

The Crimson Mask's Scorpion Trail

By Frank Johnson

*This story originally appeared in the April, 1941 issue of **Detective Novels***

The Crimson Mask's



The sight that greeted the Crimson Mask's eyes was one of torture.

CHAPTER I SIGNS OF MURDER

THE sidewalk under the marquee of the Stellar Guild Theater was brightly lighted and jammed with people. Policemen on special duty struggled good-naturedly to hold onlookers back,

while sleek limousines disgorged ermined women and silk-hatted men before the box office. Half the city seemed to have turned out for the fall opening of the Stellar Guild's newest play, "Stars Over Egypt."

As a trim, gray-haired man briskly threaded his way through the crowd toward an alley beside the theater, a policeman sprang to intercept him, then fell

Scorpion Trail



back, saluting smartly.

"Excuse me, Mr. Warrick," he apologized. "I thought it was another of them Stage Door Johnnies after a date with Greta Blake."

Theodore Warrick returned the salute, smiling faintly. Although long since retired as police commissioner, he was still greeted by salutes of sincere respect and liking from men who had worked under him. Now his smile broadened.

"I am a Stage Door Johnny this time, Cassidy," he chuckled, "but not with flowers for Miss Blake. Richard Arken, her leading man, asked me to see him in his dressing room before the first curtain."

"Yes, sir," Cassidy said. "I'll get you right in."

MOMENTS later, Warrick was outside a tiny dressing room shaking hands with Richard Arken. Although past middle age, the leading man of "Stars Over Egypt" retained a youthfulness of face and carriage that kept him a great favorite with audiences. He was already dressed for the stage in a costume of ancient Egypt that enhanced his rugged physique. But under the dark make-up lurked unmistakable signs of tension that did not escape Warrick's sharp eyes.

The actor glanced nervously up and down the empty corridor before drawing his visitor inside and indicating a chair. He seated himself before the make-up table, puffing heavily on a cigarette for a moment.

"Good of you to come," Arken began finally with nervous abruptness. "I was afraid you wouldn't pay any attention to my note. But I had to send for you." His face was grim as he added: "We're up against a menace we can't fight by ourselves any longer."

"You know, of course," Warrick reminded him, "that I'm no longer connected with the police, have no official capacity."

"Yes," Arken said. "Yes, I know. But you're the only man in the world who can help now. Not you, yourself, but another—someone only you know how to contact."

"You mean the Crimson Mask?" Warrick asked quietly.

"Yes, the Crimson Mask," Arken said vehemently. "You remember Val Lawrence? He and I founded the Stellar Theater Guild. Val always had the leading role, while I always played second lead—until this season."

"I remember," Warrick said sympathetically. "He was accidentally killed a week ago, wasn't he? Something about being stung by a scorpion out at your summer rehearsal farm."

"It wasn't an accident," Arken contradicted in a hoarse whisper. "He was murdered! That live scorpion was one of the props in our play and always kept in a locked cage. Someone let it loose in Val's dressing room and then used a hypodermic to pump Lawrence full of concentrated venom. It was cold-blooded murder, I tell you!"

"But the police—"

"The village constable out there accepted what we told him," Arken broke in. "We didn't want any bad publicity to spoil our opening, for one thing, and we were afraid of the killer. But we knew it was murder. You see, Val was a Scorpio."

"A Scorpio?" Warrick frowned. "I don't understand—"

He was interrupted by a sharp knock on the dressing room door.

"Onstage," came the voice of a callboy; "One minute to first curtain!"

"Hang it!" Arken frowned at his watch. "I've got to go right away. Look, I've arranged for an orchestra seat for you, Mr. Warrick. Won't you see the play and then come back here afterward? I must tell you the whole story. For unless the Crimson Mask helps, every member of the Stellar Guild is slated for an equally horrible death!"

"I'll be here," Warrick promised grimly. "And I think I can safely assure you of the Crimson Mask's aid—if what you say is true."

"Thank you," Arken said fervently. Then he snatched a heavy costume bracelet from a jewel case on the dressing table and ran out, leaving the jewel case gaping open. Warrick closed it absently and went out, frowning, to find his seat.

As the curtains parted for the opening scene of "Stars Over Egypt," Warrick gradually lost his frown and became absorbed in the play. The Stellar Guild merited its reputation as America's finest theater group. The beautiful Greta Blake was superb, and Arken's acting was no less flawless.

Clint Delante's supporting role was well handled and the balance of the cast, although not members of the Stellar Guild, had been selected for their outstanding ability. Even the play itself, dealing with astrology in ancient Egypt, was above average.

Tragedy struck so unexpectedly in the first scene that its coming froze everyone in that vast theater into shocked paralysis for a moment.

Warrick had been lounging back comfortably in his seat, enjoying himself. On the stage, Richard Arken had turned away from Greta Blake and was facing the

audience, arms outflung, as he delivered a brilliant monologue. Warrick saw death come, as a glinting sliver of light that whistled over the heads of the audience from somewhere back in the darkened auditorium. It flashed into the glow of the footlights and became a speeding arrow that struck Richard Arken full in the throat!

The gruesome snick, as the point tore in, and the grating impact against Arken's vertebrae were clearly audible in the sudden, grim silence. Arken staggered forward, clawing at the long protruding shaft, his face contorted with agony. Then a bright crimson flood gushed out between his fingers, and he fell at the very edge of the footlight trough, dead.

WARRICK was the first person to move. As the first sighing gasp of horror burst from the assemblage, he leaped to his feet and shouted for the doors to be closed and guarded. He knew there would be a number of police among the audience who would spring to emergency posts until more police aid arrived. Then he whirled and raced for the stage amidst a bedlam of cries and shouts.

On the stage was a milling crowd that had raced from the wings, some to kneel beside Arken's body, others to hover over Greta Blake, who had mercifully fainted. A slender, bald-headed man in shirt-sleeves raced onto the stage, wringing his hands and shouting for the curtain to be drawn.

The ponderous inner drapes began to swing majestically out of the wings, and fresh cries of terror rose from the audience. Warrick stopped in mid-stride, staring. The curtains swung together, hiding the tragedy on the stage but revealing a fresh terror.

A huge square of white had been painted on the purple curtain and against that white hung an immense double circle, divided into twelve equal arcs. Inside each arc was a painted symbol. Warrick recognized the device instantly as a zodiac, a chart of the heavens familiar not only to students of astrology but to astronomers, surveyors and meteorologists as well.

The entire chart was painted in dead black with the exception of two signs. These two were painted in vivid crimson. Gazing at them, Warrick understood now what Arken had meant in saying that Val Lawrence had been a Scorpio.

Warrick knew enough about astrology to know that the date of a person's birth determines his own particular sign of the zodiac, that according to astrology a person's life is governed by his birth sign. Arken had said that Val Lawrence was a Scorpio—and the sign of

Scorpio, a coiled scorpion, was one of the two blood-red symbols on the curtain!

The other symbol marked in crimson was the sign of Sagittarius. The ex-police commissioner felt certain that Richard Arken had been born under the sign of Sagittarius—the symbol of the archer with his bow and arrow. It was equally obvious that the murderer had painted the huge zodiac with its two bloody signs to advertise his gruesome handiwork.

But why? Was Arken murdered to prevent his revealing a clue to the earlier death of Val Lawrence? Or was there, as Arken had hinted, a plot afoot to murder all the members of the Stellar Theater Guild?

These thoughts sped through Theodore Warrick's mind as he vaulted to the stage and hurried behind the curtains that spoke of death. There was no ready answer to the questions, however. Of only one thing was he certain. Here was a task that would call on all the ability of that enemy of crime—the Crimson Mask!

Grimly, Warrick pushed through the shuddering group around Richard Arken's body and quickly identified himself.

"You'd all better stay in sight on the stage until the police arrive," he ordered crisply. "Has someone phoned them?"

"I did," the bald-headed man said tremulously. "I'm Arthur Simmons, stage director for the Stellar Guild."

A DISTANT wail of police sirens backed up his statement. Warrick glanced down to where the stout and dark-complexioned Clint Delante knelt beside the body in silent grief. Just then a broad-shouldered man with a shock of wavy blond hair burst through the curtains.

"This is terrible—awful!" he cried, rushing up to the group. "I saw the whole thing. Poor Dick!"

"Who are you?" Warrick asked, remembering that this man had been racing down the middle aisle when he first reached the stage.

"Mason," the blond man panted. "Jerry Mason. I'm a member of Stellar Guild. A business manager and agent for the actors. That arrow came right over my head from somewhere behind me. I couldn't see anyone and people jammed around so that I couldn't get loose to come up here until just now."

A detail of police, headed by Detective-lieutenant Kane rushed onto the stage. Warrick gave them the details of what had occurred in a concise report.

"The killer must still be in the audience," he concluded, "and whatever weapon he used to hurl that arrow won't be easy to hide."



ROBERT CLARK, Ph. G.

“That’s great!” the lieutenant snapped disgustedly. “Except that somebody started a panic and at least a hundred people pushed their way out before the doors could be blocked. You can bet the killer was among ‘em.” He eyed the ex-police commissioner curiously. “How come you’re here, Mr. Warrick? Is the Crimson Mask on the job?”

“Not yet,” Warrick answered grimly, heading toward the wings. “But he will be as soon as I find a telephone!”

CHAPTER II THE CRIMSON MASK TAKES OVER

ON THE dimly lit corner, the old-fashioned drug store showed the only light in the neighborhood, though it was only nine-thirty in the evening. But in that stronghold of respectable poverty, people had no money to squander on unnecessary lights so they went to bed early, as decent people should. They slept calmly, knowing that if illness should strike unexpectedly, the light at the drug store would be a friendly beacon of ready help.

There was little of the modern drug store behind those cheery windows—no confusion of gorgeously

colored counter cards, no displays of candies, perfumes, alarm clocks or the thousand-and-one knickknacks that, in most stores, have crowded drugs back to some remote corner. This was simply a drug store, with only ethical pharmaceuticals lining its spotlessly clean shelves.

The one exception was the huge jar of lemon drops prominently displayed. But that was not for sale. It was a free and unstinted gift to wistful kids who had never had any money of their own to spend for candy, kids who otherwise might be tempted into petty thievery to satisfy a natural craving for sweets.

Behind the store was a neat prescription room, and few persons knew or cared that the certificate on the wall read “Robert Clarke, Ph.G.” To the grown folks, the pleasant-faced young druggist was always “Doc” or “Bob.” And to the kids he was the “Lemon Drop Man.”

Why he stayed in that penniless neighborhood, or how he could afford an assistant like jovial, pink-cheeked Dave Small, was a mystery. But the fact that he was there was a great blessing for those who lived in the district.

Beyond the prescription room, however, was a white-tiled laboratory that outsiders never saw. In it, Bob Clarke made chemical and bacteriological analysis



SANDRA GRAY

for physicians, but there were instruments there that would have made any doctor open his eyes wide.

For neither blood-counts nor bacterial analysis require comparison microscopes with special stages to hold fingerprints or cartridges. Nor do they involve moulage materials, calibrators, fingerprint equipment or slide projectors. Those things are the tools of modern scientific crime detection, and if the underworld ever so much as suspected their presence behind that little prescription room, one of crime's greatest stumbling-blocks might be "eliminated."

For Bob Clarke, the idolized druggist, was also the Crimson Mask, most feared of all crime avengers!

His identity concealed by clever make-up or a mask of crimson silk, his activities unhampered by the red tape of police routine or legal restrictions, he repeatedly solved mysteries and smashed crime rings that baffled the police.

The creation of the Crimson Mask was neither an accident nor a casual hobby. Years before, Bob Clarke's father, a sergeant of police, had been shot from behind by cowardly thugs. As the officer lay dead, his own blood formed a crimson mask across his face. Bob Clarke had stood there above the body and sworn to

dedicate his life to the eradication of crime.

Theodore Warrick was also present at the end of the brave officer's life. He had seconded, planned and financed the preparation for that career. And so, from the mask of blood on a dead man's face, the Crimson Mask was born.

Besides Theodore Warrick, only two others knew the true identity of the Crimson Mask. One was chubby, loyal Dave Small, who ran the store while the Mask prowled at large and who frequently gave valuable aid to his friend's work.

