was quickly followed by an expression of mingling comprehension and self-disgust.

“I see it now. I’ve been as gullible as a ten-year-old. The message purporting to come from Mr. Shei was meant to divert my suspicions from Fairspeckle. He

might have been prepared for some such emergency, or else he signaled Haiuto while I wasn't looking. The Japanese could easily have gotten in touch with one of the members of Fairspeckle's gang and instructed him to call me up and give me the prearranged message. But just how it was done doesn't matter. The important point is that I was taken in. I am wondering now whether the threat in regard to Miss Hardwick was pure bluff, or whether she is really in danger."

"I wouldn't take chances," cautioned Culligore. "If I were you I would call on Mr. Fairspeckle to-night and have a confidential chat with him. He may not want to talk, but maybe you can persuade him. Of course, as an officer of the law, I must warn you there mustn't be any rough stuff." Culligore's twinkling eyes gazed toward the ceiling.

"Then you have abandoned your intention of dragging me over to headquarters?"

Culligore did not answer directly, but the faint grin on his lips was eloquent. "I would advise you to watch your step," he said softly. "The moment it becomes known that The Gray Phantom is in town, there will be the niftiest little man hunt you ever saw. I wish you luck. In the meantime, I'm going to tackle the case from another angle. I'd give a pair of pink socks to know just when, where, and how Mr. Shei is going to strike."

He tilted his chin against his hand and lapsed into deep thought. When he looked up, several minutes later, The Phantom was gone. Very softly, with a twinkle in his eyes, he stepped to a recess in the wall toward which he had cast an occasional furtive glance during his talk with The Phantom. On a marble shelf extended across the niche were a number of potted ferns, and behind them was a small window, artistically decorated to render it opaque. Culligore, noticing that it stood open a crack, pricked up his ears and listened. From the other side came a faint, scraping sound, as if someone were hiding there.

Culligore nodded elatedly as he tiptoed away. He seemed immensely gratified at having verified his suspicion that his interview with The Gray Phantom had been overheard.

## CHAPTER XII—MR. SHEI STRIKES

A fine drizzle was in the air and the street lights emitted a blurred and languid sheen. For an hour The Gray Phantom had been pacing the sidewalk across the street from the Whipple Hotel, impatiently waiting for the lights in Mr. Fairspeckle's suite to go out. His coat collar was turned up and the brim of his soft hat was pulled low over his forehead. Taking Culligore's warning to heart, he had resolved not to endanger his project by running unnecessary risks.

The passing pedestrians gave him scarcely a glance, and he told himself that the inclement weather was a point in his favor. Evidently neither Culligore nor Starr had mentioned his presence in the city, for he could see no signs of accelerated activity on the part of the police, as there would have been if the news had leaked out that The Gray Phantom had come out of hiding. The solitary watcher whom he had seen from the window of Mr. Fairspeckle's bedroom earlier in the day had evidently quitted his task, for he was nowhere in sight.

Throughout the late afternoon and early evening, The Phantom had been harassed by fears for Helen's safety. At times he had scarcely been able to control his impatience, but his eagerness had been cooled by the knowledge that a headlong rush into danger would only render the situation worse. His interview with Culligore had not only helped to clarify his mind, but it had left him with a renewed conviction that the emaciated and dour-looking ex-financier was Mr. Shei.

Again he cast a speculative glance at the windows of Mr. Fairspeckle's apartment. All the lights but one had been extinguished since he last looked in that direction, and he guessed that the occupant had retired to his bedroom. His imagination pictured the old man sleeplessly pacing the floor, chuckling softly to himself while his mind evolved nefarious schemes. It was The Phantom's plan to take him completely by surprise and if possible wring a confession from him. But above all else he was determined to ascertain whether Fairspeckle knew anything about Helen's whereabouts.

He waited fifteen minutes longer, then adjusted his hat and collar and walked briskly across the street. With the air of one belonging on the premises he

entered the hotel and, not thinking it safe to use the elevator, walked toward the stairway in the rear. A few drowsy loungers sat in chairs in the lobby, and the clerk was engaged with a late arrival, so no one noticed him. The long, heavily carpeted hallways were silent and deserted, for the Whipple was catering chiefly to the staid and respectable element that retires early and sleeps soundly.

The Phantom ascended three flights of stairs, then turned down the corridor toward Mr. Fairspeckle's apartment. Reaching the door, he stopped and listened, but no sound came from the interior. After a cautious glance behind him, he took from his pocket a compact case which he always carried when engaged in enterprises like the present, and from its silk-lined grooves extracted a small metallic tool. In a few moments the lock had yielded to his deft manipulation, and he stepped inside.

Again he stopped and listened. The hallway in which he stood was lighted only by a tiny electric bulb in the ceiling, and its glow was so faint that the surrounding objects were scarcely distinguishable. At first he could not hear the slightest sound, and he was about to proceed when a curious impression caused him to draw in his steps. Perhaps his imagination was deceiving him, but he thought someone was sobbing, and he had a distinct impression that the sounds were coming from the door at his left.

In an instant he had pressed his ear against the keyhole. Now he could hear the sounds quite clearly, but the soblike effect was gone, and instead they made him think of someone gasping and spluttering. Mystified, he tried the lock and pushed the door open. The room was dark, and he ran his hand along the wall until he found the electric switch. As the light flashed on, a mutter of amazement fell from his lips.

On a bed at the farther end of the room, with hands and feet bound and a gag firmly adjusted to his mouth, lay Haiuto. The servant, a look of mute pleading in his bulging eyes, was tugging impotently at the ropes around his ankles and wrists.

"What's happened?" sharply inquired The Phantom, but renewed splutterings called his attention to the fact that the gag prevented Haiuto from speaking. He removed the cloth while repeating the question. Haiuto, breathing hard, licked the bruised portion of his mouth.



“Don’t know,” he finally managed to say. “I sleep. Then noise at door. Before I can get up, somebody walk in. All is dark, like tomb of Iyeyasu. I get awful crack on head. Then sleep again. Don’t know anything else.”

With a moan Haiuto sank back against the pillow. A startling suspicion flashed through The Phantom’s mind. Without troubling to release the servant’s limbs, he ran from the room and opened a door at the farther end of the hall. He had thought it led into Fairspeckle’s bedroom, but his sense of direction had become somewhat confused, and he found himself in the library instead. Faintly through the darkness he glimpsed the bright nickel trimmings of the typewriter at which the ex-financier had been at work earlier in the day. He groped his way across the floor, turning in the direction where he thought Fairspeckle’s bedroom was. A soft tinkle brought him to a dead stop.

The telephone was ringing! Acting on impulse, he fumbled about in the dark till he found the instrument, then lifted the receiver to his ear and spoke a low response into the transmitter. The answering voice sent a quiver through his being. He recognized it at once, for he had heard it before.

“Mr. Shei speaking,” it was saying, and the cold, precise tones were edged with a taunt. “I perceive you have chosen to disregard the warning I gave you a few hours ago. Unless you abandon your plans at once, Miss Hardwick will die. That is absolutely final.”

A faint click signified that the connection was broken. For a few moments The Phantom stood rigid, scarcely able to comprehend the import of the message. It had been spoken in tones so emphatic and sinister that he was left in no doubt regarding the speaker’s sincerity. But how had the man at the other end of the wire learned that The Phantom was in Fairspeckle’s apartment? The telephone call, coming a few minutes after The Phantom’s arrival, had been so accurately timed as to indicate that he had been followed to the Whipple. Yet that did not seem quite possible, for he had been particularly alert against that very thing.

Finally he put the telephone down. He tried to stifle the new and poignant misgivings with which the voice had inspired him. He remembered the other message he had received from the person purporting to be Mr. Shei. He had been deceived then, unless his own and Culligore’s deductions were all wrong, and he would not be so easily imposed upon again. Doubtless the second message, like the first, was only a clever hoax on Fairspeckle’s part. Well, in a few moments

he would probably know the truth.

His fears and doubts were only partly quieted when he stepped softly from the room. Time and again there flashed through his mind a suspicion that something was wrong with the theory Culligore had implanted in his mind, but his thoughts in this direction were hazy. The binding and gagging of Haiuto was a disquieting and perplexing circumstance that did not seem to fit into the woof of the lieutenant's ideas in regard to Fairspeckle.

The Phantom passed through another door, then stopped short and stared in astonishment at the scene that met his eyes.

He was in Mr. Fairspeckle's bedroom. A single electric light, the one he had seen while standing on the sidewalk opposite the hotel, glowed softly in a wall fixture. In a morris chair in the middle of the room, with the folds of a dressing gown hanging loosely over his bony frame, sat W. Rufus Fairspeckle. He sat so still that, if his eyes had been closed, The Phantom would have suspected that he was either asleep or dead. He was bound and gagged in the same manner as Haiuto had been, but it struck The Phantom as vaguely significant that his right arm was bared to the elbow.

As he stepped closer, he became oddly impressed by the strange expression in the old man's eyes. They looked straight ahead in a fixed, unseeing way, and there was a gleam of merriment in their dim depths that clashed sharply with the pallor on the shrunken cheeks. It seemed as though Fairspeckle's soul was indulging in fancies of which his physical self was unaware, and the whole effect impressed The Phantom as uncanny.

He leaned forward and examined the exposed arm. Just below the muscles of the elbow, and directly over one of the smaller veins, was a puncture and a congealed drop of blood. The puncture was so small that it might have been inflicted with a needle prick. In a roundabout way The Phantom's mind went back to the scene in the Thelma Theater as it had been pictured in the newspapers, and with an inward start he remembered that just such a puncture had been found on the right arm of Virginia Darrow.

Though as yet he could not grasp the meaning of it, the coincidence acted as an electric shock on his nerves. He tore away the gag from the old man's lips and vigorously shook his arm.

“What’s the matter?” he inquired.

The red eyelids quivered a little. The look of hilarity flickering in the depths of the orbs grew a trifle more pronounced. It was almost gruesome, but The Phantom’s sense of perplexity was stronger than his repugnance.

“Can’t you speak?” he asked sharply. “What is the meaning of this?”

Fairspeckle’s chest heaved feebly. The motion was accompanied by a plucking movement of the fingers. The hands and feet strained impotently against the fettering cords. Then the lips fluttered, exposing a row of uneven teeth, and in the next instant a shiver ran down The Phantom’s spine.

Through the fluttering lips came a laugh such as he had never before heard. It sounded hollow and cracked and as unreal as if produced by a mechanical contrivance. The Phantom had an uncanny sensation that the dead, if they were capable of producing sounds, might laugh just like that. Then he remembered the vivid descriptions he had read of the mocking laughter that had come from Virginia Darrow’s dying lips, and a hazy suspicion entered his mind. He took a jack-knife from his pocket and swiftly slashed the cords around Fairspeckle’s arms and legs.

Although released from his bonds, the man in the chair scarcely moved. The feet scraped gently against the floor, and the arms fell limply to his sides. Weird snatches of laughter were still trickling through his lips, but the expression of insane merriment in his eyes was slowly yielding to a look of returning reason.

The Phantom looked helplessly about him, and suddenly his eyes fell on a sheet of paper lying at the old man’s feet. Mechanically he picked it up and glanced at the typewritten lines. From the smudged and indistinct type he was vaguely aware that he was gazing at a carbon copy. A word here and there attracted his attention, and presently he was reading the communication from the beginning. It read:

Dear Friend: The poison which has been injected into your veins to-night has been accurately adjusted to produce death within seven days. You will have lucid intervals, but you will be gradually growing weaker and weaker. Consult as many high-priced specialists as you wish, and if they can help you, you are to be congratulated. There is only one antidote, and that is the secret of a confederate of mine. It will be supplied you for a consideration.

The exact terms will be communicated to you in a few days. By that time you will probably have been convinced that your life is absolutely in my hands.

If misery loves company, I trust you will find consolation in the fact that six others are in precisely the same predicament as yourself.

Mr. Shei.

The sheet dropped from The Phantom's fingers. If what he had just read seemed grotesque and absurd, a glance at the man in the chair conferred a semblance of hideous reality upon it. Mr. Shei had struck the threatened blow, and he had struck sooner than expected.

Fairspeckle's laughter had ceased and a look of reason was coming into his waxen features. The expression of ribald mockery had left his eyes, and now they were fixed on The Phantom's face in a dull, suspicious stare. With a start The Phantom awoke to a realization of his predicament. If he were caught in Fairspeckle's apartment, the police and the public would be firmly convinced of what they already suspected—that Mr. Shei and The Phantom were one. Not even Culligore's keen mind and generous impulses would suffice to save him from arrest and imprisonment. And there was Helen—the thought gave him a spinal chill. Perhaps at this very moment she was confronted by some terrifying peril. And if he were arrested, then his last chance of helping her would be gone.

His mind made up, The Phantom ran to the telephone in the adjoining room. He called a number, and presently he was answered by an operator at police headquarters. His inquiry for Culligore elicited the information that the lieutenant was out and would probably not return until morning. The Phantom hesitated for a moment, then spoke hurriedly into the transmitter:

“This is important. Send a doctor and a couple of detectives at once to the Whipple Hotel, suite 36. You will find something very interesting. That's all.”

With that he hung up, and a few moments later he had left the apartment and was briskly walking down the stairs.

### CHAPTER XIII—A MESSAGE FROM MR. SHEI

The city, consuming the news of Mr. Shei's amazing coup along with its coffee and toast the following morning, reacted to the sensation much as a child might react to the sight of a fabled monster. The whole affair seemed monstrous, unbelievable—and yet the facts could not be reasoned away. Seven of the city's wealthiest men had been inoculated with a malady of such a mysterious nature that the most celebrated physicians in New York City had admitted they were unable to diagnose it.

An air of bafflement and suspense hung over the city. Mr. Shei's name was on every tongue, and the blow he had struck was discussed by groups that gathered on street corners, in cafés, and in public squares. Among the seven victims were several of the most important capitalists in the country, so the effect of Mr. Shei's astounding maneuver was an assault on the financial nerve center of the nation.

The name that, next to Mr. Shei's, was most often spoken in the street corner discussions, was that of The Gray Phantom. The spectacular nature of the coup, as well as the daring and resourcefulness exhibited by its perpetrator, seemed ample proof that The Gray Phantom had returned to his old ways under the *nom de guerre* of Mr. Shei. No one else, it was argued, could have engineered an achievement of such magnitude without bungling and falling into the clutches of the police. Already wagers were being placed on The Phantom's ability to evade capture until he should have consummated his plans.

At ten o'clock, just as newsboys were raucously crying the latest extras, a taxicab stopped before a dingy establishment in a squalid and disreputable section of the lower East Side. The Gray Phantom alighted, hurriedly tossed the driver a bill, then disappeared in a basement entrance. The door was opened by a surly-looking man wearing a soiled apron, and The Phantom took a seat at one of the tables in the rear. He looked nervously at his watch. Lieutenant Culligore, whom he had reached by telephone at police headquarters, had promised to meet him at ten sharp, and he had suggested Lefty Joe's place as a reasonably safe rendezvous.

The Phantom cast a slanting glance at the rough-looking customers scattered about the place, and just then the door opened and Culligore walked in and took a seat beside him.

“Any luck?” inquired the lieutenant, though the question seemed superfluous in view of The Phantom’s dejected appearance.

“None. That’s why I wanted a talk with you. How is Fairspeckle?”

The lieutenant, a little bleary-eyed and with a trace of diffidence in his manners, looked queerly at the questioner. “Why single out Fairspeckle? He’s in the same boat with the six others. Neither better nor worse, though the doctors say his age and poor health will weigh against him.”

“You still think that Fairspeckle is Mr. Shei?”

Culligore hesitated. A thin, inscrutable smile hovered above his lips.

“If he is, he gave himself a dose of his own medicine,” was his final comment.

“And that’s precisely what I think he did.” The Phantom, speaking in low tones, gave the table a resounding thwack. “Being one of the city’s richest men, he knew suspicion was apt to turn in his direction, unless he was inoculated along with the others. He is easily one of the seven wealthiest men in town, and it would have looked queer if he had been omitted. And so, to ward off suspicion, he had a dose of the poison injected into his own veins, though I suppose the amount was carefully adjusted so it would produce the characteristic symptoms without causing death.”

Culligore appeared to ponder. “Not bad reasoning,” he remarked. “That would be on a par with the trick he played on you yesterday. Fairspeckle seems to be a shrewd old fox, the kind that isn’t overlooking any bets. Maybe you’re right. In that case, of course, the binding and gagging of the Jap was a blind.”

The Phantom nodded.

“Well, whoever Mr. Shei is, he certainly put one over last night,” was Culligore’s rueful comment. “He seems to have a gang of highly trained followers who do exactly as he tells them without batting an eyelid. Last night, between ten o’clock and two in the morning, he sent one or more of his men to the homes of

each of the seven victims. In two or three instances the servants were bribed, I understand. Anyhow, Mr. Shei's men got in by some hook or crook. Four of the seven were caught in bed and trussed up before they could say Jack Robinson. Two of the others were tapped on the back of the head when they returned home from the theater, and one got his in a taxicab. Mr. Shei made a clean sweep."

"What do the doctors say?"

"Most of them are doing some fancy stalling to cover up what they don't know. The high muckamucks of the profession are holding a consultation this morning to decide what's to be done. One of them let slip the information that the symptoms look something like a combination of rabies and delirium tremens, but he believes the disease is produced by one of the ancient poisons that were known to the Asiatics. The fact that the doctors are keeping mum is a bad sign. It will be interesting to see how many of the patients will cough up Mr. Shei's price for the antidote. If all of them come across, Mr. Shei will rake in a good many millions."

"Billions, rather, I should say." The Phantom smiled wearily. "If successful, the experiment will be unique in that it will demonstrate just how much a billionaire considers his life to be worth. But that isn't what I wanted to talk with you about. Culligore, I still think that Fairspeckle knows where Miss Hardwick can be found."

"Well?" Culligore gazed noncommittally into space.

"I wonder if some sort of pressure couldn't be brought to bear on him to make him divulge what he knows. Last night he was in no condition to be questioned, and to-day, I can hardly make a move without running the risk of being arrested."

"I should say you can't!" declared Culligore explosively. "It's as much as my job is worth to be seen here talking with you. The Gray Phantom is a marked man, if ever there was one. Fairspeckle and the Jap swear you were in the apartment late last night, and Fairspeckle believes—or pretends to believe, which amounts to the same thing—that it was you who squirted the poison into his veins. Of course, he doesn't pretend to know just how it happened, but he remembers seeing you just as he was recovering his senses. You'd better take my advice and lie low for a while. I'll see what I can do with Fairspeckle, though I haven't any

high hopes. I'll have him watched, and it's just possible that we can squeeze some information out of him. But look here. Aren't you starting this thing from the wrong end?"

The Phantom gave him a puzzled glance.

