

# Decoy for the Creeping Shadow

By Norman A. Daniels

*Sudden death awaited those who attempted to solve the strange demise of old Jed Darrell. And when fate decreed that Steve Bishop investigate the mysterious house of disaster, he was greeted with a crimson message—a message that was a foreword to a tombstone tribute.*



## CHAPTER I

### MYSTERY MISSION

**T**HE man was so huge as to be ungainly. He walked very erect, but even so, his arms reached down to within an inch or two of his knees. They ended in gigantic hands that kept curling and uncurling as though he had the neck of a man he despised between them.

His hair was overlong and never had been neatly cut. He had a scraggly beard and small pinkish little eyes. He was dressed in overalls and heavy shoes with a blue work shirt open at the neck to show powerful muscles and the

beginning of a hairy, massive chest.

The big man climbed the porch steps without hesitation, approached the door and banged the brass knocker until the wood was almost splintered. His lips kept working in silent rage and bushy eyebrows flickered up and down the only own visible sign of nervousness.

A rather small man opened the door, took one look at the visitor and backed up hurriedly.

The giant's voice rumbled, "Aumont, where is the old man? Where is he?"

"Rolf—Rolf Licho! You can't come in here. Mr. Darrell gave orders. There's a little party going on. You can't—come—in."

The last two words were practically an afterthought because the big man was already striding down the hall. He turned into a living room and stopped. His eyes roved over the four people there and he bared his teeth in a snarl at Elijah Madden and smiled a bit at Sally Adams.

She was small, trim-figured and wore a loosely fitted blue coat because it was chilly in this big house. Her hair was dark, curling around her head attractively. She had deep blue eyes that were fixed on the huge man's and her lips answered his smile somewhat weakly.

Elijah Madden stepped forward, the only man in the group who seemed able to find his tongue. Madden was slender, about fifty and bald-headed. His eyes were a faded color submerged in wrinkled pouches.

Elijah Madden said, "Rolf, what's wrong? Whom are you looking for? I thought you agreed not to come here."

"Where's Jed?" Licho demanded. "Don't try to hide the slimy skunk. Where is he?"

Licho whirled suddenly and seized the small man who'd let him in, by the throat. He shook him until his teeth chattered. Aumont tried to pull himself away, failed and raised one hand to point toward a closed door at the far end of the room.

Licho let go of him and started walking like an automaton toward the door. Aumont rushed ahead of him, set his back against the door and his thin arms wide. The small man was a puny figure against the giant, who merely lifted him, set him three or four feet away and then opened the door.

The little man darted inside, yelling something inaudible and the door closed. Only muffled voices could be heard, but they were anger-filled. . . .

Attorney Madden grabbed an arm of the man beside him. It was Hanline, a long-time friend of the owner of this house, who was about the attorney's age and none too strong looking.

"Madden," he said, "Licho might kill Darrell. You know how much he hates Darrell since that boy of his killed Licho's daughter."

"I know," Madden answered. "But Darrell has always handled Licho so far. Anyway, if you went in there Licho might turn on you."

There was a metallic click from the corner of the room. A young man, smiling slightly, arose with a rifle tucked under one arm. He was Charlie Lane, who was a paying guest at the house and up in this semi-wilderness to hunt.

Lane said, "I don't know what this is all about, gentlemen, but I know a maniac when I see one and that big gorilla who went in there is crazy. If anything happens, I'm using my gun so stay out of the way."

A shrill scream came from the room. It was followed by another, and then a window crashed. Charlie Lane sprinted toward the door, found it locked and attacked the panels with the butt of his rifle. He kept at it until he'd gouged a hole through the wood. Then he reached inside, found the key and a moment later the door opened. Lane took one look inside, turned and warned Sally away.

"Don't come in, Sally. It— isn't very nice."

Lane and Madden entered. The lawyer closed the door behind him, shivered violently and then hurried to the side of the small man who'd tried to bar Licho's way so bravely.

"Aumont doesn't seem hurt," Madden said. "I think he just fainted."

"Yeah," Lane answered half absently. "But look at Darrell. His head is crushed like an eggshell. Looks as if the big guy just took it between his hands and pushed until the skull cracked open. Then he jumped right through that window. We'd better call the cops first and then start searching for Licho. He's liable to kill everything and everybody he meets."

**T**HE last cell of tier number eleven at the state's prison was losing its occupants. One man was carried out in an undertaker's

wicker basket. The other walked out, head erect, steady eyes burning in hatred. A guard walked beside him, chatting volubly.

“Tough break, Steve. You’ve been here four months and now they find out you’re as innocent as you always claimed to be. Cheer up—might have been four years, who knows. The warden wants to see you now.”

Steve Bishop said nothing. He hadn’t talked a great deal during this prison term, except to deny his guilt when questioned. He was a rugged looking type whom four months of cell life hadn’t injured much. A bit paler than when he’d entered, perhaps, but his steps were just as firm.

He walked into the warden’s office and shook hands with that official. The warden wasn’t a bad guy.

“Steve Bishop, all I can do is apologize. You were accused of opening the vault at the bank where you worked and stealing a lot of money. You and two other men were the only persons who knew the combination.”

“Must we go all through that again?” Steve Bishop asked. “Just tell me how they found out I wasn’t guilty.”

