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THE CRIME DEVIL

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CHAPTER I. THE MADMAN.

HE is the most dangerous man in the world," Doctor Verdann said gravely. "There is absolutely no doubt about it."

Then the physician began rubbing the back of his neck, as men do when absorbed in anxious thoughts. He shivered.

"In that case, my dear brother," his companion commented, "it is a mighty good thing for the rest of us that you have him locked up here in this insane asylum. How long has he been confined?"

"Five years," was the reply. "By a curious coincidence, I took charge of this institution on the very day he arrived in a straitjacket and was promptly taken to a padded cell."

The two men puffed their cigarettes, and there was a brief silence. They were alone in the doctor's private office.

"I don't know much about maniacs," said the younger brother presently. "This has been my first trip through a madhouse. And once is twice too much! Next visit I pay you, I'll steer clear of this place. Those were some awful sights that you showed me in the private wards."

Doctor Verdann shrugged. "Oh, you get used to it," he answered laconically. "One nice thing, our work never becomes monotonous—as yours must, toiling in an office. We shift from the pathetic to the horrible and hair-raising, by merely passing through a door."

His brother shuddered.

"You can have your fascinating realm to

yourself," he said. "Tell me more about this inmate whom you call the most dangerous man in the world. Of course, I'm not a good judge; but he didn't look formidable to me when, through the bars, you pointed him out, taking a stroll through a corridor with a guard. I reflected at the time that he might be turned loose with safety."

Doctor Verdann laughed grimly. "That is where you are wrong," he said. "No doubt, you share the popular belief, that a man isn't really crazy unless he does some such thing as standing on his head in the middle of the street. The most serious cases, as a matter of fact, are ones whose insanity can be detected only by the skilled psychiatrist. Take this most dangerous man in the world. Talking to him, you find that he is a polished gentleman, cultured, highly educated. He speaks nearly all languages fluently. He is an expert in the chemical laboratory. He delves into higher mathematics where few can follow."

"Ah!" exclaimed the brother. "I get your drift now. This fellow is a monomaniac."

Doctor Verdann nodded. "Yes," he responded, "he is absolutely sane on all except one subject."

"And that is?"

"He actually believes that he is the devil!"

Startled, the brother stared blankly into the celebrated physician's eyes. "Is that an exceptional form of insanity?" he asked.

"There have been others. But this case is so pronounced that it will long remain as a psychopathic precedent. Most certainly, it has no antecedent in recorded medical history."

"In what way?"

"Let me explain. The fellow calls himself Doctor Diabolus. That, of course, is not his real name. My original diagnosis was that his was a plain case of a brilliant intellect snapping under the strain of too much study. Most geniuses hover on the brink of insanity. Nature is jealous of her secrets. She seems to want to destroy men when they begin to learn too much. Such an individual is Doctor Diabolus. Born into a rich inheritance, never compelled to work or worry about his pocketbook, he took postgraduate courses abroad, on the Continent. Then he went to the Orient, where he delved deeply into the mysticism of India and the subterranean thinking of the Chinese. He came here in a straitjacket, but that was not due to any such condition as epileptic frenzy. It was simply that in no other way could his superhuman

strength be controlled during the journey to this asylum."

The brother's memory prompted him to interrupt. "Such abnormal muscular power is often a manifestation of insanity, isn't it?" he asked. His reply was an affirmative nod. "I thought so. Neighbor of mine went bughouse out in Chicago. She was a refined, demure little woman, who looked as if she couldn't lift a peck of potatoes. I saw her taken away, and it took six men to subdue and handle her—burly Chicago cops, into the bargain. But go ahead."

Outside, a dismal wind was whining and hurling sheets of rain against the heavily barred windows. Melancholy, indeed, was the weather, quite befitting this abode of hallucinations.

"Let me tell you," the physician resumed, "how this cultured Doctor Diabolus happened to be sent to us. In line with his belief that he is Satan, he had developed the pastime of abducting women, gagging them to stifle their screams, and then thrusting them alive into a roaring furnace in the basement of his country home. He had murdered at least six victims in this fashion before the law seized him and put him under lock and key."

The listener was so horrified that he evidently experienced the first stages of suffocation, for he gave a violent gasp. "Merciful Heaven!" he whispered. "Why, the fellow is a fiend."

"That's exactly what he claims," said the doctor calmly. "He believes that he is the devil, and that he should act accordingly. The worst of it is that, in a strictly legal sense, he cannot be blamed. For, being insane, he is not responsible for his actions. So, no matter how atrocious a crime he might commit, one is ethically bound to feel pity for him, almost to the point of a certain sympathy."

Perspiration had appeared on the younger brother's brow; it stood out in beads and began to trickle down his cheeks. He turned and gazed uneasily at the door.

Doctor Verdann chuckled. "Oh, it's locked and bolted, all right," he assured him. "Besides, our friend Satan is most carefully guarded—both by attendants and by steel barricades that would still hold him prisoner even though he overpowered his watchmen. At that, though, I am continually uneasy. You can fancy what a terrible thing it would be if he escaped and ran at large. Why, no one's life would be safe."

"He should be chloroformed!" protested the

brother. "It is an outrage to permit him to exist as a hovering menace."

Doctor Verdann gestured his helplessness. "A great many psychiatrists would agree with you," he replied. "But the law will not permit us to exterminate him. And I am not altogether certain that we could, even if we tried."

The brother was puzzled. "What are you driving at?"

Doctor Verdann hesitated. He squirmed uncomfortably. "Inside these somber gray walls," he said, "we of the medical staff live—like our patients—in an unreal world, weird, grotesque, uncanny. We encounter, among the maniacs, things that cannot be explained by natural laws. As, for instance, confusion of the senses! Thus, hearing may become mixed with vision, so that the victim will not hear the strains of a violin, but, instead, will see a symphony of vivid flashes of colors. We even have sight confused with the sense of touch, apparently transferred to the fingertips. I have actually seen a blindfolded inmate take a dozen strands of yarn, each of a different color, and differentiate them by merely feeling."

Doctor Verdann paused and studied his companion as if pondering whether to entrust him with further confidences.

"Tell me all," the brother urged tensely. "I understand. I will not think that you, too, are going crazy."

"That is my fear," was the reply. "Not that I will lose my balance; for I am confident that I am phlegmatic enough to resist my environment. But a man living here as a physician, studying the abnormal minds of the inmates, acquires strange ideas. And outsiders might not comprehend. So usually we keep our mouths shut."

The brother lit a fresh cigarette. He removed it for a few moments and used his trembling tongue tip to moisten his lips. They had become quite dry.

And the wind moaned even more dismally, and the rain flung itself on the panes with increasing force.

"I have made a profound study of Doctor Diabolus," resumed Doctor Verdann. "He is as enigmatic as he is brilliant and fascinating in conversation. And I am actually beginning to wonder if, after all, he is really crazy."

This bewildered the brother. Cogitating, he again glanced apprehensively at the locked door.

Doctor Verdann's gray eyes now showed the

awe of one in a labyrinth of uncertainties. "Baudelaire," he said, "wrote a story called 'The Generous Gambler,' in which a preacher says from the pulpit: 'My dear brethren, the loveliest trick of the devil is to persuade you that he does not exist.'"

The brother smiled mirthlessly. "Many millions of people," he said, "believe firmly in the existence of a real, personal devil. Perhaps they are right. Who knows? Perhaps, too, the devil does come to earth and mingle among us."

Doctor Verdann did not immediately reply. Presently he resumed: "Once I asked Doctor Diabolus why, if he really is the devil, he doesn't use his supernatural powers to escape from this asylum. His answer was two-edged. 'I am in no hurry,' he told me. 'I go forth in spirit, while you sleep, to direct the activities of my agents. You think that you are the jailers of the people confined here, don't you? We have the joke on you. Though you realize it not, we are keeping you doctors and nurses prisoners within these walls.' And," Doctor Verdann commented, "there is a lot of truth to what he said. A prison or asylum is not the most cheerful place in the world for the keepers compelled to pass their nights and the best of their waking hours therein."

"Do you think there is any chance that Doctor Diabolus is really the devil?"

"I don't know," Doctor Verdann replied frankly. "Maybe he is."

CHAPTER II.

DOCTOR DIABOLUS.

INSIDE his cell, Doctor Diabolus had been reading Rudwin's collection of the most celebrated devil stories in literature. He tossed the volume aside.

"It is strange," he reflected, "that writers vary so greatly in their depiction of me. In turn, I have been pictured as fearful, fascinating, serious, comic, pathetic, satiric, grotesque. Odd, indeed, that they cannot agree on me. Writers certainly should be familiar with my diabolical self. They are my most powerful agents."

The cell that confined him was a padded one, for his captors were taking no chances on his seizing them and dashing their brains out against a hard wall or floor. The table and chair were of flimsy construction, calculated to be of little or no use as weapons of attack. His bed was a thing of

deep upholstering, a gigantic pillow.

Doctor Diabolus rose from the pallet. He stood up and stretched.

Attractive in the extreme was this individual who maintained that he was Prince of Darkness. He had the fascinating black eyes of an Arabian, the cultured and intellectual features of a Persian aristocrat. His hair was of a peculiar, blazing red, suggestive of hot coals or iron about to become molten.

In a crowd, nearly everyone would turn irresistibly to gaze at him—and with an emotion of intense curiosity blended with envy. What attracted the eye was quite as much his manner as his countenance. No panther could move more gracefully, languidly, or quickly. He had the truly majestic air—the ease and poise that come naturally and cannot be acquired.

There were no windows in this padded cell. The illumination was artificial, electric. Sunlight never greeted him, save when, heavily guarded, he paced the recreation corridors or the high-walled courtyard without.

From somewhere downstairs came a series of rattlings and rumblings.

A passing sentry paused to inspect him through the small opening in the door.

“How is your Satanic Majesty?” he inquired politely. It was customary, in cases like Doctor Diabolus, to humor the patient.

“Disturbed by the infernal noise,” was the reply.

The guard grinned. “You should rejoice,” he said. “That is coal arriving to feed the furnaces.”

This news was pleasant to the ears of Doctor Diabolus, what with roaring fires reputed to play such an important part in the routine of the devil. But he expressed no appreciation.

“The atmosphere is muggy,” he said. “My nervous organization is highly susceptible to barometric changes. I desire to take a shower bath—at once.”

The guard turned and spoke to his companion. “You press the buzzer for a relief man,” he said. “Satan wants to have a wash. I’ll take charge of him.”

“How about assistance?”

The guard reflected. “Not necessary,” he whispered. “I’m onto all his tricks. And lately he has been so amiable that I’m pretty sure not to have any trouble. If I do, I’ll ring the alarm.”

His mate advised. “Don’t take your eyes off him

for a minute,” he advised.

“Say, I used to fight lions in a circus cage before I came here.”

A few minutes later Doctor Diabolus was strolling grandly along the corridor, his watchman at the rear, a formidable and cautious shadow, ready on the instant to meet a sudden turn and attack. But this day Doctor Diabolus was in jovial mood. He chatted gaily and passed quips that made his jailer grin broadly.

The bathroom toward which they were heading was, like his majesty’s padded cell, on the fourth floor. The captive entered first. The other followed, closed the door, and stood with his back against it.

There was no bathtub, for a depth of a few feet of water provides ample facilities for murder or suicide by drowning. Bathing could be done only under a shower bath.

“All the discomforts of the inferno,” Doctor Diabolus commented, glancing about at the barren room. “There is neither a stool on which to rest my regal form nor a hook to hold my garments while I perform my ablution. I fancy they are absent because, in times past, inmates used stools to brain their jailers or utilized hooks as gallows.”

“I reckon so,” replied the guard. “Say, Satan, you’ve been here a long time, and you’ve never yet caused a bit of trouble. Not once have you made a break for freedom.”

Doctor Diabolus bowed, gesturing profusely. “The devil,” he informed, “works smoothly, delicately. Perhaps I have a better scheme in mind. My millions may yet corrupt an attendant of this place. Or my lawyers may convince a lunacy commission that I am cured of my alleged malady and should, accordingly, be set free. And you—you still are adamant as regards a bribe? You could name your own price.”

“I’m not for sale!” retorted the guard. He was a burly, stolid fellow. No doubt, he was honest to the core. Then, too, he may have believed that the millions of Doctor Diabolus existed only in hallucinations of a diseased mind. True, the maniac was known to have been very wealthy prior to his capture and incarceration. But the fight to save him from the hangman had been a long and costly one; had feathered the nests of a small army of attorneys and alienists.

“Not for sale, eh?” Doctor Diabolus echoed. “Then make yourself useful, and if—after death—you come to my domain of everlasting fire, perhaps

I shall give you a job as watchman on the cool side of the gates. There being no hook, may I request you, my dear sir, to hold my clothes?"

"Sure; let 'em fly. Going to remove your horns?"

Doctor Diabolus frowned ever so slightly. "The horns," he said with dignity, "are on my head, though you cannot see the invisible. I have, too, in reality, a forked tail and cloven hoofs in lieu of feet, as you shall shortly perceive."

The guard long since had mastered the art of repressing smiles. "Sure!" he rejoined soothingly. "I wasn't kidding about your horns and other stuff. I know you have 'em."

Doctor Diabolus had removed his coat. He tossed it through the air. The thing spread out in flight.

The guard quickly reached for it and missed.

The garment obscured his vision, dropping over his head so that his face was covered. That did not alarm him; did not rouse suspicion until a moment later.

And then it was too late.

For, in that moment, Doctor Diabolus leaped forward like a leopard. Gone was his languid manner, his smooth, disarming smile. His black eyes blazed ferociously; his face was contorted in the utmost savage fashion, baring his long and glistening white teeth.

Before the guard realized that he was the victim of attack, fingers sped up under the blinding coat and gripped his throat like a bear trap.

The victim had no opportunity to cry out. Mortal screams formed, but were stifled for exit. He realized what was happening, and struggled to summon help.

Out went his arms, frantically groping for a push button that would sound an alarm and bring help at top speed. But his fingers stabbed only empty air.

It amazed him, how fast a man could strangle. Why, it seemed as if his breathing had been shut off only a few seconds. Yet already he was suffocating, fire starting in his lungs.

He was quick-witted enough to think of kicking backward at the door. His heels, banging on it, would be heard in the corridor and summon aid.

But there, too, he was checkmated. As he kicked, he felt himself lifted bodily from the floor and swung around so that he was in the very center of the bathroom.

He could not make a sound.

Held aloft by the unbelievable, jungle strength of the madman, he could not kick anything except the body of his attacker. That was futile. He rained blow after blow, and might as well have assaulted a punching bag.

Gradually his movements became weaker, slower.

Doctor Diabolus softly placed the guard on his back on the floor. The fellow was dead, all right; no doubt about that. His face was a terrible sight to behold. But, though normally the fiend would have enjoyed such a gruesome spectacle, there was no time for infernal artistic appreciation.

