The Problems *of* Professor Forrester

No. VIII – The Ghost of Towneley Towers

A Startling Novelette

By SEABURY QUINN

Mysterious murders; secret tunnels; unearthly sounds; eerie happenings; subterranean adventures—you will find them all in this exciting story! . . . And Professor Forrester and Rosalie all but lose their lives in trying to solve the mystery of Towneley Towers.

PROFESSOR HARVEY FORRESTER sank his chin deeper into the fur collar of his overcoat and gazed disconsolately about the desolate midwinter prospect. Festoons of dripping icicles hung from the disused wharf, patches of half-melted snow alternated with larger patches of foot-fettering mud, and a chill wind whipped the waters of the Potomac into angry whitecaps and howled dismally around the eaves and corners of the shuttered and boarded-up summer hotel. Furthermore, look where he would, the Professor could descry no one who remotely resembled a messenger from Towneley Towers.

"This," announced the Professor in a manner which admitted no gainsay or denial, "is a deuce of a fix we're in, my dear."

"Are you sure we got off at the right landing?" his pretty blonde ward inquired, thrusting her small hands deeper into the pockets of her otter skin coat.

"Sure?" echoed the Professor tartly. "Of course, I'm sure. See, here's Towneley's letter." From his pocket he produced the crumpled sheet and read:

> "'...take the steamer Swordsmith to Piny Point landing. I'll come for you in my launch or send somebody to bring you over to the Towers.'

"And if that 'somebody' doesn't show up pretty soon we're in a fine pickle," he added bitterly, once more surveying the scenery with marked disfavor.

"There's a man with a boat over by the pier," the girl replied. "Maybe he knows the way."

"Excellent idea," the Professor commended, putting down his kit bag and approaching the aged colored man who had just made his "buckeye" one-master fast to the pierhead.

"How much will you charge to take the young lady and me to Towneley Towers—if you know where it is?"

The ancient negro hitched his greasy sheepskin reefer about his shoulders and regarded the Professor solemnly. "Yas, suh, Ah knows whar it is," he vouchsafed. "Hit's up de St. Mary's crick a piece, 'tother side o' Inigo's Landing. Yas, suh, Ah knows it."

Professor Forrester suppressed a sigh of vexation. Primitive peoples were alike the world over, he reflected, whether you encountered them in darkest Africa or St. Mary's County, Maryland. The white man's direct methods seldom appealed to them, and nothing was to be gained by losing his temper. "Well," he repeated, "how much will you charge to take us over?"

"Cap'n," the negro shifted his gaze from one of his broken boots to the other, then looked intently at the ramshackle wharfhouse, as though seeking inspiration from its battered plank walls, "Cap'n, de feeshin' ain't ben very good dis winter, wid de oyster policemen chasin' me all ovah de river, an' Ah ain't made no money ter speak ob sence Thanksgivin'."

"Umpf?" Forrester grunted. "I suppose that means I'll have to underwrite your overhead. Very well, how much?"

"Cap'n, suh," the other returned solemnly, "Ah sho'ly would lak fer ter git fo' bits, or mebbe a dollah; but, Cap'n, suh, dere ain't enough

money in yo' pockets ter git me ober to no Towneley Towahs. Naw, suh. Ah don' crave ter mess 'round wid no daid folks' business."

"What do you mean, you black rascal?" the Professor demanded. "I offer you your own price for taking the young lady and me a few miles down river, and you refuse—"

"Cap'n, suh," the other broke in, softening the discourtesy by removing his battered slouch hat and bobbing an obsequious bow, "yuh all don' want ter go to no Towneley Towahs. Dat place is all right fo' Yankees, but Ah knows quality folks when Ah sees 'em, an' Ah knows yuh all ain't gwine ter do yo' sefs no good by goin' dere. Cap'n, suh—" his voice sank to a husky whisper, and his rheumy old eyes rolled apprehensively—"hit's ha'nted! Yassuh."

"Bosh!" the Professor returned. "Don't you know there aren't any such things as ghosts?"

"Yassuh, Ah knows it in de daytime; but it'll be dark befo' we can make de landin' dere, an' Ah don' crave no parts o' dat place after de sun hides his face, suh."

That ended the argument. Meanwhile the sun was sinking behind the Virginia hills and long shadows were creeping down to the water's edge.

"Uncle Harvey," Rosalie's joyous hail broke in, "there's a motor boat standing in!" Two minutes later a long, cabined cruiser pulled alongside the wharf and Eugene Towneley himself, wrapped from throat to ankles in a chinchilla ulster, and radiating health and hospitality, clambered up the sea-ladder and wrung Forrester's hand.

"Mighty glad you got here, Harvey, my boy," he announced in his big voice. "Hope my little breakdown didn't inconvenience you too much. The engine got the willies just as I was shoving off from the landing and I had to stop and repair a feed-line. All ready?"

"We'd begun to feel like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island when you showed up," Professor Forrester confided as the big power boat gathered speed and bucked her way through the rising rollers. "The steamer cast off the minute we'd landed, and there wasn't a soul in sight but an old oyster pirate who vowed he'd rather starve than ferry Rosalie and me over to your place. In fact, he intimated rather broadly that Towneley Towers is—"

"Haunted eh?" his host cut in with one of his big laughs. "Yes, that's getting to be an old story, now. We've had the devil's own time keeping any help about the place since the rumor of the ghost got about."

"Oh, it's not an ancestral spook, then?"

"No, it's this year's model, with all improvements," Towneley returned, swinging the trim craft into the creek. "The Towers dates back to the Lords Proprietaries' days, you know, and I dare say enough dark deeds were done under its roof at one time or other to justify a whole battalion of ghosties moving in, but the fact is no one ever heard of a 'ha'nt' in the neighborhood until after we came here to live. Usually it's deserted houses which get the reputation of harboring spirits, you know, but the rule's reversed in our case. Everything was quiet as a Quaker meeting until I decided to recondition the old place and live here, and the carpenters and plumbers had hardly moved out before the ghost moved in and began scaring my cooks and laundresses out of seven years' growth. I've had about five hundred percent labor turnover since the first of October, and if things keep on the way they're going I may have to shut the place up and move back to Baltimore, or do my own cooking and washing.

"I've tried every way possible to trap whatever it is that's scaring my niggers white, but so far I haven't got a bite. I've got a standing offer of a thousand dollars to any one who can prove the ghost is some malicious human playing a practical joke on me, too; but no one's made good on the offer to date." He bit savagely at the end of a cigar, set it aglow with an electric lighter attached to the cabin dashboard, and spun his steering wheel over sharply. "Here we are," he announced, warping the boat into her slip with the skill of a practical yachtsman, then clambering out to the cement landing and giving the painter a half turn about an iron stanchion. "Welcome to spooky hollow! Watch your step getting up that ladder, there's half an inch of ice on the rungs."

IT was a royal feast which Towneley spread before his Christmas-week guests that night. About forty people from New York, Baltimore

and Washington were gathered at the old country seat at the invitation of the financier and his twin daughters, and nothing had been left undone to make the guests' visit an outstanding experience. Canvasback ducks, killed in the Potomac marshes a week before, and "gamed" to perfection, stewed green celery tops, quince jelly after the recipe of a seventy-year-old colored cook, spoon bread as golden as new coin from the mint and port as mellow as summer moonlight combined to make dinner a Lucullian banquet, and ten o'clock had struck on the tall mahogany clock in the hall and echoed by the library banjo clock and the ormolu timepiece on the drawing room mantel before the long Madeira cloth was cleared of gold plate and Wedgwood.