"When Miss Hardwick left the Thelma Theater day before yesterday," pursued Culligore, "I could have sworn she was on her way to see you. She didn't say anything about her plans, but that was the idea I got from her actions."

The Phantom shook his head. "If she started for my place, she never got there. I called up on the long distance this morning, and was told that nothing has been seen of her. Of course, something may have happened to her on the way."

"Well, I wouldn't worry just yet. The young lady has a lot of spunk, and I'll bet a pair of pink socks she knows how to take care of herself. It mightn't be a bad idea to get in touch with her father. He may have had some news from her since yesterday. I must be on my way. Mr. Shei is putting gray hairs on my head."

Culligore rose, and the two men shook hands. They parted after the lieutenant had once more admonished The Phantom against exposing himself to arrest. For a moment or two after the detective had left the place, The Phantom looked dubiously at the door through which he had departed.

"There's something queer about Culligore," he mumbled. "I wonder if he——"

He did not finish the thought, but with a shrug of the shoulders he stepped out and looked warily up and down the sidewalk. Culligore's warning had not been needed to impress upon him that caution was necessary. He sniffed danger in the very air he breathed as he slunk across the street, walked a block to the east, then ducked into a deserted doorway. A taxicab appeared, and he signaled the driver. For a moment he hesitated as to his next move, then Culligore's parting advice occurred to him and, after consulting the small notebook he carried, he gave the chauffeur the address of the Hardwick residence.

The cab started. The Phantom glanced sharply through the windows. A familiar and yet intangible sensation had been with him constantly for the past hour. Now and then, at long intervals, he had had a fleeting impression that he was being watched. Now, as the cab chugged its way down the avenue, a sixth sense told him he was being followed, yet he could detect no sign of pursuit in the welter of



traffic. He tried to dismiss the impression, knowing that in his present state of high mental tension his senses were not to be trusted.

He alighted in front of a modest brownstone house, its rigid exterior relieved by sprawling vines and flowers in the window boxes. The female servant who opened the door announced that Mr. Hardwick was at home, and The Phantom gently pushed past her. In the room he entered, a thin, stoop-shouldered man was pacing back and forth with hands clasped at his back. He stopped abruptly at sight of The Phantom and peered blankly into the visitor's face.

"You know me?" inquired The Phantom.

"It's—it can't be—The Gray Phantom?" A startled look appeared in Mr. Hardwick's deeply furrowed face. He came a few steps nearer. "But you *are* The Gray Phantom, I see. I recognize you from your photographs. Where is my daughter?"

The Phantom was a trifle taken aback by the sharply spoken question. "Then you have received no word from her? I telephoned your house shortly after my arrival in the city and was told she had been missing for twenty-four hours. I was in hopes you might have heard from her this morning. That's why I called."

"I have not seen my daughter since breakfast day before yesterday," explained Mr. Hardwick in quavering tones. "In the afternoon I received a brief message from her announcing she did not expect to be home for dinner and telling me not to worry. She is an impetuous child, and it isn't the first time she has caused me anxiety. Her message made me very uneasy, for she had been acting strangely ever since—since——"

"Since the affair at the Thelma Theater," guessed The Phantom. "Listen, Mr. Hardwick. I am as deeply concerned in what has happened to her as you can possibly be. I intend to find her, no matter where she may be. Can you trust me?"

Mr. Hardwick's dim eyes searched The Phantom's face for a long time. At first there was a look of doubt and suspicion in the old man's countenance, but it faded gradually away.

"I believe I can," he declared. "I know what your past has been, and I confess I have disapproved strongly of the friendship between you and my daughter. She is still impressionable and there are romantic notions in her head, and you will

forgive me if I say that you did not seem quite the proper person for her to associate with.”

“I can understand that,” murmured The Phantom. “Your attitude was quite natural in view of the circumstances.”

“And so,” continued Mr. Hardwick, “when your letters came I did not feel justified in giving them to her. I was not unappreciative of what you had done for her and me, but I feared she might form an unsuitable attachment. In short, I destroyed the letters after a glance at the handwriting on the envelope.”

The Phantom smiled faintly. “I know you acted for what you thought your daughter’s best interests. It is not for me to criticise your conduct in the matter. I can readily see—— But wait.” The Phantom’s brow suddenly clouded. “How many letters did you intercept?”

“I think there were two. One came in the spring; the other late in the summer. Yes, I am quite sure there were only two.”

The Phantom’s narrowing gaze swept the older man’s face. His lips tightened into a grim line. “The letter I mailed in the spring was the one in which I told your daughter of my removal from Azurecrest to Sea Glimpse,” he explained in tense tones. “I had promised to keep her informed of my movements so that she could communicate with me if she should ever need me.” He paused for a moment. “Have you any idea where your daughter might have gone? Didn’t she say anything that suggested what her plans were?”

“She talked rather incoherently at breakfast, but said nothing about intending to go away. When I received her message later in the day, it occurred to me that she might have gone in search of you. You had been mentioned several times in our talks together, and I thought that——”

“If her intention was to find me, she probably went to the wrong place,” gravely interrupted The Phantom. “Not knowing of my removal to Sea Glimpse, she naturally would look for me at Azurecrest. I sold the place through a broker and never even learned the name of the present owner. But her going to Azurecrest doesn’t explain her absence for the past twenty-four hours. She would naturally return at once upon learning that I was not there. The trip by train takes only two or three hours. I fear something must have happened to her on the way. Well, we shall soon learn——”

He dashed across the room, snatched up the telephone from its stand in a corner, and, after being connected with the long-distance operator, gave his old number at Azurecrest. A wait followed. The Phantom stood tense and rigid, while Mr. Hardwick dazedly drew his palm across his forehead. He gazed expectantly at The Phantom while the latter spoke briefly into the transmitter. Finally, with a puzzled look in his face, The Phantom hung up.

“The present owner of Azurecrest is a Mr. Slade,” he announced. “I just had him on the wire. He tells me nothing has been seen of Miss Hardwick, or of any person resembling her.”

Mr. Hardwick looked as if he did not quite know whether to feel relieved or discouraged. The Phantom grasped his hand.

“Don’t worry,” he said in a tone of hopefulness which he was far from feeling. “We will find your daughter. I shall communicate with you as soon as I learn something.”

He squeezed the older man’s hand and walked out. Though he could not understand why, his interview with Hardwick and his brief talk with Slade had intensified his fears and misgivings. It seemed as though the mystery of Helen’s disappearance had become darker and deeper. Suddenly, as he stood irresolute on the doorstep, he heard someone call his name. A limousine had silently drawn up at the curb, its sides of burnt sienna flashing brilliantly in the sunlight, and at the window, beckoning him with a smile and a nod, he saw a woman’s face. He stepped forward, and the woman leaned slightly from the window.

“If you will step in,” she whispered, “you may learn something of interest concerning the young person you are looking for.”

The door opened invitingly. The words had exerted a magical effect on The Phantom, and without a moment’s hesitation he entered. As the car glided away, he noticed that the woman had a young, dark face, a figure almost serpentine in its slenderness, and that there was an air of gay insouciance about her smartly embroidered frock and rakish picture hat that seemed to clash with the subtlety and craftiness expressed by her pale-green eyes.

“You are very reckless, my dear Phantom,” she murmured. “Please don’t ask to what happy circumstance you owe the invitation to ride with me. I abhor ceremonious speeches. I am Fay Dale, though that probably don’t interest you,

and I have a message for you from Mr. Shei.”

The bluntness of the statement made The Phantom catch his breath. He wondered whether it was the vivacious eyes of Fay Dale that had been following him all morning and giving him the haunting impression of being watched.

“As I said, you are very reckless,” Miss Dale went on. “Twice within the last two days you have been warned to abandon the course you are pursuing, and you have paid no heed whatever. There’s such a thing as carrying audacity to a fault, you know. Doesn’t the safety of a certain young lady mean anything to you at all?”

“Everything!” exclaimed The Phantom impulsively. “You said you had something to tell me about her.”

“I have, but you mustn’t be impatient. I have something very important to tell you. You have seen fit to meddle in an affair that doesn’t concern you in the least. You have been warned that your conduct is endangering the life of the young lady, but evidently you have not taken the warnings seriously. I can assure you that Mr. Shei never makes idle threats. It is his wish that you leave New York at once.”

A taunting laugh was on The Phantom’s lips, but he held it back. “Why?” he demanded.

“Because Mr. Shei doesn’t care to have you interfere with him. He is now engaged in the most important enterprise of his life, and he would rather not be opposed by such a formidable enemy as yourself. I shall be perfectly frank with you, even at the risk of inflating your vanity. You are the only man of whom Mr. Shei stands in fear. He has a profound respect for your genius. He laughs at the police and snaps his fingers at public opinion, but he knows The Gray Phantom is a dangerous adversary. At this particular time he can brook no opposition. That’s why he requests you to leave New York immediately.”

“I am flattered,” murmured The Phantom, gazing reflectively out of the car window. “What I cannot understand is how Mr. Shei learned of my plans.”

Miss Dale gave an amused laugh. “One of Mr. Shei’s agents saw you in Times Square the morning you arrived. You have been watched ever since. Mr. Shei has sources of information that would amaze you if I were to tell you about them.

And he is just as resourceful in other ways. Don't you think you had better swallow your pride and comply with his wishes?"

"Suppose I were to refuse?" The Phantom temporized, trying hard to restrain his impatience.

Miss Dale looked straight into his eyes. There was a hint of cruelty in her tightly compressed lips.

"There are ways of breaking even such a stubborn will as yours," she coldly declared. "The young lady is absolutely in Mr. Shei's power. That gives him a means of persuasion that ought to impress even you. Nothing in the world can save her if you disobey his wishes."

Her tones carried an emphasis that caused The Phantom to give her a sharp glance. There was a curl to her lips and a gleam in her eyes that impressed him even more strongly than her words. His mind worked quickly.

"If Mr. Shei will return Miss Hardwick safely to her home, I will leave New York on the next train," he promised.

She laughed frigidly. "You must think Mr. Shei is a fool. He would lose his hold over you the moment he released Miss Hardwick, and what guarantee would he have that you would carry out your promise?"

"My word of honor."

"It would be enough under ordinary circumstances, but not in this case. Evidently you do not realize the gravity of Miss Hardwick's position, or you would not quarrel with Mr. Shei's terms." She shrugged her slight shoulders. "Well, you shall soon be convinced that Mr. Shei is not to be trifled with. From Miss Hardwick's own lips you shall learn what a desperate predicament she is in. After that, my dear Phantom, I think you will be more amenable to reason."

There was a question on The Phantom's tongue, but just then the car drew up in front of an apartment house facing Central Park, and Miss Dale conducted him through an ornate entrance, then up three flights in the elevator, and a little gasp of admiration escaped The Phantom as they passed into an exquisitely furnished apartment. Save for the prevalence of the feminine touch, exemplified in gorgeous but meaningless trifles and gewgaws, it met the emphatic approval of

The Phantom's discriminating eye.

Miss Dale excused herself and entered an adjoining room, and he was left alone for a few minutes. He strained his ears and listened. From faint sounds coming through the closed door he imagined she was at the telephone. The cold gleam in her eyes as he had helped her from the car was still haunting him, and he wondered what she had meant when she promised that from Helen's own lips should he learn the nature of her predicament.

The frigid, insinuating smile was still on her lips when she returned to the room in which she had left him.

"Your curiosity shall be gratified in a few moments," she announced, seating herself and regarding him with a cold, impersonal gaze. There was an air of quiet self-reliance and efficiency about her that enabled him to understand how she could be a valuable assistant to Mr. Shei. Neither spoke, and presently the silence was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone in the other room.

"Answer, please," she said lightly, the faintest trace of malignant satisfaction in her tones. "I think Miss Hardwick is on the wire."

Puzzled and tormented by vague suspicions, The Phantom passed to the telephone. The woman followed a short distance behind.

"Hello," he said tensely.

He started violently as he recognized the answering voice. He would have known it among a million voices despite the hysterical catch and the staccato accents that tended to disguise it. It spoke a few jumbled and disconnected phrases, then broke into a stream of loud and wild laughing in which he detected the same note of maniacal glee that had characterized the ghastly laughter of W. Rufus Fairspeckle.

## CHAPTER XIV—THE ELUSIVE MR. SHEI

Spasmodically The Gray Phantom pressed the receiver closer to his ear. The laughter at the other end of the wire rose to a shrill crescendo, then ended abruptly in a harsh and discordant twang.

“Helen!” shouted The Phantom.

No answer came; nothing but a muffled thud that sounded as if the person at the other end had suddenly dropped the receiver. His face white, The Phantom turned to Miss Dale.

“Are you convinced now?” she murmured, a silken smile hovering about her lips. “And don’t you think you had better obey Mr. Shei’s wishes and leave the city immediately?”

The Phantom mopped the clammy perspiration from his forehead. A moment ago his face had been distorted from horror; now a look of rage glittered menacingly in his eyes. “Mr. Shei will pay for this,” he muttered thickly. “When I have finished with him, he will wish he had never been born.”

“And just what do you propose to do?” Miss Dale airily waved her slim, white hand. “As a measure of self-protection, knowing that he could not control you by any other means, Mr. Shei has caused Miss Hardwick to be inoculated with the same malady that killed Miss Darrow, and which will kill seven of the city’s wealthiest men unless they comply with his wishes. There is only one thing which can save her, and that is the antidote. It is in the possession of a Malayan scientist, one of Mr. Shei’s most devoted followers, and it will be administered only when you have carried out the terms I have explained to you.”

The Phantom stood silent while trying to fight down the surge of emotions that threatened to swamp his reason. Suddenly his roving gaze was fixed on the numbered tag above the mouthpiece of the telephone instrument. His lids contracted a little.

“Brilliant idea, my dear Phantom,” drawled Miss Dale. “For once you are quite transparent. It is your intention, as soon as you leave my apartment, to call up the

telephone exchange and trace the call, thus learning Miss Hardwick's whereabouts. It would be simple, for it was a long-distance connection, and such calls are always recorded. I will save you the trouble, however. Miss Hardwick is at Azurecrest."

"Azurecrest?" echoed The Phantom, momentarily a trifle dazed.

Miss Dale seemed to find his perplexity highly amusing. "When Mr. Shei learned the place was for sale, he bought it anonymously through an agent. It seemed an ideal spot for certain experiments he had in mind. Hoping to find you there, Miss Hardwick went to Azurecrest the day after Miss Darrow's death, and for divers reasons it was thought best to detain her."

The Phantom muttered an exclamation. Slade had lied to him, then, when The Phantom had called up Azurecrest earlier in the day and inquired for Miss Hardwick. Slade, he now suspected, was one of Mr. Shei's agents, and under the circumstances it was not surprising that he had disclaimed all knowledge of Helen. The Phantom might not have accepted his denial so readily if he had had the faintest inkling that Mr. Shei was the present owner of his former retreat.

Suddenly he whirled round on his heels and started abruptly from the room.

"Wait a moment," commanded Miss Dale as he reached the door, and a subtle quality in her tone caused him to stop. "How impulsive you are, my dear Phantom. I suppose you mean to rush madly off to Azurecrest and rescue the fair damsel. Stop and think for a moment. Surely you don't imagine I would have told you Miss Hardwick's whereabouts unless I had been absolutely certain that you were powerless to act."

The Phantom saw the weight of the argument at once. He moved away from the door.

"Glad you are willing to listen to reason," murmured Miss Dale. "You see, you could accomplish nothing at all by going to Azurecrest alone. The place is very carefully guarded by a little army of picked men, not to mention a few savage dogs. Of course, you might ask the police for assistance, supposing that you were on good terms with them, but what would be the result? If Mr. Shei and his followers are put in jail, Miss Hardwick will die, and so will the seven others. In fact, if anything at all happens to Mr. Shei and the members of his organization, the antidote will be irrevocably lost. I believe you grasp the idea, don't you?"



The Phantom's expression showed that he did. There was a baffled look in his eye that testified to his thorough appreciation of Mr. Shei's ingenious precautions.

"In other words," Miss Dale went on, her tones now soft and purring, "you have the best reasons in the world for not wishing the police to annoy Mr. Shei. In a way, Mr. Shei has compelled you to become an ally of his as a result of having Miss Hardwick in his power. It is really an excellent arrangement. And the police, when they understand the situation, will not be inclined to risk the lives of the seven wealthy men by forcing Mr. Shei to take extreme measures. Ah, you are beginning to understand at last that Mr. Shei is practically invulnerable."

"So it would seem," mumbled The Phantom, at last finding his voice.

"And don't you think you had better be reasonable and accept Mr. Shei's conditions? If you decide to be sensible, the antidote will be administered to Miss Hardwick as soon as Mr. Shei's plans are consummated, and she will not be one whit the worse off for her experience. On the other hand, if you choose to be disagreeable——" Miss Dale paused significantly.

The Phantom's tense face bespoke a great mental effort. One by one he reviewed the details of Mr. Shei's brilliant precautions. He could not see a loop-hole anywhere. As far as his imagination could stretch, the only result of obstinacy would be certain death for Helen. Yet the cup of defeat was a bitter draft. Never before had The Gray Phantom surrendered to any man; but now the life of one dear to him was in danger. He made his decision promptly.

"Mr. Shei wins," he announced with a bow. Then he walked out, oblivious of the triumphant smile that curled Miss Dale's lips. His brow was clouded as he descended in the elevator and walked out on the sidewalk. He was aware that the dragnet was thrown out and that he was endangering his liberty by going about so boldly, but arrest and imprisonment seemed a minor matter now. For the first time in his life he was a defeated man. Worse still, he could not rid himself of fears concerning Helen's safety.

Presently he paused as a new and even more disturbing thought flashed through his mind. He had accepted Mr. Shei's terms in the hope that by doing so he would insure Helen's safety. He wondered if he had been too gullible, and he dodged into a doorway while considering the question. He had been under a

terrific tension the past few days, and his mind had not been working with its customary agility. Now it occurred to him that he had nothing but Miss Dale's word for it that Helen's life would be spared if he yielded to Mr. Shei's terms. He had relied on her promise, not because of blind faith in her, but rather because Mr. Shei would gain nothing by killing Helen. He was merely using her as a means of suasion whereby to hold The Phantom in leash and prevent interference with his plans, and once she had served his purpose there was no reason why he should do her harm.

But The Phantom was far from satisfied. At Azurecrest, Helen must have heard and seen things that if divulged would constitute a great danger to Mr. Shei and his organization. Her keen perceptions and inquisitive nature were always delving into whatever was strange and mysterious. Would Mr. Shei dare let her live after her usefulness to him was past? Again, as he repeatedly asked himself the question, a cold perspiration broke out on The Phantom's brow.

Once more he made a quick decision, completely reversing the one he had made in Miss Dale's presence. He glanced quickly at his watch. If he remembered correctly, there would be a train for Azurecrest inside twenty minutes. Single-handed, relying only on his quick wits and agile strength, he would beard the lion in his den.