Doctor Diabolus hoped to escape. There were many obstacles to be overcome. His troubles had only started. He must work fast, if he were to have even a slim chance of winning his freedom.

Cunningly he turned on the shower bath so that anyone passing in the hall would hear the falling water and believe that he was taking a sojourn in artificial rain, with the guard watching him and everything fine.

Doctor Diabolus did not have to sit down and think. He had been in this room numerous times. And he had been observant without attracting attention. In particular, he had noticed two things.

The first was that the door could be bolted from this side. Quietly he manipulated the fastener. Then he turned to the object that had instigated this murder. It was a small panel door in the wall.

He opened it and made inspection. Before him was a clothes chute, for dropping soiled towels to the laundry room far below. Best of all, it was large enough to accommodate his agile body.

CHAPTER III.

DESPERATE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM.

WRIGGLING into the clothes chute, Doctor Diabolus embarked on a perilous adventure. The vent of this passageway was in the laundry room of the basement. That was far below, for he had killed the guard on the fourth floor.

Arrived at the other end of this concrete shaft, he still would be far from freedom—very far. The crafty management of the insane asylum had amply provided for the possibility of an inmate getting to the cellar. There were no sewer manholes that could be lifted to disclose passageways of flight. The only possible way a fugitive could escape

would be to emerge into one of the high-walled courtyards, dash to a gate, and by some ruse—which seemingly would be little short of a miracle—overpower the watchman, get the portal open, and vanish into the distance.

In the meantime, however, keen-eyed men in uniform would emerge from their sentry boxes atop the walls, and cut loose with high-powered rifles.

The odds were certainly against anyone attempting such a foolish rush, apparently overwhelmingly against him.

Yet Doctor Diabolus was undismayed.

His fast-working brain already had a whole chain of movements planned, to follow each other in swift and logical succession.

He realized that he had not a Chinaman's chance unless he gained the open country before the rifles could be called into play. For the time was mid-afternoon, with a bright, warm sun, and a fleeing man would make the most excellent kind of target.

His immediate problem was to make his way down the long shaft without falling and, say, breaking a leg. It is rather commonly agreed in literature that the Devil walks with a limp because he broke a leg when, as the ousted rebel archangel named Lucifer, he fell to earth and suffered injury. Nevertheless, Satan in the present form of Doctor Diabolus, would need his walking apparatus. A devil with one leg out of commission would be at as great a disadvantage as if a vault door, slammed shut, held his forked tail securely.

However, it was not necessary to fall, though the chute was sufficiently large for such catastrophe.

Doctor Diabolus descended like a chimney sweep.

He kept his body somewhat hunched, pressing with his back and knees against the rough concrete sides of the rectangular well. Slipping a few feet now and then, but otherwise buckling his way, he soon left the bathroom far behind.

There was one admirable feature of this place. Its walls, of artificial stone, muffled his sounds.

His journey was not through absolute darkness. Far below, basement light came through an opening. There was either no hinged door at the bottom, or, if there were, at present it was open. Chances were, the system was to keep it unclosed, so that downward-falling towels and the like would drop directly into a huge basket or vat.

Doctor Diabolus reached the third floor in safety, and passed the chute door at that level without being discovered.

Now he was a fourth of the way to the cellar.

Luck was playing him for a favorite. In a few minutes he should reach the basement, unless misfortune switched the tables on him.

Undetected, he wormed toward the second floor. Inch by inch he continued descending. The physical phase of his trip was hard on his muscles; but his abnormal nervous system failed to respond. He was conscious of no effort, no uncomfortable, cramped position. One thought alone dominated him—that he must escape, and that to do so he must be silent and not slip and fall.

Ah! His goal was not far off now. Here was the second floor, at a level with his feet. He must be careful and not exert pressure on the clothes-chute door, else the clasp on the other side might snap and the wooden panel fly open with a bang.

And then came an unexpected interruption.

Somewhere above him he heard a click. His sense of location, coordinating with his ears, estimated that the sound had originated high above him, farther up than the floor from which he had fled; perhaps at the top story of the prison.

Next instant there came a distinct banging, as of a small door being hastily closed.

Had someone looked down and seen his body silhouetted against the rectangle of light that showed in the basement? If so, a button soon would be pressed, making the necessary electric contact that would operate alarm bells and buzzers. A shrill siren would automatically begin shrieking, conveying a warning that would be heard by the entire countryside for a matter of five miles or more.

Doctor Diabolus looked up. He saw only darkness. Simultaneously, he was aware of a peculiar rustling, as of a plunger striking at him.

Thud! Something collided with his head.

The weight was not burdensome. But the element of surprise played him a trick that might have fateful consequences.

Startled, his legs relaxed, so that they no longer aided his back in keeping him braced against the concrete walls.

He was falling now, speedily, too, bewilderingly so. Doctor Diabolus endeavored to check his descent. But the reaction came too late. The pressure that he hastily exerted merely caused the

walls to grind swiftly through his garments by friction.

Down he shot, and then, like a cork from a champagne bottle, he emerged from the shaft and fell sprawling into the open basement.

Doctor Diabolus had been needlessly alarmed as to the possibility of breaking a leg. He landed in the cellar on a very thick cushion bumper. Instantly he comprehended the nature of it. He had fallen into a large box, placed under the chute to catch laundry. It was half-filled with towels and the like, effectually softening his collision.

A blinding something enveloped his head. He seized it and tore it off. And as his fingers touched the substance it dawned on him that his near accident had had a most simple and matter-of-fact origin.

A bundle of wet towels, thrown down the chute, had landed on his head, caused him to lose his grip and catapult into the laundry box.

He wasted no time on lamenting the spilled-milk angle of the situation. The basement was brilliantly lighted. So the important matter was whether or not anyone had been nearby to hear or witness his descent.

The box was about five feet high. Lying on his back, the sides concealed him from view. For a few moments he waited, his keen, maniacal ears straining for human sounds.

There was none! Cautiously Doctor Diabolus rose to his knees and peered in all directions. His acute powers of vision were instantaneously and all-embracingly photographic.

He was alone! This room of the cellar held, at the time, no other person.

Here was luck, indeed. The madman made the most of his opportunity. He vaulted out of the box and landed on the concrete floor with the agility of a cat.

Now it was time for the next important link of the chain of escape that he had in mind. Doctor Diabolus had never been in the basement before. But, during his five-year incarceration behind the stone walls and barred windows, he had learned much. Piecing together, bit by bit, the fragments of information that he had heard, he had constructed mentally a rather accurate picture of the layout of the entire below-ground floor of the asylum.

So he did not have to pause and explore. With confident directness he ran softly toward a certain door. One thing was sure. It stood out, looming

above all others. He must get under temporary cover at once. Any moment, now, someone might enter the laundry room and discover him. And he did not want to turn off the lights. An attendant, observing the darkness, would be suspicious.

Every second was of crucial import now. Doctor Diabolus, if he were to escape, must do so fast. In twenty minutes, at most, the mate of the murdered guard would have it occur to him that it certainly was taking a long time to give his Satanic Majesty a shower bath. Inquiring rappings on the door would bring no response. Presto! the alarms would begin sounding, the door would be battered down, and then a small army of enemies would be hot on the fugitive's trail.

He reached the door, which was open, and there paused. Warily he peeped around the corner. As he had expected, he found himself looking into a narrow corridor. It was rather dimly lighted. Best of all, it was deserted.

Doctor Diabolus hastened along the hall. Ahead lay the furnace room. Already he could see a pile of coal in a corner.

A man was there, shoveling—audible but not visible. That would, the maniac figured, be either the engineer stoking his furnace or the coal-truck driver finishing the heaping of the fuel that he had dumped through a window.

Temptation! Doctor Diabolus had arrived beside a door. Through the bars of its window he could see a flight of stone steps leading upward. The bright sunlight out there indicated that the steps led to open air.

The door was unlocked!

That was unusual, around the asylum. Still, it had been necessary to admit the coal heaver, for engineers in charge of furnaces incline to make such gentry finish their own work. Of course, the door should have been locked during the coal man's visit. There was carelessness, all right. On the other hand, the engineer's apparent negligence was not unnatural. After all, a fugitive departing by this egress would be seen by the tower sentries atop the walls, the instant he showed his head in the open.

Doctor Diabolus was too crafty to attempt a wild dash for freedom, courting death by bullets on the way. Such did not dovetail into his plans.

He turned his attention to another door nearby. It was a plain affair of upright boards, without fastening other than a spring catch. This meant, in

all probability, that it was the opening to a cupboard.

The prowler inspected. Sure enough, he found a closet. It was a place about three by six feet. In an orderly row along one side hung disorderly garments—soiled overalls, battered hats, and grimy sweaters. These presumably constituted the spare wardrobe of the engineer during working hours.

Strangely enough, Doctor Diabolus was not immediately interested in the clothing, despite their possibilities in the nature of disguise.

He sought something else and found it.

The thing was an old hammer. One of its nail claws was broken. Apparently the furnace tender had placed it in the cupboard, on the floor, with an idea of taking it home with him. At any rate, there it was, inviting, fascinating.

Doctor Diabolus, searching for a weapon, had not expected to be so lucky. He gripped the heavy hammer and tested it by striking at the air, thereby killing half a dozen imaginary guards.

Then he pulled the door almost shut, leaving it with a slim crack through which he could listen and peer. The hinges were on the right side, as he faced the portal, so that the crack fortunately was in the direction of the furnace room.

From that place he now heard stealthy voices. The shoveling had ceased, and the engineer was holding surreptitious parley with the coal heaver.

“Come on!” pleaded one. “Give me another snort before you leave.” This speaker, obviously, was the furnace expert, for he had referred to the other as about to depart.

“Sure!” the coal man agreed obligingly. “But, remember, next time I come with a load, it’s your turn to have a flask on hand.” They laughed, and the short silence that ensued suggested that they were gulping beverage.

“Ah!” approved the engineer. He smacked his lips so audibly that Doctor Diabolus heard him. “Much obliged, old horse. Well, I don’t dare chance any more. The bosses might smell it on my breath. They don’t mind an occasional drink. Fact is, they slip me one, off and on, some of them doctors being good sports. But I’ve been warned not to have a breath that you could touch off with a match.”

Again they laughed.

“Got to be on my way,” the coal heaver grumbled. “They’s an efficiency expert running our joint now, and he checks up to see if we stay out

too long on a trip. So long!”

“Hurry back!” said the fireman in farewell. “I’ve got to do a bit of stoking.”

Then came soft sounds of the coal man shuffling along the passageway. Quickly they were muffled by the clanging of the furnace door and the rattle of huge pokers.

That coal man certainly was not given to premonitions of the impending future. He hummed contentedly as he approached the lurking devil, utterly unmindful that he might be walking into a trap. There was ample reason for the music that was crudely stimulating his emotions. The coal heaver was decidedly human. He was not overly fond of visiting this insane asylum, despite the elaborate precautions that were taken, every minute of day and night, to keep the inmates under control. He would, he reflected, breathe more freely when he got outdoors to his truck and rattled beyond the gates.

Shuffle—shuffle—shuffle! Closer he came to the fateful cupboard.

Behind the door, Doctor Diabolus waited in darkness, peering through the narrow crack. He was wiggling his hammer with the affectionate manner of a coquette toying with a closed fan.

The coal heaver reached the door. He passed it in safety.

His humming was rather low. But, no doubt, liquor that he had imbibed heavily had started ringing in his ears. At any rate, his hearing was below normal.

He was quite unaware of the very faint creaking as the cupboard door opened in his wake.

Doctor Diabolus, emerged, shot a swift glance toward the engine-room, and was gratified to learn that the furnace tender was not in sight.

One cat-footed step—another!

The hammer descended with maniacal force and accuracy.

CHAPTER IV. THE DARING FUGITIVE.

NO outcry rose from the victim of the hammer attack. He died too fast for that. Then, too, as the metal crushed his skull, Doctor Diabolus simultaneously clamped a muffling palm tightly over the poor fellow’s mouth.

Within five seconds he had carried the body back into the cupboard.

There he worked hastily. Things were coming his way, and he must make the most of his advantages. He had noticed, at first glimpse of the deceased conveyor of black diamonds, that they were about the same height and build.

Doctor Diabolus first discarded some of his own garments. Next he removed the dead body's filthy overalls and tattered shoes. Donning them, he gathered coal dust on his hands by rubbing them over the blackness of what had once been blue cloth. He smeared this stuff carelessly over his forehead and cheeks, also the back of his neck. Then he took his victim's crumpled old felt hat and pulled it down over his own head so that it covered his red hair completely.

Disguise completed, Doctor Diabolus stepped out into the corridor and closed the door.

He glanced toward the furnace room. The clanging and scraping and rustling was continuing there. The engineer, stoking, was not in sight.

Boldly the fugitive shuffled along the hall. Arrived at the exit to outdoors, he opened the door quietly. He must take no chances. Not more than two minutes had been consumed in the second murder, the concealing of the body, and the alteration of the madman's appearances. Yet, if the fireman heard the door closing belatedly, it might occur to him that it had taken the coal heaver rather a long time to traverse the passageway.

There was the chance that, coming this way shortly to lock the door, the engineer might look into the cupboard. If he did, he would discover the body. Alarms would follow. The danger was one that Doctor Diabolus could not eliminate. There had been no other place conveniently at hand for temporarily hiding the body.

He must trust to fate, as regards the time of detection of his victim's remains.

But otherwise he had taken the reins from fate and was in direct personal charge of his immediate future; that is, if his plans carried through smoothly.

Outside, he gently closed the door. Then he drew a deep breath and experienced exquisite pleasure.

"The first time in five years," he reflected, "that I have been in sunshine and the open air without a guard trailing at my heels!"

From now on, he must enact his role skillfully. He had stepped into the shoes of a dead man, and he must play the part naturally and without

hesitation.

Up the steps he went. At the top, he did not pause for furtive scrutiny of the courtyard and the high walls with their ominous sentry boxes. Instead, he shuffled ahead, faking his victim's gait with uncanny realism.

There was no doubt about which way he should go. His goal was the vehicle—whether motor truck or horse-drawn wagon—in which the murdered man had arrived. It should be located near a cellar window where he had shoveled its load into the furnace room.

No such conveyance was in sight. But Doctor Diabolus knew where to find it. Back in the basement, he had seen the coal heap.

As he indolently plodded alongside the stone building, guards eyed him from their stations aloft. But the walls were fully three hundred feet distant, so that they could not see him clearly without field glasses. True, they were provided with such binoculars. But they did not use them, being confident that this grimy figure, emerged from the basement, was the same one that they had previously watched unloading his cargo and then going into the cellar to "tidy up" what he had delivered.