"Now, as a little surprise," the host announced, gazing benevolently about the company, "I propose giving you something you don't often find these days. Procter—" he turned to the solemn-faced Englishman who presided over the household domestics, and tendered him a bunch of keys—"two bottles of the Napoleon brandy."

A hum of respectful, expectant voices went round the table as the butler stalked majestically from the room. Napoleon brandy is a comparative luxury in Europe. In prohibitionized America it is rarer than roast pork at a Jewish wedding breakfast.

"Mr. Towneley, sir, if you please—" Procter returned to the dining room, his florid face slightly paler than its wont, his long, smooth-shaven upper lip trembling visibly, and no bottles in his hands—"may I speak with you a moment in private, sir?"

"What's the matter?"

"If you please, sir, I'd rather not enter the smoke house. I thought I saw—"

"Oh, good Lord! You, too? Take a couple of the stable boys—take half a dozen, if two aren't enough—and *go get that brandy!"*

"Yes, sir." The servant bowed with frigid respect and departed.

"I hope the superstitious fools don't get scared at their own shadows and drop one of those bottles," the host remarked as he cast a worried glance toward the door through which the butler had vanished. "If anything more were required to make me go mad—"

"Mr. Towneley!" The butler was once more in the dining room, his face positively gray with fright.

"Well, what's the matter now?"

"Oh, sir," the servant interrupted, his thick, throaty voice gone high with terror, "it's Thomas, sir; Thomas, the 'ostler. 'E's dead, sir!" Excitement had played havoc with Procter's aspirates, and his h's dropped like autumn leaves in Vallombrosa.

"Dead?" repeated Towneley.

"Yes, sir. You see, sir, I asked 'im and James and Thaddeus to accompany me to the smoke 'ouse, as you said, sir, and they went, though most reluctantly. When we got there, and I hopened the door, sir, somethink hinside laughed right in our faces, most 'ornble, 'ha-ha-ha!' just like that, sir. I thought it might be some of the servants making game of us, if I may use the hexpression, sir, and was about to hadmonish 'im, sir, when Thomas—who always was a vexatious little fighter, sir, if you don't mind me saying so—rushes into the 'ouse, sir, and the next thing we knows we 'eard 'im scream and choke, and when I played the light from my flash hinto the 'ouse, there 'e lay, all sprawled hout, as you might say, with a broken bottle on the floor beside 'im, and a great 'ole in 'is throat, sir!"

"And—"

"Yes, sir. Quite dead. The hother boys are bringing 'is body back now, sir. I ran along to tell you—"

"I'll bet you did," his master cut in. "Very well, that'll do, Procter.

"By Heaven, this is too much!" he stormed as the servant withdrew. "This foolishness has gone too far. It was bad enough when this 'ghost' hung around scaring my servants into fits; but murder is no joke and murder's been done here tonight. I suppose I'll have to communicate with the county authorities, and I'll have to ask you to remain here overnight, at least. You're at liberty to leave, if you wish, as soon as the inquest has been held. Meantime, I'm going to increase my offer to anyone who captures this supposed ghost to twenty-five hundred dollars, spot cash. Maybe that'll get some action."

"I'll take you on, sir," Rodney Phillips, a

young Baltimore lawyer, who had pretensions to the hand of one of the Towneley twins, remarked in a voice rendered somewhat unsteady by excitement and too much port. "I'll get your ghost for you and make a clean job of it, too."

"I'll go with you, Rod," announced Waterford Richie, rising and extending his hand, but the volunteer ghost-breaker waved the offer aside.

"This is my personally conducted spook hunt, old son," he replied. "I'll get Mr. Towneley's ghost single-handed, or perish mis'rably in the attempt."

Details of the ghost hunt were quickly arranged. With a pair of double blankets, two serviceable revolvers and a thermos bottle of hot coffee, young Phillips was accompanied to the smoke house by the rest of the company. At his request the single door and window of the building were sealed with gummed paper to testify to the continuity of his vigil when the other members of the party should come for him the following morning.

"I'll be here, ready and waiting," he boasted as the door closed behind him, "and if any of you chaps think you can get my goat with some monkey tricks, you'd better put on your bullet-proof vests before you start, for I'm going to shoot the first thing that tries to cross that doorsill between now and six o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Hum, the more I think of it, the less I'm inclined to believe there's been a murder, after all," declared Mr. Towneley as the company turned toward the house. "What probably happened was an accident. Poor Thomas ran into the dark house and stumbled over something, and that broken bottle was standing on the floor and gashed his throat. It's a ghastly business, I'll admit, but I'm beginning to think we sha'n't need the county officers, after all."

It was Gladys Towneley who put the consensus of opinion into bald words: "Well," she announced, "I'm terribly sorry for poor Thomas, and all that sort of thing, but we can't bring him back by being gloomy. I'm going to dance. Who's with me?"

Apparently they all were, for the radio was soon relaying the latest jazz from New York, and the faint whisper of thin-soled shoes slipping over the drawing room's polished floor mingled with the crooning of the saxophone and the titillation of mandolins two hundred miles away.

About half-past eleven Professor Forrester excused himself from the group of older men gathered in the library and turned toward the stairs. "Not dancing, dear?" he asked as he espied Rosalie sitting in the hallway, a thoughtful look on her face.

"No, Uncle Harvey," she replied, "it is an evil thing to dance in the house of death, and brings no good to those who do it. Moreover, I have a feeling that more misfortune is to follow."

The Professor smiled understandingly. Born in the Philippines, reared and tutored in the household of a ringleader of Singapore's criminal population, the girl had been less than two years in American society, and her mental attitude was still fundamentally that of the Oriental. Also, while she spoke English proficiently, there were times when she expressed herself after the manner of the East, and when she became greatly excited she was wont to lapse into Hindustani or one of the Malay dialects which had been the tongues of her childhood and youth.

"I agree with you, my dear," he nodded. "As Gladys said, our being gloomy won't revive the poor fellow, but it does seem heartless to indulge in a dance while—"

"Wallah," the girl burst out, "while his soul still hovers over us? Thou hast said." She recovered herself with a flush of confusion, and added in conversational English:

"Are you going up? I'll go, too, if you don't mind, for I want to rise early tomorrow."

"Something special to do in the morning?"

"Yes, I'm afraid—I think so," she returned. "Will you rap on my door early in the morning? I want to go down to the smoke house before the others and see that all is well."

"You don't think young Phillips will stick it out?"

"I'm afraid he'll try to, and—"

"Why, you don't actually believe there's anything supernatural in this business, do you?" he demanded. His ward's affirmed belief in djinn, ghosts and devils was a never-failing source of amusement to him.

The girl turned big, serious eyes up to him.

"This is an old, old house, Uncle Harvey," she replied, "and old houses often grow evil spirits, even as they grow poisonous mosses. Who knows what wicked thing may seek to do him harm this night?"

"H'm, well," the Professor returned, "the young man appears quite able to look after himself."