But first he was anxious to learn whether Culligore had made any progress toward clearing up the other phases of the mystery, particularly in regard to Mr. Fairspeckle. He entered a convenient telephone booth and called up the police department. Luck was with him, for after a brief delay he heard Culligore's voice over the wire.

"Oh, Fairspeckle! Why, he's vamoosed. Slipped away right from under the eyes of a doctor and a nurse. Can you beat it?"

The Phantom's veins tingled as he hung up. Fairspeckle's disappearance was final proof that he had correctly guessed the identity of Mr. Shei.

## CHAPTER XV—DR. TAGALA

Helen's little wrist watch showed a quarter past four.

Getting up from the chair, she roamed aimlessly about the room. Presently she stopped at the table and gazed down. The initials she had heedlessly scrawled in the dust were still there. The faint tracings that had betrayed her knowledge of Mr. Shei's identity seemed fraught with fate now. With a few idle strokes of the hand she had signed her own death warrant.

She could not have mistaken the sinister gleam she had seen in Slade's eyes as he looked down at the letters in the dust. His eyes had spelled her doom just as surely as the tracings on the table spelled the name by which Mr. Shei was known to the world at large. And the slam with which he had closed the door told even more eloquently than words that her life was forfeit.

Suddenly she felt a little hysterical. The fatal secret she had learned, the spectacular intrigues of Mr. Shei, even the scrawl in the dust seemed so trivial now that she felt an impulse to laugh. It was grotesque, she thought, that such a little thing as a couple of initials traced on the surface of a table should mean the blotting out of her life.

The house was very silent. No one had entered the room since Slade's departure, and she had spent the intervening hours in a state of musing detachment. Her thoughts and fancies flitted about in circles, and she had a curious impression that only her mind was functioning and that her emotions were numb. The slanting rays of the sun glimmered pleasantly on the furniture and she wondered abstractedly whether she should ever see the sunlight of another day. She glanced down at her dress, trimmed with delicate touches of red, and the thought struck her that perhaps she was wearing it for the last time. It was odd, she mused, that the prospect held no terror for her, and that her only feeling was a sense of dull, aching void.

Voices in the hall outside started her out of her reverie. The Gray Phantom's name, spoken in excited tones, sent an emotional quiver through her being and awoke her from her lethargy. Sensations, gentle and stimulating ones, stirred in

the depths of her consciousness.

“The Gray Phantom,” she whispered, looking pensively at the door. He had inspired her with emotions that she had never been quite able to understand. At times they had terrified her by their strangeness and power, for she had felt as if they were rousing new impulses within her and sweeping her along toward an unknown destiny. His career, bright and swift as the flash of a meteor, had intrigued her imagination even while she felt awed and a little frightened at the stories she heard about him. Of late he had tried to throw off the shackles of the past and start a new life, and she had watched his efforts with a strange and bewildering sense of sponsorship.

The voices in the hall had ceased now, but the name that had been spoken was still echoing in her ears and vibrating against hidden cords in her consciousness. Of a sudden the prospect of death, which a few minutes before she had contemplated without fear, filled her with dread and poignant regrets. The mere mention of a name had inspired in her a vehement desire to live.

She tiptoed to the door. It did not surprise her that Slade had left it unlocked. The picket fence, the ferocious Cæsar, and the attendants made such a precaution unnecessary. She stepped out in the hall, then looked hesitantly about her, but she could see nothing of the men whose voices she had heard a few moments ago. At the end of the hall a door stood open, and she moved silently in that direction. Entering, she ran her eyes over long white benches on which were bottles, jars, and queer-looking apparatus. There was a reek of chemicals in the air, and she guessed it was a laboratory of some sort. It all seemed a little strange to her, but in the next moment her attention was engaged by voices coming through a partly open door at one side of the large room.

“Oh, it’s serious enough,” one of them was saying, and she instantly knew that the speaker was Slade. “The Gray Phantom is the only man alive who can queer Mr. Shei’s game.”

The words were spoken in a tone of reluctant respect that gave Helen a thrill. Coming from an enemy, it was a striking tribute to The Phantom’s genius and power.

“Ah, The Gray Phantom! I have heard the name. One of your fascinating master criminals, is he not?” The second man spoke with the exaggerated precision that

characterizes the educated foreigner. “But why does The Gray Phantom interfere in the affairs of Mr. Shei?”

Slade chuckled grimly. “That’s hard to tell, Doctor Tagala. Perhaps for a number of reasons. Maybe he dislikes to see another man excel him at his own game. There’s such a thing as professional jealousy even among crooks, you know. All we know for certain is that he arrived in New York the day Mr. Shei’s notices were posted. One of our men saw him, and he was watched almost from the moment of his arrival. His actions indicated plainly that he had gone on the warpath against Mr. Shei. Confound the infernal meddler!”

“But Mr. Shei is a resourceful man,” observed Doctor Tagala. “He surely can devise some means whereby this impudent fellow may be restrained.”

“He has already done so. As you know, he motored back to New York early this morning, but I had a long-distance telephone conversation with him a few minutes ago. He made a very good suggestion, but the execution of it will have to be left to you.”

“To me?”

“You remember hearing me speak of the young lady who came here looking for The Gray Phantom. Her name is Helen Hardwick, and she is much too astute for her own good. She’s learned a number of things that won’t bear repeating, and among them is the identity of Mr. Shei. Of course, as soon as I found out how much she knew, I saw that she would have to be put out of the way, and I told Mr Shei so over the telephone. He over-ruled my plan; or, rather, he suggested an improvement.”

“What was it?”

“To let the young lady remain on earth five or six days longer; in other words, until Mr. Shei had cashed in his chips. You see, doctor, The Gray Phantom has quite a crush on the young lady, and he would rather go through hell fire than have a single hair on her head hurt.”

Helen felt the blood rushing to her head.

“I am beginning to comprehend,” remarked Doctor Tagala. “It is Mr. Shei’s plan to keep The Gray Phantom in check by threatening to inflict harm on the young

lady. An excellent idea, but a trifle vague.”

“Oh, there’s nothing vague about it, and it involves something far more substantial than mere threats. Can’t you guess, doctor?”

There came an interval of silence. Evidently Doctor Tagala was exercising his imagination. Helen crept a little closer, then peered through the narrow crack between the door and the jamb. Only two or three feet from her, with his lips curled into a leer, sat Slade. Her eyes traveled a little farther until she saw Doctor Tagala, and suddenly she caught her breath. It required all her self-control to keep from betraying her presence. She had seen the face twice before, first in the Thelma Theater and later at the window of the room in which Slade had interviewed her shortly after her arrival at Azurecrest, and on each occasion the sight had given her a chill. The coarse and brutal features, framed by black hair that reached almost to the shoulders, stood out in sharp contrast to the man’s cultured speech and polished manners. Again, as she saw the brutish lips and the flaming eyes, she received an impression of something evil and loathsome. She leaned weakly against the wall, and then she heard again Doctor Tagala’s voice.

“I am very poor at making conjectures. You will have to enlighten me.”

“Well, then, Mr. Shei’s orders are that you are to inoculate the young lady with the laughing fever. You will calculate the dose just as you did in the cases of the seven millionaires. The Phantom will be told that the antidotes will be administered on the one condition that he goes back to his bailiwick and keeps his hands out of Mr. Shei’s affairs. That will keep him on his good behavior for a week, and by that time Mr. Shei will have cleaned up.”

“And the young lady?”

Slade laughed unpleasantly. “She knows too much, as I have already told you. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Much knowledge is apt to prove fatal. You will merely forget to administer the antidote when the time comes.”

Doctor Tagala gave a rumbling laugh. Helen felt a sudden chill. She leaned weakly against the wall. Inoculation with what Slade had called the laughing fever seemed far more dreadful than death itself.

“By the way, doctor,” Slade went on, “I hope the antidote is safely hidden?”

“You may rest assured on that point,” Tagala declared. “I have hidden it so securely that not even Mr. Shei knows where to find it.”

“Good. That being the case, our seven millionaire friends would be in a bad fix if a sudden misfortune should befall you.”

“Nothing on earth could save them,” said Tagala emphatically. “The secret is in my exclusive possession. No other man could diagnose the malady, much less prescribe a remedy. The lives of the seven gentlemen are absolutely in my hand.”

“Then there isn’t the slightest chance of Mr. Shei’s plans falling through?”

“Not the slightest. The seven gentlemen will pay Mr. Shei’s price, and within a week we shall all be rich beyond the dreams of avarice.” The gloating tones hinted that Doctor Tagala’s imagination was luxuriating in enchanting visions. “By the way, when do we inoculate the young lady?”

“Better wait till evening,” suggested Slade. “There will be less danger of interruption then.”

Helen turned away. She feared an involuntary cry of horror would betray her if she remained longer. Steadying herself with great difficulty, she stole out of the laboratory and slipped back into her room. Her watch showed half past five, and the inoculation would probably not take place for an hour or two. In the meantime she wanted to think and if possible find a way of escape, but the fierce pounding of the blood against her temples seemed to preclude clear thinking.

Her only distinct thought was that she must flee from Azurecrest no matter what dangers and difficulties she might encounter. She felt that The Gray Phantom would gladly fling his life away in order to protect her, but in this instance his hands were tied. He could not make a single move without rendering her predicament worse, and that fact would restrain him, much as he might rebel against his enforced inaction. Mr. Shei’s men would point out to him that her safety depended on an unresisting attitude on his part. He could not know what she had just learned from the conversation between Slade and Tagala, that it was their intention to take her life, anyway.

Somehow, she told herself, she must manage to escape from the horrors awaiting her at Azurecrest. Even being clawed and torn by the savage dog seemed preferable to the slightest touch of Doctor Tagala’s hand. She shuddered

whenever her imagination conjured up a vision of his repelling features, and a hoarse cry rose in her throat at thought of being inoculated with the fearful malady. Miss Neville's maniacal outbursts were still ringing in her ears, and she remembered the hideous strains that had poured from the lips of the dying woman in the Thelma Theater.

The recollections filled her with sickening terror. With ghastly visions floating before her eyes, she rushed blindly from the room. The hall was deserted, and she scurried down the stairs as if pursued by a monster. She reached the outer door without hindrance, and a flickering hope began to stir within her as she scanned the wide stretch of lawn surrounding the house. The long shadows cast by the trees gave her an additional sense of safety. Swiftly, without a backward glance, she started to run. Her hopes rose higher and higher as she plunged into the thick shadows among the trees. In a few moments now, if her flight remained unnoticed, she would have reached the fence. Somehow she would manage to scale it, or maybe she could find an opening somewhere.

She quickened her pace, but of a sudden a low, rumbling growl sent a chill through her veins. She stopped, stood crouching behind the scraggy trunk of a hemlock, and glanced wildly in all directions. With great leaps and skips, a huge, black form was rushing toward her, its teeth gleaming ominously between slavering jaws. In a few moments it would be at her throat, and then—— Once more a vision of Doctor Tagala's repulsive features filled her with dread. Again she looked about her, then raced swiftly in the direction where the shadows were thickest. Behind her the underbrush crackled beneath the paws of the savage beast. In a moment or two he would be snapping at her heels.

Again hope rose within her. A squatty shed loomed within a narrow clearing. With the strength of frenzy she sped toward it. If she could reach it before the dog could overtake her, she would be temporarily safe. A great terror urged her on with the speed of the wind. Now the dog was snatching at the hem of her fluttering skirt, but she was already at the door. With a final exertion of strength she pushed it open and rushed in, then slammed it shut behind her. With a deep breath of relief she lurched against the wall. Suddenly she recoiled as from a blow.

“What are you doin' here?” queried a gruff voice.

She stared into the dusk around her. A few wisps of waning sunlight straggled in



through a small window in the rear. Gradually, as her eyes grew accustomed to the dusk, she descried a stocky figure leaning over a shovel. It was the sour-faced individual who had opened the gate for her on her arrival at Azurecrest. Little by little, as her pupils responded to the dim light, she took in each detail of the scene. An amazed gasp slipped from her lips.

An oblong space had been torn up in the center of the flooring and on each side of it were little mounds of dirt. Instinctively she stepped closer and looked down into a rectangular hollow. She had a weird sensation that she was looking into a grave, and with a shudder she glanced up into the man's face.

"What—what's that?" she asked hoarsely, indicating the hollow.

The man guffawed. "Better not ask questions, miss. This is a nasty job, and you'd better clear out."

He looked aside just then, and she followed his glance. In a corner of the shed she saw a heap vaguely resembling a human form. Her feet seemed to drag her forward in spite of her horror, and she lifted the blanket that covered the figure. Then she stood rigid, her tightly drawn lips stifling the cry that rose in her throat. At once she recognized the features of Miss Neville, the woman whose maniacal laughter had startled her the night she arrived at Azurecrest. The face was white and rigid now, but the wraith of a ghastly smile lingered on her lips. A long, shuddering moan escaped her, and then she sank limply to the floor.

She had a weird sensation, during the hours that followed, that she was treading on the brink of oblivion. A merciful mist seemed to obscure everything. She was dimly aware of being carried from the shed and placed on a long, white table. Through the haze that engulfed her she glimpsed the repulsive features of Doctor Tagala. She felt a sting in the arm, and then a sickening substance raced through her veins. For a time she felt as though unseen hands were wafting her body through a limitless void. Somewhere—far away, she thought—there was laughter, and she had a curious impression that it was coming from her own lips.

Dawn came, and a flood of sunlight brightened the void through which she was roaming. The strange and wild fancies that had flitted around her throughout the night seemed to melt away, and now she saw things more clearly. She was standing at a telephone, and over the wire came a voice that sounded strangely familiar. Words poured from her lips, but they seemed futile and meaningless,

and then an involuntary contraction of laryngeal muscles filled the room with wild strains of laughter. It frightened her, and just then a hand jerked her away.

“That’ll do,” said a voice, and she thought it was Slade’s. “The Gray Phantom has heard enough.”

## CHAPTER XVI—CHECKMATED

A mass of jagged, elongated clouds hovered like scowling specters over Azurecrest. A raw wind sighed moodily among the birches and hemlocks as The Gray Phantom reached the apex of the hill. Stopping within fifty yards of the high picket fence, he glanced toward the house that once had served him as a retreat and shelter against the activities of the police. The white trimmings of doors and windows gleamed faintly in the dusk and here and there a light twinkled through the trees.

The Phantom turned away and walked a few paces toward the fence. On the trip from the city he had tried to exclude Helen from his mind, for each thought of her was maddening, and he needed a cool brain and a steady nerve if he were to accomplish his purpose. By sheer force of will he had tried to forget the hysterical laughter he had heard over the wire and which had told him with grim eloquence what had happened to her. To keep disturbing thoughts from his mind, he had outlined several plans of procedure and prepared himself for the difficult and perilous task that awaited him.

After a brief search over the rugged ground, he stopped at the side of a huge boulder and cleared away an accumulation of dry twigs, dead branches, and rotting weeds. After the obstruction had been removed, an opening barely large enough to permit him to crawl through appeared at the base of the rock. It slanted gently into the ground, then widened into a tunnel in which he was able to walk upright. During his sojourn at Azurecrest it had often occurred to him that an emergency exit might some day prove desirable, and he had built the tunnel in consequence. He had not happened to mention the existence of the passage when he sold the place, and he did not think it likely that the new owner had discovered it. Though he had never had occasion to use it during his occupancy, it now gave him a distinct advantage in that it enabled him to enter the house secretly and by an easy route.

Reaching the farther end of the tunnel, he fumbled along the wall until he found a spring deftly hidden in a crevice. Evidently the mechanism was still in good working order, for a door swung squeakily on unoiled hinges. He passed inside, touched another spring, and the door swung shut. In another moment he had

switched on an electric light.

The room was narrow and almost square, and there were neither windows nor visible doors. It was supplied with air through ingeniously hidden ventilators and The Phantom had fitted it up for brief occupancy. Occasionally it had suited his mood to retire to the hidden chamber and read one of his favorite books.

Throwing off the light overcoat he had been wearing, he then examined his automatic and the little pocket case in which he carried a number of carefully selected tools that had stood him in good stead in numerous emergencies. Despite the advantages afforded him by the tunnel and the secret room, he would be surrounded by dangers at every step. He had no doubt Mr. Shei's henchmen would kill him on sight, and he could not afford to toss his life away recklessly while Helen was in danger.

He glanced at his watch. It was only a little after ten, and sounds reaching him through the ventilator shaft warned him that the occupants of the house were still about. As soon as the house had quieted down a little, he would try the first plan on his programme. If that failed, he was holding two or three others in reserve.

For half an hour he waited, then a sliding panel opened at his touch on a spring, and he ascended a narrow spiral stairway that terminated in what appeared to be a blank wall. His hand touched a lever, and The Phantom passed through an aperture that instantly closed behind him. He was standing in a dark room in a seldom frequented part of the house. He advanced a few steps, then stood still, listening. Someone was laughing, and in the darkness the sounds impressed him even more forcibly than they had in the light of day. He walked on, trying desperately to exclude the agonizing accents from his ears. Hurriedly he opened a door, then as quickly drew it to again. Someone was passing in the hall outside.

He waited till the footsteps moved away, then looked warily out. A tall figure, walking with a brisk, swinging gait, was turning into one of the rooms farther down the corridor. As soon as the door had closed behind him, The Phantom followed on tiptoe. Noticing that the hall was deserted, he bent his ear to the keyhole. Two voices, one of them speaking with a distinct foreign accent, were talking in tones signifying that they had reason to be well pleased with themselves. They were discussing the progress of Mr. Shei's adventure and congratulating themselves on the prospect of becoming immensely rich within a few days.

The Phantom, listening intently, was learning several facts of interest. The two speakers were addressing each other as Doctor Tagala and Mr. Slade, and he gathered from divers remarks that the latter was in charge of affairs at Azurecrest while Mr. Shei was watching developments in New York. Doctor Tagala seemed to be the scientist who had discovered the poison that was the chief factor in Mr. Shei's scheme.

Having absorbed a great deal of useful information, The Phantom raised his head from the keyhole. Then, he flexed his muscles and drew the automatic from his pocket. Here was his opportunity for putting his first plan to the test. It was cruder than the alternative ones, but it might also prove vastly more effective. His hand closed around the knob. With automatic in one hand he softly pushed the door open, entering so silently that for several moments neither of the two men in the room was aware of the intrusion.

He gazed for an instant at the singularly repulsive face of the man addressed as Doctor Tagala, then gave his companion a fleeting glance of inspection, noticing that Slade had the strong jaw and aggressiveness of manners that usually go with a domineering personality. Only the eyes, shifty and unmagnetic, gave him a suspicion that there was a weak strain in the man's moral fiber. Smiling affably, with every nerve in his body atingle, he advanced to the table.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," he said softly.

With a hoarse cry Slade sprang from his chair, but Doctor Tagala gave the intruder only a cold, impersonal glance.