The other inside member of the crime-fighting group was a girl—slender, blond, beautiful Sandra Gray. Like Bob Clarke, she was fighting crime to avenge a murdered father, and her courage and ability had already proven her an irreplaceable aid.

IF SANDY, as they affectionately called her, guessed that behind the Crimson Mask's admiration for her lay a deeper, stronger emotion, she gave no sign. For she, like the Crimson Mask, knew that as long as humanity looked to them for defense against vicious crime, there could be no time for love in their lives.

When the tiny light winked beneath the drug store

counter, signaling a new appeal to the Crimson Mask through his sole contact, Theodore Warrick, their own lives became secondary to that call. Bob Clarke, trim in his crisp white jacket, was thinking of these things as he helped Dave Small unpack cases of the vitamin capsules they were forever giving away to poverty-stricken mothers. The sudden glow of the signal light was like an echo to his thoughts.

"Action, Bob," said Dave tensely. "I wonder what it'll be this time."

"The same as always," Bob Clarke answered grimly, as he headed toward the private phone concealed in the rear of the store. "Someone thinks he has concocted a sure-fire scheme for beating the law. The details may vary from one case to another, but that's the basis of almost all crime."

He went through the rear door, whose flimsy-looking wood panels concealed a backing of the strongest steel armor, and took up his private phone. Then, for several minutes he listened in silence while Warrick's voice succinctly detailed the tragic events at the Stellar Guild Theater and all he knew of what preceded them.

"This case has some new touches," Bob Clarke commented finally, when Warrick was finished describing the murder. "I'm particularly interested in the flaunting of that astrological angle by means of the zodiac and the murder methods. It sounds to me like either a challenge to the police or, more likely, a hidden threat to other prospective victims. I'll be over there within half an hour. Suppose you meet your old gray-haired friend, Bert West, at that coffee shop next to the theater about ten o'clock."

"I get it," Warrick said. "I'll be there with all the information I can pick up that might prove usable. . ."

At exactly two minutes to ten, an elderly man whose graying hair framed a gaunt, lined face, entered the restaurant and approached the table where Warrick sat alone. He extended his hand, smiling at the surprise in the ex-police commissioner's eyes.

"Great heavens!" Warrick gasped. "You look at least sixty-five years old. Even your hands are those of an old man's."

"I'll be sixty-four m'next birthday," the Crimson Mask quavered, smiling. "Seriously, I picked this disguise because a man of my apparent age isn't as noticeable poking around where he doesn't belong. Well, what are developments now?"

"Not much," Warrick admitted. "The audience was so full of society people that the police had to sift

through the net pretty fast. Caught a couple of known petty crooks but that's all. No sign of the killer or the bow he used."

"Is there still a police guard at the theater?" the Crimson Mask asked.

WARRICK shook his head.

There didn't seem to be much point in leaving one. A cursory checkup of the place didn't show anything that seemed even remotely to connect up with the crime. After all, the killer seemed to be a part of the audience and sifting that crowd was about all the police had any reason to do. Frankly, I discouraged anything but locking the place up for the night—insofar as I could. I had an idea you'd want a free hand to prowls there later."

"Good," the gray-haired man approved. "I'll look it over, presently. You said the arrow didn't pass completely through Arken's neck, didn't you? In that case, I'd rule out a bow as the weapon. A long bow will drive an arrow through a three-inch plank, let alone a man's neck. And you didn't hear the twang of a bowstring, either. Probably the arrow was shot from a spring gun hidden in a walking slick or furred umbrella. Did you get anything on the Stellar Guild itself?"

Warrick waited for the Crimson Mask's order of coffee and doughnuts to be brought before answering.

"Yes," he said then. "Arken and Lawrence started the theater, with Greta Blake, Delante, Mason and Simmons joining in to put it over. The Stellar Theater Guild is a stock company with equal shares and equal profits to all. If a member dies or retires, his stock is divided among the survivors. But all the members had money of their own to begin with and Stellar has made money ever since. They own their theater here and a farm in the mountains near Wendtville, Pennsylvania, where they spend summers in rehearsal. Stellar is considered the most successful theater guild in the country."

"Not much excuse for murder there," the Crimson Mask mused. "Any sign of personal friction among the members?"

"Not friction, exactly. But they all acted reserved and furtive. I'd guess they know something they aren't revealing about the murders. By the way, I wired the Wendtville constable for details on Lawrence's death, in case you want them."

"Fine." The Crimson Mask finished his coffee and rose. "I'll drop over in the morning to see what you learn. Now I'm going to look over the scene of the crime for myself."

For a few minutes, the Crimson Mask strolled up



DAVE SMALL

and down the street with apparent aimlessness. Actually, his sharp eyes were scanning every passerby. If the killer or his allies happened to be watching Warrick, they might make a shrewd guess as to the identity of his "old" friend.

Then, certain that he was unobserved, the Crimson Mask slipped into the dark alley beside the theater and made his way to the stage door. A master key from a ring he always carried let him in. He closed the door softly behind him and froze. From the darkness had come a faint whisper of sound.

FOR five minutes the Crimson Mask stood motionless, hand on his gun, listening intently. When the sound was not repeated, he decided his ears must have picked up the scurry of mice. He relaxed and snapped on his pencil flash.

Ahead lay two short flights of steps, one leading down to the dressing rooms, the other up to the stage. The Crimson Mask chose the stage for his first investigation. There were reasons for this. Why, he asked himself, was the inner curtain drawn instead of the main one, when the tragedy, had occurred? Possibly

it was the murderer's own idea to have the zodiac appear as a means of producing further horror.

Could it be that the stagehand did it purposely, or, perhaps, in his excitement he pressed the wrong lever? Also, the zodiac sign must have been painted on only recently, for it would certainly have been noticed before. Whatever the truth of the matter was, the killer had certainly created the desired effect.

Threading his way past a litter of scenery, lights and prop furniture, Bob made his way into the wings, where the switch panel was located.

He flashed his light over the switch panel beside the stage, quickly locating the two curtain-control switches. One switch was marked "Main Drop," the other "2nd Drop." Closing either switch started a motor which, winding one of the control ropes overhead onto a revolving drum, drew the proper curtain in or out.

By all rights, the "Main Drop" switch should bring out the new curtain, but when the Crimson Mask tested the control, it was the inner curtain that began to move. And when he pressed the inner curtain control switch the main drop appeared. He whistled softly. Somehow, the curtain controls had been reversed.

A glance at the back of the switch panel showed

the wiring intact. His flash moved on and picked out an iron ladder leading to a narrow catwalk above the stage for the use of electricians and scene-shifters. Beside this ran the actual control ropes that pulled the big curtains. Without hesitation, the Crimson Mask went up the ladder. A moment later, kneeling on the narrow platform, thirty feet above mid-stage, he was gazing narrow-eyed at the killer's ingenious handiwork.

The rope that should pull the main curtain had been cut and spliced onto the drum for the inner one. The inner curtain had, in turn, been similarly spliced to the new drum. In order to operate the main curtain at the opening of the play, the killer or his accomplice had deliberately closed the "2nd" switch.

Later, after the murder, any one of the stagehands answering the call to bring down the curtain had instinctively closed the "Main" switch, thus unwittingly bringing the inner curtain into view. It was cleverly arranged, but one thing was obvious. The killer, or his accomplice, must have had complete access to all parts of the stage.

THE Crimson Mask turned, and his beam, spraying along the catwalk beyond where he knelt, fell across a man's feet planted solidly on the platform.

The unseen lurker grunted as the light revealed his presence. There was a swift flurry of movement. The Crimson Mask, on his knees and with his gun tucked into its holster, tried to scramble back. But he was too late. Something whistled through the darkness and smashed against his head with stunning force. The pencil light dropped from his fingers. He felt himself toppling forward helplessly, toward the bare stage thirty feet below!

One hand, clawing desperately, caught at the edge of the catwalk. His attacker leaped forward and stamped on the clutching fingers, kicking them loose.

The Crimson Mask fell across the control ropes, felt the crude splices break under his weight. Desperately he clutched at one of the severed ropes. Then he was hurtling downward, into pitch darkness!

CHAPTER III MYSTERIOUS BOTTLE

GRIMLY, the Crimson Mask knew a split second interval of complete hopelessness. Then a terrific jerk nearly tore his arm from its socket and the direction, but not the speed, of his plunge changed. Unconsciously, he had wrapped the broken control

rope around his hand as he fell and reaching the end of that rope had changed his straight fall into a pendulum-like swing toward the wings.

But this was by no means a way of escape, for his swing at the end of the rope would smash his body against the wall with a force no less devastating. The Crimson Mask's brain whipped through a realization of his predicament and hit upon a faint hope of escape, all in the space of a heartbeat.

With a sudden jerk of his dangling legs, he changed the direction of his plunge, let go the rope, and hurled straight out into inky blackness. He was pinning everything on his fleeting memory of how that stage wing was arranged. He could never survive a head-long plunge against the wall at that speed.

There was an instant of sickening uncertainty. Then the Crimson Mask's outstretched hands touched velvety fabric, and the next moment his plunging body was burrowing deep in the folds of the huge curtain. His desperate gamble had worked! He had missed the stage wall by inches!

Clutching at the curtain to slow his descent, the Crimson Mask slid down to the stage. For a moment, his overtaxed nerves and muscles nearly precipitated him to the floor. Then the sound of clattering footsteps on the iron ladder across the stage snapped him out of his reverie. His mysterious attacker, disappointed at not hearing the Crimson Mask's body smash to the stage, was attempting flight.

The Crimson Mask sped across the stage like a furtive phantom and launched himself at the dark shadow darting away from the foot of the ladder. A whirlwind of smashing blows met his attack. The Crimson Mask drilled in grimly, fighting to get a knockout blow at his assailant. He caught a handful of rough fabric and something clattered to the floor under his feet. Setting himself, the Crimson Mask put all his strength into one devastating blow.

But disaster struck then. His foot came down on the invisible object on the floor. It rolled under his weight, throwing him off balance. His fist glanced off his opponent's shoulder instead of landing a direct blow. And before he could recover his balance, a vicious kick sent him sprawling. Until now, the Crimson Mask had not drawn his gun because he hoped to overpower the mysterious assailant and make him talk. Now he reached for his gun, anticipating a vicious attack.

The dark figure leaped forward, a sharp beam of light suddenly lancing out from a flashlight in his hands. The light limned the Crimson Mask in its glare and showed him just clearing the gun from his coat. The

sight brought a sharp gasp from the attacker.

Abruptly the light clicked out, the dark shape whirled away and a moment later the outside door slammed. Apparently the Crimson Mask's disguise as an old man had made him appear helpless and unarmed. The sight of a ready gun had given his attacker an abrupt change of heart.

The Crimson Mask rose painfully and reholstered his gun. He knew pursuit was useless and he was curious over the queer object that had upset him. He found his flash undamaged, thanks to its special construction, and snapped on the light.

The object dropped by his assailant was a glass bottle, long and round like a pickle jar. The Crimson Mask picked it up in his handkerchief, so as to preserve any possible fingerprints, and studied it narrowly. Although empty, it smelled faintly of acid and the inside was acid-etched part-way up one side. Blown into the neck was the numeral "7" and a queer mark.

THE Crimson Mask tucked it away, frowning. In his laboratory, it might tell a great deal, but for the moment it was only another part of the unsolved mystery.

He still wanted to examine the dressing rooms. Since it seemed unlikely that other enemies lurked in the darkened theater, he went down boldly and switched on the overhead lights. Name cards on the doors showed that Arken's dressing room faced Greta Blake's at the front of the corridor. That of Arken drew his interest first.

He stepped inside and snapped on the light.

Chaos met his eye. Every drawer and box in the room had been emptied with cosmetics, jewelry, costumes and personal effects strewn carelessly on the floor. The Crimson Mask's eyes narrowed. This was not the result of a police investigation. More likely, the mysterious prowler was responsible. But what had he been looking for? And did he find it? The Crimson Mask reflected grimly that the answers to those two questions might be the answer to the whole mystery. He knelt then and began a methodical examination of every item in the heap on the floor.

His search was rapid but thorough. When he finished, only two items held his attention. One was a three-line newspaper clipping mentioning the suicide of a man named John L. Jones. It had been stuck in the lid of Arken's costume jewel box. The other item was a hand-drawn, personal astrological horoscope for Richard Arken on the stationery of Jerry Mason, actors' agent.