"But you will call me—early?" she persisted.

"Of course, if you wish it. Goodnight, dear," he responded, bending to kiss the lips she turned up to him as naively as a child.

II

A SHRIEKING blast of north wind, driving a rout of scurrying snowflakes before it, hallooed through the open window of the Professor's room, shaking the chintz curtains furiously and raising the blankets and coverlet of the bed. The Professor drew the disturbed bedclothes tighter about his chin, then, realizing that a faint gray light showed at the window's square, reached beneath his pillow, fished out his watch and inspected it. "Half-past six," he muttered gloomily. "I suppose I might as well go for Rosalie; she seemed set on making an early inspection of that confounded smoke house." Reluctantly, he disengaged himself from the bed, dashed across the chamber and slammed down the window, then started the water running in the bath room.

Already dressed in sweater, knickers, knitted barret and brushed wool muffler, Rosalie was awaiting his tap on her door half an hour later.

A heavy fall of wind-driven snow greeted them as they let themselves out the back door of the silent house and floundered across the rear yard toward the small brick building where Rodney Phillips watched for ghostly visitants.

"I don't quite see the urgency of this call," the Professor grumbled as he bent his head against the howling December blast, "and I'm not so sure Phillips will thank us for our interest. He's probably just settling down for his second nap—"

"Uncle Harvey!" the girl's exclamation cut his observations in two, "Look!" Her mittened hand pointed dramatically to the door before them.

Professor Forrester obeyed her imperative gesture and a grin spread over his cold-stiffened features. "Umpf," he remarked with a chuckle, "he lost his taste for it, eh?" The seals of gummed paper with which the door had been fixed were broken from their places and the door itself swung open some five or six inches.

Taking one of her guardian's hands in hers, the girl crept across the intervening stretch of snow, her head thrust forward, her big, amber eyes wide with apprehension.

"No use going in," the Professor decided as they neared the threshold. "Phillips has probably been gone since midnight. He must have found it too cold for comfort in there and decided—ha?"

The sharp exclamation ended his speculations as he stepped over the low doorsill and accustomed his eyes to the dull light inside the little building. Three feet before them something half leaned, half knelt in the gloom, its outlines proclaiming it a man, but its attitude terrifyingly inhuman.

It was, or rather had been, Rodney Phillips,—Rodney Phillips, fully clothed, even to his hat and gloves. Rodney Phillips, leaning obliquely forward with half bent knees and dangling hands, his head oddly twisted sidewise and his mouth partly opened to permit half an inch of livid, empurpled tongue to protrude between his lips. A three-foot strand of knotted rope was about his neck and made fast to a hook halfway up the smoke house wall.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Professor.

Shrinking from the contact, yet impelled to act, no matter how his instincts rebelled, he put out a hand and felt the young man's cheeks. They were cold as the surrounding atmosphere, and stiff with the chill of the December snowstorm.

"Poor chap," he murmured, attempting ineffectually to undo the knot about the dead boy's throat, finally taking out his pocket knife and severing the strand. "Whatever could have possessed him to do it?"

Rosalie looked steadily at the contorted body which her guardian eased to the brick floor. "Made him do what, Uncle Harvey?" she asked, removing her woolen mittens and bending to loosen the thick hempen loop from the young

man's neck.

"Why, kill himself," the Professor responded, looking at her in amazement. "You can see it was suicide, and a mighty determined one, at that. The rope wasn't long enough to lift his feet from the floor, and the poor boy actually had to lean forward—almost kneel—in order to get sufficient downward drag to strangle himself. H'm, I've heard of such cases, but I never thought I'd see one. When they set their minds to it, there's nothing that will stop them. He could have saved himself easily, simply by straightening his knees, but he persisted until unconsciousness came; then, of course, it was too late."

"Uncle Harvey," Rosalie spoke slowly, choosing her words with deliberate care, for when she was excited her English was apt to become unintelligible, "I do not think this poor young man slew himself. The marks do not match." She placed one slender, perfectly-manicured forefinger on the livid indentation showing on the dead man's throat. "This rope, my master—" she threw aside the attempt at English and lapsed unconsciously into Hindustani—"it is a thick one, worthy to tether a cow or make a boat fast to its dock, while the scar on the poor one's throat is much narrower—and double."

"Why—" Professor Forrester knelt beside the body and struck a match to aid his inspection—"why, by George, you're right, my dear! You can see the depression left by the rope he was hanged with here—" he laid a finger on the cold, white flesh—"and here, underneath the wide rope mark, is a well-defined spiral encircling the neck. Much deeper than the wider indentation, too. H'm, I wonder what the deuce that means?"

Rosalie's long, almond shaped eyes were almost round with excitement, her breath came hissingly between parted lips and her slender bosom rose and fell with suddenly increased respiration. "My lord," she whispered, glancing fearfully about, as though to make sure no eavesdropper lurked near, "my lord, it is the mark of the roomal!"

"The—what?"

"The *roomal* of Bhowanee the Black—the thags' strangling-cord! I have seen its mark a score of times while I dwelt in the house of Chandre Roi, the accursed, my lord. See, 'twas a slim, strong cord, and nothing else, which killed the young Phillips sahib. From behind him—see where the cord crosses lightly at the front and heavily at the back?—the murderer tossed his roomal, and drew it tight, shutting off breath and cries for help at the same time. It is not long that a man can live without air, my lord. One minute will render him senseless, two more will kill him, even if the killer does not jerk his head forward and break his neck. Believe me, master, I know, for I have seen!"

Forrester bent down and examined the man's bruised neck again under the flare of another match. As the girl had said, there was a well-defined double circular mark about the throat, the lines running in a spiral form and crossing each other at the front slightly above the Adam's apple, while at the base of the skull the horizontal X-shaped bruise was more pronounced. These circles were less than a half-inch in width, and of slightly purple shade, while running around, and almost obscuring them, was a line of white bruise, considerably wider, and with a marked depression, the indentation slightly deeper at the left side and rising gradually toward the base of the right ear, where the crude slip-knot of the noose had been tied.

"H'm, my dear, you're right about these narrower bruises being made first," the Professor conceded at the conclusion of his examination. "They have the familiar black-and-blue tint of a pressure applied to living flesh while the wider rope's mark is dead-white, an almost certain sign of pressure applied after circulation of blood has ceased. But who would use a roomal here? We're six thousand miles or so from India, and thaggee is a rather rare commodity in southern Maryland."

"Even so, my lord," the girl persisted, "the murderer has written his signature large for those to read who can."

"Umpf," the Professor murmured thoughtfully, "one thing is fairly certain; Rodney Phillips didn't kill himself. It remains for us to find out who killed him, and why."

"Thou hast said, my master," his ward agreed, nodding solemnly. "Once more shall the secret deeds of the evil-doers be made manifest by the wisdom of Forrester sahib."

A SMARTLY uniformed negro maid with a silver tray of coffee, rolls and marmalade, passed them in the hall as they mounted the stairs to their apartments. Towneley prided himself on his hospitality, and one item of its perfection was the presentation of *petit déjeuner* at his guests' rooms promptly at seven o'clock each morning.