"Sit down, Slade," ordered The Phantom, "and both of you keep your hands on the table." He made a significant gesture with the automatic.

Slade stared and looked as if not quite certain that his eyes were to be trusted.

"How the devil did you get in?" he exclaimed explosively. He tried hard to get a grip on himself, but the twitching of the lines around his mouth showed that he was ill at ease. "But then," he added, steadying his voice with an effort, "I suppose anything is possible for The Gray Phantom."

"Ah, so you are The Gray Phantom." Doctor Tagala seemed mildly impressed. "I have heard a great deal of you, and I have felt some curiosity in regard to you. I must confess to a great disappointment, however. I did not think a man of your

genius would descend to such crude methods. Of you I had expected subtlety and finesse. Bah!”

Slade was rapidly regaining his self-control, but he kept his hands obediently on the table. From time to time he cast an uneasy glance into the muzzle of The Phantom’s pistol.

“I can’t imagine how you got in,” he admitted. “How you got past the picket fence, the dogs, and the watchmen is too much for me. But, now that you are here, what do you intend to do? I suppose it has something to do with Miss Hardwick?”

“Precisely, Slade.”

The other sneered. “Don’t you realize that there’s nothing you can do? What you heard over the telephone wire should have warned you to keep hands off. Miss Hardwick’s life is absolutely in our power.”

“For the present, yes; but I think the situation will soon be reversed.”

“How?”

The Phantom’s lids contracted and his eyes held a steely glitter as he looked down at the man in the chair. Then he cast a quick glance over his shoulder. At any moment someone was apt to enter and deprive him of his advantage.

“I intend to fight the devil with fire,” he announced. “In other words, I am going to fight your Mr. Shei with his own weapons. Mr. Shei works through fear. He hopes to induce his seven victims to surrender half of their fortunes to him by putting the fear of death into them. Now, it’s a poor rule that doesn’t work both ways.”

“Suppose you come to the point,” suggested Slade sneeringly.

“Very well. I understand that you, Slade, are in charge here during Mr. Shei’s absence. I want you to do two things at once. One of them is to release Miss Hardwick immediately; the other, to have the antidote administered to her.”

Slade’s eyes left the automatic and gave The Phantom an insolent glance. “A bit dictatorial, aren’t you? Has it occurred to you that I might refuse?”

“Certainly.” The Phantom smiled, but his eyes were hard as steel. “Mr. Shei has probably considered the possibility that his seven victims may refuse to accept his terms, but he feels fairly sure that in the end they will submit. His whole scheme is based on the idea that a man will do almost anything to escape death. So will you, Slade; especially when I convince you that you will never leave this room alive unless you do as I say.”

Slade shifted uneasily in his chair. A tinge of gray was slowly creeping into his face.

“Make no mistake, Slade,” The Phantom went on. “It’s true there are no bloodstains on my hands, but this time I am gambling for higher stakes than ever before in my life. I could kill you without the slightest scruple.”

His eyes, as he looked down at the other man, were keen as rapiers. He spoke each word with an emphasis that spelled terrible earnestness. Slade winced and writhed beneath his lowering gaze.

“What—what do you want me to do?” he stammered.

The Phantom felt a thrill as he saw that the other was yielding. He had judged him correctly at first glance. Slade, despite his swaggers and blustering, was at heart a coward.

“In the first place, you are to instruct Doctor Tagala to administer the antidote to Miss Hardwick immediately. I will give you exactly sixty seconds. If you have not obeyed by that time, you will be a dead man.”

To emphasize the threat, The Phantom took out his watch. Slade turned a quavering glance on the scientist. He opened his lips to speak, but Doctor Tagala anticipated him.

“I dislike to interrupt such a dramatic scene,” he declared in drawling tones edged with a faint trace of sarcasm, “but it has proceeded far enough. You see, my dear Gray Phantom, that even if Mr. Slade should give me such absurd instructions as you request, I would refuse to comply with them. Furthermore, in order to save you needless waste of energy, let me inform you that the antidote is concealed in a place where I alone know where to find it. We are protected against every conceivable emergency.”

The Phantom felt a presentiment of defeat, but his face, tense and threatening, showed not the slightest sign of it. With a quick movement he turned the pistol from Slade and pointed the muzzle straight at Doctor Tagala's head.

"All right, doctor," he said crisply, "in that case let me warn you that I could kill you with just as little scruple as I could Slade."

But the scientist only folded his arms and smiled. A look of patient amusement crossed his swarthy and evil face.

"That is an excellent example of what you Americans call bluff," he drawled. "You can't frighten me, for I know you have not the slightest intention to kill me. If you take my life, the antidote will never be found, and then the charming young lady will die. Mr. Shei anticipated just such a situation as this when he made me the sole custodian of the antidote."

A trace of disappointment passed over The Phantom's face; a sense of bafflement took hold of him as he realized that, thanks to Mr. Shei's ingenious precautions, his first plan had failed disastrously. Still pointing the pistol, he backed slowly toward the door.

"Mr. Shei wins this time," he frankly acknowledged, "but he will lose in the end. The Gray Phantom was never beaten yet. I wish you good-night, gentlemen."

With that he was out of the door and running swiftly down the hall. With a cry of rage Slade sprang from the chair and started in pursuit, blowing a pocket whistle as he ran. Men appeared from every direction, and Slade shouted orders that the house and grounds be thoroughly searched at once. The men scattered, and in a few moments the search was on.

But The Gray Phantom, safe in his hidden chamber, was already at work on the details of his next move.



## **CHAPTER XVII—DOCTOR TAGALA'S DISCOVERY**

A glance at his watch as he entered the secret room showed The Phantom that daybreak was not far away. In a little while it would be highly unsafe for him to walk about the house; besides, the execution of his next move depended for its success on darkness and quiet. To jeopardize his project by a reckless move would be the height of folly and might result in disastrous consequences. Much as his fears and anxiety urged him to immediate action, The Phantom decided to wait till the following night.

He lay down on the cot and slept by snatches. Now and then, as a faint but terrifying sound came down the ventilator shaft, he awoke with a start. Peals of unnatural laughter, sounding remotely in the darkness of the hidden chamber, started a cold sweat on his forehead. By sheer physical force he would shut out the sounds, knowing that for the present he could do nothing, but the mutterings that fell from his lips and the convulsive clenching of his hands boded no good for Mr. Shei and his followers.

Morning came, and he tried to fix his mind on his forthcoming move. A grim look came into his face as he contemplated the step he was about to take. Ordinarily he would have shrunk from it in disgust, for it was an expedient he had never employed in the past. Now, however, with the life of Helen Hardwick in danger, he must employ whatever means might prove effective. It was no time for niceties or scruples. Besides, there was no reason why he should be restrained by ethical considerations when dealing with blackguards like Mr. Shei and his retainers.

The hours dragged. A troubled look on his face, The Phantom paced the floor of the narrow chamber. His plans for the night were complete except for one detail. Cudgel his brain as he might, there was one small but important matter that continued to puzzle him. Evening came, and the solution of the difficulty still eluded him. He was a little faint from hunger, for he had not eaten for twenty-four hours, and he wondered if his brain would not work better after a visit to the pantry. In a little while the house would quiet down for the night, and then he could safely leave his hiding place.

At last he was ready for action. He gave his automatic a careful inspection. Into his pocket he put a coil of thin but strong rope which he had unearthed from an old chest. Then he turned off the light and ascended the spiral stairway. After listening in vain for sounds, he tiptoed out in the hallway, then down the main stairway. The entire house seemed immersed in sleep, and even the strained laughter had stopped for a time. Evidently the occupants of the house, never guessing that he was hiding in their very midst, supposed that The Gray Phantom had left Azurecrest.

He felt more alert after gratifying his hunger in the well-stocked pantry. By the back stairway he returned to the second floor. Silent as a shadow he walked down the hall, pausing briefly before every door and listening. It was important that he should locate Doctor Tagala's room, for his whole plan revolved around the scientist. Also, he was anxious to take the doctor completely by surprise.

At one of the doors he stopped longer than before the others. A faint reek of chemicals filtered through the keyhole, and in a vague sense the odor suggested Doctor Tagala's nearness. Neither light nor sound came through the tiny opening, so evidently there was no one in the room. The door was locked, but a simple operation with one of the tools in his case opened it readily, and he stepped inside.

He peered sharply into the darkness before he thought it safe to snap on his electric flash light. As the small point of light played over floor and walls, he knew at once that the room was a chemical laboratory. Chemistry had always held a strong fascination for him, and his knowledge of the science was far more comprehensive than the average layman's. Something prompted him to glance twice at the long rows of bottles stacked on shelves around the room. Stepping closer, he read some of the labels, and suddenly he gave a faint chuckle of elation. The problem that had puzzled him all day was at last solved. From its place on the shelf he took a small bottle containing a colorless fluid, and slipped it into his pocket. The chemical was a very ordinary one, but he expected it to serve a highly useful purpose.

Again he darted the electric gleam over the room. At one side was a door, and as he bent his ear to the keyhole he heard sounds of deep and regular breathing. Something told him that the sleeper was Doctor Tagala, for it seemed only logical that the scientist should occupy the room adjoining the laboratory. Quickly extinguishing his flash light, he turned the knob and noiselessly pushed

the door open, then stepped softly in the direction whence the sounds of breathing came. Once more he brought his flash light into play, but only to assure himself by a swift glance that the sleeper was Tagala.

A faint, triumphant grin curled his lips, and then the flash disappeared in his pocket. For a moment, standing in utter darkness, he tensed his muscles for action. In an instant he pressed his knee firmly against the sleeper's chest and wound his fingers tightly around Tagala's throat. A harsh rumble sounded in the doctor's windpipe, but the firm clutch over his Adam's apple prevented an outcry. He writhed, squirmed, doubled up his knees, and attempted to fight with his arms, but The Phantom gradually increased the pressure on his throat, and his struggle grew feebler and feebler. Finally, when he was nearly exhausted, The Phantom took out a cloth with which he had provided himself before leaving the secret room, and applied it as a gag. The doctor made only a feeble show of resistance while his arms and legs were bound, and finally The Phantom took the limp form on his back and started from the room.

Every inch of the way was beset with perils. A board creaking under the double weight of captor and captive might bring on a sudden attack, or one of the occupants of the house might be encountered in the hall. But luck was with The Phantom, and in a short time he had placed his burden on the cot in the hidden chamber. Panting from the strenuous exercise, he removed the gag from his prisoner's mouth, then switched on the light.

The doctor, breathing stertorously, his face almost black from the recent choking, wriggled his arms and legs in a futile effort to free himself. Seeing it was hopeless, he subsided and looked dazedly about him. His eyes opened wide as he saw The Phantom.

"You—again!" he exclaimed.

The Phantom smiled at sight of his stupefaction.

"You didn't suppose I would give up so easily; did you, doctor? You don't seem particularly pleased to see me. No doubt you thought I left Azurecrest after the fizzle last night. I suppose you are wondering where you are. It is enough for you to know that you will never leave this room until we have had an understanding, and that for the present you may regard yourself as my prisoner. Your confederates will never find you, and you may as well reconcile yourself to

the fact that they are unable to help you.”

Tagala, gradually recovering breath and wits, looked balefully at The Phantom.

“You—you will suffer for this!” he muttered thickly. Again he strained at the cords around his ankles and wrists, but he soon saw that it was useless. “We know how to deal with meddlers.”

The Phantom smiled complacently. As yet it had not occurred to his prisoner to cry for help, and The Phantom had no fear of the result if he should do so. Though Slade and the others were not far away, they were as harmless as if they did not exist. Save for the ventilating shaft, the room was practically soundproof, and the exits were so completely hidden that they would never be able to locate the chamber.

“We shall see,” was his calm response. “Mr. Shei appears to be a very shrewd man, but even he has his limitations. The infirmities of age are beginning to show a marked effect on his strategy. He is too old for this sort of thing.”

“So,” said the scientist in queer tones, “you think you know him?”

The Phantom nodded. “I had an encounter with him some years ago, and he proved to me then that he had extraordinary astuteness. As a matter of fact, he was a little too much for me. The other day I ran into him by accident, and we had quite a pleasant little chat.”

Tagala lay motionless on the cot while his eyes, slowly recovering their customary brilliance, searched The Phantom’s face.

“The police are laboring under the delusion that *you* are Mr. Shei,” he dryly observed.

“Oh, well, the police are not particularly bright at times.” The Phantom shrugged. “Now, doctor, you and I are going to have a very serious talk. I was outmaneuvered last night, but this is my round. I shall convince you by a very simple method that it will be wise for you to place the antidote in my hands.”

Despite his humiliation and physical discomfort, the doctor gave a contemptuous laugh.

“Fool!” he snorted. “Every move you make is fore-doomed to failure. We have provided against every possible emergency. Our plan is already a certain success. Only this afternoon Mr. Shei telephones me from New York that everything is going well. A group of the most celebrated physicians in America have held several consultations without practical results. They are utterly at a loss to diagnose the disease or to prescribe even a palliative. Poor idiots! It took me years to perfect the toxin, and they have only a few days in which to combat its effects. On the seventh day after the inoculation, the seven subjects will be doomed unless the antidote is administered in the meantime. After the seventh day it will be too late. Mr. Shei told me that two of the subjects are already in a mood to discuss terms. Perhaps by to-morrow they will place half of their fortunes at Mr. Shei’s feet.”

“You seem very confident of success,” observed The Phantom.

“Our success is already assured. In a few days I shall be wealthier than I ever before dreamed of being. Some people scoff at money, but it is an excellent thing for all that. All my life, while pursuing my scientific investigations, I have had my eye on what you Americans call the main chance. I never dreamed that I should realize my hopes through an accidental discovery. Ever hear of the datura plant?”

The Phantom shook his head.

“It grows in great profusion in my native soil, the Malay States, but it can be transplanted or produced almost anywhere. It is an odd plant, from four to six feet high, with wide-spreading branches and black flowers that are shaped like trumpets. Children have been known to die after eating the seeds, which are very poisonous. A few years ago, after an extensive tour in Europe, I returned to my native land and was called upon to treat a child who had eaten a great quantity of the seeds. It was then I made the discovery that shall make me a wealthy man in a few days. It was a mere accident, but isn’t our whole life a series of accidents?”

He smiled philosophically, for he had quite recovered from the effects of his recent humiliation.

“If you will permit me to explain a little further,” he went on, “I think you will understand how invincible we are and how foolish it is for you to oppose us. The

poisonous property of the datura plant is known as daturin. It is a very curious drug. Its active principle is a mixture of a kind of atropine and hyoscyamine, but the true nature of the component alkaloids has never been fully determined. It is one of the mysteries of nature. Among the symptoms of datura poisoning are hoarseness, dryness of the mouth, dilation of the pupils, disturbed heart action, bad memory, and a curious vocal affection that produces involuntary laughter. No chemical antidote had been either known or suggested until I made my accidental discovery. It has suited my purpose to keep that discovery to myself.”

There was an elated smirk on his face, and The Phantom turned away in disgust.

“I came to America,” continued the doctor in oily tones, “and by mere chance made the acquaintance of our remarkable Mr. Shei. I shall not weary you by reciting all the details. I happened to mention my discovery to Mr. Shei, and his brilliant mind immediately conceived the idea of putting it to a highly profitable use. Like all great things, his plan was simplicity itself. His theory was based on the fact, so aptly stated by yourself last night, that the average run of mortals can be most effectively controlled through the factor of fear. He suggested that if a deadly malady were communicated to a number of wealthy men, they could easily be persuaded to pay almost any price for a sure antidote, especially if the antidote were the exclusive property of an individual or an organization.

“That was the beginning of the idea. It required quite a little elaboration. The chief factors in the plan were the poison and the antidote. The antidote was in readiness, but the poison had to be so adjusted that it would produce death within a specified time unless the antidote were administered meanwhile. If the plan was to succeed, we must be in a position to tell the subjects that they would die within a certain number of days unless they paid our price for the antidote. You probably know, since you appear to be an educated man, that the ancient Chinese knew how to adjust poisons so as to produce death within a certain time. All my life I have been making special studies along that line, and my discoveries proved very valuable in connection with Mr. Shei’s project. Yet, for a long time, I was unable to adjust the poison with sufficient accuracy. With Mr. Shei’s assistance I fitted up a laboratory here and began making additional researches. It was necessary to have human subjects for the experiments, and Mr. Shei furnished me several. Two or three, who were inoculated in the early stages of the work, failed to react properly to the antidote, and one or two of them were unfortunate enough to die.”

“You murdered them, in plain words,” suggested The Phantom curtly.

“Harsh word, my dear Gray Phantom. As a whole, the experiments were highly successful. I discovered how to adjust the poison so as to produce death within a specified time. We were now ready to go ahead with the plan. Mr. Shei selected the victims, and I showed a number of his most trusted men how the poison was to be injected. Each of these, with an assistant, was assigned to one of the seven victims chosen by Mr. Shei, and the whole number of inoculations were successfully accomplished the other night. In a few days——”

“What about Miss Darrow?” inquired The Phantom brusquely. “What did you gain by murdering her?”

“Really, I wish you would drop that unpleasant word from your vocabulary. Miss Darrow had been unfortunate enough to learn certain facts which were detrimental to Mr. Shei. She had been watched constantly, and she was followed to the Thelma that night. Her actions were peculiar, and Mr. Shei’s agents suspected she was on the point of making embarrassing revelations. I was in New York at the time and happened to be within reach, so the agents communicated with me. I arrived just in time to prevent unpleasant consequences. In another moment she might have made some very damaging disclosures. In fact, she had already sent a peculiarly worded note to that remarkable person whose name eludes me.”

“Vincent Starr?” suggested The Phantom.

“Precisely. Mr. Starr is one of your highly temperamental geniuses. Just how much Miss Darrow had learned will never be known, but I thought it advisable to act promptly. The amount of poison I injected into her veins was carefully calculated to produce death within a few minutes.”

The Phantom mastered his sense of loathing. What he was learning might prove highly useful later on.

“Wouldn’t a knife thrust have been quicker and safer?” he suggested. “Even in the few minutes between the inoculation of the poison and Miss Darrow’s death she might have blurted out all she knew.”

“There was slight danger of that. The poison always blunts one’s mental faculties, especially when given in such a large dose. It was very unlikely that

Miss Darrow would speak coherently in the brief interval while the poison acted. A quick thrust with a knife would perhaps have been safer, but we needed the moral effect.”

“The—*what?*”

The satisfied gleam in the doctor’s eyes testified that he was quite at ease once more, despite the cords that incapacitated him for action.

“Yes, the moral effect was valuable. You see, the seven victims selected by Mr. Shei had to be impressed with the deadliness of the poison. Unless they were thoroughly convinced that the poison would kill, they might not have been amenable to reason. Miss Darrow’s death, coming just a day or two before the seven were inoculated, was a valuable object lesson.”