The Crimson Mask put these two items into his pocket and quickly went through the other dressing rooms without finding anything of further interest.

He left the theater then, locking the alley door behind him, and hailed a cab. On sudden impulse, he gave the address of Mason's office. His original plan of rushing the mysterious bottle to his laboratory for study could wait. The connection between the horoscope on Mason's stationery and the astrological murders seemed to be more important at the moment.

Mason's office address turned out to be his apartment on the fourth floor of a swanky apartment house on the outside of the city. The Crimson Mask strode through the empty lobby, rode the automatic elevator to the fourth floor and paused before Mason's door while he adjusted the mask of crimson silk that was his trademark.

Then he rapped sharply.

There was no sound from inside. He rapped again, louder, and thumbed the buzzer. When he was sure the apartment was empty, he brought out the master keys and let himself in, locking the door behind him. His hand flash showed a large living room, in one corner of which sat a modernistic desk and file cabinet.

Before examining the desk, the Crimson Mask located a window opening onto the fire-escape and unlocked it for quick flight, should Mason come home unexpectedly. Then he went to work. The cabinet revealed nothing of importance, but the contents of a fat brown envelope in a desk drawer made his eyes widen.

Jerry Mason handled several stage stars besides the Stellar Guild members. But what made the Crimson Mask's lips purse in a soundless whistle was the evidence that Mason had every one of these stars insured for amounts ranging from ten to fifty thousand dollars each.

The deaths of Arken and Lawrence alone would pay him a hundred thousand in cash. That he needed that cash was evidenced by carbons of letters to the insurance companies, each asking for an extension of time in which to pay up premiums on other actors. Jerry Mason needed cash, but it was not proof that he was involved in the murders. Still, it was a lead worth extensive plumbing.

The Crimson Mask returned the policies and papers to the desk drawer and rummaged further. In another drawer he found a pile of astrological books and copies of horoscopes bearing the names of his clients. The Crimson Mask was grimly thoughtful as he closed that drawer. Definitely, Mason would bear closer

investigation.

ABRUPTLY then, his eyes caught the gleam of a slip of paper tucked into a corner of the desk blotter. He centered his flash on the slip and stared in amazement at the typed, unsigned note it bore.

"Mason," it read, "you've seen Val Lawrence and Richard Arken pay for their treachery. Your turn will come soon. Are you ready to die?"

The Crimson Mask straightened from his reading. And as he did so something hard and unyielding jammed into his back. He had been so absorbed in his sensational discoveries that he had been blind and deaf to his surroundings. Now he saw that the window he had unlocked was wide open.

"Stand still, pal," a harsh voice growled, close to his ear. "One move and your backbone'll come flying right out through your belt buckle." A hand lifted the Crimson Mask's gun from its special pocket, returned there and found the mysterious bottle inside his coat. There was a sharp intake of breath at this discovery. The crimson-masked figure stood tensely, cursing his own carelessness, alert for any sign of relaxed vigilance on the part of his captor. He was in a bad spot, for the crimson mask across his eyes branded him irrevocably as the man marked for death by everyone in the underworld.

Suddenly the flashlight was jerked from his hand and turned fun on his face. From behind came a gloating chuckle.

"Well, well! So the terrible Crimson Mask is caught at last, like a kid with his hand in the jam jar. Boy, will I collect plenty dough from certain people when I hand over your corpse. You know what you're gonna get, don't you?"

"I know what you *think* I'll get," the Crimson Mask drawled coolly. "But getting rid of me has been tried by experts, and you don't act like an expert."

Though every nerve quivered at the anticipation of burning lead, the druggist detective deliberately turned and studied the shadowy bulk of his captor. He saw at once that this was a bigger, heavier man than the one who had attacked him at the theater.

A snarl of rage burst from the other.

"You almost took a slug for that crack, wise guy," his captor threatened. "You'd take one right here and now, too, if this dump was soundproofed. But I got a better idea, Mask. Climb out and down that fire-escape, slow and quiet. You and me are gonna take a little ride out in the country where it's nice and private and no coppers around to butt in. After all, I might as well do

this up right, huh? It ain't every day I get a chance to bump the Crimson Mask. Get going!"

The Crimson Mask could do nothing but obey. The menacing gun never wavered. Any move he made either to attack or escape would bring quick, certain death. The Crimson Mask was too fearsome a captive to be permitted the slightest chance of a break. Helpless, he climbed slowly down the fire-escape and let himself be prodded to a big sedan that waited in the shadows.

"Get under the wheel, chump," the other ordered. "You're driving to your own funeral. And get your mitts away from that pocket!"

A vicious jab of the gun emphasized the sharp command. The Crimson Mask stopped his furtive fumbling with the edge of his coat. But he had accomplished his purpose. His left hand now clasped a tiny vial that had been placed in a secret pocket of his coat just a few hours before.

THE vial was one of Dave Small's ideas—simply a few drops of oil in which floated a sliver of silvery metal about the size of a match head.

As he climbed into the sedan and slid under the wheel, he contrived to loosen the cork and toss the vial into the rear seat, unnoticed. Then, with the gun jabbing viciously into his side, he brought the car out onto the street and started driving toward the open country.

From the corner of his eye he studied his captor's face. He had never seen the brutal, battered countenance before, but he would never forget it now. Then he realized that unless his luck held, that cruel face might be the last thing he saw in this world.

"Say," the thug snarled abruptly. "What's burning? I smell something."

The Crimson Mask made no answer but a glint came into his eyes and little muscles suddenly ridged the line of his jaw. Surreptitiously, his elbow pushed the window crank beside him, rolling the window down an inch, sending a draft of air circulating to the back seat. He tensed for split-second action.

"If you're tryin' something—" the big thug snarled, half-raising the gun in his hand. "I don't like that satisfied look on your—Hey! The car's on fire!" But the windshield had already shown the Crimson Mask a reflection of leaping orange flame from the back seat. It was the moment for which he had been waiting. The tiny vial he had opened and tossed back there had contained only a sliver of metallic sodium, but that sliver in contact with the air had generated a little spot of intense heat.

The blast of air from his opened window onto that

spot had caused the back seat cushions to burst into roaring flame.

The uncanny appearance of the blaze occupied the burly thug's whole attention on the back seat for an instant. In that instant, the Crimson Mask went into action.

CHAPTER IV THE MYSTERIOUS JONES

HIS right hand chopped down on the thug's gun wrist, driving the weapon to one side. At the same time, his left fist arced up and cracked solidly against the massive, brutal jaw. It was a blow that would have felled an ordinary man, but the Crimson Mask's opponent shook it off with a bellow of rage. The gun roared once, sending a slug into the back of the seat.

The big man was hampered by trying to line his gun on the Crimson Mask across his own body. The masked man blocked a vicious blow and felt gristle collapse as his answering punch smashed into the thug's already battered nose.

At that strained, tense moment, the car, which was still rolling unguided down the dark street, responded to the pressure of struggling bodies against the wheel and shot off at an abrupt angle. Climbing the curb, it bumped over sodded lawn and stopped with a roaring crash against the bole of a tree.

The Crimson Mask, who by now had managed to get hold of his own gun that was in his enemy's pocket, was thrown against the dash with stunning force. The impact burst the opposite door open and the big man tumbled out, leaving part of his coat and the captured gun in the Crimson Mask's hand.

But the same impact hurled the flaming back cushions against the front seat. Instantly, a sheet of flame and a shower of burning fragments of the fabric swept over the masked man, momentarily blinding him. From outside suddenly came two sharp explosions and slugs whipped past his face. But the leaping flames or the jolt of the accident spoiled the thug's aim.

The Crimson Mask shot once, blindly, in the direction of the sounds and then launched himself in a leap that carried him out through the open door and clear of the flames.

He struck the ground and rolled over, blinking his eyes clear of smoke and glare, and coming up with his gun ready for action. Then he grunted in anger. His captor was gone and with him, the mysterious bottle. For the second time in an hour, the Crimson Mask had escaped with his life but lost his attacker.

A moment later he heard the reason for the big thug's unexpected flight, when the shrill blast of a police whistle reached his ear. Apparently a patrolman close by had heard the crash and the shots, and was racing to investigate.

Already lights were springing up in surrounding houses. For the moment, at least, the Crimson Mask had no desire to waste time or tip his hand by submitting to a police investigation. The thug's idea of sudden flight seemed wise. But first he had an important job to do.

The front seat of the sedan was already consumed in flames, but the Crimson Mask jerked off his singed coat, wrapped it around his head and plunged back into the holocaust. Though the flames seared his wrists and hands, he caught the steering wheel and put every ounce of his superb strength into a twisting jerk.

The light steel of the rim and spokes bent without breaking, but the thick plastic of the wheel itself shattered into long splinters. The Crimson Mask hastily gathered these splinters, tucked them into his pocket and fled into the darkness as the policeman came pounding across the pavement toward the wreck. . . .

SANDRA and Dave were waiting anxiously in the Crimson Mask's Quarters above the drug store when he arrived. Although dead tired, he paused only long enough to have his blistered wrists coated with salve and to change into fresh clothing. While Sandra applied the unguent, he quickly sketched the details of what had occurred.

"You'll go to bed and get some rest now, won't you?" Sandra pleaded when he had finished.

Bob Clarke, the Crimson Mask, shook his head, smiling.

"Not quite yet, Sandy." He produced the splinters of steering wheel he had salvaged. "Somewhere on these scraps I hope to find a clear fingerprint or two of my burly chum, although my prints may have smeared them when I drove. I want to try to identify that thug as quickly as possible, for he may be a lead to the mystery behind the murders."

They watched in silence while Bob Clarke's deft fingers dusted the fragments, photographed them for permanent record and then sat down to analyze his findings. Thorough knowledge of the Henry fingerprint system enabled him quickly to translate the loops and whorls and arches he found into a simple classification formula.

When he had eliminated his own prints and those too smudged to be usable, he had two clear impressions

left that could only be those of his huge attacker. With the index of these before him, he turned to his private phone.

"I hate to disturb Warrick at this hour," he said, "but tonight's developments indicate more murders unless we smash the plot quickly. In that case, every second counts."

He turned to the phone, apologized to Warrick and gave a concise report of the evening's events.

"Now I need your help," he continued. "I wish you'd get in touch with the police and find out all they know about the burned car, and whom it belonged to, if possible. Then read them the fingerprint classification I'm going to give you and see if it's on file. Also, get any dope you can on a suicide named John L. Jones. Now get pencil and paper and I'll give you the fingerprint index. . . . Ready? L over L, nine over twelve. . . ."

After finishing, he cradled the phone. Within ten minutes Warrick called back.

"You got something," he said excitedly. "The car belongs to Delante, who reported it stolen yesterday. Those prints belong to a thug named Beef Slattery who did time for beating up merchants in a protection racket. But get this! Until a month ago, Slattery was employed as bodyguard and chauffeur by Greta Blake!"

"Whew!" Clarke whistled. "That *does* introduce some new angles. I think I'll visit some Stellar members in the morning before I see you."

"Say," Warrick interrupted, "I just thought of something. Where did you say you found that Jones suicide clipping in Arken's dressing room?"

"Why, lying in the top of the case where he kept the jewelry that went with those Egyptian costumes he wore on the stage."

"Bob, I just remembered that when Arken ran out to go on the stage, he left that case open and I closed it. There wasn't a sign of a newspaper clipping in there then."

BOB CLARKE frowned puzzledly. "Then someone planted it there after you left," he said. "For what reason? Did they mean it to be found by the police after Arken's murder, or was it intended for him by someone who didn't know he wouldn't be back to read it? By the way, did you get any dope on John L. Jones?"

"The Records Room was closed for the night," Warrick answered. "I'll get you the information first thing in the morning."

Bob Clarke hung up and recounted his new information to the others.

"Got some work for us, then?" Dave Small asked eagerly.

"Your job will come later, Dave," said Clarke. "But I have a job for you, Sandy. Greta Blake, like most stars, is hungry for publicity. If a young lady writer named Sandra Gray asked permission to write a magazine article on the home life of a star, she'd practically get the run of Greta Blake's home for a few days. I'm sure she'd forgive us the deception, afterward."