The girl was a West Indian, proud of her British citizenship and despising the superstitions of the southern negroes with haughty disdain. "Good morning, sir; good morning, madame," she greeted formally as she tripped down the corridor with her salver held high and paused before a bedroom door, raising one hand to knock.

The Professor and Rosalie saw her lift her knuckles, then press against the panels with her open hand, swing the door back and enter the room. Both had noticed the door was slightly ajar when the maid approached it, and the Professor was speculating idly whether the occupant of the room had been abroad and what the cause of his early rising was, when the crash of falling silver and china, followed immediately by a rasping, terrified scream, tore through the early morning quiet. Next instant the maid dashed wildly from the room, her eyes staring and glassy with terror, her mouth squared tragically as she emitted another shrill cry.

"Sir—Madame!" she panted, approaching Forrester and Rosalie with faltering, fear-hampered steps and fairly clawing at them in her acute terror. "Mr. Richie—he's lying on his bath room floor, and the place is flooded with blood!"

"What?" shouted the Professor. "Richie—dead?"

"Ye—yes, sir, I think so, sir; I didn't stop to see, but—oh, my God, it's terrible!"

Clothed in a suit of blood-soaked linen pajamas, an old-fashioned straight-bladed razor in his open right hand, Waterford Richie lay in an oddly contorted posture on the tiled floor beneath the long mirror.

Forrester viewed the ghastly scene in sickened horror a moment, then shook himself like a dog emerging from the water, leaned far forward across the doorsill and gently turned the young man's head so that he obtained a clear view of the ghastly, gaping wound in the throat. "By Jupiter!" he murmured softly, allowing the head to roll into its original position again and straightening abruptly. "My dear," he turned solemnly to his ward, "I think we have another pseudo-suicide to puzzle over."

"How so, my lord?" the girl asked, averting her face from the gruesome sight before her.

"Because, while everything seems to point to suicide in this case, just as it did in the other, that wound runs from the point of Richie's right jaw downward across his throat, nearly to his larynx, and the razor is in his right hand."

"But—" the girl began wonderingly.

"Try it yourself," her guardian ordered. "Run your right forefinger across your throat, as though it were a knife!"

"See?" he demanded, as the girl complied.

She nodded understandingly. Obeying his order, she had held her finger horizontally, as though it were a knife blade, and drawn it across her smooth, white neck, as if with suicidal intent. The digit, following its natural course, had described a slightly oblique line, running from a spot immediately beneath the point of her left jaw to a spot slightly to the right of the center of her throat.

"My lord is all-knowing. He was suckled at the fox's breast and fed on the broth of the owl. His wisdom never faileth."

"Never mind the efflorescent compliments. It doesn't take a mental giant to figure out the natural course of a man's right hand, my dear; besides, I'd be a Class Z moron if I couldn't read such a sign after years of studying the phenomena of wounds. Remember, dear, an anthropologist's chief work lies among the temples and tombs of forgotten peoples, and we've got to make reports on what we find which will bear the strictest inspection. I remember distinctly a lovely little wrangle I once had with a curator at the Cairo Museum concerning the manner in which a certain mummified Egyptian gentleman came to his end. He insisted a wound in the breast was due to the embalmer's tools, and I claimed it was a spear-thrust. I silenced the fellow by taking a spear from his own collection and fitting it into the wound.

"Now," he turned abruptly from the bath room and stalked toward the hall, "the first thing for us to do is to notify Towneley. After that we'll

be governed by circum—*what the deuce?"*

Beside a chair on which the dead man's clothing lay he paused, his eyes intently narrowed. "By Jove, who would have suspected it?" he murmured.

"What is it, lord ?" the girl asked.

"That," he replied, pointing to a glittering metal plate showing on the under side of Richie's half-folded waistcoat.

Rosalie leaned closer to inspect the find. It was a shield of gold-plated metal decorated with the device of an American eagle, and on the scroll above and beneath the imposing bird was the legend: *Department of Justice—Bureau of Investigation.*

"H'm," muttered Professor Forrester thoughtfully. "H'm-m. So that's it, eh?"

As they tiptoed from the death-room, he remarked dryly; "My dear, as they say in England, 'There's dirty work at the crossroads.' Nobody knew it, but Waterford Richie, Baltimore society man and supposed gentleman of independent means, was a member of the United States Secret Service. That may or may not explain why he was murdered and his murder camouflaged to simulate suicide, but—" he drew a deep breath, and his long, narrow face set suddenly in grim lines—"I'm inclined to think it does."

III

IT was a dismayed, half hysterical company which gathered at the dining table that morning. Knowledge of the three tragedies sat with them like skeletons at a feast, dampening every spirit and taking the edge from the keenest appetites. Added to the gruesome proximity of sudden death was the realization that for the day, at least, they were marooned at Towneley Towers, for, though the snow flurry had ceased, the wind had risen steadily, making it impossible for the house power boat to venture out on the Potomac, and since the Towers was situated up the creek a considerable distance, the only method of communication with the outside world was by private ferry to Piny Point or St. George's Island, where the Baltimore and Washington boats might be had every second day during the winter. The inevitable result of this forced companionship was that the guests, gathered for mutual amusement, suddenly discovered how terrifyingly uncongenial they were, and turned from each other with aversion amounting almost to loathing. Sporadic attempts at bridge, dancing and outdoor sports fell through almost as soon as begun, and by the time luncheon was announced scarcely any two of the party were on speaking terms.

Professor Forrester spent an hour in his room, going over the details of the case, adding together the scraps of information he had gleaned, attempting to fit them together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but finding himself no wiser at the end of his cogitations than when he began.

Rosalie and he had tacitly agreed to keep their discovery that the supposed suicides were really nothing of the sort to themselves, for the girl, with the practicality which was her heritage from a youth educated in the devious ways of crime, had summed the situation up concisely when she remarked: "We know not whom to trust or to suspect. We did not dream Richie sahib was of the Secret Service, and if one among us was secretly enlisted in the cause of the law, how can we be certain that there are not others here who have some evil connections to hide?"

"Very aptly put, my dear," her guardian agreed. "If there is another member of the Service in the company, he'll find out what he can without our help. If there is someone with criminal connections in the crowd, we'll do well to keep our knowledge to ourselves, and thus avoid putting him on his guard."

At the Professor's suggestion, Rosalie circulated among the guests, carefully refraining from giving any cause for offense and deliberately refusing to be drawn into a wrangle, but always noting the actions and remarks of those with whom she came in contact. There was a remote possibility that someone in the gathering would let slip his mask for a moment and thus proclaim himself identified with one of the three mysterious crimes.

"Umpf, I'll never get anywhere sitting here and fretting myself into a funk," the Professor told himself as he knocked the ashes from his aged-blackened briar pipe and slipped into his overcoat and galoshes. "A little walk in the air may freshen

my thinking apparatus.

"Two things stand out thus far," he murmured as he crossed the back garden of the Towers. "First, the door of the smoke house was open when Rosalie and I came here this morning; second, the door of Richie's room was unfastened when the maid rapped. Now, does that mean the murderers obtained entrance through those doors, or that they got in some other way and left the doors ajar to mislead us? H'm, I rather think not. They'd hardly have taken so much pains to make the murders seem suicide if they'd wanted to make us think it an outside job. On the other hand—" his voice trailed off into thoughtful silence as he neared the smoke house door and paused a moment, looking carefully about to make sure no one observed him.