An oily smile creased the scientist’s swarthy features. Once more, despite his uncomfortable position, he seemed hugely content.

“No doubt,” admitted The Phantom ironically. “Mr. Shei doesn’t seem to have overlooked anything. What I can’t understand is why you, a man of scientific attainments, should consent to do the bidding of such a blackguard.”

“Wealth is a very excellent thing,” said Tagala musingly. “It is even more desirable than fame. Mr. Shei has put me in the way of acquiring a great fortune, so why should I not serve him?”

“And what are you going to do with the money after you have acquired it by such vile methods, granting that your scheme succeeds?”

“Enjoy life, my friend.” The doctor’s repulsive features were wreathed in smiles. “I have a great capacity for appreciating the beautiful things in life. Nature works by contrasts. She treated me very shabbily as far as physical characteristics are concerned, but by way of compensation she gave me a taste for the only things that really matter. I intend to surround myself with luxuries that an Indian maharajah might envy. I intend to feast my eyes on the costliest and the best the world can produce. Now perhaps you understand?”

The Phantom nodded. Inwardly he tingled and glowed, but his face showed nothing but boredom and disgust. The insight he had just obtained into Tagala’s character would have an important bearing on his plan.



“And now that we understand each other,” the doctor continued, “let us terminate this rather dreary farce. This little room is pleasant enough, but I never sleep well in strange places, and these cords are not conducive to repose.”

“You will be free to go wherever you please as soon as we have settled the little matter I mentioned a moment ago.”

“Ah! Then you persist in your foolish determination. Your experience last night should have convinced you of the futility of your efforts, but I see you are as stubborn as ever.”

“More so,” The Phantom assured him. “I have discovered a new weapon since last night. Before you leave this room, you will have told me where the antidote is hidden.”

Tagala grinned insolently. He tilted his head back against the pillow and complacently regarded The Phantom.

“You are very amusing,” he murmured. “I thought that——”

He stopped and looked toward a corner of the ceiling. The Phantom followed his glance, and his figure tensed perceptibly. From somewhere above their heads came strains of soft, lilting laughter, edged now and then with a hysterical vibration. A pallor began to spread over The Phantom’s face.

“There, my dear Gray Phantom,” said the doctor elatedly, “is your answer.”

The Phantom clenched his fingers spasmodically. His face was hard and his eyes held a strange gleam.

“You are mistaken, doctor.” He clipped off the words with sinister precision. “Until a moment ago I had silly scruples about employing my latest weapon. After hearing that,” and he inclined his head toward the corner of the ceiling, “I have concluded that any methods are fair when dealing with scoundrels of your type.”

“That is obviously true,” assented Tagala cheerfully. “The only difficulty is that any methods you employ are certain to prove ineffective. Please don’t make any more threats against my life. I should laugh, and that would be impolite.”

The Phantom came a step nearer the cot. “No,” he said grimly, “I have no intention of doing anything so futile. I have the best reason in the world for not wanting you to die just yet. Also, I have discovered a much more effective way of dealing with you.”

An odd emphasis in his tones seemed to impress the doctor. A flicker of uneasiness crossed his face, but it was gone in a moment.

“Ah!” he murmured derisively. “I might have foreseen it. You mean to force me to surrender the antidote by torturing me. It is an improvement on your previous method, but it will prove just as useless. Torture is unpleasant but I can endure any amount of it.”

“Mistaken again, doctor. Torture is a little too crude, and I am not sure you are the type of man that could be influenced by it. The plan I have in mind is subtler and surer. You told me a moment ago that your highest aim in life is the enjoyment of beautiful things and the pursuit of pleasure.”

“I told you the truth.” This time there was a trace of bewilderment in Tagala’s tones.

From his pocket The Phantom drew the bottle he had taken from the laboratory. He studied the label with a preoccupied air, then held it so the man on the cot could read the inscription. Tagala’s eye narrowed in perplexity.

“I have been told,” said The Phantom casually, “that a single drop of this fluid, when injected into the eye, is sufficient to cause blindness.”

The doctor’s hands and feet strained spasmodically against the cords. A quick muscular contraction told that The Phantom had found his sensitive spot.

“Blind men are not particularly appreciative of the luxuries and pleasures you so vividly described a while ago,” The Phantom went on. His voice was soft, but there was a faint throb to his tones. “What good will it do a man to accumulate costly and beautiful things if he can’t see them?”

A grayish tinge crept into Tagala’s face. His eyes, with a look of horror lurking in their depths, were fixed rigidly on The Phantom’s face.

The Phantom held the bottle to the light. A faint but ominous smile was playing

about his lips.

“Just a drop of colorless liquid!” he murmured. “But what a different complexion it would put on your prospects, Tagala! All the money you hope to get through Mr. Shei would be only so much rubbish. All the wealth in the world couldn’t relieve your misery. Don’t you think you had better reconsider?”

The scientist’s lips fluttered, but no words came. A look of abhorrence accentuated the repulsiveness of his face.

With a quick movement The Phantom stepped toward the cot. The doctor wiggled and squirmed, but was unable to move.

“Perhaps, just to convince you that I am in earnest, I had better begin by blinding the left eye now,” The Phantom went on, bending slightly over the trembling man. With two fingers of one hand he pressed back the lids of the doctor’s left eye while holding the bottle in the other. The scientist rolled from side to side, but the firm pressure of The Phantom’s knee against his chest checked his efforts. Finally, as The Phantom was tilting the little bottle against the exposed eye, a great sigh of horror broke from the doctor’s lips.

“Stop!” he cried, almost overcome by terror. “You have won. I will do anything you demand. Only don’t blind me!”

## CHAPTER XVIII—THE FIGURE ON THE STAIRS

The Phantom could scarcely hold back a cry of exultation as he saw the abject fear written in Doctor Tagala's face. Knowing how ingeniously Mr. Shei had laid his plans and guarded against every imaginable emergency, he had not been altogether certain that his artful contrivance would succeed. But the scientist's acute distress was ample proof that Mr. Shei had been outmaneuvered and that The Gray Phantom was master of the situation.

"It appears Mr. Shei has overlooked something, after all," observed The Phantom in tones that expressed his elation. "Now, doctor, let me warn you that evasions and trickery will only aggravate your position. Where is the antidote?"

Tagala seemed to be making an effort to gather his scattered thoughts. "If I tell you, will you release me at once?" he asked shakily.

"All I promise is to spare your eyesight," declared The Phantom, still holding the little bottle in dangerous proximity to the scientist's terror-filled eyes. "You will have to be content with that, and I am really letting you off very easily. Now answer my question."

The doctor glanced at the bottle, gave an involuntary shudder, and seemed to be trying hard to think clearly.

"The antidote," he finally managed to say, "is hidden in the wall of my bedroom, exactly one foot from the window and directly above the head of the bed. The wall is apparently solid, but if you will carefully run your hand over the space I have indicated, you will find a slight protuberance. A light pressure on it will release a hidden panel, and inside you will find a number of small bottles, each one containing a full course of treatment. You will find complete directions on the label."

The Phantom searched his face, but found no signs of guile. "I hope, for your sake, that you have told the truth," he said sharply. "I shall be back as soon as I have verified your statement."

He examined the cords around the doctor's feet and hands and saw that they

were securely tied. Then he stepped out of the little chamber, carefully closing the sliding door before he ran up the stairs. Even now he could scarcely realize that his stratagem had succeeded. There were still dangers and obstacles in the way, but somehow he would win out. He would take as many bottles as his pockets could hold, then he would find Helen, and they could easily make their escape through the tunnel. His imagination pictured Mr. Shei's discomfiture when he should learn that this stupendous scheme had failed.

The Phantom drew his revolver before stepping out in the hall. The slightest slip or a chance encounter might easily reverse the situation and turn the tables against him. His feet glided soundlessly over the floor till he came to the laboratory. A quick glance up and down the corridor assured him that so far he was safe. He opened the door and entered the bedroom at the side of the laboratory. Now he took out his electric flash, placed his automatic within easy reach on the bed, then gingerly ran his fingers over the area specified by Doctor Tagala.

In a short time he had found the slight protuberance mentioned by the doctor, but he hesitated for several moments before pressing it. First he carefully examined the surrounding space, looking everywhere for hidden wires. Even when controlled by terror, the wily scientist was not to be trusted, and The Phantom had no intention of walking blindly into a trap. His search satisfied him, however, and finally he placed a finger on the tiny projection and pressed inward. Almost instantly a narrow portion of the wall opened. Within, arranged in an orderly row on a shelf, stood a number of small bottles.

He drew a long breath of intense relief. Before him was visible proof that he had frightened the truth out of the scientist. His head swam a little as he contemplated his success. Each one of the bottles would have netted Mr. Shei a fortune if the audacious plan had succeeded. What seemed more wonderful still, one of them would save the life of Helen Hardwick. The Phantom's hand trembled excitedly as he reached out and clutched one of the bottles.

In the next instant his hand darted back. Something was wrong, for the bottle was immovable, as if clamped down with rivets, and a hideous suspicion flashed through The Phantom's mind. Simultaneously there came a loud clanging which reverberated throughout the house, confirming his agonizing suspicion that a gong had been released the moment his hand touched the bottle. He had blundered into a trap, after all. For an instant he marveled dazedly at the almost

uncanny scope of Mr. Shei's precautions.

Then suddenly alert and tense once more, he put the electric flash light back into his pocket and snatched up his automatic. The clangor of the gong, resounding throughout the entire house, was almost deafening. Overhead doors were slamming and voices shouting excitedly. From the direction of the stairs came a tumultuous clatter, and above the hubbub he caught the insistent tones of Slade's commands. He cast a glance at the window, its outlines delineated by a gray dusk against the darker background. But flight was out of the question, for he could not leave Helen behind him. The Phantom steeled himself for battle. Often in the past he had fought against overwhelming odds, and this time something far greater than his life depended on the outcome.

Every vein tingling, he left the bedroom and crossed the floor of the laboratory. Maintaining a steady grip on his automatic, he pushed the door open and stepped out into the hall. A chorus of shouts greeted his appearance. Men in various stages of attire were running excitedly up and down the corridor, but all stopped at sight of the tall, tense figure standing with his back against the laboratory door. His eyes, hard as steel and swift as speeding arrows, surveyed them narrowly with a long, comprehensive sweep. The barrel of his automatic, held in readiness for instant action, glimmered ominously in the dim light shed by a single bulb in the ceiling.

"The Gray Phantom!" was the hushed whisper that went back and forth in the huddled crowd. A spell seemed to fall over them as they stared at the man of whose amazing exploits they had heard and read, but whom few of them had seen until now. But their inaction lasted only a few moments. Some of the bolder ones were already crowding forward.

"Stop!" cried The Phantom. The gong had ceased ringing, and his voice rang sharp and clear down the hall. "The first man that moves will get a bullet."

Momentarily awed by the metallic tones, the crowd fell back. The Phantom's glittering eyes seemed to encompass them all in their sweep, and there was an air of desperate determination about his tense, slightly crouching figure that impressed them strongly.

The situation was the most critical The Phantom had ever faced, yet he felt a tingle of triumph as he surveyed the huddled throng. Any one of them could

have crippled or killed him with a well-aimed shot, but not a hand moved. For the moment, at least, he was holding them in subjection through the sheer strength of his domineering personality and his attitude of utter fearlessness.

Someone laughed, and The Phantom's eyes turned to Slade, standing on the outer fringe of the crowd. He held a pistol in his hand, but the muzzle was pointed downward.

"You must be crazy," he said contemptuously. "Can't you see that you are outnumbered eleven to one?"

"I hadn't taken time to count," said The Phantom calmly. In the same instant a crack and a flash of fire came from his automatic. One of the crowd, more intrepid than the others, had ventured forward as he spoke, and now a yell of pain signified that The Phantom had aimed straight.

Slade scowled. On his face was a look of mingled wonder and rage.

"Mr. Shei's orders are not to kill you unless necessary," he explained, "and I have been hoping you wouldn't make it necessary. Mr. Shei has the highest admiration for you."

"Thanks," said The Phantom dryly, and for a mere instant his thoughts went back to the ludicrous figure of Fairspeckle. "It's too bad I can't say that the sentiment is mutual."

Slade's scowl deepened. He seemed inclined to instruct his men to advance, but something evidently restrained him.

"You ought to know by this time that Mr. Shei is invincible," he declared impressively. "You are a wonder in some ways, but a fool in others. How you keep slipping in and out of this house is beyond me. Not that it matters, for you have sung your last tune. What have you done to Doctor Tagala?"

A thin smile hovered about The Phantom's compressed lips.

"I suppose you have kidnaped him," Slade went on, "but we will find him before long. You see, Mr. Shei foresaw even such a possibility as that, and prepared for it. He anticipated that pressure of some sort might be used on Tagala to make him reveal where the antidote is hidden, and so he prepared the trap you walked

into a moment ago. The bottles, as you may have guessed by this time, contain only water. The real antidote is elsewhere, and Tagala is the only man who can put his hand on it.”

“So I understand.” There was a momentary flicker in The Phantom’s eyes which indicated that Slade’s words had suggested something of importance to him. “Mr. Shei is amazingly clever—but there is such a thing as being *too* clever.”

Slade looked as if he sensed a hidden meaning which his mind could not quite grasp. Presently he shrugged and fixed his frosty gaze on The Phantom.

“I’ll give you just one more chance to surrender,” he warned. “Throw down your pistol and tell us where Tagala is, and I promise you will not be harmed.”

“Very anxious to learn Tagala’s whereabouts—aren’t you, Slade? Without Tagala you can’t find the antidote, and without the antidote your beautiful scheme goes to pieces. It would be very awkward for you if you shouldn’t be able to deliver the goods when your seven victims have come around to the point where they are willing to pay your price.”

Slade mumbled something under his breath. Again The Phantom’s eyes darted over the fringe of sullen faces in the background. He was gambling for Helen’s life and his own, and he still held one card in reserve.

“Tagala seems to be the key to the whole situation,” he went on. “I have hidden him in a place where you will never find him, even if you search from now till doomsday. Men sometimes die of hunger in three days, especially if they do a lot of fretting in the meantime. Slade, why don’t you order your men to shoot me?”

The last sentence was spoken in taunting tones, and Slade’s face showed that the gibe had gone home. Inwardly fuming, he glared savagely at The Phantom.

“Is it because you realize that, if I am killed, Tagala will die with me?” The Phantom’s smile told that he once more felt he was master of the situation. “Is that the reason, Slade?”

Slade grumbled inarticulately. He glanced gloomily at the men lined up behind him. Then he looked again at The Phantom, and his face took on a baffled look. He seemed unable to account for the fact that one man, single-handed, was holding nine at bay. Suddenly, as his glance flitted up and down The Phantom’s



tense figure, his face brightened a trifle. He whispered something in the ear of the man at his side, and the latter immediately hurried away.

The Phantom felt a twinge of misgiving. It was evident from the gratified smirk on Slade's lips that an inspiration had just occurred to him and that he was planning a surprise of some sort. The Phantom wondered whether the resourceful Mr. Shei had provided against this latest emergency as he had against the others. He waited in a state of tremulous tension, and presently a slight sound drew his attention to the stairs at the end of the hall.

He glanced aside out of the tail of an eye, and then sudden despair took hold of him. Halfway up the stairs, gazing blankly down upon the scene in the hall, stood Helen Hardwick. There was a look in her face that caused a groan to break from The Phantom's lips.

Suddenly he stiffened. In an instant he saw the meaning of the elated smile on Slade's face. Directly behind Helen he discerned a crouching figure, evidently the man who had left the hall a few minutes before.

"Splendid!" ejaculated Slade. "I see you have already glimpsed the idea. At this very moment the muzzle of a pistol is pressing against Miss Hardwick's back. The slightest pressure on the trigger will send a bullet through her heart. You cannot fire at him, much as you would like to do so, for Miss Hardwick's figure makes an excellent bulwark. Will you admit you are beaten?"

Torn between rage and despair, The Phantom gazed rigidly at Helen. The stolid expression on her face showed plainly that she had not the faintest inkling of what was going on. Now and then her lips twitched as if she were on the point of laughing. Of the figure crouching behind her only an elbow and a narrow strip of shoulder were visible. An anguished cry rose in The Phantom's throat as he saw the full infamy of Slade's ruse.

"I shall begin to count," said Slade in triumphant tones. "If, by the time I come to ten, you have not signified by throwing down your pistol that you are willing to surrender, Miss Hardwick will die instantly."

A hush, charged with an electric tension, followed the ultimatum. Then, slowly and evenly, Slade began to count:

"One—two—three—four—five——"

## CHAPTER XIX—A FUTILE SEARCH

Walking with his usual listless and shuffling gait, Lieutenant Culligore mounted the steps in front of police headquarters and entered the office of Inspector Stapleton of the detective bureau. It was late in the afternoon, and Culligore might have quickened his steps and carried himself with more animation if he could have known that at this very moment The Gray Phantom, seated in the secret chamber at Azurecrest, was planning his second move against the redoubtable Mr. Shei.

Stapleton, a huge, thick-necked man with a reddish face and a tendency toward irascibility, looked up with a scowl as the lieutenant walked in.

“Well, what’s new?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” said Culligore patiently and flopped into a chair beside the inspector’s desk, “except that our friend Mr. Shei seems to be getting away with it.”

Stapleton glared at a pile of newspapers he had been reading. His temper was on edge from his perusal of several editorials that chided the bureau for its failure to circumvent Mr. Shei.

“Two of the seven moneybags are already showing the white feather,” Culligore continued, “and two or three of the others are getting wabbly. By the end of the week I guess most of ’em will be ready to pay Mr. Shei’s price. I don’t know how he means to manage the transaction, but I’ll bet a pair of pink socks he’ll figure out a safe way.”

“What are the doctors doing? Still loafing on the job, I suppose?”

“They’re up a tree—every mother’s son of them. They can’t dope out the disease at all. If they had seven months instead of seven days, they might be able to do something, but as it is, they’re at the end of their tether. Their only hope is that one of the seven will be obliging enough to die before the others, so they can perform an autopsy.”

Stapleton jerked his head savagely to one side. "This is the twentieth century and we're living in a civilized country," he muttered. "A man can't put over a thing like that in these times."

"Just what I've been telling myself for the last three days," admitted Culligore. "I've been saying it can't be done—but Mr. Shei is going right ahead and doing it."

"And he's pulling the trick right under our noses," supplemented the inspector. "That's what gets my goat. It's plain as day that Mr. Shei is The Gray Phantom. Nobody but The Gray Phantom ever got away with a thing like this, and this job has all the ear-marks of his work. Well," and his huge fist descended on the desk with a slam, "we'll get him yet, and when we do I'll see to it that he's put away for keeps."

Culligore drew the palm of his hand across his mouth as if to stifle one of his infrequent grins.