They were careless, yes. And yet it was quite natural for them to be deceived. A coal heaver had come and now was going, and at the time it did not enter the watchmen's minds that there might have been a substitution of personalities inside the dirty overalls, dilapidated shoes, and battered hat.

At that, too, it is doubtful whether binoculars would have enabled them to detect the identity of the shuffler. His red hair was entirely concealed. His face, neck, and hands were smudged with coal dust. His gleaming black eyes were not conspicuous, for now he was keeping them with lids dropped.

Doctor Diabolus turned the corner of the building without exciting other than mild inspection and indifference on the part of the sentries. He now stood in line of vision of other guards atop the lofty stone walls. But they, too, paid little attention to him. Why should they? A truck stood nearby. He went to it with the ease and naturalness of being the proprietor.

The truck was a big one, built to accommodate a three-ton load of coal. Doctor Diabolus noted with intense satisfaction that there was a hood over the driver's seat as protection against storm, and that it

had not been lowered despite the fair weather.

He climbed up and settled himself on the driver's seat. Cars had changed a lot during his five years behind the bars. But he experienced no apprehension that he might not know how to operate this one. The wily madman had read technical magazines to keep pace with progress.

In particular, he had studied engines and driving mechanisms of motorcars and airplanes. The asylum doctors had attributed this diligence to the desire of a supermind to acquire more knowledge.

His main purpose, however, had been to keep abreast of the fastest mediums of escape, a wise provision for the future, for the day when he might make a successful break for freedom. And now his foresight was to be rewarded.

Rrr-r-r! Chut-chut-chut! The motor started. The truck swung forward along the driveway, crunching at the gravel.

Doctor Diabolus now was in the third stage of flight. The fourth would come outside the grim walls, racing with time to put distance between himself and the madhouse before the alarm siren sounded. After that would be the problem of gaining shelter that would effectively secrete him during the combing search that would be made. Next would be the task of remaining beyond the talons of the law.

His truck now was approaching the gates. The towering walls, as he neared them, seemed to grow higher. He realized how futile it would be for a fugitive to attempt to scale them.

From various sentry stations aloft, four in all, armed guards watched him. Not that they were particularly curious, but because of lack of anything else to do. Time hung heavily on their hands. Many months had elapsed since the rifles had been called into play against an unfortunate frantically seeking freedom.

Doctor Diabolus was by no means excited. He viewed this affair distinctly as an adventure, and was not unmindful of its thrills and ironies. Furthermore, he was executing a carefully developed plan, in which he had confidence.

Long since, he had conceived the inspiration of using a coal delivery as the means of escape. For some time he had been puzzled by the problem of how to get to the vehicle. Then the idea of employing the clothes chute had occurred to him. And the minor details had suggested themselves readily in his fertile brain. Why, he had even

anticipated that it would be necessary to commit two murders—eliminating a guard and the coal heaver.

Things certainly were going like clockwork, his scheme unfolding without a hitch.

The gates, formidable steel barricades, were not more than a hundred feet distant now. Beyond them lay liberty to the fullest extent that it could be experienced by a man hounded and hunted by the police, and who must, therefore, remain discreetly undercover.

In the enticing world outside the gates, Doctor Diabolus would have to live as a creature of shadowland, hidden in a lair and imperiling himself whenever he emerged, night or day. Such penalties, however, would be largely neutralized by the joy of having realized a five-year dream and longing. Furthermore, he would have the thrill of being able to vent diabolical laughs at his cleverness in having outwitted the utmost imprisoning devices that man so far had invented.

On the other hand, he was not yet past the gates. They were closed and locked, and they might not be opened until he had been inspected and questioned closely. Would he pass the test? Or would the gatekeepers become suspicious and detain him?

Doctor Diabolus did not know the answers to these questions. That merely made them more interesting. He was like a boy, pattering downstairs Christmas morning, wondering what he would find in his stocking.

The gates now were not more than fifty feet distant.

He had slowed down the truck and was looking inquiringly at the two men who had come out of the small brick office. His eyelids still drooped lazily, so that their intense black gleam would not be conspicuous.

The guards stared at him intently. Then one said something to the other, and went back into the office.

Doctor Diabolus had stopped his car, prudently hovering away from close examination. He groped in a pocket of the dead man's overalls, encountered some matches and half a packet of alfalfa cigarettes, falsely branded as tobacco. He lit one and puffed in excellent simulation of a coal heaver, the paper cylinder dangling lazily from a corner of his mouth.

And then he learned his fate. He had passed

inspection!

The man had gone back into the little building to operate some mechanism. Slowly the gates parted. They slid to each side, vanishing into cavities of the huge archway.

Doctor Diabolus registered no reaction. He acted calmly, indifferently, as if he would have been very much surprised, indeed, if the portals had remained closed.

Again he started his engine. The truck crunched forward.

He passed the two watchmen, the one standing silently aside, the other peering casually at him through a window. In a most nonchalant, indifferent way, the driver saluted them by a slight nod and a careless, happy-go-lucky wave of his right hand.

They were to realize later that it was not by coincidence that, in the moment of passing, he shot a cloud of smoke from the right-hand corner of his mouth so that it helped obscure his countenance.

Ah! The truck arrived on the main highway. Doctor Diabolus had passed the formidable walls!

He had escaped!

But he was not yet out of his difficulties. Far from it; his resourceful wits would be taxed to their utmost by the problem of remaining escaped.

He turned the car to the left, for in that direction lay the city, and if he went the other way it would excite suspicion. From a corner of an eye he saw the gates slide back into place.

It had been a very busy half-hour, indeed. Doctor Diabolus had committed two murders. That did not bother him in the slightest. Ruthless, utterly without conscience, he lacked emotional brakes. All that concerned him now was how far away he could get before the dead men would be discovered and he would hear the steam-siren alarm. He would know soon.

CHAPTER V. IN HOT PURSUIT.

GLANCING back through the isinglass window of the hood, Doctor Diabolus took a farewell look at the high walls that had held him captive for five long, monotonous years.

“Five years!” he whispered savagely. “More than eighteen hundred days and nights! If I finish this escape, I’ll make society pay with interest for depriving me of my liberty.”

He laughed maniacally. His eyes flashed malignant fire, and, for a few moments, his lips curled back in a sneer, disclosing his long, white teeth.

“I am the Devil!” he gloated. “I am Satan—Lucifer—Diabolus—Old Nick—The Prince of Darkness! They laugh at me behind my back and say that I am insane. I’ll show them. I’ll raise so much trouble in this world that any doubt as to my identity will vanish.”

He meant it, too; no doubt of that. Combined with his mad viciousness, now, was a thirst for vengeance. Most terrible of all, he had the education, fertile imagination, and scientific background to make good his threats in a degree horrible to contemplate.

The most dangerous man in the world!

That was what the newspapers had dubbed him. At the time, he had felt immeasurably pleased. There was, in Doctor Diabolus, a pronounced streak of vanity such as makes men thrill at triumphs.

Prior to his capture and incarceration in the asylum, he had determined to become the most celebrated criminal in history. Pondering that goal, there had come to his diseased imagination a distinct envy of the real Devil. He had reflected how fine it would be if he actually were Satan.

Subject to hallucinations, an uncanny obsession had taken hold of him. He had had a dream, and in it the devil had appeared and told him that he, the evil one, would move into his mortal body and henceforth abide there. It had been an extremely vivid vision, and so convincing that Doctor Diabolus had forthwith adopted that name and become, in his own belief, an incarnation of Satan.

Was this, after all, an hallucination? It is said that the devil, through the ages, has assumed many and varied forms for pursuing his iniquitous work. At times he has even been reputed to have occupied the bodies of swine and idiots. In selecting Doctor Diabolus, he had exercised better taste than customarily. There was no denying that Doctor Diabolus was highly educated, abnormally shrewd, cultured and quite charming in conversation.

Perhaps, if truth were known, Satan actually did cast out this madman’s soul and take its place. Not that he moved in entirely, of course. Such a vast power as Satan would require a legion of bodies. This was early recognized by the philosophers, who recorded that the heart of a beautiful woman is the

abode of at least nine devils.

The insane asylum was located in a gently sloping valley. Fleeing, Doctor Diabolus was somewhat handicapped by having to drive his truck up a grade. He soon reached the crest, however, and found himself on a down slope.

Again he looked back. The prison of diseased intellects and chaotic souls was no longer in sight. The top of the hill concealed it.

By previous knowledge, abetted by study of road maps in the asylum library, he knew the topography of the surrounding country quite thoroughly, even to winding country lanes. There was a certain goal that he had definitely in mind. But just how to get to it was fraught with uncertainty. For any minute, now, the steam siren back at the madhouse would pierce the peaceful air of the countryside. And shortly thereafter he would have to abandon his truck and seek shelter. Powerful pursuit cars would come speeding along, bound to overtake the slower truck. Then, too, telephones would be busy and attempts made to head him off.

Now and again, through open spaces in the trees and bushes that lined the right side of the highway, he caught glimpses of the river.

Soon he arrived at a crossroad. A short distance away, it extended over a bridge.

A loud, shrill whistle! Promptly Doctor Diabolus stopped his car. He listened. The whistle was repeated.

He felt relief. At first, he had feared that the siren alarm was functioning, advertising his escape. But now he comprehended that what he had heard was a train. He looked to the west and could see it, a long procession of cars, traveling about twenty miles an hour, perhaps more. The madman noticed something else.

On the instant, he abandoned the truck.

Jumping to the ground, he ran along the road to the river. He did not cross it. Just this side of the stream, the bridge extended over railway tracks below. There he stopped and stood looking down, with the air of an inquisitive rustic very much interested in the choo-choos.

The engine passed beneath him with a bombardment of smoke and cinders. No brakeman was in sight atop of the cars. Doctor Diabolus waited until the middle section of the train was below.

Then he climbed over the railing, lowered

himself from the edge of the trestle, and dropped.

He had carefully calculated his distances, and landed on coal that filled a gondola. The fall had been not more than a dozen feet. He was uninjured.

Quickly he burrowed into the fuel. It was egg-size anthracite, and responded readily to his purpose. In a few seconds he was completely buried, save for his black-smudged nose that projected for breathing.

Had anyone seen him jump? If so, the circumstances would be remembered and quickly reported to posses. Terse messages would click over telegraph wires. He would be discovered if he still were aboard the train.

As the car rattled and bumped ahead with him, he reflected grimly that there was irony in the situation, also cunning on his part. He now was headed back toward the madhouse. At the moment, that was the illogical direction for him to be traveling. This afforded him a sense of temporary security, for his enemies would naturally seek him fleeing away instead of coming back.

It came suddenly—the siren's alarm.

Though he was covered by coal, he heard its sound, which, in the open air at this near distance, must be almost deafening.

Doctor Diabolus experienced no panicky fear, not even a skipping of heartbeats. For years he had noticed that his nerves had acquired a peculiar quality, making him almost as imperturbable as a Chinese. True, there had been an exception in the clothes chute, when dropped towels striking his head had caused him to lose his grip and fall down the shaft. But, in the main, he was serene in emergency. Certainly, danger even made him more calm, more daring.

He knew no fear, this ruthless Doctor Diabolus.

The siren seemed to grow louder, indicating that the train was approaching the vicinity of the asylum. Then it softened gradually, and the fugitive knew that he had passed his late prison and now was being borne eastward.

It would not do to remain long where he was. Trains would be searched for him, freight trains in particular. But he must wait a while before emerging. It would not do to go into hiding too close to the madhouse.

He counted to himself, marking off time by reckoning sixty pulsations of his heart as equivalent to the passage of a minute. While waiting on the bridge, he had estimated the speed of the train. At

length, after long calculation, he figured that he was fully five miles from the place whence he had escaped.

Doctor Diabolus lifted his head from the coal. He still had the car to himself. Cautiously he rose. Fortunately for him, the gondola was sandwiched between two higher cattle cars. Thus a brakeman on the top deck of the train could not see him.

Over the side he went, clung to the edge, and dropped off.

Momentum tripped him, made him roll over and over. But he was uninjured.

Close to the tracks was a ditch filled with muddy water. He dropped into it and submerged his body, save for his face. A growth of weeds concealed his head.

Now, his objective was the woods nearby. But if he had rushed directly into it someone might have seen him from the train. As it was, he felt quite confident that he had not been observed.

He waited until some minutes after the caboose had rattled past. Then stealthily he sat up and explored with his eyes. The train was gone from view. No one was in sight. He had the neighborhood to himself, apparently.

Peaceful in the extreme was his present environment. The hot cinders of the roadbed radiated the sun's heat, making the cool forest all the more inviting. Birds chirped, whistled, cawed. A frog croaked, and a squirrel barked.

"Freedom!" Doctor Diabolus rejoiced. "This is freedom!"

But he wasted no time, after rising, in pausing to enjoy his surroundings. Into the thicket he went. It meant cover, concealment, the factor that he now needed most.

Bloodhounds would soon be sniffing, hoping to strike his trail. Probably they already were. He was not worried, for he was wearing the shoes of the murdered coal heaver, not his own.

He prowled through the thicket for some minutes before he found a path. And he pattered forward along it rapidly, for of a sudden the asylum steam siren, after a rest, again began shattering the peaceful stillness with its shrill scream.

By reason of its power, it sounded menacingly close to him, despite the intervening distance. It, too, was a pursuer, groping to locate and help capture him. Doctor Diabolus grinned wickedly as he mentally pictured the terror that now was stalking the countryside. Every farmer within

hearing of that siren knew its import, realized that a dangerous inmate had escaped from the institution for the criminal insane. Men were abandoning plows in the fields, hurrying to their homes to get their rifles and shotguns. Children were fleeing to their mothers, to hide in attics. Doors were being barricaded and savage hounds unleashed to stand guard.

There would be little sleeping in the country this coming night. Not with the notoriously horrible Doctor Diabolus at large!

He was a nightmare demon in the flesh.

CHAPTER VI.

WEALTH FOR THE TAKING.

THE dreaded Doctor Diabolus followed the winding path through the forest. The path, being a beaten route, would obviously take him to a dwelling, to a highway where he would find a house, or to a river wharf, he being headed in the direction of the stream.

It might seem that a fugitive should steer clear of human habitation in the present predicament. Such would probably have been the strategy of an average man. But Doctor Diabolus, possessed of an abnormal intellect, had intentions to the contrary.

His predicament was highly perilous. Above all, he must find shelter—a hiding place. In the woods there were few places to secrete himself. Treetops and clumps of shrubbery did not suit him. On the other hand, if he could get into a residence he could more ably employ his wits. For one thing, he would be enabled to change his disguise. He might also secure weapons and money, both of which he needed badly.

As he went along the trail, he was alert for the presence of others. Possessed of the super-keen senses of a madman, he had a striking advantage as regards sight and hearing.

But he encountered no one.