"H'm," he murmured musingly as he pushed the door open, "wonder why they didn't lock up after taking poor Phillips away?" A moment's inspection furnished him the answer. The door's lock had been broken.

"U'm!" He swung the door to behind him and struck a match. "That's queer. How could anyone force that lock without waking Phillips, or warning him, if he weren't asleep? I wish we'd noticed whether that lock was broken when we were here this morning. Too bad; couldn't think of everything at once, though."

Striking a second match, he held it high above his head and gazed about him. On all sides of the single room were the heavy, iron-bound cases holding Towneley's prized reserve of liquors and vintages. The floor was of brick, so was the vaulted ceiling, and no means of ingress was apparent save the narrow door through which he had just come and the small, barred window set high in the rear wall.

"Here's where poor Thomas fell," he told himself, bending down to scan the telltale spot of brownish-red on the brick pavement, "and here's the hook from which Phillips was hanged. Phillips must have spread his blankets here, and—ha? What the deuce is this?" Leaning forward suddenly he snatched a small oblong of cardboard from the pavement close to the spot where the murdered youth had been suspended from the hook.

His find was slightly larger than the ordinary playing card, backed with an ornamental scroll design and bearing the device of a comely youth, hanged head-downward from a grape-arbor, on its obverse side. The rope encircled the hanged man's left ankle, permitting his right foot and hands to hang free. Above the picture was the Roman figure XII.

"H'm," murmured the Professor, eyeing the square of pasteboard curiously. "H'm-m. Where did this come from? I'm sure it wasn't here this morning. Who the dickens could have dropped it? It's not a gambler's card. No-o—" thoughtfully—"it's—by Jupiter, what's that?"

Skilled in detecting significant sounds while burrowing in the earth in search of buried Egyptians, or the long-forgotten civilizations of Ur and Susa, Professor Forrester had caught the faint, persistent echo of some strange noise, apparently rising from the ground to the west of the little room in which he stood.

Carefully, creeping forward like a cat stalking a sparrow, he moved on hands and knees in the direction from which the sound came, stopped, listening intently a moment, then sprawled full length on the brick pavement, putting his ear to the cold clay blocks.

Clang—pause—*clang*—pause—*clang*, the sound repeated itself with rhythmical insistence.

"Now, what the dickens is it?" the Professor asked himself petulantly after several moments' listening. "I've heard that noise before, somewhere, but where?" He rose, dusting his trousers methodically, and turned toward the door.

"Who's there?" challenged a gruff, unfamiliar voice as the portal was suddenly blocked by a bulky form, an the gray winter light glinted evilly on the barrel of leveled revolver.

"Er—" began the Professor, but the intruder lowere his weapon with an apologetic laugh.

"I begs your parding, Professor Forrester, sir," said the familiar, half-whining tones of Procter, the butler. "Master sent me out 'ere to get 'im some whiskey, sir, and, not hexpecting to find you here, as you might say you gave me quite a start, if you don't mind me saying so, sir."

"Not at all," the Professor assured him as he edged through the door. Almost unconsciously, he noted that the butler eyed him suspiciously, and kept his pistol raised and ready until the corner of

the building separated them.

"Quaint character, Procter," the Professor mused, "I wonder how long he'd been watching me before he announced himself. Now, let's see, where next?"

Idly, he turned toward the creek above the spot where the Towers' private landing lay. The stream provided an ideal feeding ground for ducks, with its reed-bordered shores and channel choked with water-weeds which would permit the passage of only the smallest craft.

As the Professor approached the creek he was startled by the sudden wheeling flight of a flock of canvasbacks, and a moment later the hum of a high-powered motor struck his ear. Next instant a long, sharp-prowed speed boat shot past him like the shadow of a flying cloud, rounded a little headland and disappeared as abruptly as though submerged in the quiet water of the creek.

"Umpf!" Forrester muttered. "That's not Towneley's boat, and there's no house up the stream for ten miles or more. Where the deuce were those chaps going, and who are they?" He leaned against a convenient tree, listening intently for the hum of the boat's engine.

"Now, that's odd," he reflected after a moment. "They were going like old Harry, it's true, but they shouldn't be out of sound so soon. I wonder—"

Creeping forward stealthily, he reached the margin of the stream, leaned out as far as possible with the aid of a low-growing sapling, and looked up the creek in the wake of the vanished boat. No sign or token of it was to be seen. A moment's scramble brought him to the top of the miniature bluff behind which the craft had disappeared. The creek widened out to a sort of basin behind the small peninsula, and beyond that narrowed abruptly to a width of scarcely more than six feet, and even that tiny channel was choked to suffocation with matted reeds and water-hyacinth. A canoe would have had difficulty in negotiating the passage. Any craft driven by a propeller would have been utterly disabled within its own length by the water weeds.

"By George," the Professor whispered, "I've seen some queer doings, but never anything to beat this. One moment a speed boat dashes past, the next it dematerializes. I wasn't seeing things, either, for those ducks didn't leave their meal just for exercise. There's—something—darn—queer—here."

Undoubtedly, there was. Its queerness was accentuated a moment later when from the solid ground beneath his feet the Professor suddenly heard the subdued strains of the csardas, a favorite folk-song of the Horolane, or Turkish gypsies. Trained anthropologist that he was, Forrester recognized the tune instantly, and with recognition of the music came enlightenment in another quarter. The card in the smoke house!

Turning on his heel, he hastened to the house, bending his head against the rising storm wind and breathing fast with exertion and excitement.

"My dear," he demanded, drawing Rosalie into a corner as soon as he could extricate her from a languishing bridge game, "do you recognize this?" He displayed the scrap of pasteboard retrieved from the smoke house half an hour earlier.

The girl studied the card with wide, thoughtful eyes a moment, then nodded her golden head slowly in affirmation. "Yes, Uncle Harvey," she replied. "It is the twelfth card of the tarot of the homeless ones—the gypsy fortune-teller's pack. They call it 'the Hanged Man,' and regard it as the emblem of atonement or revenge satisfied. Where did you find it? It is not well that such things be spread about."

"Never mind now where I got it," he responded, narrowing his eyes intently. He was thinking, and thinking fast. Things were beginning to take shape in his mind. A vaguely remembered, but unclassified noise coming apparently from the ground beneath the smoke house floor where two men had been killed, a fast motor boat seen one moment, vanished the next, gypsy music emanating from beneath the earth—Turkish gypsies. Ah, that was it! The recollection of whispers heard in Stamboul during the reign of "Abdul the Damned," stories of men strangled with the bowstring and flung into the Bosphorus at night. The bowstring! The Turkish executioner's strangling cord—the purple line about young Phillips' dead throat! Ha, he was beginning to get somewhere, now.

"By Jupiter, I'll do it!" he declared suddenly,

leaping to his feet and striding across the hall, then half turning and beckoning Rosalie to follow. "Stand here, dear, if you please, and see that I'm not interrupted while I 'phone," he ordered. "Tell me the moment any one comes within twice hearing distance of us. I must talk to Baltimore right away."

IV

"EXCUSE me, sir, you're wanted on the wire," Procter bowed respectfully behind the Professor's chair as the gentlemen lingered over cigars and liqueurs after dinner that evening.