"Keeping something up your sleeve again?" demanded the inspector, who had noticed the gesture. "If you've got something on your mind, why don't you spring it?"

The lieutenant shifted his lanky figure in the chair. "I've been trying all day to get a line on Fairspeckle," he said slowly, without directly answering the inspector's question. "Queer how that old duffer vamoosed. I tried to question the Jap valet, but all he knows is that there are two bumps on his head where there was only one before. The doctor and the nurse got rough treatment, too. Of a sudden the lights went out, and old Fairspeckle seemed to go out with them. Anyhow, he was gone when the doctor came to." Culligore paused to light one of his vicious-looking cigars. "Something queer about that old goat's disappearance—eh, inspector?"

Stapleton stared hard at his subordinate, as if trying to read the thoughts stirring behind his stolid countenance. "Of course there is," he said irritably. "There's something queer about every disappearance. Just what are you driving at? You don't doubt that Fairspeckle was kidnaped by Mr. Shei's agents?"

"I doubt everything, inspector. Know of any reason why Mr. Shei should go out of his way to abduct the old geezer?"

“No, I don’t,” admitted Stapleton after some thought. “The kidnaping of Fairspeckle doesn’t seem to fit into the pattern of Mr. Shei’s scheme. What’s your idea, Culligore? You don’t suppose Fairspeckle kidnaped himself?”

“Stranger things have happened, inspector. By the way,” and the lieutenant reached into his pocket and took out several typewritten slips, “I meant to hand you these yesterday, but was too busy with other things. I found them beside the typewriter on Fairspeckle’s desk. What do you make of them?”

Stapleton picked up the slips and glanced at them. His eyes widened into a stare as he read the typewritten lines. He read them twice, and then he transferred his gaze to Culligore.

“Holy mackerel!” he muttered. Then he sat silent for a time, wriggling his ample frame to and fro in the chair. “Why, these things make it look as though Fairspeckle was Mr. Shei.”

“They show that the mystery isn’t quite so simple as you thought, inspector. They sort of knock the pins from under your theory that The Gray Phantom is Mr. Shei.”

For a few moments longer Stapleton’s bewildered eyes rested on the slips. Then he read aloud the list of names beneath the introductory paragraph, and the pucker on his forehead deepened. Finally he looked quizzically at the lieutenant.

“Yes, I noticed it, too,” said Culligore. “There’s something queer about that list. Looks as though Mr. Shei, whoever he is, hadn’t followed his original programme. Seven men were inoculated, but only five of them are named in Fairspeckle’s list. The other two names don’t jibe.”

Stapleton pondered for a while. He seemed to have great difficulty readjusting his thoughts to a new fact.

“And here’s another interesting thing,” Culligore pointed out. “Every one of the seven men mentioned in Fairspeckle’s list was a member of a ring that fought him tooth and nail some years ago.”

“And this is Fairspeckle’s way of getting even with them,” ventured the inspector.

“Maybe,” said Culligore guardedly. “Anyhow, a fairly strong motive could be made out of it.”

“But how do you account for the fact that Fairspeckle didn’t carry out his original programme?”

“I’m not trying to account for it just now. There might have been a slip of some kind. *If* Fairspeckle is Mr. Shei, the fact that he revised his list doesn’t really cut any ice. Any man has a right to change his mind.”

Inspector Stapleton sat up straight. He looked at Culligore in a determined way. “What I can’t understand is why you didn’t show me these slips yesterday. You say you were too busy with other things. I’d like to know what other things could be more important. Never mind that, though. The thing to do now is to find Fairspeckle.”

Again Culligore drew his palm across his mouth. “And when you have found him, inspector, what are you going to do with him?”

“Eh?” Stapleton seemed to think the question a strange one. “Do with him? Why, we’ll see to it that he gets the stiffest sentence the law provides. If we once get our hands on him we’ll put him in a place where he won’t be able to trouble us for some time.”

“Aren’t you overlooking something, inspector?”

Stapleton stared perplexedly at his subordinate.

“What about the seven capitalists?” the lieutenant went on. “They’ll die like rats unless the antidote is administered in time. You can’t make Mr. Shei fork over the antidote by putting him in jail. He’s wise enough to know that as long as the antidote is in his possession he has a hold on us, and he won’t be likely to give it up. He knows we are not going to let seven of the biggest men in the country die just for the sake of sending him to jail. The fact is, inspector, that Mr. Shei has us sewed up in a sack.”

Stapleton seemed about to make an indignant reply, but it died on his tongue. Evidently Culligore’s argument had made a strong impression. He dropped back against the chair and peered diffidently into space.

“I’m hanged if I’m going to sit with arms folded and let Mr. Shei put this thing over,” he muttered at last. “He’s a slick crook, but there ought to be a way of dealing with him.”

“I think there is, inspector,” agreed Culligore, leisurely rising from his chair. “I can’t see it just yet, but maybe my mind will work better after a little walk. So long, inspector.”

He shuffled from the room, followed by Inspector Stapleton’s puzzled gaze. After leaving the headquarters building, he walked to a near-by restaurant and ordered a substantial meal. He seemed in no hurry, for he ate slowly and lingered for a considerable time over his coffee and cigar. An observer, noticing his languid air and phlegmatic expression, might have thought that Mr. Shei was farthest from his mind. It was dark when he left the restaurant, and it was a little after eight o’clock when, after a leisurely stroll in a zigzagging direction, he reached the Thelma Theater.

His decision to visit the Thelma once more might have been due to the fact that it had been the scene of several mysterious incidents which were more or less directly traceable to the activities of Mr. Shei. The death of Virginia Darrow had occurred there, and the bullet that had missed The Gray Phantom by such a narrow margin was still imbedded in one of the pillars. But Culligore’s expression gave no indication of his purpose as he stood on the sidewalk across the street from the theater and glanced up at the windows of Vincent Starr’s private office on the second floor.

The windows were dark, so evidently Starr was not there, and the entire structure presented a gloomy and lifeless appearance. Culligore hummed a little tune as he walked to the nearest street intersection, then cut diagonally across the thoroughfare, continued half a block to the west, and finally ducked into a dark basement entrance. The ease with which he made his way suggested that he had traveled the same route before. After walking down a dirty and foul-smelling passage, he emerged into a vacant space bordered at one side by the rear wall of the theater.

He crossed the inclosure, then ran down a short stairway, and brought up against a door. Now he took a number of keys from his pocket and tried several in the lock before he found one that fitted. At last the door came open, and the lieutenant, locking it carefully behind him, stood in the basement under the

Thelma Theater.

On all sides was total darkness. For a time he stood still, listening for sounds, but nothing but dull and distant noises from the outside reached his ears. Having satisfied himself that he was apparently alone in the basement, he took out his flash light and began a thorough and comprehensive search. With the electric flash peering into every nook and corner, he explored the dressing rooms, peeped behind piles of discarded scenery, examined odds and ends of stage property, looked into the barrels and boxes in the dusty storerooms, and even tapped the walls here and there to assure himself that there were no hollow spaces.

At last he gave up. His search had taken almost an hour and it had been complete and painstaking in every respect, yet Lieutenant Culligore seemed not quite satisfied. On his face was a look of hesitancy that seemed to suggest a lingering suspicion that something might have eluded him. Standing in the center of the basement, he extinguished the flash light, for it had been his experience that his other senses were more acute when his eyes received no impressions.

For a little while, standing in impenetrable darkness, he scarcely breathed. He had a curious sensation that a faint sound was passing him and dissolving in the dank air. It was so slight and elusive that his ears could scarcely detect it, yet it appealed to his imagination with peculiar insistence. It might have been either a moan or a sigh, or perhaps a cry coming from a great distance. Somehow, though he could not analyze the sensation, he fancied it expressed a great, overwhelming anguish. Whether it came from above, below, or the sides he could not determine, but it inspired him with a haunting feeling that he was not alone.

Again he took up the flash, and instantly the impression vanished, as if it had been a wraith fleeing from the light. Once more, step by step, he went over every square foot of the basement, covering the ground he had already searched so patiently, but he found nothing that gave the slightest clew to the peculiar sound. Finally, half inclined to believe that his imagination had deceived him, he ascended the stairway and continued his search on the ground floor. With dogged determination he explored the space in the wings and back of the stage, then went up and down the aisles in the auditorium. His inspection of the boxes was fruitless, and he found nothing of significance in the little niche where, on his previous visit to the Thelma, he had strongly suspected that an eavesdropper was hiding. Finally he went through the offices on the street front, occupied, as was

indicated by the brass plates on the doors, by the treasurer, business manager, and stage director. Here also his quest was unavailing, and nothing now remained but Vincent Starr's private office on the upper floor.

The moment he entered, Culligore felt as though he were invading the den of a sybarite. His flash light, flitting slowly over the room, revealed soft color harmonies and exquisite decorations. Faint and delicate perfumes mingled with the fresh and alluring scents of flowers. Culligore's feet sank deep into costly rugs as he moved about the office, peeping behind chairs, desks, and cabinets, and occasionally sounding the walls for hollow spaces. After an hour of intense and patient effort, he was forced to admit that he had exerted himself needlessly and that his impressions while standing in the basement could have been nothing but figments of his fancy.

Finally he sat down in the luxuriously upholstered chair beside Starr's desk. His watch showed a quarter past eleven, and he tried to reconcile himself to the thought that the only thing he could do was to go home and sleep. He was disappointed, for he had hoped that his search would yield some tangible results. He scowled a little as his gaze roamed idly over the orderly piles of papers on the desk. The ink stand, the paper cutter, and the pens were all of ornamental design. The only plain and undecorative objects in the room were the two telephones standing at one side of the desk. It struck him as a little odd that there should be two of them, but then he noticed that one was an automatic instrument without outside connections and communicating only with the various departments in the building.

Presently he yawned ostentatiously. He could not quite understand his reason for remaining after his fruitless task was done, nor could he comprehend the feeling, vague but uncannily persistent, that the next few minutes would bring some startling developments.

A gentle buzzing caused him to sit up straight in the chair. The telephone was ringing, and instinctively he reached out his hand for one of the instruments. He spoke a soft "hello" in the transmitter. There was no response, but the ringing continued. A little dazedly he hung up the receiver and peered fixedly at the other telephone. He jerked it to him, thrust the transmitter to his ear, and instantly the buzzing ceased.

A gasp of amazement fell from his lips. Someone was calling on the automatic



telephone, the one that had no outside connections. The person calling must be inside the building, then, despite the fact that his patient search had convinced him that there was no other human being within the four walls of the structure.

## CHAPTER XX—TRAPPED

“Hello—hello!” shouted Culligore into the mouthpiece. From head to foot he was tingling with suspense. It was one of the rare occasions within recent years when he felt the thrill of excitement.

A hoarse and rasping voice responded, but at first he could make out no words. The person at the other end seemed to speak with great difficulty and was evidently on the verge of hysterics.

“Speak a little louder, can’t you?” urged the lieutenant. “Who are you?”

A jumble of split words and syllables sounded distantly in his ear. Now and then, between efforts to speak clearly, came a titter and a giggle that awoke a startling suspicion in Culligore’s mind.

“Tell me who you are,” he said in loud tones.

A short, cracked laugh came over the wire. It was followed by a groan, as if the speaker were despairing over his inability to make himself understood. Then he tried again. “Fair—Fairspeckle.”

“Oh!” Culligore’s teeth clicked out the exclamation. He nodded at the instrument, as if the name just spoken had confirmed a suspicion in his mind. “Where are you, Mr. Fairspeckle?”

“I can’t—can’t tell you,” came gropingly over the wire.

“Haven’t you any idea?”

“None. I’m locked in a—a room, and I am—dying! For God’s sake get me out!”

“Listen, Mr. Fairspeckle,” said Culligore tensely. “You’re somewhere in the Thelma Theater, and I am going to find you. It may take some little time, but don’t worry. It won’t be very long.”

A groan of relief mingled with pent-up suspense sounded in Culligore’s ear, and

then he slammed the receiver back on the hook. His eyes were twinkling and there was a new eagerness in his face. He jumped up from the chair and took a step toward the door. Then he drew back, and in the next moment his face had resumed its habitual sluggish expression and there was nothing in his manner to indicate that anything out of the ordinary had happened.

The door opened and in walked Vincent Starr. The theatrical manager, faultlessly attired in evening dress, topcoat, and silk hat, shrank back at sight of the man standing beside the desk. Then, recognizing the lieutenant, he instantly gathered himself.

“You startled me, Culligore,” he explained with an apologetic laugh. “So many strange things have happened in this place that I am naturally a little nervous. I often come here late at night to read or write, according to my mood, but of late I approach the place in fear and trembling.” He eyed the detective inquiringly. “I wonder what brings you to my private office at such an hour.”

“Hope you don’t mind my snooping,” said Culligore genially. “I have been looking around a bit. There were a couple of things I wanted to get straightened out in my mind. As you say yourself, there have been a lot of strange doings in this place, and I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that Mr. Shei is back of them all.”

Starr doffed his hat and ran his fingers through his long, glossy hair. The discoloration of his nose had diminished greatly, but his face was still pale and drawn.

“That’s precisely my idea,” he said nervously. “I shall never feel safe until that scoundrel is behind iron bars. Unless he has a private grievance against me, I am at a loss to understand why he can’t keep away from my theater. By the way, did you obtain any light on the things that were puzzling you?”

“Not much,” said Culligore disgustedly, with a furtive glance at the telephone. “I searched every square inch of the place without finding what I was after.”

“Yes?” Starr seemed politely curious. “I infer, then, that you had a definite object in view, that you were not just searching at random.”

“Oh, no.” Culligore looked about him as if not quite at ease. “I suppose we’re alone?”

“Not another soul in the building. You can speak as freely as you like.”

“Then I’ll tell you exactly what I think. The way Mr. Shei’s men have been sneaking in and out of this place is mighty suggestive. Just why they should be turning your place into a rendezvous is something I don’t understand, but that’s exactly what they seem to be doing. They were right on the job the night you opened your new play. They gave Virginia Darrow a shot of poison just at the psychological moment, before she could spill what she knew. Then they sneaked the body away right under our eyes, and we have not yet discovered how they managed it. Only the other day, somebody took a shot at either you or The Gray Phantom. All this looks mighty queer.”

“It does,” assented Starr. He took out a jewel-studded case and lighted a cigarette. His pale, uneasy eyes did not leave the detective’s face for a moment. “What is your theory?”

Culligore looked musingly into space. “Mr. Shei is very clever, but he is of flesh and blood, like the rest of us. There must be a simple and natural explanation for all these strange doings. I’ll bet my hat that he has found a secret entrance to your place.”

“Impossible,” said Starr promptly. “This theater was built according to my own directions and my own architects supervised every detail of the construction.”

“That may be, but I still stick to the idea of a secret entrance. Don’t you see, Mr. Starr, even if you didn’t have such an entrance made when you constructed your theater, Mr. Shei’s men may have drilled a hole through the wall or the floor somewhere? Nothing else explains how they have been slipping in and out of the place.”

“But why?” demanded Starr, and his fingers trembled as he took the cigarette from his lips. “Why should they do such a thing?”

Culligore smiled faintly while his muddy little eyes scanned the other’s face.

“I think you can make a pretty fair guess,” he said dryly.

Starr’s face turned a shade paler. For an instant there was a look of positive dread in his eyes, but it vanished quickly. A sad smile came to his lips.

“I see I must be frank with you,” he murmured, “much as I dislike to discuss matters pertaining to my private life. Don’t ask me to go into details, for there are excellent reasons why I should not do so. In plain words, I do not care to incriminate myself. I have not always been what I am to-day. There was a time, quite a number of years ago, when I led a very violent life and when the law and I were not on the best of terms. I made enemies—a number of them—and it is possible that they are pursuing me to-day. In fact I——”

He paused, and his narrowing gaze slanted to the floor. Culligore repressed a start. In the intense silence of the moment he heard a faint buzzing. Somewhere, in one of the offices on the ground floor, a telephone was ringing, and he guessed that Fairspeckle had grown impatient and was calling one of the other departments of the intercommunicating system.

“In fact,” Starr went on after a moment’s pause, quickly controlling his astonishment, “if I were to come face to face with Mr. Shei to-day, I strongly suspect that I would recognize in him one of my old enemies. Don’t ask me to explain any further, Culligore. You will appreciate the delicacy of the matter.”

“I do, and you’ve said enough to explain the funny doings that have been going on here. I want you to answer one question frankly. Have you any idea who Mr. Shei is?”

“Have you?” was Starr’s prompt rejoinder.

Culligore chuckled. “Maybe I have and maybe I haven’t. I’m pretty sure of one thing. Some people think The Gray Phantom is Mr. Shei, but they’re dead wrong.”

Starr’s lips twitched into a knowing smile. “I agree with you, there, Culligore. Shall we go a step farther? With The Gray Phantom eliminated, the range of available suspects narrows down to one man. Am I right?”

“I think you are on the right track, Mr. Starr.”

The theatrical manager, once more quite composed, seemed to find a great deal of amusement in the speculative drift of the conversation.

“It is diverting to try to read other people’s minds,” he observed. “I wonder how close I can come to an accurate reading of yours. A detective’s thoughts travel a

devious route, but I will try to look at the situation from your point of view, taking all the circumstances into account. If you were to mention the name of the one remaining suspect, I fancy it would be W. Rufus Fairspeckle.”

Culligore stared as if dumfounded at the other’s astuteness, but his lips curled into the faintest grin as soon as Starr averted his gaze.

“You might as well admit that I was right,” said the manager with a smile of elation. “For once a mere layman has read your mind like an open book. The next question is what has become of Fairspeckle. Do you suppose——”

He broke off short. His glance darted involuntarily to the automatic telephone on the desk. Its summons sounded clear and distinct in the tense silence. Once more a tinge of gray crept into his face. With a tightening of the lips he looked furtively at Culligore.

“Queer!” muttered the lieutenant, fingering the green cord attached to the instrument and tracing it to the sound box. “Someone is calling on the private wire. And you just told me that you and I were alone in the building.”

The buzzing continued. Starr stared helplessly at the instrument, but out of the tail of an eye he was watching the expression on the detective’s face. Finally, with a jerk of the shoulders, he emerged from his daze.

“I don’t understand it,” he murmured, “but we shall soon see what it means.”

He sat down and drew the instrument to him. His face took on a look of determination, but there was also a baffling and inscrutable expression that might have puzzled the detective. But Culligore’s thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. He looked as though he foresaw a critical moment and realized that quick thinking and prompt action were necessary. While Starr was speaking into the telephone, he looked quickly about the room. From his vest pocket he took a small box and removed the lid, exposing a reddish substance that looked like salve. Rubbing a little of it onto his finger tips, he softly crossed the room and quickly smeared a thin coating of the reddish material on the doorknob.

Starr hung up the receiver just as the little box disappeared into Culligore’s vest pocket.