At intervals the asylum siren repeated its loud, warning blast. Doctor Diabolus frowned. He quickened his pace.

Suddenly he saw a clearing ahead. In lacework patches through the trees, a house was disclosed.

He approached it boldly. The inmates, no doubt, had heard the siren and realized its import. If they saw him stealthily scouting, they would at once surmise his identity. Thus put on their guard, they would barricade doors and, perhaps, shoot at him

from cover. It was, therefore, best to walk right up to the door and knock. He had a convincing story ready on his glib tongue, to the effect that he had been driving a coal wagon, taking fuel to a rich man's country estate; that his team had run away, thrown him off his vehicle, and that all he wanted now was to telephone to his employers. Certainly, he looked the part.

The house faced the river, with landscaped grounds in front. So it was at the rear door that he applied.

There was an electric push button there. He pressed it; heard the loud pealing of a bell within.

Doctor Diabolus waited, conscious that he might be on the verge of a crisis. But no one answered his call. He rang again.

Soon it became evident that the place was deserted.

He tried the door. It was locked. And then something caught his attention—the fact that the door did not look like wood. Its varnished surface quite evidently had a faked grain.

He tapped. The sound was metallic.

“Steel door!” he reflected. “It may harmonize with the brick walls, as fire protection; but I doubt it. The existence of such a formidable portal suggests that within this structure is something that the tenants consider worth guarding carefully.

He examined the keyhole. It was in a patent lock. Then he left the porch and inspected the windows. More tapping disclosed that the small panes were inset in steel framework.

His suspicion, that he was at an abode of wealth or deviltry, now became a certainty. Perhaps his conviction was guided by some diabolical sixth sense. At any rate, he acted upon it.

Without hesitation, he climbed a porch pillar and got to the roof. The walking there was easy, for the shingles had an asphalt base surfaced with chips of red crushed slate.

Trees roundabout were high, so that he was screened from distant observation.

He made for a large chimney that his photographic eyes had noticed while approaching the house. It had no metal spark guards blocking the opening.

Quickly he lowered himself into the brick well. It was fully twice as large as his body. He descended it the same way he had gone down the asylum clothes chute. The interior was sooty, but that did not bother him, for his garments, face, and

hands already were grimy, black. He could hear the soot rustling down into an open fireplace below.

One minute; two; three; and Doctor Diabolus emerged on the hearth below.

He was standing in a large living room, furnished expensively. All equipment had obviously been acquired for comfort. Chinese wicker lounging chairs and couches, along with a multiplicity of ash receivers and bookshelves, were conveniently at hand. On the walls were a moose head and seven mounted fish, a lynx pelt. Bearskin rugs were scattered over the floor.

Doctor Diabolus removed his dirty overalls and shoes, for he wanted to explore the house without leaving tracks. He rolled the discarded garments into a bundle, tucked it under his left arm, and set forth.

His first stop was the table, where he picked up a bottle of Scotch and drank fully a pint without a chaser. As he turned away, again he heard the asylum siren, and there appeared in his countenance a sneer of utmost viciousness and defiance.

Within five minutes he had been in every room, upstairs and down. A tin of peeled potatoes, covered with water, in the kitchen, indicated that whoever had left this house expected to return for dinner. The amount of potatoes was just about enough for two men.

Doctor Diabolus had noticed a large trapdoor in the capacious pantry. He lifted it and went to the cellar. There he found numerous cases of liquor, shelves of food, a wood furnace with a supply of fuel nearby.

The furnace interested him extremely. He opened its door, examined the interior, and calculated that a human body could be crammed into it with ease.

That pleased him. He might want to use the furnace later.

Now, Doctor Diabolus had been raised a gentleman. He loved the fine things of life, and his training had been such that he could enjoy them to their utmost. Accustomed to being immaculately groomed, he detested the smudges on his face and the filthy costume in which he had escaped.

So he hastened to the bathroom. It had a tub, with plenty of water, pumped from the river and stored in a tank on the top floor.

Hurriedly, but with appreciation, he bathed. In an adjoining bedroom he located a blue suit and

other clothes that fitted him fairly well. He washed out the tub, wiped trickled water from the floor, removing all traces of his ablutions. Then he took his wet towels and his discarded coal heaver's outfit to the cellar, where he hid them behind the woodpile.

A pistol might be urgently needed.

He found one, a loaded automatic, in a dresser drawer. Ears alert for sounds of intruders, he continued his search. In all, he acquired three guns. They went into his pockets. To some degree, at least, he had disarmed the owners.

Hark! A motorboat was chugging.

Doctor Diabolus stepped to a front window. Cautiously he peered out. The craft was swiftly approaching the private wharf, some distance through the trees. Two men were in it.

They were not guards seeking him. The madman was sure of that, for they were not carrying rifles.

He watched the boat enter the boathouse slip.

Then he softly hurried upstairs. Several cupboards were there, in which he could hide. But he was not ready to use them. Instead, he lay on the floor of the chamber above the living room. It had an open register, a crisscross grille for admitting heat from below. Its slats were not closed.

Through the opening, he could watch what happened beneath him. Better still, he could hear any conversation.

The two men arrived hurriedly. He wondered at their haste. They were running. That was unmistakable, from the sounds of their footsteps. Door unlocked, they entered—and instantly shot the bolts.

Doctor Diabolus, from his position above, could not see them clearly, save that both were smartly tailored and of somewhat subnormal stature. They removed their plaid caps, tossed them aside, and he saw that their hair was almost as black as his own was red.

Without pausing, they ran from room to room. He heard them trying doors and windows. Then they returned to view.

"Boy!" ejaculated one of them, with a sigh. "That's sure a relief, Harry. No one's broken in." The speaker's voice had a whine, but the words were distinct and sharp, as if each were the lash of a whip.

The answer came in the surly tone of an ugly, sullen nature. "We gotta watch like hawks. I

wonder what nut crushed out. Siren's still blowing. He may come this way yet."

"We'll bump him off if he does. I'm not worrying about him, though. It's the guys that'll be frisking the country for him. They won't pass up a single bet. Just a question of time until they come here."

"We'll tell 'em," Harry proposed, "that we haven't seen him—which we haven't."

"Bah!" Fred jeered. "You think they'll take our word for it? They're bulls, and they'll wonder right off why a couple of able-bodied gents like us are hiding out in the bush. No, pal, they'll surely insist on searching the joint."

"Let 'em!" Harry retorted defiantly. "They won't find anyone but us."

"Well, for crying out loud!" said Fred. "You sure got a two-dollar ticker for a head. Suppose those birds find the swag we got cached here."

CHAPTER VII.

THE DEN OF CROOKS.

NOW Doctor Diabolus was doubly pleased that he had entered this lodge along the river. Loot had just been mentioned, and it was something that could change hands again. The madman was determined to take it. Not that he was poor. Hidden away in the outside world he still had a few hundred thousand dollars. It was all that had been left to him after paying the high-priced lawyers who had coaxed the courts into sending him to the asylum instead of the hangman.

But Doctor Diabolus at the moment was without cash. He would need money, no doubt, in continuing his escape.

Even when he got to his hoarded wealth, he would be in straightened circumstances compared with the old days when millions had been at his disposal.

Listening at the floor register, he reflected: "I must rebuild my fortune. Now is an ideal time to start. Henceforth, I shall be a hunted man, must remain under cover to keep from being sent back to the padded cell. Obviously, the only occupation that is open to me is crime. The income on the scant three hundred thousand dollars that I have salted away would not suffice to keep me in luxury such as that to which I was accustomed before they incarcerated me."

His old ambition returned surgingly—to become

the most famous criminal in history.

Wild, ruthless lights gleamed in his black eyes as he peered down at Harry and Fred and marked them for his first victims.

"I am Satan!" ran his mad thoughts. "Yonder two crooks already are serving loyally as envoys of the devil. They would be valuable allies to take away with me, if they would only see the truth and recognize me as their infernal master. But I want that plunder. And to get it their extermination may be necessary."

He wondered about the form of the loot; whether it was bank notes, securities, or jewels.

Down in the living room of the lodge, Harry and Fred were staring into each other's eyes with the fear and tension of underworldings who dread the inquisition of the law. Soon might come an authoritative rapping on the door, a curt demand to open, and then a thorough ransacking of the place.

Harry broke the silence. "We've got our swag securely hidden," he said. "I don't think searchers would find it. But the thing that worries me isn't the jack. It's myself."

Fred gave a start. "You've only been out of stir a month," he said. "Your crush-out from that pen in Indiana was sensational. You killed a guard in the getaway. This has been a good place to lie low. You couldn't want a better hideout. But your pictures and description have been sent all over the country. The guards from the bughouse are sure to recognize you if they come here and see you."

Harry nodded slowly. It was as though his brain were dazed, as if it had not yet comprehended the full extent of his peril.

He cursed himself sullenly and said, "I've been a fool."

Fred caught his idea, and he cut in with his lashing voice. "You sure have," he agreed, jeering. "You haven't done a thing to change your appearances. You haven't even been growing a beard for disguise. Why, you've still got prison pallor on your mug."

Fred paused and emitted an I-told-you-so laugh. "You poor lush!" he charged. "Why didn't you listen to me and stick in the sunshine and get tanned? No! Instead of that, you camped indoors with your hooch, sleeping in the day and staying up all night."

Harry countered defensively: "I was afraid folks would see and recognize me if I went out in the

daytime. Besides, it's second nature for me to be a night prowler."

"Bah!" Fred retorted. "You was in stir four years. That oughta changed your habits."

"It did," Harry admitted. "But as soon as I got out I slipped back to my old ways as naturally as a fish going to water. Darkness and hooch were my meat."

Fred swore a blue streak. "We can't unscramble the eggs," he declared. "The best we can do is for you to hide if the guards stop here, and I'll try to bluff them out."

Harry rose and went to a window. He peered out over the river. "By this time," he said, "guards are beating the bush. That's sure. The asylum patrol boat, though, is most apt to stop here first. That's my worst danger—just now." He turned from the window, went to the table, and took a stiff drink of Scotch. "You talk about me being dumb!" he chided. "How about yourself, not making a good hiding place here?"

"Lay off!" Fred retorted. "I didn't build this joint. I bought it. And I haven't got a police record—not yet, at any rate. I'm supposed to be a law-abiding guy with plenty of money that I made in gold mines. I didn't see any need for making any trick cupboards or other places to hide. It was all right until you came butting in here, begging me to keep you undercover."

The sullen Harry, by reason of his dangerous predicament, was inclined to placate his pal. "Sure, I butted in," he admitted. "But didn't I fetch over a hundred thousand dollars in cold cash with me? Didn't I offer you half of it if you'd hide me?"

"Yes," Fred agreed reluctantly. "You did, and I accepted my divvy. But look what a mess you've gotten me into. I'll be in a fine kettle of fish if the guards find you. They'll snake me up for harboring a fugitive. Then they'll get nosing into my affairs, and there's no telling what they'll find. Oh, well, we better make the best of it. Let's have a snort."

In silence they poured drinks, and in silence sipped the high balls.

Doctor Diabolus had determined on a daring move. Shoes off, as silently as a cat he crossed the floor and started down the stairs. Arrived below, he was in a small hall. There a door was ajar, opening into the living room.

Each of his hands held a pistol. In a twinkling he stepped into view of the two crooks.

Momentarily they were paralyzed by

amazement, so startled that they merely stared at him, spellbound, as if doubting their senses.

Menacingly Doctor Diabolus kept them covered with his weapons.

“One peep or one move, and I’ll kill you both!” he warned. And his voice was vibrant with convincing viciousness.

They knew, instinctively, that he was in deadly earnest. Knew, too, did the crooks, the death-deal possibilities of his guns. So they sat frozenly, fearful that at any moment bullets might seek them as targets.

“Raise your arms!” the madman ordered. “Clasp your hands and let them rest on top of your heads. It is my custom to shoot first and count ten afterward.”

Hastily they obeyed.

Fred, faster thinking of the two, was first to emerge from his daze.

“What you doing here, partner?” he asked in a quavering tone. “If this is just a stick-up, we’ll come across. Be reasonable. No use shooting a couple of harmless gents like us.”

The sinister face of Doctor Diabolus lengthened in a satanic grin that, instead of heartening his captives, made their blood run cold. In his glistening, phosphorescent black eyes they detected the unmistakable gleam of insanity.

Horried, Fred gasped. “Great guns!” he faltered. “You—you the guy that escaped from the bughouse?”

Doctor Diabolus nodded. “I was the most notorious inmate of the asylum,” he announced in a terrifying, boastful voice. “They call me the most dangerous man in the world. No doubt you have read about me.”

He laughed shrilly.

“I am the world-famed Doctor Diabolus!” he bragged.

At that the prisoners turned a shade more pallid. They exchanged glances of dismay that bordered on panic, for they had, indeed, read of the exploits of this fiend incarnate.

Harry was stricken mute. He might as well have been a statue of clay.

But Fred, aggressive and jeering, was a man of quick wits. He used them promptly, comprehending that his life was in extreme danger, that he might be standing on the very brink of the grave.

Flatteringly he said: “Satan, we welcome you, honored beyond expression by your visit. Few

people have the privilege of meeting the Devil in person.”

“Yet all work for him, at one time or another,” replied Doctor Diabolus. “You are sensible in recognizing my identity. Most fools tap their foreheads meaningly and say that I am only a madman. Ha, ha-a-a-a!”

His wild laugh rang forth triumphantly. It seemed to chill the air. The captives experienced clamminess. Shivers played along their spines, and their eyes opened even wider, in dread.

Harry came to life. He gasped loudly, gulping as though suffocating.

“You are not mad,” said Fred shakily. “I assure you that I am convinced of that. Now, let’s talk this thing over quietly, your majesty. Maybe we can help you.”

“I need no man’s help,” Doctor Diabolus answered. “Men are my pawns, just as dice are the Devil’s bones and cards his Bible. Have no delusions that I court your aid. Perhaps, though, I may be able to use you as subordinates.”

“Anything you suggest!” Fred declared hastily. “We’re at your services. And you’ll find that we’ve already had a lot of training in deviltry.”

“I know that,” said Doctor Diabolus. “Yes, you might be meritorious—*might*, I said, mark you! I am not yet sure. However, this day I have killed two men, and am cloyed with pleasure. We shall now take under advisement whether or not I shall also murder you two.”

CHAPTER VIII. DEVILISH CUNNING.

FRED’S strategy was to placate Doctor Diabolus. The game was to flatter him, to semi-hypnotize the madman so that his attention would tend to concentrate on himself, in an ecstasy of self-approval. Then, with the maniac’s vigilance relaxed, it was Fred’s hope that he and his pal could gain the whip hand.

Both Fred and Harry carried pistols. They were crack shots, quick on the draw, and accurate at hip firing without aiming. Early training in the Southwest had developed that proficiency.