"You'll know all there is to know about La Blake," Sandy promised. "From where she throws her used nail polish bottles, to what she talks about when she mumbles in her sleep."

"Good." Bob Clarke smiled. "And speaking of sleep, we had better get some ourselves. Let's break this up."

Early the next morning, a well built, middle-aged man who wore glasses and carried a cane, hammered on the locked stage door of the Stellar Guild Theater. It was the Crimson Mask in a new disguise, fresh and alert despite less than three hours of sleep. A fake phone call had already told him that Arthur Simmons, a Stellar Guild member and its stage director, was at the theater.

After a short wait, the door opened and Simmons, looking haggard and jittery, appeared.

"My name is Dawson," the Crimson Mask prevaricated. "May I come in and talk to you for a moment—about last night?"

Simmons hesitated and then jerked his head for "Mr. Dawson" to enter. He closed the door, turned, and his eyes suddenly bulged. His visitor was holding out one hand, and draped across his spread fingers was a mask of crimson silk, the trademark known to everyone in the city.

"The Crimson Mask!" Simmons whispered. "I heard you were investigating Dick Arken's murder. What can I do to help get the dirty rat who did it?"

"Give me straight answers," the Crimson Mask answered grimly. "Who, besides yourself, had access to the theater at any time of the day or night without arousing suspicion?"

"Any Stellar Guild member," Simmons answered promptly. "Don't forget, we're all equal owners of the theater and everything in it. This, of course, is my office during the season, but the rest are always poking around, experimenting with lights and scenery arid effects. Why?"

"Mr. Dawson" explained how the control ropes had been crossed to bring out the zodiac on the inner curtain and how he had very nearly been thrown to his death

while investigating. Simmons grinned lopsidedly.

"So *you're* the one." He jerked a thumb up toward the catwalk, now littered with tools and coiled rope. "I've been putting in new control ropes and cussing whoever busted the others all morning."

The Crimson Mask's eyebrows lifted.

"Do you always make your own repairs?" he asked.

Simmons made a sour face.

"It's the stage carpenter's job. But after what happened last night, I told him not to come back until I called him. He went on a binge and I couldn't locate him this morning. So, more to keep from thinking about what happened than anything else, I decided to do the job myself."

"Will they try to keep the show going?" the Crimson Mask asked.

"I don't know." Simmons shrugged helplessly. "Val and Dick were the only ones groomed to play the lead. Clint Delante couldn't take over without weeks of rehearsal."

"Tell me," the Crimson Mask said with studied casualness. "What made Jones kill himself?"

It was a shot in the dark but it hit home. Simmons stiffened and his eyes flickered.

"How did you find out about Johnny Jones?" he cried hoarsely.

CHAPTER V MURDER FOR VENGEANCE

YOU'D better tell me the whole story," the Crimson Mask said a little later.

"You're right," Simmons said. "Reputations don't mean much to a corpse. This Johnny Jones was a neurotic who came from somewhere upstate last spring to set the world afire with his plays. Thought he was a second Eugene O'Neil. Val and Dick were in town, but the rest of us had gone to the rehearsal farm. We didn't know anything about what happened until it was all over.

"Anyhow, Jones tried to sell us a play based on astrology. Val and Dick read it to please him, but it was rotten. And besides, we were already scripting "Stars Over Egypt," which has an astrological theme. When they told Jones that, he blew his top and hysterically started accusing them of stealing his idea. He made so much noise that they booted him out and forgot him.

"Some crank is always accusing a playwright of piracy, but Jones was really off base. He rushed home and killed himself, leaving notes blaming the Stellar Guild. Luckily, we kept the notes from the newspaper

boys or they'd have crucified us. That's why we've kept it quiet. Stage reputations are shaky."

"Then," the Crimson Mask said quietly, "you received the death threats?"

Simmons gave him a startled look and then nodded.

"You're either a good guesser or way ahead of me," he admitted. "Yes, we got death threats. Here. I kept mine."

"Mr. Dawson" concealed his elation behind a poker face as he unfolded the proffered note. It was typewritten on plain paper, without an address or signature. It read:

Johnny Jones is dead. How does It feel to know you murdered him, as surely as if you'd stabbed him in the back? He'd be alive today If he had received kind treatment, Instead of the careless brutality that shocked his oversensitive nature.

But, of course, you didn't know that Jones wasn't his real name. You didn't know he was too proud and ambitious to hunt success through pull. So he told no one that he was my brother—the brother of one of your own Guild members. I didn't know what was happening until too late to save him, until there was nothing left but vengeance. And he will have that.

Lawrence and Arken will pay for what they did. Johnny thought you stole his astrology plot, thought even the stars had betrayed him. But the stars hadn't failed him. They are going to avenge his death—soon!

The Crimson Mask's brain was spinning over the fantastic development. He tucked the note away in his own pocket. .

"You haven't any idea who wrote this?" he asked.

"None," Simmons denied. "They came to all of us through the mail in plain envelopes. All I know is that I never had a screwball brother, or any brother. The devil of it is, we all came together just a few years ago, so none of us really knows any of the others' background. Anyone of us could have sent the letters."

"Didn't you do anything about the notes?"

"Oh, we talked about them but decided it was another crank gag. Besides, we were scared of bad publicity over Jones' suicide. So, even when Lawrence died, we kept stalling, telling ourselves it was only coincidence. Then Dick got his warning yesterday and sent for you."

THE Crimson Mask controlled his emotions. So Richard Arken had been warned that he was to die. What had become of that warning note, then? And who

was the vengeful killer? It might be Delante, Mason, Simmons himself, or even Greta Blake. There was nothing in the note to indicate whether the writer was a man or woman. But the sudden flood of unexpected information had opened limitless vistas of new possibilities to the Crimson Mask.

"Keep this little talk to yourself for now," he told Simmons. "I may ask you for more information later."

At the door he turned and asked, casually: "Who does your astrological horoscopes?"

"Jerry Mason," answered Simmons promptly. "He's the only one of us who can handle the mathematics necessary to cast an accurate horoscope. He does work for most of the stage and screen stars as a sort of hobby."

Half an hour later, the Crimson Mask sat at ease in Theodore Warrick's library, recounting the amazing information he had obtained. The report had come in from the constable at Wendtville with no new information on Lawrence's death. Before starting his recital, Bob Clarke had quickly sketched a picture of the mysterious bottle, and learned that Warrick had never seen one like it and could offer no suggestion as to its use or importance.

"That solves it," Warrick exclaimed when Clarke had finished. "The police report I got this morning confirms all you learned about Jones, even to the fact that they have never located his family. I'll have the police check on the family background of each member of the Stellar Guild and we'll have the killer. It all ties in with the typical grudge-killing pattern I've seen so often. We know Jones was mentally unbalanced and that trait probably ran through the whole family."

"I wish I could think that would settle it." Bob Clarke frowned. "But there are too many loose ends. The missing death threat note, the planted suicide clipping, the mysterious bottle and Beef Slattery. None of those tie in. I'm sure there's more to the murders than mere revenge. There's a money pattern in there somewhere."

"How about Mason?" asked Warrick. "You found that he was broke and could recoup through insurance on his clients. His lateness in getting on the stage last night could have meant that he shot the fatal arrow and stopped to hide the weapon."

"Maybe," the druggist detective mused. "Have the police look into everyone's past, anyhow. Meanwhile, I'm going to visit a dark horse. Clint Delante is as much a part of this as any member, yet he has never once appeared as suspect. I'd like to see what might be hiding under that quiet surface."

DELANTE'S apartment was on the second floor of a walk-up flat. As the Crimson Mask approached, his eyes narrowed at the sight of a sedan parked in front, with its motor idling. A rat-faced man sat watchfully at the wheel, slitted eyes studying each passerby along the street.

The Crimson Mask felt the impact of that calculating stare as he turned boldly into the building. Still disguised as a substantial middle-aged man, the Crimson Mask calmly entered the foyer, selected a key from his master ring and let himself in as though he lived there. As he turned to climb the front stairs, he sent a quick glance back toward the parked car. The rat-faced man was leaning over to peer through the glass of the door, one hand hovering above the horn button as if to signal.

The Crimson Mask plodded up the stairs to the fourth floor, taking care to show himself plainly at each landing window as he passed. The rat-faced man below relaxed.

Instantly the Crimson Mask raced silently down the fourth floor hall. He darted down the back stairway and a moment later was quietly applying his ear to the door of Delante's apartment. The rumble of conversation from within became audible speech that made the Crimson Mask's eyes turn flinty and his fingers close over his gun.

"For the last time, punk," a cold voice was snarling, "do you talk, or do I have to persuade you some more?"

A low moan was the answer. Then a weak voice that could only be Delante's gasped:

"Don't! Please, don't burn me any more. I tell you, I didn't murder them and I don't know who did. I don't even know what you're hunting for, Let me go!"

The Crimson Mask frowned. Was someone accusing Delante of the murders of Arken and Lawrence? A muffled crash reached his ears, coming from some inner room, and a third voice called:

"Not a single thing in his bedroom, either, Carson. It looks like maybe we hit a duster on this one."

"Yeah," the first voice agreed coldly. "He's too soft to be playing dornick. Well, that leaves two others."

"Gonna leave this guy tied up, Boss?"

"To finger us to the cops afterward?" the first man answered. "Don't be a sap, Fats. Bring me a good, thick pillow."

The Crimson Mask's face was cold. A killing shot, silenced by a muffling pillow, was to be Delante's callous fate. But the Crimson Mask's hands had not been idle as he listened. He had already selected a suitable master key and slipped it quietly into the lock of the door. Now he straightened, slipped the identifying crimson mask

over his eyes and drew his gun.

Then he braced himself against the door, turned the key and pushed.

CHAPTER VI SOME NEW ANGLES

ABRUPTLY the door whipped inward on a frozen tableau of violence. Delante's apartment was a wreck—with drawers emptied, furniture overturned and cushions slashed. The actor himself, his swarthy face puffy with purple bruises, was lashed to a chair. A ring of burned matches around his bare, blistered feet told a mute story of brutal torture.

At sight of the Crimson Mask he cried out sharply and then toppled against his bonds in a faint.

Bending over Delante was a gaunt, hard-faced man whose right hand held an automatic and his left the pillow that was to serve as makeshift silencer for the weapon. At one side crouched a fat, moon-faced thug, licking thick lips in anticipation of the brutal murder.

Both whirled at the sound of the opening door and then froze. There was something unutterably terrifying about the crimson-masked figure in the doorway, covering them with a rock-steady pistol.

"Drop it!" the Crimson Mask barked. "Now, back up against the wall and keep your hands in sight."

Desperation made the fat thug's fingers move tremblingly toward the front of his coat. Instantly the Crimson Mask's gun swung in a silent threat.

"Behave, sap!" the gaunt leader growled at his companion. "This is the Crimson Mask—and he's poison."

"Rat poison," the Crimson Mask agreed coldly. "And the worst rats I know are ones who would torture and kill a bound victim. In case you consider making a break, just remember how I feel. You"—he gestured at the fat thug—take out your gun and drop it on the floor."

Sweat beaded the fat thug's face. Fearful lest any of his movements be misconstrued, he carefully lifted out his gun with two fingers and dropped it on the floor.

"Kick it over here," the Crimson Mask commanded. "Then untie Delante and place him on the couch." Meanwhile the gaunt Carson had flattened against the wall in apparent submission, both hands spread against the plaster at each side. But one hand was covering and pressing upon a small button set in the wall.

It was the buzzer, common to all walk-up flats, which unlocked the front door downstairs. The sound of its intermittent buzzing was barely audible in the

apartment, but it would be easily heard by a man in the street outside. Carson hid a grin of triumph.

"All right," the Crimson Mask snapped, when Delante's limp figure had been made comfortable. "What were you two trying to get out of Delante?"

"I'm not talking!" Carson snarled.

"How about Beef Slattery?" the Crimson Mask asked quietly. "Are you as sure he won't talk?"

He was fishing for information and the result surprised him. Carson's eyes showed only hatred and blank amazement.

"What's the gag?" the gaunt man demanded. "I don't know anybody named Slattery."

There was no denying the genuineness of the denial. But if Beef Slattery was not working with Carson, what was his part in the mystery? And for that matter, what was Carson's?