“I don’t understand it,” said the manager frettingly. “Someone was speaking. It

was a man's voice, but I couldn't make out what he was trying to say. It is very mysterious." He smiled faintly. "It's beginning to look as though I was mistaken and there was someone else in the building besides you and me."

"It certainly looks queer," admitted Culligore. "I searched everywhere, but we might as well go over the ground again."

Starr acquiesced readily, and Culligore saw to it that the manager preceded him out of the room. He noticed with gratification that the other's fingers closed firmly around the knob as he opened the door, and he knew that Starr was too preoccupied to take heed of the faint smear left on his hand from contact with the greased metal. He chuckled inwardly as he followed the manager down the stairs and through the offices in front of the building. After a brief and somewhat perfunctory search, they entered the auditorium.

"Shall I switch on the lights?" whispered Starr, walking beside the detective.

"I wouldn't. If there's a prowler around the place, we don't want to warn him. My electric flash will do."

For a time they conducted the search in silence, the detective cautiously darting the electric gleam over floor and walls and into dark corners. Finally he paused before a niche in the wall and pointed to an aperture behind the marble shelf that spanned the opening.

"Do you know," he whispered, "that the other day, while I was talking with The Gray Phantom, I had a funny feeling someone was hiding back there and listening to our conversation? Who do you suppose it could have been?"

There was no response. Culligore had been peering into the recess behind the marble ledge. Now he looked up quickly, but Starr was gone—and the twitching of the detective's lips signified that the manager's sudden disappearance did not surprise him greatly. In an instant he was amazingly alert. Jerking his electric flash hither and thither, he moved quickly back and forth within the narrow space where he had last seen the manager, sweeping the surrounding objects with his electric gleam and examining the surfaces of chairs, pillars, walls, and decorative articles.

Presently he brought up in front of one of the larger pillars supporting the balcony. He had previously noticed its huge dimensions, and now he gauged

them again with a quickly calculating eye. It was there The Gray Phantom had stood when the mysterious shot was fired the other day, and Helen Hardwick had been leaning against the same pillar when the curious individual with the repulsive features glided past her.

The electric gleam moved swiftly over the white surface of the post with its ornate trimmings of dull gold. Again, as once or twice before, he wondered whether there was any hidden significance in the fact that The Gray Phantom had stood in this identical spot at the moment the shot was fired. Was it possible that the skulking assailant had feared that The Phantom was about to make an important discovery, and was that why he had fired the shot? Culligore pondered the question while scanning every square inch of the pillar.

Suddenly the electric gleam stopped at a point near the floor, and Culligore could scarcely repress an exclamation of elation. His ruse had succeeded, for on the white surface of the post was a faint discoloration which signified that Starr's hand had recently touched that particular point. There were no other marks, and this one was only a few inches from the floor. Culligore's fingers ran quickly over the surrounding space, and occasionally he pressed his thumb firmly against the wood, but without discovering anything. His hand slid downward to where the rich Persian carpet was neatly tucked around the base of the post, and suddenly his exploring fingers touched a slight knoblike projection. He pressed firmly, and he felt an exultant tingle as there came a soft, whirring response. A panel in the post, ingeniously hidden in the gold-lined grooves, was sliding back, forming an aperture.

The electric gleam showed a look of keen elation on Culligore's face. His discovery had taken only a minute or two of valuable time, for he had moved fast since he noticed that Starr was gone. Yet, but for a happy inspiration and the resultant reddish stain on the post, he might have searched for days without finding the opening.

Now he squeezed his figure through the narrow aperture, at the same time pocketing his electric flash and drawing his automatic. His feet encountered the upper rungs of a ladder that pointed straight down. He descended rapidly, making no sound. At the bottom was a narrow passage extending in the direction of the street, and at its farther end he saw a faint glow. He approached quickly, warned by a sixth sense that he had no time to waste.



He came to a door. It stood open a crack, and through the narrow opening he saw a strange scene. An elderly man, with a thin and haggard face and sunken eyes that stared about him in an agonized way, was lying on a cot. Starr, bending over the recumbent man, was winding pieces of rope around his feet and hands and drawing them into tight knots.

“There, Mr. Fairspeckle,” he tauntingly declared when he had fastened a gag around the other man’s mouth, “I don’t think you will work loose a second time. Even if you should, you will find that the telephone is out of order.”

He laughed, turned away from the cot, and uttered a gasp as he looked into the muzzle of Culligore’s pistol. Every trace of color faded from his face, but he gathered himself quickly.

“You are a most astounding person, Culligore,” he remarked coolly. “I wonder how you found your way down here. Not that it matters,” he added with a shrug, “but I am naturally curious. I won’t press you for the information, however. Any way I can be of service?”

“Yes, Mr. Shei,” said Culligore, emphasizing each word and looking straight into the other’s eyes, “you can hold out your hands and not make any fuss while I put the handcuffs on you.”

Starr laughed derisively. “Sorry not to be able to oblige you, but I have a distinct aversion to handcuffs. Won’t you sit down and be comfortable? An underground room like this has many advantages. In the chests you see against the walls I occasionally store things that the police and private detectives would give a great deal to be able to lay their hands on. It is an excellent hiding place, and it serves several other purposes besides.”

“So I see,” muttered Culligore with a glance at the man on the cot. Fairspeckle’s face bore a dazed look and he seemed to understand nothing of what was being said, but his staring eyes held an expression of terror.

“I would like to know,” murmured Starr, fixing his pale eyes on the lieutenant’s inscrutable face, “how and when you learned that I was Mr. Shei. I was under the impression that you suspected Fairspeckle.”

“I meant you should be,” said Culligore with a dry chuckle. “I knew somebody was listening behind the marble ledge the day I had that talk with The Gray

Phantom upstairs, and I guessed it was either you or one of your men. I pretended to believe that Fairspeckle was Mr. Shei, and I encouraged The Phantom in thinking the same thing, but all the while I was talking for the benefit of the fellow behind the marble slab. I had a pretty good suspicion as to who Mr. Shei was, and I wanted to throw him off his guard. Once a man gets careless it isn't hard to catch him."

Starr grinned appreciatively. "I'll admit that you are far shrewder than you look, Culligore, but I am not so sure that I have been guilty of carelessness. That remains to be seen. What I am curious to know is when you first began to suspect that I was Mr. Shei. You see, I have nothing to fear from you, so I frankly admit the fact. But I would like to know by what sort of reasoning you were led to suspect me."

"There wasn't any course of reasoning," said Culligore, maintaining a steady grip on his pistol. "It was only a flash here and there. The first flash came when I saw the note Virginia Darrow sent you the night she died. I guessed then that she had learned in some way that you were Mr. Shei, and she wanted to tease you with it. A little later, when you were handed that bump on the nose, I didn't know exactly what to think. Then it came to me that, if you really were Mr. Shei, you would have yourself assaulted along with the others to turn suspicion away from you. It was a clever move, Mr. Starr, but it didn't fool me for long. Well, a number of other things happened that strengthened my suspicion, but I wasn't really sure until I walked into this room to-night."

Starr scowled a little. "You are a bit disappointing, Culligore. I had hoped you would give me an example of fine-spun deductive reasoning of the kind that always drips from the lips of story-book detectives. Just one more thing before we close this pleasant interview. How do you account for Mr. Fairspeckle?"

"Oh, that part was fairly easy. Fairspeckle is a queer sort, but he never did any real harm. He's been troubled with insomnia, and when a man can't sleep, he's likely to do any foolish thing, from writing poetry on a park bench to murdering his mother-in-law. The deeper the mystery, the simpler the explanation. That has been my experience, and it has held true in Fairspeckle's case. I'm not dead sure of my facts, but I can make a pretty close guess. The night Mr. Shei's notices were posted, Fairspeckle had been roaming the town as he always did when he couldn't sleep. He saw one of the notices in Times Square and, being one of the seven richest men in town, he didn't like the idea a bit. Then The Gray Phantom

came strolling along, and Fairspeckle recognized him. Like many others, he jumped at the conclusion that The Phantom was Mr. Shei, and right away he began to study out a way of beating Mr. Shei's game.

“By some hook or crook he got The Phantom into his apartment, and there he tried to drug him. He had two objects in view. One of them was to keep The Phantom under cover for a time so he wouldn't be able to go on with his scheme, and the other was to get even with certain enemies of his by throwing an almighty scare into them. While the real Mr. Shei, as he supposed, was a prisoner in his apartment, he meant to carry the scheme just a step or two farther—just far enough to put fear into his old enemies. It just so happened that five of those enemies were among the seven richest men in town. Well, Fairspeckle got a typewriter and went to work and typed a new set of notices, supplementing the ones that had already been posted. I hope he had a good laugh while he was typing the seven names, for that's all the good his scheme did him. A few hours later he was kidnaped. That was another fairly clever move, Starr.”

Starr seemed to enjoy the compliment. “Thanks, Culligore,” he murmured. “I knew you would appreciate that little touch. After overhearing the conversation between you and The Phantom, in which I thought you made it plain that both of you suspected Fairspeckle, I saw a still more effective way to divert suspicion from myself. Since you already suspected Fairspeckle, as I thought at the time, it occurred to me to let the suspicion take firmer root by having Fairspeckle disappear. A man who vanishes mysteriously is always an object of suspicion.”

Culligore nodded absently. Only half his mind had been on Starr's speech. Now, still holding the automatic firmly leveled, he came a step closer to the other man.

“I don't like to muss you up,” he said softly, “so please put out your hands and make no trouble.”

Starr chuckled amusedly. “You are really surprisingly simple, Culligore. Your pistol doesn't frighten me, for I know you won't use it. And arresting me won't do you any good. If you put me in jail, the antidote will never be found, and then seven of the biggest men in the country will die. Don't you see, Culligore, that there isn't a thing you can do?”

His tones were soft and teasing, and his words expressed the same idea that Culligore himself had voiced in Inspector Stapleton's presence. Slowly the

lieutenant ran his eyes over the walls. The underground chamber, and especially the steel chests stacked along the side, would serve excellently as a hiding place. What more natural than the antidote should be concealed in one of the chests? It seemed——

He got no farther in his reasoning. Too swiftly for Culligore to interfere, Starr's hand moved to the wall at his side. A faint click sounded, and then blackness fell. Culligore sprang forward, but already a loud slam signified that the door had closed. He hurled himself against it, but he might as well have been pitting his strength against a brick wall.

“Trapped!” he muttered.

## CHAPTER XXI—MR. SHEP'S STRATAGEM

A swarm of jumbled thoughts and emotions crowded each fraction of a second as The Gray Phantom, standing with his back against the door, heard Slade's slow and precise voice pronounce the numerals. At each distinctly spoken word he started as if a rapier had prodded his flesh. His gaze was fixed on Helen, who from her position in the stairway stared down on the scene with eyes that appeared to see nothing, and the blank look in her face told him that she was mercifully oblivious of the meaning of it all.

With the speed of lightning, stray thoughts and impressions flashed through The Phantom's mind. Slade had warned him that Helen would die when he had counted ten, unless The Phantom surrendered in the meantime. At Helen's back, shielded by her body against a possible bullet from The Phantom's revolver, stood the executioner, ready to press the trigger.

Things swam in confusion before The Phantom's eyes. He would gladly have given his life if thereby he could save Helen from her predicament. But Slade dared not kill him just yet, not until he had learned where Doctor Tagala was hidden, and so he hoped to force The Phantom into submission by threatening Helen. The plan was subtle and fiendishly clever, and more than once, as the seconds dragged by, The Phantom had been on the point of yielding. The only thing that had restrained him was the belief that his surrender would only make the situation worse. It would deprive him of his precarious advantage, and then Helen's position would be doubly desperate.

Once he glanced at the automatic in his hand, wishing that he could fire a bullet into the figure crouching behind Helen. It was a forlorn hope, for the coward knew better than to expose himself. Again Slade's voice, pronouncing each syllable with excessive precision, broke in upon his thoughts:

“—five—six—seven——”

The Phantom jerked up his head as an inspiration flashed through his mind. He still had an advantage, though his aching mind had not been able to grasp it until this very minute. Again his eyes sought the pistol drooping from his nerveless

right hand.

“—eight—nine—” A note of hesitancy crept into Slade’s accents, and he looked expectantly at The Phantom. Evidently he was reluctant to pronounce the final word, the word that would mean Helen’s death. He vastly preferred that The Phantom should accept his terms, but his face showed no sign of yielding from his purpose.

His lips opened, and in another moment the fatal word would have been spoken. But in that brief interval The Phantom acted, and the word never left Slade’s lips. Instead he uttered a long-drawn-out exclamation of amazement.

The Phantom’s maneuver had been both swift and surprising. The blue steel of his automatic had flashed for an instant in the dim light, and then he had pressed its muzzle firmly against his heart. For a few moments the crowd stared in dumfounded amazement; then a startled look in Slade’s face showed that he understood. He bit his lip and suppressed a cry of rage.

“If Miss Hardwick dies, I die, too,” declared The Phantom in gritty accents; and the metallic gleam of his eye and the note of grim earnestness in his voice left no doubt of his sincerity. “And you can’t afford to let me die, Slade. With me dead, you would never find Tagala, and then the bottom would drop out of Mr. Shei’s scheme.”

Slade fumed and gnashed his teeth in impotent rage. A glance at The Phantom’s face, smiling and yet grimly determined, seemed to increase his fury. But The Phantom’s airy confidence was all on the surface. He knew that his dramatic gesture had only postponed the crisis, and already his mind was planning another move.

At last Slade’s rage cooled and his reason reasserted itself. Pointing to the stairway, he bawled an order to the man behind Helen to take her back to her room. The Phantom drew a long breath of relief as she was half led, half carried up the remaining steps; but the comfort the sight gave him was of brief duration.

Now Slade’s finger was pointing at himself. “Take his gun away,” he ordered the men lined up behind him. “Make a rush for him, all at once, but don’t shoot. Go!”

The men bounded forward, but in the same instant The Phantom’s pistol spoke

twice. Two yells of pain followed the sharp cracks of the weapon, and the leaders of the rush sank to the floor. The others stopped, stared diffidently at the steadily pointing pistol, then wavered and fell back. Once more The Phantom had triumphed. He cast a quick glance at the two who had fallen. He had aimed to cripple, not to kill, and he could see that their wounds were not serious.

Slade shook his fist at the cowering men.

“Are you all white-livered kittens?” he shouted. “Are you going to let one man bluff you? Rush at him again, all together!”

The Phantom tensed himself for the attack. He quavered inwardly as he recalled that only two slugs remained in his cartridge chamber. He crouched behind the pistol, fixing each man in turn with a piercing gaze. The line advanced with a rush. Someone, more intrepid than the others, seized one of his legs and tried to pull him to the floor, but The Phantom disposed of him with a vigorous kick. The next was dispatched with a well-aimed bullet, and the third went reeling to the floor from a blow with the butt of his pistol. He took careful aim before he fired his one remaining shot, and a scream of agony told that the bullet had found its mark. Again the line wavered and broke. On the floor lay five who had been maimed by The Phantom’s bullets and one who was still unconscious from the blow with the pistol. Of the original eleven combatants only five remained, but also The Phantom’s ammunition was spent, and at any moment one or more of the wounded might revive and get back into the fray.

Slade’s face was white with helpless rage. He could not know that The Phantom’s cartridge chamber was empty. He stamped his foot and again shook his fist at the men. Taking advantage of his temporary distraction, The Phantom glided forward and, stooping quickly, snatched a pistol from the cramped fingers of one of the wounded. Then he threw down his own weapon and hurried back to his position at the door.

Slade noticed his sudden move out of the tail of an eye, but not soon enough to prevent it. He turned again to the remnant of his little army. His face was dark and bore an ominous scowl.

“We will get him yet,” he declared, snarling. “Form a line and take aim, but don’t shoot to kill. Aim for the arms and legs only. Don’t shoot until I give the word.”

The men spread out in a half circle, and The Phantom saw five pistols pointing at him. There was a malevolent grin on Slade's lips as he watched the preparations. Then he stepped to one side of the half circle.

"Fire!" he commanded.

The Phantom ducked just as a chorus of shots rang out. A stinging sensation in the shoulder told him he had been hit, but he choked back the cry of pain that rose in his throat. A dense film of powder hung in the air, and for a few moments the firing line was only a row of shadowy forms. The Phantom thought of flight, but someone opened a window and the smoke quickly scattered. In the next instant the blare of a motor horn was heard in the distance.

The men exchanged quick glances, and The Phantom fancied he saw a look of relief on Slade's face. In the muttered conversation that followed he made out the name of Mr. Shei, and new misgivings caused him to forget the stinging pain in his shoulder. Slade's handling of the situation had exposed him as a bungler, but for Mr. Shei's ingenuity and resourcefulness The Phantom had a high respect. If Mr. Shei had arrived, as the blare of the horn and the conversation among the men seemed to signify, then a new and more critical situation awaited him.

He glanced toward the end of the hall. A faint glimmer of dawn showed against the window back of the stairway railing. The night had been crowded with exciting events, and the time had passed more quickly than he realized. Again Mr. Shei's name was mentioned among the men, and then a hush fell over the group. A door opened at one side of the hall, and in the next instant The Phantom's eyes widened into a bewildered stare.

The tall man who entered and was received with such marked deference by Slade and the others was none other than Vincent Starr!

A film floated before The Phantom's eyes. It seemed almost unbelievable at first, but a succession of minor incidents and circumstances that had vaguely puzzled him at times suddenly came back to him in the light of a new significance. He had been blind, he told himself; yet it was no wonder that he had been deceived. His concern for Helen had been uppermost in his mind, and he was forced to admit that Starr had played his game very shrewdly.

The newcomer cast a swift, comprehensive glance up and down the hall, then



turned to Slade, and the two engaged in a low-voiced conversation. Now and then Starr mentioned Culligore's name, and The Phantom gathered from isolated words and phrases that something of an unpleasant nature had happened to the lieutenant. He learned, too, that there had been developments that necessitated quick action on Mr. Shei's part and that the latter had made a quick motor trip from New York to Azurecrest. The Phantom absorbed these bits of news with interest, but all the time he was studying the characteristic gestures with which Starr emphasized his statements. Once before, while standing in the Thelma Theater, it struck him that there was something familiar about them, and the same impression came to him now. He was searching his memory for half-forgotten facts when Starr suddenly turned round and faced him.

"Surprised?" he inquired, and his smile exposed two rows of flashingly white teeth.

"A little, at first, but I think I understand it all now," was The Phantom's nonchalant reply. Then, of a sudden, his figure stiffened. Starr had delivered another of his oddly expressive gestures, and it had started another train of recollections in The Phantom's mind. "Starr," he added impulsively, "you were once a member of my organization."