Alas! The cunning Doctor Diabolus was too able a psychologist for an inferior like Fred to get the better of him.

“You fellows are crooks,” said Doctor Diabolus craftily. “No doubt, you are armed. I am

temperamental in that regard; have an aversion to conversing with people who carry firearms. Stand up, boys, without lowering your hands.”

They obeyed glumly, with sinking hearts.

“Excellent!” the madman approved. “Now, turn around with your backs toward me. I shall be in the rear, with pistol alertly ready, so it will be to your advantage to be discreet and not attempt any monkey business. However, that is entirely a matter of indifference to me. If you prefer to be murdered, you will find me quite ready to accommodate you.”

In a few minutes he had disarmed them.

Then, absolute master of the situation, he retreated and sat on a couch at the far end of the room. “You may turn and sit down now,” he announced, abruptly.

In most dismal spirits they acquiesced. Gone now was any hope of turning the tables. They were at the mercy of the madman, famed for ruthlessness and an insane passion for killing.

The asylum siren suddenly began sounding again. They could hear it distinctly. Harry shivered, conscious of his double peril—his unscrupulous captor and the madhouse guards that might soon knock imperatively at the cottage door. As regards the latter, however, he now felt a lessening dread. First of all, they would have Doctor Diabolus to reckon with. That devil would either murder them or keep them so busy that they would have scant time for eagle-eyed scrutiny of the two who now were held quaking at the point of a gun.

“Ha, ha-a-a!” Doctor Diabolus laughed mockingly. “The siren announces that they have not yet captured me. Can it be possible! Courageous men, those guards! And fools, too, wanting to find Satan. Still, through the centuries, humanity has certainly manifested fascination and devotion for me.”

“Mr. Devil!” Harry burst forth hoarsely. “The three of us have a common enemy—those asylum guards. And they may be here any minute.”

Doctor Diabolus shrugged. But, just the same, though he feigned indifference, he was uneasy. Satan he might be, in spirit and mind; but his body was subject to human limitations. That had been amply demonstrated in his inability to escape from the madhouse during five long and monotonous years. So he was boastful, for effect; but inwardly he yearned hungrily to be at a far distance.

“Let me make you a proposition,” he said. “Time is indeed short. We must come to an

understanding speedily, if at all. You are fortunate that I bother with you—I who have ever an endless legion of the illustrious in my toils. Yet, though I once entertained the distinguished poet, Dante, at my court, it is necessary in my business to have emissaries in every walk of life. You lowbrows may be aware that compacts with the Devil date back to remote antiquity. Millions of times I purchase the soul while its owner still is on earth. Pope Innocent VIII, in his ‘Summis Desiderantes’ bull, year 1484, took stock that a compact with Satan was quite possible. Increase Mather referred to men who made covenants with the Prince of Darkness. Aye, Old Nick barter shrewdly. *Faust* was not the only one that sold himself to me.”

Fred interrupted with a wretched laugh. “Pardon, your majesty!” he said apologetically. “I mean no disrespect. My mirthless outburst was directed at myself and my destiny. I have not always been a crook. My parents were God-fearing people, my father a minister.”

“Aha!” Doctor Diabolus exclaimed delightedly. “You are just the type that I strive most to induce as aids. Good people are my most prized acquisitions.”

“Yes,” said Fred, “I have often thought of that. My father said the same thing, innumerable times, in sermons. Perhaps I would not be wayward today had I not been compelled to take overdoses of religion. I reacted to them, turned to wickedness as a boy to honey after castor oil. You talk of compacts with your Satanic Majesty. I and my friend here have long since sold our souls to the devil, though we may not have realized it at the time.”

Doctor Diabolus leaned forward. He spoke in soft, soothing tones. “My dear chap,” he said, “I know that you two already belong to me. The only difficulty is that you may doubt that my body really houses Satan. I maintain that it does; that in this flesh-and-blood person that sits before you, you see a being whose soul was cast out of his body and displaced by Satan, as has happened so often—is happening—and will forever happen. The Devil adopts varied forms. If there were no evil, there could be no good; for all is relative, a matter of contrast. Good is good only by comparison with evil. And evil is evil only by comparison with good. Contrast, my friends, is the thermometer of existence. Thus, evil is only good carried to extremes. Take a man who squanders his money;

that is bad. He becomes prudent, thrifty, and people approve, view him as a good citizen. He carries his thriftiness too far, turns into a grasping miser; and that is evil—thrift carried to extremes—good carried to extremes.”

Fred had been watching Doctor Diabolus in fascination.

He was like a toad being charmed by a snake intent on devouring it.

“I am a hardboiled egg,” he said, “and I think you are right, knowing life in the raw as I do. Evil is perverted good. And let me comment that you are crazy like a fox.”

Doctor Diabolus rose and bowed with grace and the manner of a suave, oily personality. Yet, all the time, he had his pistols in hand and his eyes were alert for treachery on the part of his captives.

Harry interrupted. “Aw, chop it short!” he growled. And then, as Doctor Diabolus frowned and the speaker realized that a fatal bullet might be his reply, he said hastily, in a most agitated voice: “Excuse me, Mr. Devil! I—I”—and his teeth were fairly chattering now—“I didn’t mean to be disrespectful. But you guys sound like a sermon. Great guns! Don’t you realize that the bughouse guards may be here any second now? Let’s get down to brass tacks. What do you want of us? You say that Fred and I already have sold our souls to the devil. All right! I don’t give a whoop about that. It’s my neck that I’m concerned with. I escaped from a pen and killed a guard in doing it, and if they capture me and take me back they’ll put a noose around this fat throat of mine and stretch it. Come on, now, lay off this chit-chat and get us out of this mess.”

Doctor Diabolus did not frown. “There is nothing that I appreciate more,” he said, “than a practical man. The situation is, indeed, one that calls for action, not discussion. I have dallied merely to convince you that I am what I claim to be—the Devil.”

“Sure!” Harry said with a growl. “Sure thing! I get you, Satan. I’m willing to believe that you’re Napoleon or the guy that put the salt in the ocean, or anything else you want. But if we keep on chewing the rag here, them guards will come trooping up and we’ll all be in irons before we know it.”

Doctor Diabolus grinned in his most diabolical manner. “Ah!” he said approvingly. “I would not be especially averse to you calling me Napoleon.

He was one of my most valued agents. He caused murder wholesale. The writers who have followed him, particularly the writers of school books, have been almost as valuable, by reason of their inducing people to accept Napoleon as a hero instead of as a supercriminal. It is the same way in modern times. If you killed a German in the World War, they gave you a medal. If you kill him now, they hang you, because the law has declared that there is a closed season on Germans. Ah! I owe an eternal debt to the diplomats. A diplomat, you know, often is simply a wholesale-murder-breeding politician. They simplify my work. In normal times, I must spend my activities inducing men to do individual murders. The politicians save me a lot of bother. They cause war—wholesale murder.”

Doctor Diabolus paused and sighed, expressing the most intense form of satisfaction.

Fred had been scrutinizing him intently, with knitted brows. “I don’t think you’re crazy at all,” he said. “To be perfectly frank, I thought you were, from what I’d read of you. But I’m doggoned if I don’t believe that you’re sane.”

“Ha!” commented Doctor Diabolus. “Don’t let that bother you. Sanity is just a relative proposition, after all. Every man is crazy, in one way or another, or at some time or another, in his life.”

Fred was beginning to lose his fear of the madman. It was becoming apparent that they could come to amicable terms, that Doctor Diabolus had something definite in mind, that he wanted to use his captives for a very specific purpose. At least, it seemed assured that he desired to employ Fred as an agent. As for Harry, his fate was doubtful. The madman had devoted to him only casual attention, in the nature of watchfulness. Doctor Diabolus was, to the contrary, however, quite intent on Fred.

And Fred felt, in addition to relief, a growing and intoxicating feeling of his own importance. Somehow, it flattered him, that Doctor Diabolus had directed his conversation almost exclusively to him. It was as though Harry were an alien element, excess baggage.

“Mr. Devil,” said Harry in his most wheedling tone, “we are at your services. Now, just what is it that you want us to do? We have suggested that we should hasten, for the madhouse guards may be upon us at any moment.”

Doctor Diabolus grinned; and the elongation of his face produced a more satanic effect than the makeup of any actor.

"I," said he, "shall escape my searchers. That is certain. It is fate written in the stars. Of course, the pursuit will continue. It will be necessary for me to remain undercover, in hiding. Thus hounded, I am determined to become the most celebrated criminal in history, and, incidentally, to steal millions. I shall require aids, and could use you profitably, both to myself and to yourself."

Fred had imagination. Yet he knew that in that respect he was far less gifted than the madman. "What will your headquarters be like?" he asked.

"I," replied Doctor Diabolus, "am Satan, the Devil. Accordingly, I shall have appropriate headquarters. It will be an earthly duplication of hell. There I shall rule supreme, with imps catering to my whims. There will be fires in which to destroy my enemies. My inferno will be chambers of tortures that will surpass the inventiveness of the Orient. To it will be brought the recalcitrant ones who oppose my demands. I shall build up a worldwide reputation, so that when I mark a rich man for looting or an unfortunate victim of circumstances or environment as one desired to serve me, the reputed horrors of my torture rooms will induce them to obey me. In other words, ruthless and unscrupulous, I intend to have a hell on earth. I shall do this with scientific efficiency. It will be a reality, from which men will shrink in stark terror."

CHAPTER IX. THE DOUBLE CROSS.

AWARE that he was in the presence of an abnormally brilliant brain, even though alienists had pronounced it insane, Fred at once was eager to become an ally of Doctor Diabolus.

"You can bank on me!" he declared fervently.

And there was no doubting that he spoke sincerely.

Doctor Diabolus sensed his earnestness. He said: "Then you and your pal herewith enter into a compact with the devil. Now, Harry, how does that strike you?"

"Sure!" Harry agreed wretchedly. With anxiety his eyes strayed to the windows. "Only let's get down to brass tacks before the asylum guards put in an appearance."

Doctor Diabolus reassured him by a confident laugh. "The guards," he said, "will not have a ghost of a chance against us. Look! Twilight is

approaching. Already it is growing dusky without. Darkness is ever the abode of evil. The invention of artificial street illumination was a severe handicap to my work. And now that we have come to an understanding, we must make a definite compact—a contract.

"The devil always fulfills his engagements. There is not a recorded case, even in folklore, where I evaded my share of the agreement. Gustav Freytag recognized that when he recorded that the deceiver is always man. 'You men,' said Satan, 'are cheats; you make all sorts of promises so long as you need me, and leave me in the lurch as soon as you have got what you wanted.' A contract with the Devil was the original 'scrap of paper,' the derivation of that phrase. Having been thus cheated through the centuries, I came to insist that my human negotiators sign the deed with their own blood. Is that agreeable to you two gentlemen?"

They nodded.

"I have already sold my soul to you," said Fred in a brittle tone, "and it might as well be made a matter of record."

Eagerly Harry seconded him. "I'll sign anything," he said. "I used to be a forger, so it doesn't much matter."

The light was waning, with the shadows of late afternoon already forming in the corners.

"On the table at your left," Fred informed, "you will find a fountain pen and a pad of paper."

Doctor Diabolus turned to the articles. Feeling that the two men were completely in his power, he seemed to relax his vigilance, in that he shifted his attention to the paper as he wrote. On the other hand, he kept watching them alertly from a corner of the eyes. And, with pistol in his left hand, the two crooks would have invited death by any attempt to rush him.

"I have written the pact," Doctor Diabolus announced presently. "Step forward, read it, and *sign!*"

They obeyed. And they found that his writing had been brief. These were the words:

In consideration for assurance of protection and wealth to be delivered to me in fabulous amounts, I herewith sell my soul to Doctor Diabolus.

Both signed. And then Fred, handing back the pen, commented: "You did not date it."

"Ha, ha-a-a!" laughed the madman again, in that peculiar, bloodcurdling tone. "It is not necessary to affix a date. The body is limited to years. But the

soul knows no years. It is eternal, for a thing that persists forever can have no beginning as well as no end. I do not need dates. There are no courts that can invalidate a contract made by man with Satan. The date is immaterial. Have you an ordinary pen?"

"Sure," Fred replied. "Why do you ask?"

"I have your signatures in ink," said Doctor Diabolus. "But that is not sufficient. It has been customary, for thousands of years, as I told you, to sign these assignments of souls in human blood. Get a needle. Prick your fingers. Draw blood, and sign—that the contract may be forever binding."

This was done within a few minutes.

Harry shuddered as he drew away from the presence of Doctor Diabolus. "And now," he asked, "what's next?"

The madman gestured gracefully, conveying his opinion that the most important matters had been disposed of and that henceforth nothing was to be encountered save trivial detail.

"You men," he said sepulchrally, "have over a hundred thousand dollars' worth of plunder cached here. It is inconsequential, compared with what I shall lead you to. Ahead lie millions!"

Fred smiled eagerly, as though confident that he expected to live and share in the booty. But the doleful Harry seemed depressed, apprehensive. He kept glancing into the growing shadows in a most fearful manner, with his gaze repeatedly seeking the windows overlooking the river. Plainly, he was a man who had lost faith in the future, who had a premonition of disaster.

Doctor Diabolus folded the contract in a most neat and systematic manner. But he did not pocket it. Instead, he struck a match and touched flame to the thing.

"The signing of the document was all-important," he explained. "Admittedly, it would be derided in a court of law. I have gained my point, however—bought your souls. That is all that I desired. Henceforth, you are mine."

Again he emitted that diabolical laugh. His listeners shivered. And Fred, at least, wondered if, after all, this extraordinary personage really were Satan. Alienists had pronounced him insane. But insanity is only a deviation from the normal. And Fred pondered the possibility that, after all, it might be the alienists that were crazy.

Said Doctor Diabolus: "Now that we have adjusted the details, we must take stock of material circumstances? Night is approaching. Posses,

searching for me in the woods, will make slow progress. They will have to use lanterns. Our chief danger is from the asylum patrol boat that keeps watch on the river. Harry, suppose you go down to the wharf and keep an eagle eye for the boat. You cannot mistake it, for it is a speed launch with two purple lights that identify it, in addition to the regulation lights."

This suggestion obviously met with Harry's utmost approval. There was no denying that he stood in terror of the madman, and that nothing would please him better than a trip to the open air.

He departed speedily, without waiting to don his cap. The door closed behind him.

Doctor Diabolus was alone with Fred. And his resultant feelings were none too comfortable. He felt as if all this were unreal, weird, a nightmare.

He stared through the gathering gloom; and it was disconcerting that he could see, of the madman, only a spectrally vague and indistinct form on the couch in a shadowy corner, with a face that was pasty white and eyes that gleamed phosphorescently.