"Pardon me," Forrester murmured, rising and making for the hall telephone. "Probably the school wanting to know when I can come back to mark some examinations, or something equally silly." He strolled toward the 'phone with exaggerated nonchalance, but once he had rounded the corner of the wall, his indifference dropped from him like a cloak, and he fairly sprinted to the instrument.

"Forrester talking," he almost whispered through the transmitter. "Yes. Ah, is that so? I'd suspected as much. Yes, I found out Richie's connection by accident after he died, but I didn't suspect Phillips until—Very well; I'll await developments. Goodbye." He hung the receiver back on its hook and sauntered into the drawing room where the ladies talked in muted whispers.

"Rosalie, may I speak with you a moment?" he asked from the doorway, and, as his ward obeyed his summons and joined him, he breathed: "Make your excuses as soon as you decently can, and go upstairs. Sneak into the room where we found young Richie this morning, and bring me every scrap of paper you can find there. I'll be waiting in my room as soon as I can get away."

Half an hour later he rose from his chair in the library with a rueful grin. "Sorry, gentlemen," he admitted, "but our host's excellent liqueur has been a little too much for me. That's the penalty of poverty; those who can't afford Benedictine as a rule don't know how to carry it when they get it. If you'll excuse me, I'll take my headache up to bed with me."

Followed by a chorus of chaffing laughter, he walked unsteadily to the stairs and mounted them slowly, leaning heavily on the handrail, and pausing as though for breath every few steps.

Once round the bend, his intoxication left him abruptly, and with swift, steady strides he ran down the hall to his room. Rosalie was nowhere in sight, but on his dressing table was a pile of blank white note paper, a fresh blotter with a single smear across its virgin surface lying on top.

Hastily seizing the blotter, Forrester held it before the mirror, and began spelling out the words which had been soaked from the message it had been used to dry. "H'm," he muttered, "what—the devil?"

In the mirror's brilliant surface he read:

"Try again, old fox. Others have eyes and ears, too."

Again and yet again he read the curt, one-line note, then turned to the pile of paper underneath and scrambled through it frantically. Every sheet was clear and unspotted, mocking him with is virginal purity.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated, letting the sheets fall from hands gone suddenly nerveless. "This is dreadful! If Rosalie—"

Down the hall on stumbling feet he raced to the room occupied by his ward, and beat upon the panels with frantic fists.

No answer.

Once again he hammered his summons on the white door, then seized the handle with a savage wrench and bore his weight against it. The door swung open readily, and he half ran, half stumbled, into his ward's room.

Every electric bulb in the apartment was aglow. Not a corner of the place but was flooded with sharp, brilliant light. In the glass ash tray on the bureau lay a long Philippine cigarette, half consumed, a thin spiral of smoke slowly ascending from its glowing tip. Forrester knew the speed with which the dry, black Island tobacco burned. The cigarette could not have been lighted more than two minutes before. Rosalie must have been here then. Where was she now? Across the foot of the bed hung a bright orange and blue coolie coat; beneath its trailing hem, toes inward, stood a pair of blue and yellow satin Chinese slippers. But Rosalie was nowhere in sight.

"Rosalie," the Professor called softly, gazing wildly about the room. "Rosalie—ha?" The exclamation was fairly jerked from him as his eye fell on a long, vertical crack in the wall. Half an inch wide it was, running from baseboard to cornice, and showing behind the black, impenetrable background of utter darkness.

One long stride carried the frenzied Professor across the room, one furious tug swung back a section of the wall like a door, and left him gazing down a flight of narrow, winding stairs, tunnel-like and unlighted, and leading, apparently, to the very nadir of the earth.

As he stared horrified down the twisting spiral of the stairway, he felt a tug at his hand. Operated by some cunningly hidden spring, the secret door he had wrenched open was closing slowly, resistlessly. In a moment, despite his utmost efforts to hold it open, it would be shut.

The Professor gave one desperate look about the deserted room, searching for something which might serve as a weapon, found nothing suitable, drew one quick, sharp breath and squeezed through the rapidly narrowing opening of the secret panel. The door shut behind him with a sharp click, latching firmly with a snap-lock, and he was sealed in total darkness at the stairhead as securely as a corpse desposited in the crypt of a mausoleum.

V

PROFESSOR FORRESTER paused a moment on the topmost of the stone steps, seeking vainly to pierce the Stygian darkness of the downward-spiraling passage. Thrusting a hand into his pocket, he felt for a match, but his questing fingers encountered nothing but an accumulation of snuff-like powder where the longcut black tobacco he habitually smoked had leaked from its paper carton and crumbled to dust. "Confound it!" he lamented, remembering too late that he had laid his book of matches on his dresser just before picking up the blotter on which he had read the defiant message.

Slowly, putting first one, then the other foot forward in tentative, experimental steps, the Professor began descending the curving stairs.

Down, down, endlessly down, he crept, through the impenetrable dark, pausing now and again to feel the walls on each side for a possible connecting passageway. Nothing but iron-cold, smooth masonry met his hands. At last, when it seemed he must be in the immediate vicinity of Hongkong, his searching foot encountered level ground, and he stepped forward over a pavement of smooth, moist stones which seemed to incline upward at a gentle grade.

"This thing must lead in the general direction of the creek," Forrester told himself, striding forward carefully, for much experience with underground passages had taught him they often contained deep fissures, or even wells, and he had no desire to step over the brink of such an opening in the dark. "Yes, I'm sure we're going toward the creek. Those circular stairs threw me off my bearings to some extent; but—oh!"

Rounding a sudden angle in the passage, the Professor found himself at the entrance of a sizeable subterranean chamber, roughly circular in shape, floored, walled and vaulted with slabs of ancient freestone, and lighted by two ship's lanterns hanging from the ceiling. A charcoal brazier, evidently used to furnish some measure of heat for the cavern, stood in the center of the floor, and just beyond it, her hands and elbows bound behind her, and her wrists secured to her ankles by a sailor's knot, knelt Rosalie, the loose ends of the cord which fettered her limbs made fast to a rusty iron staple let into the cement between two blocks of stone. A wide band of dirty cotton cloth was wrapped over her mouth, effectually gagging her, but her big yellow eyes were uncovered, and looked with feline fury on the corduroy-clad young man who lounged on a dirty mattress and leered at her.

Facing the entrance of the chamber was a second man, a tall, wide-shouldered fellow with thick, curling black hair and a broad Tartar face. As the Professor came to an abrupt halt the fellow grinned broadly, displaying a set of astonishingly white teeth in the midst of which two gold crowns gleamed opulently. The lamplight also gleamed on a pair of gold rings in his thick-lobed ears and on the blade of a long, murderous dirk-knife.

"Ah, Meestair," he greeted, advancing a step, "I t'eenk you come for you gal, an' wait here for

you. You not make any noise w'ile we tie you opp, or—" he raised the dirk and drew it horizontally through the air some six inches before his throat in a gesture more expressive than agreeable. "You stan' steel w'ile we tie you, no?" he concluded.