"Listen, Mask," said Carson abruptly, "we're both after the same thing—the guy who bumped them actors. Now, I'll make you a straight proposition. You find out who the rat is and tell me before you tip the cops. I'll pay a grand in cold cash on delivery for the guy's name—two hours before the cops get it. How about it?"

The Crimson Mask concealed his amazement behind a stolid face. There was an undeniable sincerity in the gaunt thug's voice. For some unfathomable reason, Carson did want the name of the killer.

AT THAT moment, the unlatched hall door behind the Crimson Mask's back inched noiselessly open a space, and a face peered through. It was the vicious, snarling face of the thug who had been on guard in the car below. By not so much as a flicker of the eyes did either Carson or the fat hood betray the presence of their ally.

With an evil grin twisting his face, the newcomer eased the door open wider and crept toward the Crimson Mask's unprotected back. His right hand held a cocked pistol, which he slowly raised.

The masked man, at that moment, was shaking his head in bewilderment. He said, very quietly:

"I'll make *you* a proposition, Carson. You will notice that I have pulled back the trigger of my gun and am holding the hammer back only by the pressure of my thumb. If the thug who is creeping toward my back drops his gun and lines up beside you, I'll try not to let my thumb slip off the hammer. But if he either shoots or hits me now, I'm very much afraid a bullet will go into your heart. Is it a deal?"

A snarling curse of fury and amazement sounded

behind the Crimson Mask's back. Carson's jaw dropped, and the fat hood bleated in superstitious terror.

"Drop the gat and get over by Fats, Hack!" bawled Carson hoarsely. "The guy ain't human and he ain't fooling. Hurry up before he gets sore or his thumb slips, you flatfooted ape!"

By that time, even the cynical Carson was willing to believe, as did so many thwarted crooks, that the Crimson Mask truly possessed supernatural powers. The Crimson Mask's swift action was not due to any sixth sense, but to carefully cultivated powers of observation that might seem almost miraculous to the average man.

Habit, gained during rigorous preparation for crime fighting, had made him instinctively photograph every detail of the room with his keen eyes the moment he crossed the threshold. He had seen the buzzer and, later, seen Carson's hand cover it.

He had seen cords tighten on the back of the gaunt hand as Carson pressed the concealed button and had guessed that he was signaling to the man below. After that it had been only a matter of keeping his ears alert for the soft sound of the third man's arrival. The Crimson Mask had kept quiet because he wanted this third man to walk, unsuspecting, into his trap.

"Hurry up, blast you!" Carson growled. "Do you want to get me plugged?"

"Okay," the newcomer said reluctantly.

His gun thudded to the floor at the Crimson Mask's feet and the gaunt Carson sucked in a deep breath of relief. Hack edged around their Nemesis' tense figure in sullen fury.

He was directly beside the masked figure when he suddenly exploded into action. Whirling, he butted into the Crimson Mask with a beefy shoulder and at the same time, shot a fist at the poised gun.

Although the Crimson Mask was not unprepared for such a move, the fury of the attack threw him momentarily off balance. His thumb was knocked from the hammer of his gun by the blow and the same impact discharging the automatic, sent a slug smashing into the center of the fat thug's throat.

CARSON yelled and made a dive for his own discarded weapon. Hack, having butted the Crimson Mask aside, was lunging to retrieve his gun from the floor. Fats was out of the fight, falling forward with blood gushing from his shattered throat.

Carson had caught up his gun and was swinging around to level it at his enemy. The Crimson Mask's

gun spoke first and the weapon flew from Carson's shattered hand. The gaunt man yelled with pain.

But in that instant, Hack had caught up his own gun from the floor and leaped at the Crimson Mask from a crouch, firing as he moved. The masked man dodged as he saw the muzzle lift toward him and felt the heat of the slug sear his cheek. His own weapon leaped and thundered before Hack could fire again, and the thug died in mid-leap, went crashing to the floor.

The crimson-masked figure whirled instantly to cover Carson. Then a grunt of dismay escaped him. The hall door was open and the gaunt man was gone.

Wounded and with his gun shattered by the Crimson Mask's bullet, he had fled.

The Crimson Mask raced for the hall, intent on capturing Carson to make him talk. Then he abruptly halted and lowered his gun. Pursuit was useless.

His ears caught the slam of the front door below and, an instant later, the roar of a car motor.

The Crimson Mask turned back, conscious of terrified cries from other apartments. The frightened neighbors would soon have the place overrun with police. He did not fear the police, but for the present he had no desire to waste time getting his identity established.

A hurried search of the dead thugs' clothing revealed no information. As he started for the door, his eyes fell on a bulky scrapbook carelessly tossed in one corner. He saw that it was Delante's, filled with newspaper clippings of Stellar Guild activities.

On impulse, he tucked it under his arm.

Then, with a quick glance at Delante to make sure the actor would be in no danger until the police could rush him to a hospital, he went quietly down the back stairway and out through an alley as police sirens screamed up to the front of the building.

ONCE more in his neighborhood pharmacy, Bob Clarke relaxed in the rear of the store. He looked at Dave Small and grinned.

"Hasn't Sandy come back yet, or contacted you?" he asked.

Dave shook his head.

"I tried to phone her at Blake's apartment but nobody answers," he said. "I was going to pretend I was her editor."

"I don't like it." Clarke frowned. "Even though she probably went somewhere with Greta Blake and couldn't call. And if we start making inquiries, we may tip someone to her connection with the Crimson Mask. But if she doesn't call by six o'clock, I'm taking up her trail."

Between bites of a meal fixed by Dave, he related the day's activities and findings.

"I'm convinced," he finished, "that Delante didn't know what the thugs were after, and I'm equally convinced Carson isn't subtle enough to have committed the two murders. No, there must be two interlocking puzzles that will click together into one pattern when we find the key piece. By the way, Dave, do you know what a dornick is, or a duster?"

"Huh?" Dave looked startled. "Not unless you mean a feather duster. Why?"

"Carson and Fats used those words today and I have a feeling they'd tell me something if I could identify them. They're slang terms peculiar to some special trade or locality, I'm sure."

HE TOOK up Delante's scrapbook and settled down for an intensive study of the clippings. Somewhere in the set-up or membership of Stellar Guild was, he felt certain, some tiny, overlooked clue that would unravel much of the mystery. He started with the most recent clippings and worked backward.

Most of them were ordinary press agent's stories. Now and then he found an item of straight news. Where an ordinary man would have given up at a hurried glance, Bob Clarke swiftly read and digested every word of every clipping. Much of his success as the ace of crime fighters was due to his ability to wring every tiny thread of possible information completely dry before abandoning it.

As the pages leafed by, Clarke's hopes dropped. Then, as he was about to give up in disgust, an unpasted clipping fluttered from between blank pages at the back of the book.

He read it with startled eyes. But his first hope that he had found the key to the mysteries was quickly dashed. Dave, drawn by his friend's first exclamation of excitement, read over his shoulder:

THE FORTUNES OF OIL

Dora Number Seven, Cloney Oil Company's newest and richest gusher, has just pumped its twelve millionth barrel of high grade crude oil, while three hundred yards away, on land leased from the Stellar Guild Theater, the second of two test wells has been abandoned as dry.

Immediately after Cloney's well came in, private drillers leased land from the farm used for summer rehearsals by Stellar Guild in an effort to tap the lame pool. This project, however, has been abandoned when no oil was reached, even at depth exceeding

that of Dora Number Seven.

Geologists say Cloney Field is apparently situated directly above an oil dome whose boundaries do not reach under Stellar Guild land.

"Whew!" Dave whistled. "For a moment I thought, you had the case right in your lap, Bob."

"I still might have," Bob Clarke answered slowly. "There's something mighty fishy about all this. I just remembered that those slang words Carson's thugs used were oil field terms. To 'hit a dornick' means to be stopped by hard rock. And a 'duster' is a dry well that has never located oil. So it's certain those men were oil field hoodlums, and I'll bet that mysterious bottle has some connection with oil. Dave, suppose you get on the telephone and get the real facts on this oil business. Try some oil men or the state geologist. I'd like to get more facts before I tip my hand to the Stellar Guild members on this angle."

Just then the signal light blinked, indicating a call from Warrick. Bob Clarke lifted the private phone.

"Can you get over here right away?" Warrick asked. "There are some developments I think you'd better know about."

CHAPTER VII WHERE IS SANDY?

BOB CLARKE stopped only long enough to don a new disguise suitable for any situation that might arise. Before leaving, he asked Dave to phone him the moment he heard from Sandy. It still lacked a half-hour to the six o'clock deadline he had set to hear from her.

Twenty minutes later the Crimson Mask was at the home of the ex-police commissioner.

"I'm glad I caught you in," Warrick said when he was assured of his visitor's identity by the secret handshake. "Great things are happening, I think. Better put on your mask before we get to the library,"

With his crimson identification in place, the masked figure followed Warrick into the library and stopped short. A man was rising from a chair—a broad-shouldered man of indefinite age with the complexion of a blond. But the color of his hair was completely hidden by a turban of stained bandages swathing his head. He stared at the Crimson Mask in frank curiosity as Warrick introduced them.

"The Crimson Mask—Mr. Jerry Mason."

The Crimson Mask studied Mason keenly as they shook hands. It was the first time he had met his

principal suspect face to face, and he found himself wondering if those blue eyes were the eyes of a vicious murderer.

"Mr. Mason's had a trying experience," Warrick explained. "Tell the Crimson Mask what you told me, will you?"

"Gladly," Mason said, as they took chairs. "I was at my desk about one o'clock this afternoon, in my apartment, when I heard a noise behind me. Before I could turn, something slammed into the back of my head and I went completely out. Three hours later I came to on the floor in a pool of blood, to find my whole place ransacked. Apparently nothing was taken, which ruled out robbery. Anyhow, I bandaged myself the best I could and hurried here. I knew Mr. Warrick had brought you in on the Stellar Guild murders and I thought this might tie in with them, in some way."

"Mind if I look at the wound?" the Crimson Mask asked. "I know a little medicine and that might be serious."

"Go ahead." Mason shrugged. "I suppose you really want to see if I'm faking, but that's all right with me."

A glance showed the Crimson Mask that Mason had suffered a vicious blow that could well have proven fatal. He dressed it from Warrick's first aid kit, advising Mason to see a doctor as soon as possible.

"By the way," he said casually. "What do you charge for those astrological horoscopes you cast?"

"Nothing." Mason smiled. "It's purely a hobby. But the way show people hound me for charts, I may have to commercialize it in self-defense. If you'd give me your birth date, Mask, I'd like to erect a chart for you."

"July Thirteenth," the Crimson Mask answered after a moment's hesitation. "I'd rather keep the year to myself."

"Okay," Mason said, grinning. "I'll give you a solar delineation, anyhow. Your ruling sign is Leo, the lion. And speaking of lions, we've got an old one caged in the theater basement eating his head off. We leased him for use in the show and his owner won't take him back."

"Is the show definitely finished?" the masked figure asked.

"Maybe not. One of the actors I handle came in to tell me this morning that he was at liberty. I made him a proposition to take the lead in 'Stars Over Egypt' if we go on. He's one man I know who can handle the part on short notice. As long as we have Greta Blake, we can usually manage. I phoned the rest of the Stellar

Guild right away and they were in favor of reopening as soon as possible."

"May I speak to the Crimson Mask outside?" Warrick interposed.

AT MASON'S wave, they stepped out, closing the door.

"Could that wound be self-inflicted, Bob?" Warrick asked then.

"It could be, but inflicting it would take either real nerve or sheer desperation. Somehow, I believe that story."

Then he described the attack on Delante earlier in the day.

"But why let Mason off with a bump on the head?" Warrick frowned. "And why torture and try to kill Delante? It isn't logical. But I have some other news. The police checked the Stellar Guild members. All of them had clear family backgrounds with no missing brothers anywhere—except Mason's. Mason blew into town twelve years ago. Prior to that, his history is a total blank. What do you think, now?"

"I think," the Crimson Mask answered grimly, "that I'd like to ask Mason some pertinent questions. Let's go back in."

He threw open the library door and stopped short. The room was empty. An open window leading onto a terrace indicated the route by which their suspect had fled.