Fred felt that now he could assert a semblance of liberty with safety, even though he was conscious that Doctor Diabolus still was holding his pistols ready to checkmate treachery. So Fred went to the table and had a drink of Scotch.

The beverage, smooth but fiery, was the real thing, not an imitation. It got to him quickly, stimulating his courage and spirits as well as his physical self.

Then he paused and peered at his companion.

As if the silence were a hatching egg, they stared into each other's eyes lingeringly.

"You are a man of intelligence," Doctor Diabolus commented, "though it is obvious that your speech has suffered by contact with inferiors. It is strange that you persist as an ally of this moron whom you call Harry."

Fred felt a peculiar numbness that seemed to pervade his brain as well as his body. He swallowed.

"Yes," he agreed, "Harry isn't my class. I wouldn't have let him hide out here, except that he brought me half of his loot. That amounted to fifty thousand dollars for each of us."

"Pooh!" said Doctor Diabolus in contempt. "Fifty thousand dollars is a mere bag of beans, compared with the millions that you will reap under my guidance. You realize, of course, that this Harry

is a numbskull, that he will be excess baggage to us?"

Fred nodded; and he had the strange notion that the other had power to see him, even in the thickening twilight. "He is excess baggage, all right," Fred agreed. "Dumb from the neck up! But what are you going to do? Of course, if we were aboard a ship— Well, I don't blame the fellows that threw Jonah overboard."

Then there ensued a silence, in which the phosphorescent eyes appeared to gleam with doubled intensity. And Fred had the notion that there was a satirical smile on the face of Doctor Diabolus, even though he could not see that countenance.

"Tell me," the man on the couch urged presently, in the soft, half-whispering tone of conspiracy, "tell me; have you ever done a murder?"

Fred gave a start. "Why do you ask?" he asked. And his voice trembled in a most guilty fashion.

Doctor Diabolus laughed softly. "Your tone," he replied, "is betraying, even if I did not already know that you have guilt on your soul. My boy, murders have been committed for a farthing. Has it not occurred to you that if you eliminated Harry you would profit to the extent of fifty thousand dollars—his share of the swag?"

Fred ran a tongue tip to moisten dry lips.

"Yes!" he admitted. "I've thought of that until it has almost driven me crazy. It has kept me awake nights, and I've dreamed about it. But there is honor among thieves, you know. I couldn't do the double cross."

As he spoke, he felt dazed, and had a vague impression that he had been hypnotized, that he was voicing, not his own thoughts, but those telephatically slipped into his mind by the mysterious and sinister madman who watched him and listened.

Once more Doctor Diabolus laughed, this time softly. "It was I," he informed, "who started that myth that there is honor among thieves. Of course, there is not, ordinarily. People are eager to note rare exceptions and decide that the exception is the rule. As for the double cross, it is well known that it is the very shadow of Satan. That is why superstitious people put a double cross of nails in the heels of their shoes—to drive me off, to fight fire with fire, as it were."

"Double cross!" Fred repeated mechanically.

"Double cross!"

Doctor Diabolus tempted him cunningly. "The past is gone forever, and the present soon will be. The future is all that should concern you. If you are not a fool, you will eliminate this Harry, not so much for the money that you would gain, but to rid yourself of the encumbrance of his stupid mind."

Fred nodded. "But," he asked, "what could I do with the body? The cellar has a concrete floor, so I couldn't very well bury it there. And if I made a grave outdoors I might be seen by guards prowling through the woods."

"Night will soon be here," said Doctor Diabolus. "In darkness you can dig with safety. Until then, conceal the body in the furnace and cover it with wood, so if guards come and look inside it, they will think it is merely a fire laid ready to be started."

Fred pondered this. "That would be safe," he agreed. "You took my gun. But I have others in adjoining rooms."

"I took them, too," said Doctor Diabolus. "Besides, a pistol shot might be heard for considerable distance. Have you a dagger?"

"A hunting knife," was Fred's reply. He opened a drawer under the table and produced it.

"Excellent!" the madman approved. "Do not try to slit Harry's throat. He is more powerful than you and might turn the tables. Strike him from behind—a thrust to the heart."

"I'll do it," Fred announced in a dull monotone. "A thrust to the heart!"

CHAPTER X.

THE DEVIL'S TREACHERY.

DELIGHTED that he had incited another to the worst of crimes, Doctor Diabolus rose and straightened himself. He seemed to grow in stature. The waning light, through a window, revealed him in a most sinister, lurking pose, drawn back, contemplating his companion with intense satisfaction. There was a grin of triumph on his face, and his black eyes gleamed like coals. He struck a match to light a cigarette. Its flame illumined him. His hair, red as fire, completed a picture of a being so infernal that Fred shrank away and stared at him in horror and awe.

"Better have another drink," the madman suggested.

Fred shook his head. "I've had enough already,"

he refused. "Later, yes; but I'm going to need a clear head in the next quarter of an hour."

"This loot that you are soon to own in entirety," said Doctor Diabolus. "Where is it?"

Fred answered instantly, in a frank tone that indicated that he had utmost confidence in his fellow conspirator. "It is secreted in the cellar," he informed, "buried at the bottom of a big galvanized-iron can of ashes."

"Call Harry," Doctor Diabolus ordered. "Perhaps he has something to report. As a fuse to get him to the cellar, tell him that you want a private conference. The basement is the ideal place for murdering him. We want no telltale crimson stains up here."

Fred seemed hesitant. The madman looked at him and asked in disdain, "Are you afraid to kill him?"

"It isn't that," was the hasty reply. "I was just thinking that maybe we should wait. The furnace is the only good hiding place, and you may want to get into it if the asylum guards pay us a visit. The place isn't large enough to hold two men."

"Leave that to me," Doctor Diabolus assured him confidently. "I have my plans made. I know where to conceal myself."

Fred eyed him dubiously for some moments. Then he shrugged and said: "Have it your own way. It's your funeral."

He went to the door, opened it, and whistled thrice.

Promptly they heard Harry's running footsteps. He entered and closed the door behind him. "Gosh!" he said. "It sure is getting dark in here. Almost as bad out on the river. There's a fog rising, too."

"What's the word?" Doctor Diabolus asked. "See any signs of the patrol boat?"

Harry shook his head. "Not yet," he replied. "I'd know it, all right, for Fred pointed it out to me the other day. Real speed launch; cuts the water like a knife."

"Look here, pal," said Fred. "There's no telling what may happen if the guards stop here. We may have to hit the trail and do it fast. I think it'd be a good idea to split our plunder, and each carry his share on his person. It can be done without making any noticeable bulges, if we distribute it on our persons. The bank notes are in big denominations. Come on, and we'll go to the cellar."

As he spoke, his right hand slipped inside his

coat and fondled the knife, now hidden from view, that he had thrust under his belt.

He turned to leave, and Harry made the first movements to accompany him.

"Tarry a minute, Harry," said Doctor Diabolus in his smoothest tone. "We haven't had a drink together yet. Let us indulge, for luck and to bind our bargain. Fred, you'd better not take anymore, having had three while Harry was at the wharf. You want to keep a clear head. Go along to the cellar, and your pal will join you quickly."

Fred caught his cue. "Foxy devil!" he thought. "He works things so I can get to the cellar first and make my preparations for the killing." Aloud he said, "Shake a leg, bo!"

"Be right with you," Harry promised.

The other left the room, and they heard him descending the stairs. Doctor Diabolus poured the drinks. As he handed one to Harry, he leaned close and said in a low whisper:

"Be on your guard!"

Harry sensed the invitation to secrecy. "What do you mean?" he asked in the same low tone.

"You are in danger!"

Harry wheeled and peered into the shadows in all directions, as though expecting to discover that an enemy had entered the room.

"Worse peril than that," said Doctor Diabolus. "A viper, that you have taken to your bosom, intends to sting you."

Harry was not a fast thinker; but, perhaps more by brute instinct than by hint, he comprehended the idea.

"Fred?" he whispered in a strained tone of disbelief.

Doctor Diabolus nodded impressively. "Yes!" he replied. "While you were at the dock, Fred sounded me out. He wants to kill you so that he can take your share of the plunder."

Startled, Fred gaped. Next instant rage surged through him. "The dirty sewer rat!" he said fiercely. "Double cross me, eh? I'll fix him."

With the speed and certainty of movement that comes only from long practice, he raised his right foot, reached up inside his wide trousers leg, and pulled.

A poniard came to view from its secure sheath.

This emergency weapon had, quite naturally, escaped the otherwise thorough frisking of his person by the madman, some time before. Doctor Diabolus frowned at his own stupidity in having

overlooked this old Spanish trick. In the gloom, his expression was not clearly visible to the other.

And the chances were that Harry would not have noticed his fleeting look, even had the light been bright. The crook was so infuriated that he saw nothing but a sheet of red. In those moments he was as insane as Doctor Diabolus.

Then, suddenly, he became emotionally sobered, and he ground his teeth together. Creature of the underworld, he now had only one thought. It dominated him. It would glow hotter and hotter until he realized it. If temporarily balked, it would become a maniacal obsession.

Vengeance for duplicity—that was what Harry wanted.

Doctor Diabolus knew it. Had he not caused it? Craftily he had played upon this inferior, using him as an unwitting puppet.

The madman was thoroughly enjoying himself.

“I suppose,” he taunted, “I suppose that you will run away.” And then he chuckled in contempt.

“Not so’s you could notice it!” Harry answered tensely. “I’ll beat Fred to it. Two can play at this double-crossing game.”

“And the quicker, the better!” Doctor Diabolus advised. “Now is the time to do it, without delay. We’ll hide his body in the furnace and cover it with wood. If anyone looks within, it will merely seem that a fire has been prepared, ready to light.”

Harry was thinking with a swiftness that must have surprised his own brain, he being as slow mentally as he was agile and quick of body. Emergency had electrified his mind.

“You searched him as thoroughly as you did me, yes?” he asked.

“I did,” said Doctor Diabolus. “He is unarmed.”

“Are you sure?” Harry queried. “Perhaps he has since obtained a weapon.”

“Not the slightest chance! He did not leave this room while I was alone with him. And I watched him like a hawk to make sure that he did not arm himself here. It would have been too dangerous. He might have attacked me. Immune though I am, in my capacity as a supernatural being, I nevertheless gave him no opportunity. Therein I had a definite reason.”

The madman paused. He rattled two glasses together loudly, so that Fred, in the cellar, would hear and think that they were delaying for another round of drinks.”

“You see,” Doctor Diabolus continued, “I

wanted you to gain the whip hand. It was like this: No sooner were you out of the door, on your way to the river, than Fred began sounding me out. I caught his drift at once, and pretended to line up with him. That was the shrewd game to play, to draw him out.”

“And,” Harry interrupted eagerly, “what did you say when he proposed killing me?”

“Ah!” exclaimed Doctor Diabolus, with a lingering chuckle. “That is where I was crafty. I played the game for you; told him to go ahead and eliminate you.”

“Huh!” said Harry. He drew back in suspicion.

“Of course,” Doctor Diabolus made haste to soothe him, “my idea was just to put him off his guard, so he wouldn’t have the slightest notion that I intended to betray him. Only a fool will trust a double crosser.”

“Sure!” Harry approved. “Don’t I know that? If Fred gave me the double cross now, he’d do the same to you later.”

“As inevitable as the law of gravity! Besides, I have no use for a traitor. I am faithful to all of my confederates,” said Doctor Diabolus in a tone that was almost pious. “You must realize this, now that I have demonstrated my loyalty to you.”

Harry grasped his hand and gripped it warmly. “Thanks!” he said. “You’ll never regret it. I’ll play the game straight with you. And you can take it from me that I’m sure glad I’ve hooked up with a reliable pal like you.”

“I shall make you fabulously rich,” the madman promised. “Together, we shall head the greatest criminal organization in the world’s history. But we dare not linger longer in confab. Fred might become suspicious. Join him in the cellar and bury that pointed steel in him. Strike him from the back. A double crosser deserves no other death.”

Harry had not yet taken his liquor. But he now made up for lost time, swallowing the one that had already been handed to him, and following it by another that half-filled the highball glass before he added water.

“Ah!” he said, appreciating the fiery fluid, which almost instantly began sending invigoration along his nerves.

“Ah!” he repeated, with even greater pleasure, pointing downward in anticipation of the forthcoming combat.

Then he slid the poniard under his belt and hid it by fastening the lower button of his coat.

“Come on down in about two minutes,” he invited, “and I’ll show you a dead body.”

CHAPTER XI.
THE DEATH STRUGGLE.

HAVING pitted the two men against each other, Doctor Diabolus was highly pleased with himself. It was a maneuver in keeping with his role as Satan.

Aye, it was doubly so, by reason of the fact that by cunning deception he had transformed staunch allies into fervent enemies. Each had been hoodwinked into believing that the other could be attacked unsuspectingly. Surely this was a most devilish accomplishment. It meant that a grim encounter would take place.

Doctor Diabolus wondered which would emerge victor. He viewed this uncertainty in a cold-blooded way, as if the stake were nothing more than the outcome of a horse race.

It was, in short, his conception of perfect amusement. Harry had left the room to join Fred in the basement.

Doctor Diabolus waited until he was alone on the upper floor. Then, unconsciously feigning the limp attributed to Satan, he softly followed. The impending conflict was quite too enticing to be missed. He would witness it.

Cat-footedly he approached the cellar stairs.

When Fred first went below, he made directly for the large galvanized-iron can. With a quick movement he turned it upside down and raised the can so that the ashes fell out. He stepped back quickly and waited for the dust to settle.

It was fascinating to him, in the extreme, watching the ashes. They caved away at the top, forming a rough cone.

Down the slope of this cone tumbled a tin box.

Plunder was in that box, plunder to the extent of more than one hundred thousand dollars.

Fred’s breath caught in his throat as he pictured the enticing bank notes.

“Soon it will be all mine!” he gloated to himself. “The killing of Harry will make me fifty thousand dollars richer. It isn’t often that a bumping off pays that highly.”

He was not yet ready to open the box. That little matter must temporarily rest in abeyance. The delay was part of a scheme that had shaped itself in Fred’s brain. He had a definite idea of exactly how

he was to go about the murder.

“Harry’s taking an awfully long time about that drink,” he reflected. “Still, maybe it’s my imagination. At a time like this, seconds may seem like minutes. Ah, well, no rush!”

He hummed softly to himself, in a nearly tuneless way, while he waited for his victim to put in an appearance. The low sounds made it certain that he would not overhear the whispers of the conspirators on the floor above him.

Fred was glad now that the cellar had no windows. He had turned on only one of the electric lights. It was at the foot of the stairs, some twenty feet from the box of money. He gazed about him, considering the shadows and the places where illumination was brightest. The layout, he figured, was ideal. With intense satisfaction he contemplated his surroundings, like a fighter inspecting the arena in which he is scheduled for combat.