"After you get tied opp all nice an' tight, maybe we decide w'at we do afterwards. Maybe we leave you 'ere; maybe we put you out your suffering queek, lak dees—" again the knife-blade performed the murderous gesture. "Maybe we let you 'ave some fon w'ile we enjoy ourself wiz you gal. She ver' prett' gal, Meestair, bot I t'eenk she tak some leetle beating before she gentle enoff for us."

As he concluded, he drew up immediately before Professor Forrester and reached forward a noosed rope. "You put you 'and in heem now, an' not mak no foss," he advised, "or—"

Professor Forrester dropped both hands into his dinner coat pockets and faced the burly scoundrel defiantly. "Stand out of my way!" he commanded sharply.

"Ha-ha, ho!" the other burst into a laugh, towering over the diminutive Forrester like a turkey-cock above a bantam. "You mak foss, eh? I show you dam' queek who's boss 'round 'ere—

"Devla!" the exclamation was a scream as he staggered back, pawing furiously at his eyes.

Professor Forrester had hurled a handful of the powdered, dry tobacco fairly into the man's face as he bent forward to loop the rope about his arms.

The gypsy's knife fell clattering to the stone floor as the fiery powder stung his eyes almost past endurance, and Professor Forrester placed one foot upon it, drawing it toward him. Next instant, before his disabled antagonist had time to lower his hands from his blinded eyes, the Professor's right heel landed in the pit of his stomach with devastating force, doubling him forward like a closing jack-knife. As the man's head came level with his waist, Forrester lashed out with his fist, putting every ounce of his strength, weight and anger behind the blow. Fist and jaw collided with a sharp, smacking impact, the gypsy dropped limply to the floor and lay there, twitching spasmodically, but showing no other sign of life.

"Mahrimé!" with a lithe bound the younger man was up from his pallet, his knife flashing wickedly.

He was a muscular young man, and was obviously anxious to use his weapon. There was no time to temporize, no chance to achieve victory by some such trick as that which conquered the first Romany. Professor Forrester grasped the knife let fall by his first opponent and threw himself into a defensive position.

Eyes glaring, lips pinched, the two men circled one another like a pair of hostile game cocks. Feinting, striking, dashing in to slash quickly at each other's throats, then leaping nimbly back, they crept round the room.

Clink! the blades struck together.

Clash! steel rattled wickedly on steel.

The gypsy was evidently an adept knife-fighter, and displayed every trick known to that deadly type of fencing. Forrester had never before wielded such a weapon, but a thorough grounding in the art of boxing made him no mean antagonist. Each time the Romany struck, the Professor managed to parry the thrust with his own blade or avoid it by a deft dodge, such as he would have employed in a fist-fight. 'Each blow the Professor aimed at his enemy was met by the gypsy's ready steel or evaded by a nimble side-step.

Sweat was pouring down their faces, their breath came hot and fast in their throats, both were tiring fast, but the Professor, ten years older than his adversary, and unused to the violent exertion, was losing strength more rapidly.

A drop of perspiration trickled over his left eyebrow and ran down his lid behind his glasses. With an impatient shake of his head he sought to clear his vision.

Cling! His rimless pince-nez flew from his nose and landed on the stone floor with a thin, bell-like tinkle. He stumbled forward blindly, tripped over an uneven stone in the pavement, and sprawled toward the floor, instinctively flinging both hands out to save himself.

"Hai!" shrilled his opponent exultantly, raising his dirk for a slashing blow.

As Forrester's right hand shot out in an attempt to break his fall, he felt his point strike something which resisted, yet yielded before the keen steel. The Professor hung his weight on the

knife handle, striving desperately to recover his balance. The blade slipped downward, as though the substance in which it was imbedded were too soft to hold it, came free, and the Professor staggered backward two stumbling steps, regaining his footing by a supreme effort.

"Whs-s-s-sh!" hissed the gypsy sibilantly, a look of shocked surprise on his dark, handsome face, and fell forward limply, a spate of sudden blood dyeing his soiled gingham shirt. He was ripped open from sternum to navel as neatly as a hog disemboweled by a butcher.

The Professor gasped, regarding his handiwork with a kind of unbelieving horror. A feeling of deadly, weakening nausea rose in him, and he all but fell prostrate beside his dying foe, when the memory of Rosalie's plight revived him like a stimulant.

Stooping to retrieve his glasses, he hastened to the girl, and with two quick slashes of his razor-edged dagger severed the cords binding her to the wall, then turned to fling the murderous weapon from him.

"Not so, master of my life!" the girl besought in tumultuous Hindu. "Throw not away the emblem of thy triumph. Wallah, thou art the king of fighters! In all the world there is none who handles the steel like thee—my king!"

"S-s-s-sh, someone's coming!"

He took a fresh grip on his dripping knife, and Rosalie, nimble as a fox, leaped across the room and seized the weapon dropped by the dead man, then flattened herself to the wall beside the door so that whoever entered the room from the passage beyond must necessarily offer his back to her blade as he crossed the threshold.

"Put 'em up, you!" the sharp hail rang out authoritatively, as Procter strode into the circular chamber, leveling an ugly-looking automatic pistol at the Professor. "You may be a fair ripe 'un with the cold steel, but I'll trade you hot lead for it if you don't stick 'em up lively. Thought you could sneak round here and spy on us—Gawd!"

His pistol fell crashing and bouncing to the pavement, and his left hand flew upward to grasp his right arm.

Standing to his right and rear, Rosalie had slashed downward with her knife, and the keen steel had almost severed the butler's triceps, paralyzing his pistol-hand.

"Wah, son of a filthy and very unvirtuous female hog, descendant of countless generations of stinking cockroaches!" she shrilled. "Verily, this night shall I cut thy evil heart from out thy bosom. I shall slit thy eyes and send thee sightless to beg thy bread at the street crossings, thou son of an evil smell!"

Matter-of-factly, to her guardian, she remarked: "Tie him fast, my lord, that we may deliver him into the hands of justice."

The Professor complied with alacrity. Rosalie's hyperbolic threats, voiced in Hindustani, might be only the reflex of her oriental upbringing; on the other hand, her usually gentle nature was transformed into that of a fury when any one so much as annoyed her guardian, and there was every likelihood that she would do the butler further injury unless he were removed from her presence.

Tethering Procter and the still unconscious gypsy to a pair of iron staples in the wall, the Professor took down one of the lanterns from the ceiling, and, with the butler's captured pistol in his right hand and Rosalie close to his left elbow, began a systematic exploration of the connecting passage.

Twenty feet farther down the narrow tunnel, there was a second room, and here he found the source of the noise which had puzzled him that morning. Completely equipped, a foot-power printing press stood in the center of the chamber, a work table beside it neatly stocked with inks, packets of small, oblong slips of paper and a series of finely made halftone plates. It was the rhythmic clatter of the press, not entirely silenced by the intervening earth and bricks, which he had heard as he lay on the smoke house floor that morning.

"So that's it, eh?" he exclaimed, examining one of the finished pieces of printing with interest. It was an excellent imitation of a ten dollar national banknote. Though showing its illegitimate origin in its fresh state, after a little handling and crumpling, it would have passed muster almost anywhere among people not trained to detect counterfeit bills.

Neatly stacked on the floor were enough other spurious notes to flood an entire state, and as

many more were ready for the finishing touches on the press.