"That does it!" Warrick cried, and ran to the telephone. "He's the guilty one, I'm sure. I'll call the police right away. He won't get far."

When he returned from phoning instructions to the police, who cooperated with him partly because of his previous record as commissioner and partly because of his connection with the Crimson Mask, Bob Clarke was pacing the floor. His face was set in a deep frown of dissatisfaction.

"I wish he hadn't done that," he declared. "For all the circumstantial evidence, I can't believe Mason is the murderer."

"He's put himself in a bad light by running away," Warrick grunted. "What were you going to tell me awhile ago?"

The Crimson Mask told of his discovery of the clipping, indicating the possibility of rich oil strikes as the motive for the crimes. When he had finished he went to the private phone connecting Warrick's home and the drug store.

"It's six o'clock," he said. "I want to see if Sandy has called and also find out what Dave has dug up about

the oil deal.”

“Not a word from Sandy, Bob,” Dave’s voice reported a moment later. “But I got the dope on your oil lead and you won’t like it. The clipping was right. As soon as the Cloney well started gushing, a wildcat outfit leased a wide strip of Stellar Guild land adjoining Cloney’s field and started sinking wells. They put down two wells within a thousand yards of this Dora and never hit a drop of oil.”

“Any chance that someone’s wrong?” Clarke asked. “Is that information authoritative, Dave?”

“The best, Bob. Straight from the State geologist. He gave me a lesson on shade formations and defractionation tests for hydro-carbon molecules that meant no oil. It seems the outfit drilling on Stellar land brought soil samples to him for the latest chemical test before they gave up and dropped the lease. He said there was definitely no oil under the surface soil.”

“Okay,” Clarke said, and cradled the phone. “Sorry, Mr. Warrick, but my lead seems to have petered out. Still, I hate to give it up. A battle for oil property would be the best motive for three-fourths of what’s happened so far.”

“Then, do you think—”

Warrick’s answer was interrupted by the shrill ringing of the telephone on their regular outside line. He answered it and listened in tense silence. When he hung up, his eyes were dull.

“What is the astrological birth sign of a person born October Seventh?” he asked softly.

“Libra,” the Crimson Mask answered, after a moment’s thought. “The symbol of Libra is a pair of scales. Why?”

“Because Greta Blake was born October Seventh—and her body has just been found hanging from the scales of the statue of Justice at City Hall!”

“Where’s Sandy!” the Crimson Mask cried, fearful for her safety. “Any traces of her?”

He knew the answer, even before Warrick gently shook his head, a pitying look in his eyes. Sandy had been with Greta Blake. The answer was obvious. Sandy had been captured by the killer when he murdered Greta Blake.

“We’ve got to see the body!” the Crimson Mask snapped. “There may be dust on her clothing, under her fingernails that would tell me where to pick up the trail.”

“The medical examiner says she was stabbed to death around noon and hanged from the scales after the offices were closed down tonight. It gets dark early, now, and at the dinner hour, that section of town is

nearly deserted.”

TEN minutes later a morgue attendant was leading them to the sheeted form on the slab.

“Gruesomest thing I ever saw,” he was telling them. “I discovered it right after they phoned you.”

He turned back a corner of the sheet to uncover the dead woman’s right shoulder. Warrick and the Crimson Mask bent forward in tense amazement. A crude picture had been drawn on the dead flesh. It appeared to be a sketch of two rough triangles side by side, their bases overlapping, and with a number of fine black dots scattered above them.

“What on earth—” Warrick gasped.

“A message,” the Crimson Mask whispered, his voice filled with excitement. “It was drawn in a hurry with eyebrow pencil. Sandy did that, Ted! She was left unguarded near the body long enough to draw that. She knew I’d examine the body and find the picture. She’s trying to tell me where she is.”

But the interpretation of the crude pictograph was an enigma. The Crimson Mask’s brain spun desperately, seeking a clue to the meaning, while fear for Sandy’s safety gnawed at his heart. Her life depended on his deciphering the message. Two triangles and a cloud of dots. Triangles and dots. Dots and triangles—

“Ted!” he clutched Warrick’s arm.

“I’ve got it! Not triangles, but *pyramids!* Pyramids and stars! Don’t you see? She means ‘Stars Over Egypt.’ It’s her way of telling me that she’ll at the Stellar Guild Theater, I know. Probably she was afraid the killer might see the marks. If she simply wrote the name of the theater and he saw it, he’d either connect her with me or at least get rid of her the way he did Greta Blake. This way there was a chance that even if he saw it, he might not guess its meaning, or realize that Sandy had put it there.”

“It might be a trap,” Warrick warned. “I’ll get a squad of police to rush us—”

“No! She’d be killed at the first alarm. Even if it is a trap I’ve got to go alone, find where she’s being held and try to get her free. You stay near a phone. Have a squad ready but don’t move until you get word from me.”

CHAPTER VIII

DEATH FOR THE CRIMSON MASK

DESPITE the anguish in his heart, the Crimson Mask’s nerves were steady and his brain was functioning coolly as he crept down the dark alley

beside the theater a short time later. Years of intensive training had given the Crimson Mask the ability to maintain cool, steady nerves through the most trying ordeal.

The stage door was too exposed and too obvious for safety. He went around to the back of the theater and found a basement window. It was locked but his special diamond glasscutter gave him quick and noiseless access to the catch. He raised the window, adjusted his mask and slid through.

He dropped to the floor in inky, silent darkness that had the feeling of a small, unoccupied room. It must, he knew, face the same corridor as the dressing rooms. A brief flash of his pencil light showed stacks of dust-covered scenery and, across the room, a closed door. When no sound reached him from the corridor, he inched the door open and slipped out.

Somewhere close by, he knew, should be a door into the larger main basement. If the killer had a hideout around the theater, it should be somewhere near that little-used cellar. A moment later he found the door and eased it open. A thicker darkness loomed before him.

A rank animal odor assailed his nostrils. Somewhere in the darkness, soft feet padded and a heavy body scraped monotonously against metal. The Crimson Mask's hair lifted as he remembered Mason's mention of the hungry lion, but a moment's listening convinced him the beast was pacing a narrow cage. He slipped inside and closed the door. The unseen lion grunted at the smell of his presence.

Only a jungle animal, dependent on its sense of smell, could have detected the Crimson Mask's presence. From the time he had entered the window until he entered this larger basement, not a whisper of sound had betrayed his ghostly progress. His rigorous training in boxing, fencing and similar strenuous activities had given him such a perfect coordination of nerves and muscles that it enabled him to move as silently as a cat.

The Crimson Mask was about to flash a light toward the cage when scraping sounds came from the far end of the basement. He barely had time to throw himself behind the shadowy bulk of a big furnace, when a light bloomed out and two figures came from behind a low partition. He caught his breath. One was the hulking Beef Slattery. The identity of his companion was completely hidden by a black hood that covered head and face and draped down over his shoulders. Beyond any doubt, the hooded figure was the astrological killer. Was it Jerry Mason? There was

no way of telling.

The Crimson Mask fought down an urge to leap at the grim figures and shoot it out. Until he had found and freed Sandy, if she still lived, he dare not risk such a move. Then he drew back as the flash beam swept past his hiding place and outlined the lion's cage.

The beast blinked and snarled at the light
"Grumpy's restless," Slattery chuckled. "Maybe he's heard about the Crimson Mask bein' a brother Leo and is sore about it, eh, Boss?"

"He's probably hungry," the hooded man answered, his voice obviously disguised by some mouth attachment. He'll have a *good* meal when the Crimson Mask comes to get his girl friend."

THE Crimson Mask stiffened at the words. So the killer knew Sandy was his assistant. The pictograph on Greta Blake's body was bait for a death trap. Was Sandy already dead, then?

"Are you sure the dame worked for him?" Slattery demanded.

"It's obvious," the hooded leader snapped. "She drew that sketch on the corpse when she thought I wasn't looking. Who else would be likely to see or understand such a message? Of course she knows him. Now get up and keep watch. He should be showing up, soon."

The Crimson Mask's lips thinned. The killer had underestimated his speed in interpreting and responding to Sandy's appeal. As the corridor door closed on the two, he snapped on his own hand flash and raced for the partition. He rounded it and stopped short with a gasp of dismay. There was nothing before him but a bin half full of coal.

For a moment his iron nerve almost failed as he threw the tight beam over the walls and floor without seeing a sign of a door. Then a stray beam struck light from a sheen of metal in the coal pile. He bent over and a moment later was pushing a tiny, hidden lever. A hidden motor purred and a section of the floor moved away, revealing a flight of steps down into a dark sub-cellar.

The Crimson Mask fairly leaped down the steps, gun in hand, his flash spearing a lance of light ahead. He was in a damp, cell-like room from which several doors led off. Sandy, bound and gagged, lay behind the third door he tried. He raced to her side and slashed her bonds.

His heart leaped as she stirred and groaned.

"Sandy! Sandy!" he muttered. "Are you all right!"

"Bob!" she cried joyously. "I knew you'd come. I'll be all right, when the blood gets back into my arms

and legs. Help me sit up."

Moments later, with his arm around her for support, she was able to climb the steps that led out of her prison.

"Did you discover the killer's identity?" he asked her then.

"No," she said. "He was always concealed by that hood, even when he—he stabbed Greta Blake. Oh, it was horrible! So cold-bloodedly ruthless! And he laughed when I screamed. That man is a fiend."

"How did he capture you two?" the Crimson Mask asked, as he shut the trap and led the way across the basement.

"Greta Blake was giving me an interview when the hooded man and his sidekick walked in with guns," Sandy began. "They tied and gagged us, and brought us here hidden in the back of a car. Until you came, I thought I was going to get the same thing poor Greta got.

"We aren't in the clear yet," he said somberly. "The only way out is through that corridor outside, and if they happen to start back down here, we'll be trapped."

"Well spoken, Crimson Mask!" a sardonic voice sneered from the darkness. "You're trapped right now, in fact." A flashlight suddenly limned them in its cold glare, revealing the gaping muzzles of two pistols centered at their heads. The two had been lying in wait in the darkness, just inside the corridor door.

"It was unfortunate for you," the hooded man chuckled, "that we saw the open trap-door when we were returning. That made it easy to set our little trap here and wait for you to walk into it. Slattery, get that gun he is holding so grimly. And be careful."

THE hooded man was no more than two feet from the Crimson Mask, the flashlight in one hand glaring in the masked man's eyes, the pistol in his other hand pointing uncompromisingly at his chest. From the opposite side, Beef Slattery's hulking figure closed in, his own gun ready for action.

Between the two and hampered by Sandy's nearness, the Crimson Mask was powerless to lift the pistol in his own hand. At the first movement, both guns would blast and Sandy would share in the hail of eager death. It was that thought, not fear for his own safety, that made the Crimson Mask submit when Beef Slattery jerked the gun from his hand.

"Now, Slattery," the hooded man said, "remove that mask from his face."

And before the Crimson Mask realized it, the mask was torn roughly from his face. But that didn't matter too much, he thought, for he was still expertly disguised

and no one seeing him now could possibly identify him as Bob Clarke.

To all appearances the Crimson Mask was held in check by those who held the upper hand at the moment, but it was only apparent submission. His senses were alert for a break, no matter how slim, and he got it as Slattery snatched off his mask and stepped back. Unconsciously, the hooded man moved the light an inch toward his henchman. The movement left the Crimson Mask clearly outlined in the beam, but it brought the shadows closer to Sandy's figure. In that instant, the Crimson Mask went into action.

"Run!" he shouted, and gave Sandra Gray a shove that sent her flying out into the darkness.

At the same instant, he sprang into a headlong plunge, straight between the hooded man and Slattery. A gun flamed almost in his face and the slug whined viciously past his head. Then his arms were around the hooded figure, bearing it back as his right fist smashed for the hidden jaw.

Beef Slattery's sluggish mind was too dull for the sudden burst of lightning action. He tried to decide whether to fire at the Crimson Mask or pursue Sandra's pattering footsteps. And in that moment of indecision, the Crimson Mask had reached a position where Slattery could not shoot without hitting his leader. The big thug roared in fury and sprang after the running feet.

"Beef, you fool!" the hooded man snarled, fighting to line his gun on the Crimson Mask's body as they wrestled. "Let her go. She can't break out through the locked door. Come here and help me!"