Then he walked to the furnace and softly opened its door. The lone electric bulb was not powerful, for the current was derived from a one-house generating apparatus, such as is used in the better grade of summer cottages or on farms remote from high-tension lines. So the fire pit of the furnace was dark.

He struck a match and held it so that he could examine the interior. It was larger than furnaces designed to burn coal, considerably larger. A body could be stuffed into it without any great difficulty, and room still would be left for heaping concealing wood on top.

Hurriedly he closed the door, for footsteps announced that Harry had finished his drink and was going to the stairs.

Fred struck another match. He lit a cigarette. He began puffing slowly, to give the appearance of languor. That, he thought, would be good psychology. It would make his former pal think that Fred anticipated no drastic action; would put Harry entirely off his guard.

Despite his attempt to feign calmness, he was aware that inwardly he seethed with excitement. His heart was galloping; his muscles felt tense, his mouth parched, and there was a distinct hammering within his brain, at each temple.

Harry was equally volatile. But each was so intent on endeavoring to appear serene that neither noticed anything suspicious in the other.

Fred’s thought was: “He hasn’t an inkling that I am going to do away with him.”

And Harry kept telling himself: "He figures on getting me later. But he's not wise that I'm going to beat him to it."

"The tin box is still here, all right," said Fred. He pointed. Then, realizing that his tone had sounded dry and tense, he said in explanation, "Got a snootful of ashes when I turned the can."

"Uh-huh!" said Harry. "Is the money still in the box?"

"Guess so. I haven't looked. Left that for you. After all, you're the custodian of this money. You brought it here."

"Uh-huh!" Harry again said laconically. He yawned in a most disarming fashion, and his enemy gloated that it would be easy to get the advantage of him.

"Go on over and open the box," Fred invited, "and count the stuff out and make the divvy."

It was his plan to stab Harry while the fellow leaned forward over the ash heap.

Doctor Diabolus was lounging in a wicker chair when the survivor of the conflict returned from the cellar.

The victorious one was Fred.

Doctor Diabolus was not surprised. He had witnessed the death struggle from the stairs, then quickly had retreated without being noticed.

Fred was so white that his pallor was conspicuous even in the darkening room. He was muttering to himself jerkily, incoherently. And he lurched as he hurried to the table, picked up the bottle, and tilted it to his lips.

Then he, too, sat down. Silence ensued for several minutes while he rallied his self-control. Meantime, Doctor Diabolus eyed him calmly, though not without approval.

"I'm glad," Fred burst forth vehemently, "I'm glad you talked me into stabbing him. Why, the dirty rat had formed the same intention about me. He came at me so fast that I was almost taken by surprise. But I got him."

"And put him in the furnace!" said Doctor Diabolus. "I heard the door clang when you slammed it shut."

Now, in baiting the two against each other, the cunning being who believed that he was Satan had had a very definite purpose in mind.

He had wanted to ascertain which of them was superior. That could be determined only by a life-and-death struggle. For, while Fred had the

advantage of superior mentality, this might have been offset by Harry's greater strength.

Survival of the fittest! So it works in nature.

And so Doctor Diabolus had staged this encounter in the cellar.

Night was approaching swiftly. In the period of a few minutes while they sat there—Fred resting, Doctor Diabolus waiting—the shadows became deeper, so that they could barely see each other. In this regard, however, Fred had the edge on his companion, for the madman's eyes gleamed phosphorescently.

Fred stared at them hypnotically, and he was conscious that the fever of excitement was ebbing from him and that it was being displaced by a most horrifying, clammy chill.

He had the weird feeling that he was alone with something inhuman, supernatural. Perhaps, after all, this Doctor Diabolus really was the devil. Certainly, he brought with him the atmosphere of beyond the grave.

Fred felt dazed. It all seemed unreal now, the thing that had happened.

An hour or so before, he and the man who now lay dead in the cellar had been pals, trusting each other, allied against mutual perils. And now one of them was gone. It was like a nightmare to Fred. He wondered if, after all, this might be some horrible dream.

It seemed impossible that never again would he hear his ex-pal's voice.

A trapdoor figuratively had dropped, plunging Harry into black oblivion. And Fred would carry a horrible memory with him, forever.

Worst of all, evidence existed of the murder. Soon it would be black enough to carry the body outdoors and bury it. But suppose some prowler noticed the disturbed condition of the ground and, becoming suspicious, took a spade and investigated? Or a wild animal might uncover the motionless victim.

Fred became aware, with a start, that he was fingering his throat, exploring under the left ear for a hangman's knot.

This startled him, and he wondered if he were being visited by a premonition.

His voice shakily broke the stillness. "Maybe," he whispered, "maybe we'd better build a fire in the furnace and burn up the remains."

"Oh, no!" Doctor Diabolus replied serenely. "That would be a waste of good fire. It is my

custom to burn only live ones.”

His tone was so matter-of-fact, so convincing, that Fred’s heart leaped into his throat and his blood ran even colder. Doctor Diabolus might or might not be Satan. But there was no denying that he was a madman. That was why he had been incarcerated in the insane asylum.

Furthermore, some five years back he had actually thrust victims into furnaces. That had been definitely proved at his trial. It was by reason of these ferocious acts that his brilliant, highly paid lawyers had been enabled to save him from the death penalty.

Fred wondered, and with excellent reason, whether he dared trust this ruthless fiend.

As a matter of fact, at that moment Doctor Diabolus was calmly pondering whether to spare Fred and use him or burn him alive.

CHAPTER XII.

GUARDS FROM THE MADHOUSE.

MURDER was nothing at which Doctor Diabolus would shrink. He would kill a man—or woman or child, for that matter—as readily as he would swat a fly. Why, then, had he sought the death of Harry in such roundabout fashion? Why had he not done the killing himself?

The only answer is that Doctor Diabolus really believed himself to be the devil.

So he wanted to act accordingly.

Satan embodies all that is evil. But how often, in history or in folklore, do you find instances where Old Nick himself commits crimes? His function is more subtle.

Primarily he desires to make others do his dirty work. He is less concerned with the victim of iniquity than with the person whom he entices into committing the evil.

Doctor Diabolus had killed two men this day. That had been necessary to effect his escape from the insane asylum.

But, now that he was free, he would enact the satanic role. He would sit back and maneuver circumstances with the goal of undermining character, of destroying souls, of playing upon cupidity, jealousy, desire for vengeance, and other wicked emotions, so that his dupes would react to crime.

Toying with them as pawns, he would occasionally land in his net crime chessmen of

greater import. Crime, to him, would be a game, a sport.

The world would, indeed, find him a terrible enemy. It was not so much that he desired to incite crime, but that he had the ability to accomplish his aim. He was a genius, perverted, mentally and spiritually and emotionally, to be true; but, nevertheless, a genius. Fate seemed to have cast him for this role of the devil incarnate. Born with an abnormally clever intellect, he had been additionally aided by having funds to educate himself, to master the knowledge that has been so slowly accumulated by man through the ages.

Doctor Diabolus had studied under the master teachers of America, Europe, and the Orient. He was uncannily adept at psychology, the science of why men act as they do. He knew the chemistry of poisons, the loopholes of the law, the principles of mechanics that can be employed in obtaining plunder. All in all, he had the “background” to make him the most celebrated criminal of history.

To date, as we have followed his activities, we note that he had had little opportunity to display more than the cunning and resourcefulness that one might expect from a brilliant criminal. But let him make good his escape; let him find a secure hideout from which to direct the operations of his aids; let him have security and leisure to tackle unprecedented criminal tasks; and he might well make good his boast that he was the Devil himself.

Now Doctor Diabolus was wondering whether or not to overpower Fred, bind and gag him, and burn him alive.

It was not that he desired the entertainment that would be afforded his infernal senses by such torture. The real question was whether or not Fred would be excess baggage. The fellow might be useful later. No doubt he would be. But in the present situation would he be a ball and chain?

Doctor Diabolus was not, by any means, suffering from a delusion that he had fully escaped from the asylum. The surrounding countryside was being scoured for him. Telegraph wires and telephonic and radio communication had extended the dragnet, warning police and private citizens to be on the lookout for him. He was, in effect, surrounded. And he would not be safe until he slipped through the cordon of searchers.

A situation might develop in which he would need a helper. So he decided to spare Fred’s life.

“There is no hurry,” he thought. “I can kill Fred

later, if I so desire.”

Meantime, as they sat there in the gathering darkness, Fred was debating whether or not to entrust his future to the madman. He realized that, if he elected to part company with Doctor Diabolus, there was only one way to do it.

Fred was being watched by his new employer too closely to run away. So, then, he could escape this sinister presence only by killing him.

“But,” he wondered, “should I try to do away with him, an attempt in which I might fail and find myself, instead of him, on the other side of the grave? Or had I better sit pat and await developments, in the interim playing the game that I intend only loyalty and subjection to him?”

He looked at Doctor Diabolus, and on the instant decided to withhold his decision, to bide his time. At that moment, shadows had swallowed the madman; but his presence was indicated by his horribly glowing, phosphorescent eyes.

Fred shuddered. He experienced weakness, limpness. And he realized that in an attempt on his master’s life he probably would lose his nerve entirely.

With the terrible eyes boring into and through him, fathoming his very soul, he waited, trembling.

“Treachery would be fatal to you,” said Doctor Diabolus in a smooth, cloying tone. “You see, I can read your thoughts.”

“I—I’m not a fool,” Fred faltered. “You needn’t be afraid that I won’t do just as you say.”

“Afraid?” the madman repeated. His voice now sounded puzzled. “Why, I am afraid of nothing—not even the Devil himself, of course. Ha, ha-a-a-a!”

His shrill laugh made Fred shudder so that his teeth chattered audibly.

“The affair—in the cellar,” he explained jerkily. “It upset me. Think I’ll have a—a drink.”

He bent to the bottle, conscious that he was almost staggering and that he was on the verge of losing control of his arms as well as his legs.

Rat-tat-tat! went the bottle against the brim of the tumbler as he poured himself a potion of Scotch that, in a normal emotional state, would have chloroformed him within twenty minutes.

“I never had much use for prohibition,” Doctor Diabolus commented. “John Barleycorn for thousands of years was my most faithful aid.”

Thunder boomed in the distance, heralding an

approaching storm. Black clouds obscured the sky, and this accounted for the premature twilight. The hour was around six o’clock, but already the interior of the cottage was quite dark.

A flash of lightning sent uncanny, lingering illumination into the room. It disclosed Doctor Diabolus, his face lengthened and leering, as fine a picture of *Mephistopheles* as ever was portrayed on the stage.

“What are we going to do?” Fred asked hoarsely as the light vanished and he found himself straining his eyes in an endeavor to read the expression of the phosphorescent eyes.

“Patience, my boy!” Doctor Diabolus admonished. “We are not going to stay here any longer than we have to.”

“My motorboat!” Fred suggested. “We could get away in it.”

“We could not!” said Doctor Diabolus with emphasis. “There is no craft on the river as fast as the asylum patrol boat. And you can be sure that all boats are being watched—picked up by searchlights and searched for me.”

“This suspense is terrible,” said Fred. “I can hardly breathe, from fear that the patrol boat may stop at our wharf.”

“To the contrary,” said Doctor Diabolus, “I rather hope that they do come here.”

“What!” Fred ejaculated.

“A fugitive of my caliber,” was the reply, “sometimes is better off if the showdown with his pursuers is not delayed. I have no desire to rot in this place.”

“You mean, you wish the guards would come?”

“Perhaps; it all depends.”

“I don’t like this darkness,” Fred faltered after a short pause. “Wish we dared risk a light.”

“I have been thinking the matter over,” said Doctor Diabolus, “and I believe that I shall advertise that this place is inhabited.”

Sounds of him rising and moving came through the darkness. Again thunder boomed. Swish! Swish! Swish! The madman had carefully drawn the drapes over the windowpanes.

Then he turned on the electric lights. The ease with which he located the switch, in the gloom, made Fred realize that his companion had photographic eyes; that in his daylight inspection of this place he had overlooked no detail that might be turned to account later.

There were three bulbs in an overhead

chandelier. Doctor Diabolus glanced at them. "Too bright!" he commented. Then he went over, reached up and unscrewed two of them far enough that they ceased to glow.

This left only the one burning. With power derived from the storage battery of a one-house, make-your-own-juice plant, the room was quite dimly lighted, indeed.

What with the room being large, the effect reminded Fred of a stage scene where actors take on the semblance of shadows.

"Where are you going to hide, if the guards come here?" Fred asked. "Seeing the light, they may stop to make inquiries."

"You leave the hiding to me," Doctor Diabolus answered grimly. "I am going into the next room and partly close the door. There I shall watch from a window. As you value your life, do not attempt any treachery. In event the patrol boat stops here, I shall give you instructions."

Fred nodded. The Scotch whisky was taking full effect now, and his nerve was returning. Noticing this, he wondered fittingly if courage has anything to do with the chemistry of alcohol.

He said: "You will be able to spot the asylum boat, even in the dark. It has two purple globes, for identification, in addition to the regulation running lights fore and aft."

"I know," said Doctor Diabolus sourly. "Do you think I have been in the asylum five years without keeping eyes and ears open for every possible bit of information about the means employed for tracking fugitives? Why, I have studied the matter of escape as diligently as one of these crazy astronomers searching for a new star or comet."

He went into the next room and closed the door so that it was ajar only a few inches.

Alone, Fred sat uneasily. He certainly would have a hard time explaining his share in this affair if the guards arrived and overpowered the madman. What explanation could he give? He thought the matter over and decided that his best bet would be to plead that he had been caught unawares, and, unarmed, had played a docile part as the only way to save his life. That, he reasoned, should satisfy them. They might even not stop to search the house, once they captured Doctor Diabolus.

Nevertheless, the dead body that lay hidden under wood down in the furnace was a source of constant anxiety to him. Through his brain kept flitting visions of Harry in his expiring moments.

And these visited themselves upon Fred so vividly that he wondered if he were having hallucinations.

Now and again he could hear a motorboat out on the river. But, so far, the patrol vessel had not passed. He was sure of that. Like most people who live near bodies of water, he could quickly differentiate crafts by the varying sounds of their individual engines.

And then suddenly his heart skipped, and he went cold with fear. From off in the night came a rapid throbbing, a sort of menacing purring.

"The patrol boat!" he said hoarsely in warning.

"Yes," Doctor Diabolus replied. "I can see its purple lights. Going fast, too. Ah! it is turning in to our wharf. We are going to have visitors and some excitement."

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

PANIC-STRICKEN as the showdown approached, Fred feared that he would go to pieces during the crisis. He was experiencing sensations new to him. A learned medical specialist, accompanied by the pungent scent of formaldehyde, would have diagnosed him as suffering from vaso-motor dilation, et cetera.