"Only a very humble one," admitted Starr, "and it was years back, so it's no wonder you didn't recognize me at first. In those days you scarcely noticed me, but I was watching and studying you all the time. There were a lot of melodramatic notions in my head, and The Gray Phantom was my hero. I dreamed of some day eclipsing his achievements, and I think I have succeeded. You see, the Thelma Theater, for all the fun I got out of the experiment, was only a cover for my other and more fascinating activities."

"My first impression was correct, then," murmured The Phantom, addressing himself rather than Starr. "I suspected Mr. Shei was a former follower of mine and had learned his methods from me, and that's why I decided to defeat his purpose and break up his organization. Now I'm doubly glad that I took up the cudgels against you, Starr."

"Glad?" A puzzled frown crossed Starr's face. "You are a beaten man, defeated by a once insignificant pupil of yours. Why should you be glad?"

"Defeated?" The Phantom threw back his head and smiled. "Not just yet, Starr.

The Gray Phantom doesn't even know the meaning of the word. Before I drop out of this game you and your crowd will be in jail."

A cloud gathered on Starr's forehead. "You are a curious character. I have beaten you at every turn. I have you so completely cornered that you can't even raise your pistol against me without endangering the life of a certain person whom you are deeply interested in. By the way, Slade has bungled this situation. He tells me that you have kidnaped Doctor Tagala and refuse to tell where he is hidden."

"He has told you the exact facts. You will never see Tagala again until I release him, and that I won't do until Miss Hardwick has been freed and the antidote turned over to me."

Starr's lip curled scornfully. "As I said, Slade has bungled the situation. He doesn't seem to understand what kind of persuasion to exert on a man like you. I think I can suggest an improvement. Miss Hardwick, as I think you know, received a dose of datura poison calculated to produce death within seven days. What is the matter?" he added quickly as The Phantom winced and touched his left shoulder. "Ah! You have been wounded!"

"Only a scratch," said The Phantom coolly, despite the sharp twinges that now and then shot through the injured shoulder. "What about Miss Hardwick?"

"As I said, the injection she received was calculated to kill within seven days. As you know, if you read the accounts of Virginia Darrow's death, the dose can be so adjusted as to produce death in a much shorter time—say fifteen minutes or half an hour. Doctor Tagala, who is a very fascinating gentleman, explained the method to me very carefully."

"I don't quite see——" began The Phantom, an uneasy flicker in his eyes; but Starr had already turned to his lieutenant.

"Slade," he crisply commanded, "in one of the drawers of the desk in the laboratory you will find several bottles of datura poison. Bring me one of those marked 'Series A.' Fetch a hypodermic syringe, too, and be quick about it."

Slade withdrew. A horrifying suspicion was entering The Phantom's mind. Starr's methods were subtler and far more frightful than his subordinate's.

“You look faint,” observed Starr with a glance at The Phantom’s face. A trace of sarcasm edged his words. “I’m afraid the wound is very painful. Too bad Doctor Tagala isn’t here to treat it.”

The Phantom was about to reply, but just then Slade returned and handed his superior a syringe and a small bottle containing a dark liquid. Starr studied the label for a moment.

“Correct,” he murmured. “It’s fortunate Doctor Tagala taught me how to use a syringe. In a few moments Miss Hardwick will have received a second dose of datura poison—one that will kill her inside half an hour unless Doctor Tagala should administer the restorative in the meantime.”

A cry broke from The Phantom’s lips. The severe pain in the shoulder, together with the terrifying realization that had just flashed through his mind, made him suddenly dizzy. He leaned weakly against the wall. In the same instant Starr, quick to seize the opportunity, wrenched the pistol from his hand.

“This is ever so much better,” he murmured elatedly. “I think you will be willing to produce Doctor Tagala as soon as I have injected the second dose of poison into Miss Hardwick’s veins. Hold him, Slade, till I come back.”

He instructed one of the other men to follow him and hurried away, but his words kept dinning in The Phantom’s consciousness. He made a strong effort to fight down the treacherous weakness that was stealing over him. He wondered why his eyes saw nothing but whirling specks and why his knees shook so. The loss of blood, he reflected, must have weakened him more than he had realized. Suddenly everything went black, and with a despairing moan he sank to the floor.

He heard Slade’s derisive laugh, but it had an unreal and far-away sound.

“Dead to the world,” muttered Slade, and The Phantom was dimly conscious that someone was bending over him. “Well, I hope for the girl’s sake that he comes to before the half hour is up.”

## CHAPTER XXII—THE PHANTOM'S RUSE

The words had an electrifying effect on The Phantom's nerves. Not more than a minute could have passed since Starr's departure, and his imagination pictured the scene that soon would be enacted in Helen's room. He strove valiantly to shake off the numbness that had been brought on him by horror and loss of blood.

Out of his half-closed eyes he saw Slade standing in a listless attitude a few feet from where he lay. Evidently he was depending on The Phantom's unconsciousness to last a while longer, for he was idly toying with his pistol and seemed rather bored. Two of the other men were removing their wounded comrades, and for the moment no one was observing The Phantom. A sharp realization that he must act at once quickened his thoughts and stirred his energies. His mental picture of Helen and her desperate peril stimulated his reserve forces of mental and physical vigor.

Warily he glanced about him, then crawled swiftly and silently toward the point where Slade stood. Suddenly he rose to his knees and jerked the pistol from Slade's hand. In another moment he was on his feet, stifling Slade's loud cry for help by a blow with the weapon. Without a glance behind, he ran as fast as he could in the direction taken by Starr. His mind was already at work on a plan. A new force, more powerful than mere bodily strength, seemed to speed him on. Despite physical weariness and the sharp twinges in his shoulder, he felt as if nothing could resist him. If only there was yet time——

Reaching the top of the stairs, he turned at random in the hall. A low, drawling chuckle, uttered in a voice he recognized as Starr's, drew his attention to one of the doors near the end of the corridor. He approached cautiously and looked in.

What he saw assured him that he had arrived in time. He took in the scene with a single glance. A powerful man, one of those he had fought in the hall below, was seated on the edge of the cot, holding Helen's weakly resisting hand in his huge paws. In the center of the room, with a smile of gratification on his lips, stood Vincent Starr, and The Phantom saw that he was transferring the contents of the bottle to the syringe. Evidently it was a slow and tedious task.

The Phantom waited until Starr had finished. He flexed his muscles, then lunged forward. Before either of the two men could move, the handle of his pistol crashed down on the head of the individual seated on the cot. With a queer, fragmentary squeal, he slid from his seat and lay prone on the floor. In an instant The Phantom had whirled on Starr, who seemed completely taken back by the sudden interruption, and jerked the syringe and the empty bottle from his hands. Then, with all the strength he could muster, he crashed his fist into Starr's jaw and sent him spinning to the floor. Thrusting the empty bottle into his pocket and gingerly handling the syringe, he fled from the room.

Despite his pain and weakness, he smiled as he sped on. Once more The Gray Phantom's quick mind and elastic energies were about to reverse a seemingly hopeless situation. But the danger was not yet past, and the hardest task was still to come. Starr, only partly stunned, would soon recover his wits, and then, with a hue and a cry, the pursuit would start. The thought made The Phantom quicken his pace as he ran toward the entrance of the hidden chamber.

A din and clamor sounded in the distance as he reached the point where a sliding panel in the wall afforded egress to the spiral stairway. Quickly closing the opening behind him, he ran down the steps. The pursuers, he knew, would never be able to locate the entrance, and for the present he was safe. He stepped inside the room and switched on the light, then placed his automatic, the syringe, and the empty bottle on the table.

Doctor Tagala was lying on the bed, just as The Phantom had left him. As the light went on, he gave a hoarse gasp of amazement and tried desperately to rise.

"Didn't expect to see me so soon again—eh, doctor?" The Phantom removed his coat and proceeded to clean and bandage his wound as well as he could. "You tricked me very neatly, I'll admit, but the ruse didn't quite succeed. Even if it had, don't you realize that you would have been left here to starve to death?"

The doctor continued to stare at The Phantom, who rather enjoyed his stupefaction. He glanced at the bed from time to time while he took several articles from a cupboard and dressed his wound. When he had finished, Tagala began to strain uneasily at the cords fettering his hands and feet.

"Useless exertion, doctor," advised The Phantom. He walked to the bed and regarded the physician with a frown. Then he quickly took the syringe from the

table and placed a knee on Tagala's chest. Tagala squirmed and heaved, but to no avail. With his left hand The Phantom took one of the scientist's arms and pressed it firmly downward.

"Steady now, doctor. This is only a dose of your own medicine, you know. You seemed quite proud of it when you told me how you discovered it." The Phantom took the syringe in his right hand, between thumb and third finger, and pricked the doctor's flesh with the needlelike point. "I'm a rank amateur at this, but I'll try to manage. I believe the proper way is to inject the stuff into a vein, but that's a ticklish job, and I won't attempt it. This method is a little slower, but just as effective."

The scientist, at last perceiving The Phantom's aim, struggled frantically to free himself, but the ropes and the pressure against his chest rendered him helpless. Slowly and firmly The Phantom pressed against the piston with his index finger, gradually discharging the contents of the syringe into the physician's tissue. Tagala soon ceased struggling, and the look of mute agony in his face told that he had an acute realization of his extremity.

Finally The Phantom tossed the empty syringe aside and removed his knee from the doctor's chest. Then he picked up the empty bottle and held it so Tagala could read the label.

"Series A!" gasped the doctor, and a grayish pallor overspread his hideous features.

"You seem to know what it means," observed The Phantom. "Starr took pains to assure me that the contents of this particular bottle would produce death in thirty minutes. Now, doctor, don't you think you had better tell me where the antidote is hidden—truthfully this time?"

Every trace of color had fled from the scientist's face. He glared at The Phantom with a mingling of dread and rage in his eyes.

"Yes!" he groaned at length. "I will tell you. You have me where I can do nothing else. But, if I tell you, you will bring me a bottle of the antidote?"

"Assuredly. I am not a murderer. It isn't for me to punish you for your crimes. I am resorting to this method only because it seems the only way to influence you and save eight lives.'

“You give me your word of honor?”

“My word of honor.”

Tagala heaved a vast sigh. “Very well, then. The other time I gave you an accurate description of the bottles, although I deliberately deceived you in regard to where they were.” He spoke fast and raspily, as if realizing that every moment was precious. “Listen carefully,” he went on; and then he gave The Phantom clear and detailed directions which the latter memorized. He knew that this time Tagala, actuated by mortal fear, was telling the truth.

His pulses throbbed exultantly as he left the room and hurried up the steps. Shouts and scurrying feet told that Starr’s men had not yet given up their search for him. The hardest and most dangerous part of the task was still ahead of him. The slightest accident or misstep might yet cheat him out of the hard-earned success that now seemed so near. He groped forward cautiously, tightly clutching his pistol, infinitely alert against the slightest sign or sound of danger. The searchers were evidently in another part of the house, for he reached the laboratory without encountering anyone.

He throbbed and tingled with suspense and excitement as he entered. Doubts and fears came back to him. Had Doctor Tagala lied to him, after all? Did the wily Mr. Shei have still another ruse in reserve? Was he once more walking into a trap? Would Helen and himself be able to escape from Azurecrest with the precious antidote in their possession? He was torn between maddening misgivings and serene hopes as he crossed the floor of the laboratory. Tagala had mentioned a closet in a corner of the room where, in an ingeniously concealed hiding place, he would find the bottles. His heart raced fast and hard as he stepped inside. His hands trembled and there was an insistent throbbing at his temples as he began to follow out the scientist’s directions.

Ten minutes later, with pockets bulging and a great joy in his heart, he emerged from the closet. He had found ten small bottles in all, and each one, according to the directions on the label, contained a full course of treatment. The antidote in his possession was more than sufficient to save the lives of all of Mr. Shei’s victims. But he had promised to deliver one bottle to the doctor; and with The Phantom a promise was a promise, even when made to a blackguard of Tagala’s type. It would mean delay and additional risks, but he would not go back on his word. Holding the automatic in readiness for instant action, he began to make his

way back to the secret chamber.

He had covered about half the distance when suddenly he heard a shout at his back. It was followed by a sharp command to halt. Other voices took up the cry until the house resounded with a chorus of harsh and excited exclamations. Clear and loud, issuing commands to right and left, the voice of Vincent Starr was heard above all the others. The Phantom paid no heed. He ran swiftly along, feeling that everything in life depended upon his ability to elude the pursuing throng. A pistol cracked spitefully; then a bullet, aimed low, whistled past his knees. The Phantom ran faster and faster, summoning all his remaining strength.

Now he was only a few feet from the wall, but a swift backward glance told him that the nearest of his pursuers was almost at his heels. He found the deftly hidden knob that controlled the sliding door, and pressed it. The wall parted, and in an instant he had passed through the opening, but someone was already tearing at his coat, and he could not close the aperture behind him. Carried on by their momentum, several men pressed and shoved against his back, pushing him precipitately down the spiral stairs. One by one his pursuers rushed through the opening at the top, shouting wildly as they slid and tumbled down the perpendicular stairway.

“Get him!” shouted Starr, one of the last to pass through the opening. “Don’t let him get away this time!”

A sense of bafflement took hold of The Phantom as he saw his pursuers pouring into the little chamber, but of a sudden the glow of an inspiration came over his face. The accident that had prevented him from closing the opening had been a thing in his favor.

He had left the light on upon leaving the room the other time, and now a touch of his finger plunged the chamber into darkness. He knew it would be some time before the others found the switch. Groping in the dark, he slowly made his way to the cot and thrust a bottle of the antidote into the hook of Tagala’s arm. The others would have to cut his ropes later. Elbowing his way among men running wildly hither and thither in the darkness, he came to the foot of the stairs once more. Quickly he tiptoed to the top and closed the sliding panel, well knowing that Starr’s men would be unable to master the mechanism that controlled it. He chuckled softly as he descended again and once more mixed with the scampering throng below.



“Where is The Phantom?” shouted a voice which he recognized as Starr’s. “Get him, men—get him! We may lose millions if he slips away from us. Can’t someone make a light?”

The Phantom was crouching in a corner. “Better give Tagala a hand,” he called out. “He is badly in need of help. And don’t worry about your millions. They will be the least of your troubles after this.”

He darted across the floor before the others had recovered from their amazement. Pushing and wriggling, he reached the opposite wall. He fumbled along its surface until he found a hidden lever. At his touch a narrow door slid noiselessly open. Beyond it was the tunnel by which he had entered the house upon his arrival. For an instant, before closing the door behind him, he paused in the opening.

“Starr,” he called, an ecstatic throb in his tones, “The Gray Phantom always wins in the end.”

The door closed, and The Phantom started toward the other end of the tunnel. Starr and his men would remain prisoners in the chamber until the police could reach Azurecrest and take them into custody.

With a brisk step, wholly unconscious of the pain in his shoulder, The Gray Phantom hurried toward the light of day—and Helen.

## CHAPTER XXIII—THE END OF THE GRAY PHANTOM

A thin and stoop-shouldered old man, with a kindly gleam in his sunken eyes, gave The Phantom a warm handclasp when, three days later, he walked into the drawing room of the Hardwick's residence.

"How is Miss Hardwick?" was his first question.

"As well as ever, sir," declared her father. "The antidote seems to have worked like a charm. I needn't tell you that I am deeply grateful to you, and——" He paused and looked uncertainly at The Phantom. "I wonder if you can ever forgive me for intercepting those letters. I was a meddling old fool."

"You did what you thought best, Mr. Hardwick. Anyway, all's well that ends well. Please don't think about the matter."

"Thank you for saying that. I'll call my daughter immediately."

He withdrew, and The Phantom sat down. His eyes were keen and bright and there was a new vim and confidence in his manner. He had several reasons for feeling highly elated. Starr and his men, trapped in the secret chamber, had been lodged in jail. The seven capitalists were recovering rapidly following the administration of the antidote. Starr, after a thorough sweating by the police, had grudgingly revealed the whereabouts of Culligore and Fairspeckle, and they had been rescued from their uncomfortable position under the Thelma Theater. Incidentally, the room had been found to contain a great amount of loot stored up by Starr's organization. The full story of The Gray Phantom's achievements had been published in the newspapers, and strong efforts were being made to have all outstanding indictments against him quashed. His adventure had been successful in every respect.

He sprang up as Helen, with a wild-rose flush in her rather pale cheeks, ran into the room.

"Gray Phantom!" she whispered.

His smile was a trifle sad. "The Gray Phantom is dead," he murmured. Then his

face brightened. A whimsical light came into his eyes. “But in my gardens at Sea Glimpse I am trying to bring out a little gray orchid that is to be planted on his grave, symbolizing whatever was good in him. I am thinking of calling it The Phantom Orchid.”

“How poetic!” she exclaimed. “But I don’t quite like to think of The Gray Phantom as dead. He was so splendid in many ways, just like the hero of my poor little play. All he needed was to have the good in him brought to the surface. And that reminds me—the hero of my play was *you!*”

The Phantom nodded. “I was conceited enough to suspect it as soon as I saw the reviews in the papers.”

Helen looked as if her thoughts were wandering away from the present. “The weirdest experience of my life was when I saw Starr enact the rôle of the hero in my play. He actually *lived* the part. And it was then I first suspected he was Mr. Shei.”

The Phantom seemed puzzled.

“I am not sure I can explain. The idea that Starr was Mr. Shei came to me like a flash, yet there was quite a little feminine logic behind it. My hero was modeled after you, but Starr enhanced the resemblance. He introduced things that were not in my play, but which made the similarity between my hero and you all the more striking. His gestures and mannerisms were all yours. As I sat there marveling at it, the name of Mr. Shei suddenly leaped into my mind. I think Virginia Darrow must have felt the same thing. From time to time she looked at Starr in the strangest way, as if she had suddenly made a startling discovery.”

“Hm,” mumbled The Phantom. “Perhaps that was why she sent Starr that facetious note.”

“Afterward my impressions grew somewhat confused,” Helen continued. “The whole thing—Starr’s acting and Miss Darrow’s strange conduct—seemed sort of unreal. It was as if an illusion had been shattered the moment Starr disappeared from the stage and the curtain went down. The officers argued that Mr. Shei could be nobody but The Gray Phantom. Their arguments made me very uneasy, and after my talk with Culligore the next day I felt I must see you. On the impulse of the moment I got on a train.” She shuddered a little, as if some horrifying recollection had come back to her. “It all seems like an ugly dream—

and I am not sure even now that I am quite awake.”

For a time they sat silent, gazing dreamily into the soft sunlight.

“Helen,” said The Phantom at length, “I feel as if a great black cloud had lifted from my life.”

“I feel that way too.”

He found her hand and held it. For a moment his thoughts went back to the day when his fingers had first touched hers.

“Helen,” he murmured, “you and I have schemed together and dreamed together and shared all sorts of dangers together. I wonder if we couldn’t——”

Her misty-bright eyes met his. A smile, warm, radiant, and tender, came to her lips.

“Yes,” she whispered, “why couldn’t we?”

THE END

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