The Crimson Mask drove the gun aside with a furious blow and fought to trip his adversary. He could hear Beef Slattery's shuffling footsteps behind him. For a moment their figures were full in the glow of the fallen flashlight. The druggist detective heard Slattery's grunt and the swish of a gun barrel through the air. He tried to swing his opponent aside, tried to duck. Then his head seemed to explode into a great ball of fire that faded into darkness. . . .

HE AWOKE in the puddle of yellow light from a flashlight to find himself flat on the floor with hands and feet bound. Beef Slattery was bending above him, squeezing large chunks of something that dripped sticky liquid on his clothes. His nostrils caught the reek of fresh blood.

The Crimson Mask blinked to clear his eyes of the red haze that misted his vision. He tried to see around him in the darkness. Had Sandra escaped, or was she



"Run, Sandy! Run!" the Crimson Mask yelled at the girl.

somewhere close by, dead or a prisoner? He could see no signs of her, nor could he tell from the actions of his captors whether or not she had got free. Yet if she had, they would hardly be staying to invite possible capture. His heart sank.

"That's enough," the hooded man rasped. "Take Grumpy's fresh meat outside, Beef. With that blood on him, your pal will smell like dinner to Grumpy."

They moved back, and the Crimson Mask started involuntarily at the sight of the lion's cage shoved close to the corridor door. As the two stopped by the door, Slattery reached back and turned the key in the lock on the cage gate.

"So long, Mask," the hooded man chuckled. "I hope you two have a pleasant visit. Okay, Beef."

The burly thug swung the cage door wide open and raced out after his leader. The last thing the Crimson Mask saw, as the light vanished, was the lion, snarling and slavering, padding eagerly out of his cage. Then darkness closed in.

The Crimson Mask knew he had never been closer to death. The lion, normally docile, had its jungle instincts aroused by hunger and the smell of blood. Soon it would completely forget its fear of man and charge. Already the Crimson Mask could see its shadowy form stalking a narrowing circle about his body. An attempt to move his legs brought a warning snarl from the beast.

With infinite caution, the Crimson Mask moved his bound hands until numbed fingers located a secret pocket in the front of his coat. Fearful that his movement would precipitate an attack, he drew out the tiny razor-edged knife and worked it into position to saw at his bound wrists.

The lion was growing bolder. Its snarls rose to coughing grunts as it stopped pacing and crouched low to the floor. The Crimson Mask sawed desperately, sweat beading his forehead, as he saw the beast's tail lift in stiff jerks. It was, he knew, the signal of attack. One rope parted.

With an echoing roar, the lion charged!

CHAPTER IX BLAZING AUTOMATICS

WHEN the heavy body catapulted forward, the Crimson Mask put every ounce of his strength into a desperate gamble. As his wrists jerked free from the confining ropes, he dived sideward, out of the way of the charging beast. One raking talon tore down his arm as the lion missed its target by inches. The king of

beasts roared furiously and whirled to attack again.

The Crimson Mask rolled again and came up onto his knees. His ankles were still tightly bound and there was no chance to cut the ropes. He got to his feet, hopping clumsily to maintain his balance on numbed legs, as the lion whirled. His hands fumbled at his waist and whipped off his belt.

As the lion crouched to charge again, the Crimson Mask spun the slender belt into the beast's face and cracked it like a whip. It was a feeble weapon against three hundred pounds of enraged jungle beast, but he was gambling on the strength of habit. He knew that lions are trained to retreat before a cracking whip and he was hoping to arouse that familiar terror to offset the lion's lust to kill.

He cracked the belt again and deliberately walked toward the lion. Slowly the beast inched back, snarling horribly, but retreating. Confidence flowed into the Crimson Mask's veins as he forced the raging creature toward its cage.

Suddenly a door slammed open upstairs and hard feet hammered down the steps to the corridor. It could not be the police, he knew, for this was only one person. The new sound, however, broke the lion's resistance. With a last snarl, it slunk into its cage. The Crimson Mask slammed and locked the iron gate.

With the sound of grating bolts, the corridor door inched open and a hand fumbled for the light switch. In the sudden glare from bulbs overhead, the white, frightened face of Arthur Simmons peered cautiously in.

"Good gravy!" he gasped, his jaw dropping at sight of the bloody, disheveled, unmasked figure of the Crimson Mask. "Who are you? What—what's going on here? I heard the lion roaring from clear outside. How did you get here?"

The Crimson Mask hesitated. His present disguise was totally different from the one he had worn to interview Simmons that morning. He decided to keep his identity—as that of the Crimson Mask, not Bob Clarke—secret a bit longer from Simmons.

"I don't know how I got here," he growled. "I was walking down the alley when something cracked me on the head. I woke up in here with the lion clawing me, and I had sense enough to drive him off by snapping my belt like a trainer's whip."

Simmons eyes nickered nervously around the gloomy basement.

"We better get out of here," he whispered. "You'd better see a doctor about those gashes on your shoulder. Shall I call a cab for you?"

"There's a doctor's office just down the street," the injured man said. "These cuts aren't as bad as they look."

Tortured by fears for Sandra, the Crimson Mask almost ran ahead of Simmons. The thought of her once more a prisoner of the two killers—or worse, a victim—was maddening. He had to find out at once, somehow. . . .

THEY reached the stage door now. No light had been turned on up here and the foyer was in heavy shadows. Abruptly one of those shadows moved away from the wall and became the silhouette of a gaunt man whose right arm hung in a sling, but whose left hand held a blued automatic rock-steady. It was the murderous Carson.

"Okay, rat," he snarled at Simmons. "Not even a busted wing is going to keep me from feeding you the slugs you deserve. How about one in the belly for a starter?"

Simmons squealed in terror and tried to flatten himself closer to the wall. Carson's slitted eyes held a maniacal gleam, and his thin lips twisted with the lust to kill. His finger whitened against the trigger.

The Crimson Mask was unarmed and still stiff from being so tightly bound. But as the automatic roared its thunder, he hurled himself aside and forward. His outstretched arms caught Carson's legs and jerked. The automatic boomed again and a slug tore the floor close to the Crimson Mask's body. But Carson was already plunging down, and before he could fire again, the Crimson Mask closed his grip over the gun-hand and twisted.

A shot seared his arm as the gaunt man fought wildly to press the gun into his opponent's body. But the Crimson Mask had squirmed to a better position. Now his right fist shot up and cracked against Carson's jaw, hard. The gaunt man abruptly stiffened and the gun slid from his grasp. The dread Nemesis of crime struck again, to make sure his opponent would stay out of the fight for a long time.

Then he scooped up Carson's gun and climbed to his feet.

He had been wondering, during the brief but bitter struggle, why Simmons had made no sound or taken no part in it. Now he saw the reason. The stage director was crumpled on the floor against the wall, his bald head in a pool of dark blood.

The Crimson Mask bent, made a hasty examination. A slug had creased Simmons skull above one ear, opening a nasty gash that bled profusely but

doing no serious damage. The man was out cold from the shock. There were no other wounds on his body, though a gash in the wall showed where another slug had missed by inches.

As he finished his examination, feet pounded in the alley outside. Quickly he dug into a cleverly concealed pocket and donned a crimson mask he always kept there for emergencies such as this. Then the stage door burst open and Warrick raced in, his face a picture of dread at what he expected to see. Behind him crowded a squad of police holding tommy-guns in readiness for action. .

"Mask!" Warrick bawled in relief as the disheveled figure confronted him. "Are you all right? We heard shots as we drove up and, then they stopped. I was afraid you—Say, you're wounded!"

"Did you get a call?" the Crimson Mask demanded tensely, ignoring his friend's anxiety. "Did—"

"Yes." Warrick smiled at the other's quick breath of relief. "Your—er—plan went through. The call came in from the party you sent on ahead. But that shoulder of yours looks bad, Mask. "

"Just a scratch." The Crimson Mask grinned, examining the marks of the lion's claws on his shoulder. "Most of this blood on me was squeezed out of chunks of raw meat, so I'd be more appetizing. But Simmons, here, could stand a little first aid."

"Who's this onion?" one of the police growled, nudging Carson's sprawled figure with his toe.

"Handcuff and handle him with care," the Crimson Mask advised grimly. "His name is Carson and he's as deadly as a rattlesnake. He was the one who attacked Mason and tried to murder Delante."

"Is he the killer of those show people?" a policeman asked.

THE Crimson Mask shook his head. "He was hunting for the killer, himself," he said.

"He needn't hunt any farther," Warrick said quietly. "We caught Mason and this Beef Slattery together in a car, not over a block from the theater, just half an hour ago. Slattery shot it out with the police and got away for the time being, but Mason gave up without a murmur."

The Crimson Mask's face showed frank astonishment.

"Did Mason confess?" he asked.

"Not yet," Warrick grunted. "But the police will break him down. He claimed Slattery had kidnapped him right after he ran away from my place and was taking him somewhere to kill him. What spoiled that story was the fact that Mason had his own gun, fully

loaded, in his coat pocket.”

“Were there any rope marks on Mason’s wrists?” the Crimson Mask asked in sudden excitement.

“No, but he explained that glibly enough. He said Slattery held him with padded handcuffs that didn’t leave marks. It was obviously a lie. While Slattery was battling the police, a couple of wild bullets went through the car. He was evidently scared and thought up a quick story to save his neck when he surrendered.”

He leaned close to the Crimson Mask and added, in a whisper:

“I sent Sandra home. She had a narrow escape after you let her get out. The doors and windows here were all locked so she couldn’t get out of the theater without making a lot of noise. Finally she heard them capture you and got really scared, so she smashed out a window and jumped. Slattery nearly caught her before she got to the street.”

The Crimson Mask’s eyes were suddenly glittering and a tight smile touched his lips.

“Mr. Warrick, have Simmons fixed up and bring him back here. Get Mason and Delante here, too, and hold them all until I return. I believe when I check on a few points I’ll have the whole case solved. Have Carson, here, kept in a cell where I can question him, if necessary, a little later.”

“He’s on his way there right now,” Warrick promised. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“Not for the moment—Wait! There is something you can do easier than I can, because of your authority. Telephone the Pennsylvania State geologist. Impress on him that this is police business and have him phone me right away, here at the theater. I’m afraid if I call him, he might not want to talk. It’s late, I know, but try to locate him.”

“I’ll locate him,” Warrick said grimly, “it I have to call out the National Guard.”

A HALF HOUR later, as the Crimson Mask came out of the theater basement with a grim smile on his lips, the telephone in the theater office began to ring. He answered it and quickly identified himself.

“I’m Swanson, the Pennsylvania State geologist,” an irritated voice said. “What the devil’s the idea of routing me out of bed at this hour of the night? I already answered a lot of fool questions for someone from there earlier this evening.”

“This won’t take but a minute,” the Crimson Mask soothed, “and it will aid the police in apprehending a murderer. The first question, and I want a strictly off-the-record answer, is: What kind of outfit is the Cloney

Oil Company?”

“Don’t quote me,” Swanson said, “but they’re the dirtiest, crookedest operators in the country.”

“The second question,” the Crimson Mask said. “Do crooked oil companies ever pretend to dig deep wells and deliberately keep from striking oil, simply to fool the owner of a piece of land?”

“Do they? That’s an old lease-war trick that plenty of them have pulled. As a matter of fact, Pete Cloney himself nearly went to jail a few years back for trying that. Say, if he’s up to those tricks again, the State wants to know about it.”

“You’ll have full information and evidence within a few hours,” the crimson masked man promised. “Now for the third question.” He gave a concise description of the mysterious bottle and then asked: “Is that a piece of oil field equipment, do you know?”

“It certainly is!” Swanson sounded surprised. “You’ve described an acid test bottle perfectly. That’s the old-fashioned way of testing whether or not wells were going down straight as they should.”

“What? You mean that wells sometimes curve during digging?”

“Sure, especially holes drilled with a rotary rig. The bit hits a stone or gets worn a little more on one side and starts drilling off to that side. On a well that goes down three or four miles into the ground, it doesn’t take much bending to end up clear under someone else’s property. That’s why all of the drillers take frequent tests.”

“How do they make those tests?” the Crimson Mask asked, excited.