But this unfortunate Fred knew only that he had the feeling that he was about to explode, to disintegrate into millions of fragments.

There was one consolation to him in his wretchedness. Concealed on his person he had the plunder for which he had murdered his pal, Harry. He had come up from the cellar with the bank notes tucked into various pockets.

Doctor Diabolus knew this. He had watched the affair in the basement, from his observation point on the stairs. Fred, however, was unaware that there had been such surveillance. So it had been puzzling him that the madman had not raised the point of having the loot ready to carry away on an instant's notice.

Fred was grateful for this supposed oversight, which he attributed to a short circuit of a deranged mind. Combat with asylum guards from the patrol boat was imminent. In the melee, Fred reflected, perhaps he would have opportunity to slip away, to leave Doctor Diabolus in the lurch and take the money with him.

It was terrifying in the extreme there in the darkened room.

Doctor Diabolus had announced the patrol boat was putting into the dock. Accordingly, Fred waited with quaking heart for the sounds of footsteps.

They came—tramp, tramp, tramp.

The guard that was approaching was alone. There could be no doubt of that. Tramp, tramp, tramp! His heavy-soled shoes striking hard on the gravel, were accompanied by the swishing of pebbles kicked aside as he plodded toward the cottage.

After all, it was quite natural for him to be unaccompanied. The guards had, no doubt, merely stopped at the wharf to make inquiries. Had the occupants of the house seen any suspicious lurker? One guard could get this information. It did not require two spokesmen. Yes, it was natural, indeed, that his companion, or companions, remain in the craft until he would return with his report.

Tramp, tramp, tramp! The visitor was mounting the veranda steps now.

And Fred no longer was alone in the living room. Stealthily, swiftly, Doctor Diabolus had joined him. In his right hand he held a pistol.

To Fred he said: "Get him into the room and close the door so that what happens will not be observed from without."

Fred nodded. Doctor Diabolus stationed himself at one side of the door, so that it, opening, would hinge back upon him, temporarily keeping him from view of the intruder.

"Yes, sir!" Fred replied to his master, using the same low whisper.

Rap, rap, rap! The knocking on the door was firm, authoritative, the imperative summons of one who had the mighty law backing him.

Fred stepped forward. He opened the door. Before him stood a middle-aged man with hard face and even harder steel-blue eyes. He wore the gray uniform of the insane asylum attendants, and its nickel-plated buttons flashed like polished silver.

"You own this place?" he asked.

"Yes," Fred answered. "I reckon, from your clothes, that you come from the madhouse. I kind of been expecting you, what with all the racket the steam siren has made this afternoon."

"A crazy man escaped," said the guard. "We think he's hiding out in the woods. Have you, by any chance, seen anyone that was acting suspiciously?"

"There was a fellow," said Fred, "who went by here in a small motorboat. Come in and I'll tell you about it."

The guard's face brightened, expressing the joy of finding a clew. Briskly he stepped into the room.

Fred closed the door. Next instant the guard turned pale.

He saw Doctor Diabolus, the fugitive he sought. But, at the moment, his attention was directed primarily at the madman's pistol.

Doctor Diabolus had thrust the muzzle of the gun against the guard's breast.

"One sound out of you, and I'll kill you," he said quietly. "Put your hands up."

The guard obeyed in silence. He knew the mettle of his captor; knew that the commands would be followed by instant death in event he failed to submit.

Alertly keeping him covered, Doctor Diabolus used his free hand to frisk him. He found two pistols and appropriated them.

"If you lie to me," he said grimly, "I'll blow you into eternity. How many men are in the patrol boat with you?"

"Just one," replied the guard in a tense tone. His answer came so swiftly that it seemed to be an automatic reaction, that he spoke the truth. Had he hesitated, it would have suggested that he had dallied to ponder possible eventualities and frame a strategic lie. "The two of us are alone," he added.

"Two!" said Doctor Diabolus. "I'm inclined to believe you. The patrol boat ordinarily is manned by two guards."

The prisoner feared that he had committed a terrific blunder. But it was too late now. Of the four things that come not back, the foremost is the spoken word.

Accustomed though he was, to dealing with maniacs, he gazed at Doctor Diabolus with a dread that was almost panicky. Never had the asylum housed such a fiendish being. It was doubtful if history afforded any worse. The guard knew that Doctor Diabolus would murder him in cold blood as readily as he would swat a fly. So his apprehension was well grounded, and his feeling of growing panic could not be attributed to cowardice.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" Doctor Diabolus asked.

There was no answer to this. The guard was afraid to reply. A negative retort would be obviously a falsehood. And if he admitted bluntly

that he believed Doctor Diabolus to be insane, there was no telling what sort of reaction might follow. Long experience had taught him that nothing infuriates a madman more than a suggestion that he is not sane. This was especially so in the case of Doctor Diabolus, who was the most violent type of paranoid.

So the guard discreetly kept still.

His thoughts, despite the vividness of his predicament, were elsewhere. Foremost in his mind was his family—a wife and two youngsters. He would not leave much insurance. It would go hard for them if Doctor Diabolus killed him. His death would be an honorable one, slain in the performance of duty. Yet that would not feed, house and clothe his dependents. It is all very fine to talk of honor. The guard, however, had a tremendous craving to survive this affair. For himself, he did not care so much. But his family must be considered.

Accordingly he was quite apt to obey orders.

“Do you want to die?” Doctor Diabolus asked calmly. Ah, it was awesome, that a maniac could employ such serene tones.

“No!” said the guard with emphasis. “I don’t want to die. Of course, not!”

“Quite natural!” Doctor Diabolus commented. “You are aware, I presume, that at this moment you stand with one foot in the grave?”

“You bet!” the guard replied huskily. “And the other foot on a banana peel.”

“Good!” Doctor Diabolus approved. “It seems that you are no more crazy than myself. Now, there is only one way in which you can emerge alive. I am going to tell you to do certain things. The alternative is instant death. On the other hand, if you obey me, I shall demonstrate that even a supposedly insane man can exhibit gratitude. In other words, I shall spare your life and that of your companion out yonder in the patrol boat.”

The guard did not believe him. But, after all, there was a gambling chance that Doctor Diabolus would play on the level with him.

He wondered just what part the stranger, Fred, was enacting in this drama. He stole a glance at Fred; noticed his muscular tension and his chalk-white face; and decided that Fred was a victim like himself. In that event, Fred might furnish aid if things could be maneuvered so that Doctor Diabolus could be attacked with even a remote possibility of success.

“What do you want of me?” the guard asked. “I’ll do it. Now, why don’t you be a good sport and shift that gun from me? It might go off by accident.”

Doctor Diabolus smiled sardonically. “If my pistol goes off,” he assured his captive, “it will not be by accident. Satan never makes a mistake, and especially so in the matter of hitting a target.”

The guard was uninformed as to the marksmanship of the madman. But he was willing to give him the benefit of any doubt, what with the muzzle of the weapon still being pressed against him. Extremely disconcerting was the sensation of having the gun there. Slight though the pressure was, the victim felt that it was like a plunger that might suddenly and unexpectedly thrust forth and project him from this world into the next.

Trained in asylum tactics, he resorted to flattery. “Now, your Infernal Highness,” he said, endeavoring to make his voice calm and soothing, “we all know that you are perfectly sane, and that you can do whatever you want to. We know, too, that it is futile to oppose you.”

“Where do you get that ‘we’ stuff?” Doctor Diabolus asked. “The immortal Bill Nye said that the only people entitled to refer to themselves as ‘we’ are an editor and a fellow with a tapeworm.”

Then he laughed so shrilly that the blood of his two listeners ran cold.

Fred and the guard exchanged a fleeting glance. It was telepathic, mutual assurance that here was a common enemy, and that each could rely on the other in a showdown.

“I am enjoying myself immensely,” said Doctor Diabolus to the man in gray uniform. “Now, I am going to keep you covered with my pistol. Your life hinges on two things. First, you must obey me; open the door and call to your pal to come up from the patrol boat and join you. Secondly, you must summon him in a voice that will convince him that all is well; that you are quite calm and collected; that you have encountered here no danger. In other words, it is up to you to make the other guard walk into this room unsuspectingly.”

At that the disarmed wretch shuddered. He protested: “Are you not asking the impossible? How can I make my voice calm? Why, right now, if my ears don’t play me false, I’m away above key and my teeth are almost chattering.”

“That is up to you,” Doctor Diabolus replied. “Nothing is impossible. I fancy that you will be

enabled to control your voice if you sufficiently realize that otherwise you will be carried out of this room feet-first."

The guard groaned. "Great grief!" he said dismally. "You are asking me to entice my own pal into a trap."

"Call it what you will," said Doctor Diabolus relentlessly. "I assure you that both of you will survive this predicament; that I will not kill you. Whether you believe me or not, makes no difference to me. I'll give you the count of ten. Then I'll shoot."

He began to count.

"One!" The guard shivered.

"Two!" The guard ran dry tongue around still drier lips.

"Three!" The guard thought of his family. Thought, too, that life, after all, was by no means as unattractive as he had considered it in moments of depression.

"Four!" The guard's brain was functioning fast now. He said to himself: "After all, I've done my duty to the best of my ability. I'm trapped, and there's no other way out."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FATE OF DOCTOR DIABOLUS.

YET the guard delayed. He made no movement toward opening the door. Doctor Diabolus frowned. His cruel lips tightened. The ruthless expression of his face became even more pronounced, and the phosphorescent fires deep in eyes burned more intensely.

"Five!" came his relentless voice; and it was viciously sharp, menacing.

The unfortunate guard was in a sad predicament. For himself he cared not. True, he had a family to consider—and they rose in memory now, enticing, pathetic. But this madman was demanding that he do something without the pale—that he betray his pal.

"Six!" said Doctor Diabolus. He was counting with the regularity of a machine. And he manifested no tendency to lengthen the short durations of space between the numbers. Listening to him, one might have thought that nothing of import was at stake. He had the monotonous nonchalance of an idler tallying the cars of a passing freight train.

"Seven!" said Doctor Diabolus. And the guard,

now verging on psychic panic, thought, "It is better to die than to be a traitor to a pal."

Doctor Diabolus yawned. "Eight!" he droned. And instantly the guard changed his mind. Maybe, after all, he might not be luring his pal to death if he summoned him. Perhaps this fiend would spare them yet.

"Nine!" said Doctor Diabolus.

In a fraction of a second, the guard underwent an eternity of torture. Confronted with death, he reverted to the jungle state. Gone was his consideration for his pal. The instinct of self-preservation asserted itself, and, with it, the instinct to protect his mate and his offspring, regardless of the method. He was like a caveman, wielding a club, guarding his family cavern against a blood-seeking saber-toothed tiger.

"Wait!" he exclaimed.

Doctor Diabolus had expected this. He stopped counting.

"I'll do it," said the guard.

"I thought so," said Doctor Diabolus. "But I do not approve of this delay. Get into action immediately, as I ordered you, or I shall exterminate you. Quick, now!"

The guard was hypnotized by his peril. He functioned like an automaton.

To the door he went and opened it.

His agonized eyes stared into the darkness on to the lights of the motorboat at the wharf.

"Hi, Phil!" he called. And he had gone through such extremes of feeling that he was emotionally exhausted, so that his voice was expressionless in tone.

A whistle answered him. After it came an inquisitive call, "Learn anything?"

"No!" replied the guard. "But the guy that owns this place has some mighty good Scotch. Come on up and join us."

"Will I? Ask me!" was the answer. The boat lay quite a distance away, through the trees. But the three men in the cottage heard the fellow's approving chuckle. It was followed by a dying of the engine that had been drumming.

Soon came his footsteps.

Unsuspectingly he walked into the trap.

Doctor Diabolus had been standing to one side, out of view. He stepped forward and used a foot to close the door the instant the second guard was inside the room.

After that the action was swift. Startled at being

confronted by a pistol, Phil submitted to capture. The madman disarmed him.

As he did so, Phil eyed his pal accusingly.

"I couldn't help it," said the first guard chokingly. "I got a family to think of, you know. There was no other way out."

Phil shrugged in the gesture of accepting the inevitable. "Tough luck!" he said. And then, to Doctor Diabolus, "Well, Mr. Satan, you're having a lot of fun, eh? Come, now, go back with us and we'll let you run the furnace."

The madman laughed satirically. "I shall soon have my own furnace," he boasted. "I shall rig up a miniature of my hell, wherein I shall torture people who oppose me."

Phil grunted. He was phlegmatically calm, even in the face of such extreme peril.

"What you going to do with us?" he asked.

"Strip off your uniforms!" Doctor Diabolus ordered.

They obeyed him.

"Bring me some sheets from the bedrooms," said Doctor Diabolus to Fred. And when the linen had arrived, he continued, "Tear them into strips about four inches wide."

"Look here!" Phil said uneasily, "you going to tie us up and gag us?"

"Yes," Doctor Diabolus replied.

Both guards sighed in relief, to learn that their lives were to be spared.

Doctor Diabolus kept the captives covered with his pistol while Fred, under his crafty guidance, securely fettered them. The trussing was completed by stuffing their mouths with bound rags, so that they could not cry out.

Soon this was finished. They lay on the floor, helpless.

Doctor Diabolus chuckled.

"Perhaps," he said, "you marvel that I do not murder you. Truth is, I am Satan. You think I am crazy. So do others, but they will change their

minds when I turn loose on this world. They will realize then that I am, indeed, as I claim, the devil."

He paused. And again he chuckled.

"I kept my ears open at the madhouse," he said. "You guards are what is known as honest, law-abiding men. Dying, you would go to heaven. I do not wish to send you to such happiness. That is why I am not murdering you. You won't rot here."

Hope gleamed in the captive's eyes. That was what they had been fearing—that days or even weeks would pass before anyone would come to the cottage, and that in the meantime they would perish.

"Oh, no!" said Doctor Diabolus. "Tomorrow I'll mockingly send word to the asylum authorities, where to find you. Then you will have a worse fate than merciful death. You will go on through life, jeered at for having found me and been bested. It will be a real job to live that down—two armed guards! Ha, ha-a-a! Yes, there are worse fates than death. Ridicule is one. It can make life very unpleasant. I don't need to kill you two to send you to the infernal regions."

He turned to Fred. "Hurry!" he snapped. "We'll put on these uniforms."

The madman and his reluctant accomplice removed their outer clothes. They donned the gray suits with nickel-plated buttons.

"An easy way to escape!" Doctor Diabolus approved. "We shall flee in the patrol boat. Anyone who sees us will think that we are guards from the asylum, aiding the search for my Satanic self."

Then out into the darkness he went, accompanied by Fred.

The prisoners, lying fettered in the cottage, cursing their luck, heard the humming of the engine of the launch. It was followed by the swishing of the propeller churning water. Then the craft sped off into the darkness.

The most dangerous man in the world had escaped capture.