At the farther end of the room a heavy curtain hung before a low arched doorway. Putting it aside, the Professor was not surprised to find a small underground boathouse in which the speed boat he had seen that morning was securely moored, the entrance to the subterranean anchorage being screened by a neatly woven blind of reeds and ivy.

"Umpf," he commented, "everything seems fairly clear thus far, but I think we might do well to ask our friend Procter a few questions before going back."

Rosalie deposited her knife in the glowing charcoal brazier and blew upon the coals until the steel blade took on a brilliant orange glow. This done, she wrapped her fingers in the cotton cloth with which she had been gagged, took the red-hot knife up gingerly and advanced until she stood directly before the bound and helpless butler.

"Swine!" she admonished, speaking slowly, and in her most careful English, that every word might be understood, "Forrester sahib, who is the mightiest detector of evil in all the world, would honor your unclean ears by addressing a few questions to them. See to it that you answer quickly and truthfully, or I shall give myself the pleasure of burning out your unworthy eyes with this iron. Say, then, will it be talk or torture which you choose?"

Procter, regarding the implacable eyes she bent upon him, made a wise decision.

VI

"I SAY, Towneley, I'll trouble you for that twenty-five hundred dollar reward you offered for laying the ghost," Professor Forrester announced as he and Rosalie let themselves in the front door of Towneley Towers and surveyed a surprised group in the lower hall.

"Eh, what's that?" demanded his host, eyeing him suspiciously. "Where have you been? I thought you went upstairs drunk a while ago. Speak up, man, if you're sober. We're in the devil of a fix. Now it's Procter who's disappeared, and—"

"Wrong, my boy, quite wrong you are," the Professor contradicted with a grin. "Procter may not be present, but I'll guarantee to produce him when wanted. He's the ghost of Towneley Towers."

"What?"

"Your ghost's name is James Allerton Procter, sometime butler to Eugene Towneley, Esquire, of Baltimore and St. Mary's County, Maryland. Before he entered your employ he was popularly known to the aristocracy of the underworld as English Jimmie, and he was one of the cleverest counterfeiters—'queer shooters,' I believe the technical term is—in the entire nefarious business. I suppose you'll recall that, no matter how much dread of the ghost he displayed, Procter never offered to leave your service?"

"Er—yes, that's right," Towneley agreed.

"Quite so. But he was forever harping on the subject to the other servants, and was largely responsible for your big labor turnover.

"You'll also remember that he presented himself as an applicant for the position of butler after three negro butlers had been scared off the premises. Very well. I've been talking with Mr. Procter, and he's been quite confidential. Miss Osterhaut—" he shot a sidelong, humorous glance at the demure Rosalie, who stood at his elbow—"seemed to have quite an influence over him, and I'm sure she induced him to tell me things he never would have divulged without her persuasion.

"Now, to go back a little while. This Procter person had been head of a counterfeiting gang for some time, and had been using this location as a manufacturing plant. It's conveniently inaccessible, you know, and offered an ideal location. When you decided to recondition the Towers and live here, while it didn't materially interfere with his work, since it was literally carried on underground, it did render the danger of detection much greater, so he and his two associates, both of whom were Turkish gypsies, decided to manufacture a little ghost-scare for the benefit of your servants.

"When he'd managed to frighten the two colored men off the job, and scare half the other servants out of their senses, he applied for the post of butler to you—you'll recall he was rather vague

concerning how he came to hear you were in need of a butler just at that time?—and came down here where he could supervise the printing operations and keep watch on you and your guests at the same time.

"I dare say you'll be surprised to learn that two of the guests at this party, Rodney Phillips and Waterford Richie, were members of the United States Secret Service.

"It was a surprise to Procter, a most unpleasant surprise, I imagine, and threw him into something of a panic. To do him justice, Procter was a mild-mannered sort of criminal, and never resorted to violence when he could help it, but his two associates had no such scruples. They believed fervently in the adage that dead men tell no tales. When Thomas, the stable boy, surprised one of them snooping about the smoke house last night, he was unceremoniously put to death by having his throat cut with a broken bottle.

"When young Phillips went out to spend the night in the smoke house, he did it in hope of finding some lead to the counterfeiters' lair, for he'd received a tip the spurious bills were coming from this part of the state. There's a secret entrance to that smoke house, and while Phillips was looking around one of the gypsies let himself through it and strangled the poor lad, then hanged him to make it appear he'd committed suicide.

"I hate to say it, Towneley, but your ancestors must have done a considerable amount of smuggling in the pre-Revolutionary days, for your entire grounds are honeycombed with secret passages, and there's a perfect rabbit warren of hidden stairways from the underground storehouses to your house. Practically every room in the place can be entered, or left, by one of those unsuspected doorways. It was easy for the gypsies to enter Richie's room last night, cut the poor chap's throat, then leave the razor in his hand as though he had done the deed himself.

"I don't claim any particular credit in the matter, but I've made a little study of crime detection as a hobby, as has Miss Osterhaut, and we both became suspicious concerning the suicides supposed to have been committed. We weren't greatly impressed with Procter's version of Thomas' death, either, and decided to do a little investigating of our own.

"I got the Baltimore headquarters of the Treasury Department on the wire this morning and advised them what was going on. It was then I learned that they'd narrowed their search for the counterfeiters' den down to this locality, and that you'd been under investigation, Towneley."

"Good God!" exclaimed his host.

"Precisely," the Professor responded. "I'm sorry to say that I didn't entirely divorce my mind from that suspicion for a while. You see, we didn't know whom to suspect, so we decided to regard everyone as guilty until the contrary appeared.

"Procter was not caught napping, though. He must have listened in on my talk with Baltimore this evening, and decided that I, too, was a Treasury man. At any rate, he and one of his companions entered Miss Osterhaut's room by a secret doorway and kidnapped her, holding her as bait for a clever little trap they laid for me. I walked into it, too—just marched into it with both eyes open—but my luck held, and the result—"

He paused, surveying the circle of faces with his benign, slightly diffident smile.

"Yes, the result is—" chorused a dozen voices.

"Treasury officers are on their way here now. I fear they'll have no use for one of the gypsies. Unfortunately, the poor fellow met with an accident while discussing the merits of the situation with me; but the other one and your butler will probably be allowed to put their names in cold storage for several years while they use numbers for identification purposes at Moundsville or Atlanta."

"Well, you funny, clever little devil," Eugene Towneley fairly roared, striking Professor Forrester such a blow on the back that he nearly collapsed, "you've surely earned that reward! Here, I'll make the check out right now!"

"Er—I believe, on the whole, you'd best make it payable to Miss Osterhaut," the Professor remarked as his host removed the cap from his fountain pen and unfolded his check book. "It was really her persuasion which made Procter talk and enabled us to catch up the loose ends of the case, you see."

"Uncle Harvey," Rosalie protested as she paused at her bedroom door to say goodnight,

"you must take this check. What's mine is yours, you know, for I owe everything I have—home, food, education, even liberty and life, to you. I know you don't like me to refer to myself as your slave, but if ever one person belonged to another by right of conquest and purchase, I am yours—"

"Nonsense!" the Professor cut in. "Keep the money, child. Some day you'll be getting married—" his voice became harsh, and he looked quickly away as he spoke—"some day you'll be getting married, and the reward will come in handy to buy your trousseau."