“Today they use complicated electrical equipment. But small companies still use the acid bottle test. They take a bottle like the one you described, fill it partly full of acid and lower it into the well. After it stands awhile, the acid etches a mark around the inside of the bottle. Naturally, if the well is straight, the acid line is straight. But if the well bends, the bottle lies partially on its side and the acid line is etched up higher on that side. Old time drillers can look at an acid mark and tell almost to the foot where the bottom of their well actually lies. Anything else I can tell you?”

“No, thanks,” the Crimson Mask said fervently. “You’ve told me plenty. You’ll get details on this within a day or two.”

He cradled the phone and leaned back while his mind dovetailed together the astonishing information he had just received. His keen, analytical mind, trained to sort and catalogue disconnected facts, was rapidly building a complete picture of the motive behind the

fiendish crimes. It was astoundingly simple, once the pattern became clear.

The bottle he had possessed for such a short time had borne a cryptic symbol and the number seven. Undoubtedly that was the identifying mark of the well it had been used to test. And beyond any doubt, that well was the Cloney Oil Company's new Dora Number Seven. Furthermore, the acid line had been far off from the normal level, indicating that Dora Number Seven had been dug at an acute angle.

THE answer was obvious. Cloney's new well was actually pumping oil from a pool, not under Cloney property but under the land owned by the Stellar Guild. But if that fact became known, Cloney would have to pay Stellar for every barrel of oil that had been pumped by Dora Number Seven.

So, to conceal the theft, a henchman of Cloney's had obviously leased the adjoining Stellar land and sunk fake wells to discourage other drillers from accidentally tapping the rich resources far below. It would not be difficult to falsify the tests so that everyone would believe Stellar's land was not worth drilling into.

For who would suspect an apparently honest and independent driller of deliberately avoiding a strike with his own well?

Meanwhile, Cloney went on growing rich on stolen oil.

But what part did the theft play in the murders? The Crimson Mask felt that he could answer that question with a fair degree of accuracy. Someone had discovered the theft, someone who hoped, by the murders, to gain complete possession of the Stellar Guild's land and its hidden wealth.

Who that someone was remained to be proven. The Crimson Mask had a fairly sound idea who it was by this time, but before he confronted Mason, Delante and Simmons with his findings, he needed additional evidence.

He left the theater office, snapping off the light, and returned to the basement, a smile of satisfaction on his lips.

CHAPTER X TRAPPED RAT

THE Stellar Guild office at the theater looked like the receiving room of a hospital. Simmons sat behind his big desk, hands supporting a head that was swathed in thick bandages. Beside the desk sat the

sullen Mason, wearing gloves. He looked like Simmons' twin with a similar turban of gauze around his own head. Both men showed evidence of severe headaches by wincing at every sharp sound.

Delante, looking pale and pain-racked, sat close by with bandaged feet propped out before him on a chair. A thick cane lay across his lap.

Warrick stood off to one side, talking in a low voice with a uniformed policeman who had brought Mason from jail. From time to time, both men frowned at their watches as the period of waiting grew more tense.

"Why doesn't he hurry?" Delante grumbled, examining his watch for the tenth time. "I had no business getting out of bed, anyhow, with my feet in this horrible condition."

"Your condition!" Simmons barked. "How about me? Here I've nearly had my head blown off and you whine about sore feet."

"Shut up, both of you!" Mason snapped. "Isn't there enough noise?"

"You!" Delante cried, inching away. "I know all about what you've been doing. Where they're going to take you, a little thing like a headache won't matter—murderer!"

Mason started up, his eyes glittering with an insane light.

"Blast you!" he screamed wildly. "You're trying to pin those murders on me to save your own filthy hide. Well, you won't burn me for them!"

His gloved hand darted to his pocket and came out with a blunt, small-caliber automatic. He leaped to his feet, covering the startled group with the weapon.

"Say!" the policeman bawled in amazement. "He didn't have that gat when I brought him in."

"Never mind," Mason said hoarsely, backing toward the door. "I've got it now and I won't hesitate to use it. I didn't murder anyone but I will, before I'll sit still and let you send me to the electric chair. I'm leaving, and the first man who sticks his head out this door inside of five minutes get a bullet in it! Sit still, all of you!"

"Mason, you fool!" Warrick said angrily. "You can't get away with this. You'll be caught eventually, and this will only make things tougher for you."

"Stay there and shut up!" Mason growled, and backed from sight.

"I'll get him!" the police guard shouted, tugging at his gun as he raced toward the now empty doorway. The office was a sudden tumult of excitement.

Suddenly, the plunging officer stopped short. From outside, in the vast empty auditorium of the theater came the sudden pound of heavy feet, shouts, a scuffle. Two

shots blasted thunderously, followed by the thud of a falling body. Before anyone could move from the sudden paralysis of surprise, a man appeared in the doorway.

SUDDENLY there was a sharp gasp of indrawn breaths. The man in the doorway wore a crimson mask and carried a pistol.

"Mask!" Warrick cried. "Did you—Is he—"

"He won't run away again," the Crimson Mask answered grimly.

"Thank goodness the murder carnival is over," Simmons sighed. "Have you figured what it was all about yet?"

"Most of it," the masked figure said. "Chiefly it was a plot to ruin the Stellar Guild in order to buy your farm. There's a fortune in oil under it."

"Oil!" Simmons cried. "But test wells showed—"

"They were fake wells," the Crimson Mask corrected, and repeated the geologist's information. "Cloney field is dry. They're stealing Stellar's oil through a well that slants over into your pool underground. To prevent its discovery, they paid drillers to fake wells so your farm would be pronounced worthless. They've stolen millions of barrels and might never have been caught except for a double-cross by one of their own thugs.

"This man, Carson, wanted to grab that oil himself. He stole a test bottle, evidence of the theft, and tried to buy Stellar's farm. But Stellar didn't want to sell. In desperation, Carson finally tried to sell his secret to Val Lawrence for half the profits. Lawrence wanted to take it up with the whole Stellar group together so he called a meeting for the following week, when everyone would be present. That delay was fatal."

"What do you mean?" Delante demanded.

"Carson's story was overheard by another member who couldn't see splitting a fortune a half-dozen ways. He plotted to kill Lawrence and Carson, break up the Stellar Guild and grab the whole thing for himself. The recent Jones suicide gave him a weird idea for a perfect murder chain, with the police busy hunting for a killer who never lived—the mythical vengeful brother. The murderer sent the threatening notes and killed Lawrence, but Carson had disappeared. He was hiding from Cloney—the boss of that oil company—about that time, which saved his life.

"But Carson, not knowing someone else shared his secret, thought Lawrence had simply died at an unfortunate time. So he came out of hiding and repeated his proposition to Arken. This time, the killer was

waiting. He attacked Carson, got the test bottle, but Carson escaped. Now Carson knew he had an enemy and set out to find him by attacking each member, hunting for the missing bottle. He complicated this mystery badly by attacking Mason and Delante and Simmons before I knew where he fitted in."

"What made Arken call for me?" Warrick asked.

"My guess is that it was about the oil," the Crimson Mask went on. "And he was killed before he could take that up with you."

"Did Mason kill him?" Delante asked.

"No. Probably Slattery, the killer's accomplice. The arrow was shot by a spring inside a hollow mop stick, from an old projection booth up under the balcony. Slattery and the killer murdered Greta Blake later to make sure that Stellar wouldn't go on with a new leading man."

"Wait a minute," Delante said. "It was Mason himself who brought in that new leading man. If he was the killer—"

HE BROKE off as another policeman suddenly appeared in the doorway, caught the Crimson Mask's eye and nodded vigorously. Then he disappeared. The Crimson Mask turned back, his eyes suddenly cold.

"Mason wasn't the killer," he said quietly. "The real killer was—Arthur Simmons, your stage director!"

"Wha-a-at?" Simmons bounded up, red-faced and raging, "I—you—Why, you yourself shot Mason when he tried to—"

"Correction," the Crimson Mask interrupted, and his pistol was suddenly pointing straight at Simmons. "I did not shoot Mason! Nor did anyone else." He raised his voice. "Right, Mason?"

"Right, Mask," Jerry Mason affirmed, coming through the door.

"He pulled a gun on us!" Simmons howled.

"A gun you gave him behind that desk, Simmons, when you were urging him to make a break," the Crimson Mask accused. "You wanted him killed, didn't you, so your scheme would be complete."

"You can't prove it!" Simmons shrieked.

"It's already proven," the Crimson Mask contradicted. "The police made Mason wear gloves tonight. Now he knows why. So only one man's fingerprints would be on that gun. I've been telling my story to you here, waiting for the signal I just got—the fingerprint expert's own report that the only prints on that gun were yours.

"Also, Simmons, I found the typewriter down in

that sub-basement that wrote the threatening notes. Your prints were on those keys, too. The moment I realized you were one of the persons who could have operated those curtain controls to make the zodiac appear, I suspected you. Any innocent stagehand would have closed Number One switch and the wrong curtain would have come out at the beginning. For another thing—”

With an incoherent yell of fury, Simmons drove the Crimson Mask aside and plunged for the door. Strangely, the Crimson Mask made no effort to use his gun. It was Jerry Mason who knocked Simmons half across the room and followed it up with a hurricane of furious blows. When Warrick and the Crimson Mask finally pulled them apart, Simmons was a beaten, whining wreck.

“You earned that right,” the Crimson Mask told Mason. “He knew about your blank past and plotted to place the full blame on you. It was his plan to have you either shot by the police, resisting arrest, or to kill you himself and plant you as a suicide with a confession note by your body. Slattery dropped that first gun into your pocket before he fled the police tonight, hoping you’d be panicky enough to fight them and get killed. Simmons slipped you this gun and talked you into making a break tonight for the same purpose.”

“I was so scared I didn’t help my own case any,” Mason confessed ruefully. “I knew someone was framing me and I could see the net tighten, but I couldn’t wiggle out, any way I turned. That’s why I fled tonight, when I overheard you and Mr. Warrick discussing me. But I ran right into Slattery’s arms, then.

“He was hiding outside and heard you give me your birthdate, so even that acted against me. And insuring my clients, the way almost all agents do, only gave me an apparent motive. When you grabbed me outside just now, Mask, and told me the score, I nearly cried for joy.”

THE Crimson Mask nodded.

“It was a tight frame,” he admitted. “Shall I tell about your blank past, or will you?”

“I’ll tell,” Mason said. “I got into trouble, years

ago, and went to prison for awhile. That’s why, when I came here, I changed my name and hid my past. But I’ve gone straight ever since, so help me.”

“He has,” Warrick seconded. “Mask, what I don’t understand is why Simmons threw you to the lion tonight and then made an effort to rescue you, just after you escaped by yourself. That seems crazy.”

“It did to me, too, until you told me about that other prisoner, the girl.” He purposely avoided revealing Sandra’s name in order not to connect her with him. “About her being chased when she got away. Then I got it. Simmons knew she would bring the police and he’d be caught with my body practically on his doorstep and no time to cover his tracks. He probably had all sorts of evidence lying around at the moment. So he conceived the idea of hiding his hood and running back to save me in order to establish his innocence. But he overplayed his hand by claiming he heard the lion’s roar from outside.

“I tested, later, and found the sound didn’t carry into the alley at all. Then he wasn’t insistent enough about who I was for a really innocent man. When Carson appeared, I thought for a moment he was there to get me, until I realized I was in a disguise he’d never seen. Then I saw that he was talking to Simmons and had discovered for himself that Simmons was his doublecrosser. I already knew that neither Delante nor Mason could be the hooded man, because in the fight downstairs I stepped on his toes and banged his head. Neither one of you two could have taken that in your present condition without a groan.”

“Say,” Mason asked excitedly, “is that true about a fortune in oil? Can we get anything out of Cloney?”

“No doubt about it,” the Crimson Mask assured him. “Their well stands as indisputable proof of the theft, and the State has a record of every barrel they’ve pumped. You’ll collect plenty. And by deepening those fake wells, you should have a nice additional flow of direct oil. I think your worries are pretty well over, in more ways than one. So, if you will excuse me, I’ll go about my business. Frankly, I need a good night’s sleep.”

When the Crimson Mask had gone, Warrick smiled at the group.

“But as far as crooks and murderers are concerned,” he said meaningly, “the Crimson Mask never sleeps.”