“Well, it seems you had no alibi. You were in possession of a fairly large amount of cash which you couldn’t account for. The others who knew the combination had alibis. Therefore, you were the goat. But last night two men broke into the bank and opened the safe. Believe it or not, they knew the combination.”

Steve Bishop gasped. “Knew it? But that was a modern safe—”

“Nevertheless, they knew the combination and even how to get around the time lock. There was a gun battle when police surprised them. One crook was killed instantly. The other lived long enough to confess that he robbed the bank six months ago and that you were innocent.”

Steve Bishop sat down slowly. The hatred had gone out of his eyes.

“I guess it wasn’t anybody’s fault really,”

he said slowly. “About my being convicted, I mean. The money I go had, I just saved and nobody knew about it. I played the horses a little and the stock market. If I’d admitted that, they’d have given me a much longer sentence. I wonder if the bank will take me back?”

“I had a phone call from the president of the bank this morning,” the warden said. “They want you back and you’re going to get a check, the equivalent of the amount you would have earned while you were here. However, I wonder if you’d be interested in another proposition.”

A man arose at the rear of the room, walked up and stood beside Steve. It was Attorney Elijah Madden. “I’m very sorry for this miscarriage of justice, Mr. Bishop. Now about this proposition the warden just mentioned. I’ll pay you one hundred dollars a day with two thousand guaranteed if the job is over before twenty days.”

Steve gasped. “Now listen, money like that means something crooked. I spent four months in this place and I don’t ever want to come back.”

The warden laughed. “Steve, who’d cook up a criminal plot in the office of a prison warden? Madden has an honest offer. The pay is steep because you’ll be risking your life.”

“I don’t get it.” Steve looked at Madden.

The lawyer smiled. “This morning your cell mate died. His name was Rex Darrell. You lived with him for three months. Undoubtedly you know his habits and a lot about him. Is that right?”

STEVE nodded. “He did talk a lot. In fact he had a remarkable memory. Came from a rich family, but was pretty sore at them. Seems he’d been here for twelve years and never had a visitor or a letter.”

“Exactly,” Madden said. “Which means Rex Darrell hasn’t been seen by anyone he knows for twelve years. He was eighteen when they sent him up. Naturally, Rex changed a lot during those years. If you were

to present yourself at Rex Darrell's home tonight, no one could say you were not he.

Steve said, "Oh-h-h! Now comes the light, but you're wrong, Mister. Rex had a father and they don't forget—"

"Rex's father was murdered last night," Madden explained. "Murdered by a man we believe is a maniac. He is the father of the girl whom Rex killed—the crime for which he was sent up. We think Licho, the killer, murdered Rex's father out of hate for that crime twelve years ago. Licho was the caretaker on the estate for years. We must get him before he kills anyone else."

"But where do I come in?" Steve queried.

"You will go to Rex's house, proclaim yourself as Rex Darrell. You can pass for him because you know his mannerisms and habits. Licho, the killer, will soon know you arrived and he may try to attack you. He is twice the size of an ordinary man, is extremely strong and he kills by banging his fists against the head of his victim. The skull is crushed by one or two of those blows. You can back out if you're afraid."

"I'm not afraid," Steve said.

"Good," Madden said. "We'll keep the news of Rex Darrell's death a secret. The police are co-operating. You'll be turned out of here as Rex Darrell. Go to his home. Be careful of Aumont, the only servant on the place. He knew Rex well. I'll be around if I can manage and you'd better know about the others there."

"I'm listening," Steve said.

"There is a girl named Sally Adams," Madden said. "She's rather a mystery. Old Jed, a virtual woman hater, hired Sally and she was his secretary. Then there is Hanline, an old friend of Jed's. Hanline is a manufacturer and I think he's on the level.

"Last, you'll find Charlie Lane. Seems that Jed's estate was overrun with woodchucks and he let Lane live at the house in payment for hunting the animals."

"What about the murder?" Steve asked. "I should know the facts."

Steve listened intently while Madden related the details of the murder on the previous night.

When he told of Licho's escape through the window, Steve asked, "Didn't anyone try to get him?"

"Charlie Lane had a rifle and rushed out. He saw Licho enter the mausoleum in a small family cemetery at the rear of the estate. Lane slipped up to the tomb, but Licho wasn't there. We joined Lane, saw Licho's massive footprints leading into the tomb and none coming out."

Steve whistled softly. "Sounds like the job might be worth the kind of money you offer. I'll start for there at once."

Hours later, Steve opened a white wooden gate and began trudging up the winding, half-mile path to a big house. He rounded one corner and saw two people coming toward him. They walked hand-in-hand and from descriptions furnished by Attorney Madden, he guessed they were Sally Adams and Charlie Lane.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PHANTOM KILLER

L ANE carried a rifle and saw Rex at just about the same time. The rifle came up quickly. Sally backed off to one side. Steve kept on walking, his arms held well away from his sides. Now he had to go into his act. Rex Darrell had been a cantankerous, sarcastic sort of person so that was what Steve determined to be.

"What do you want?" Lane asked curtly.

"Put down that rifle," Steve barked. "What do I want? This whole place! I own it. How do you like that?"

"Rex Darrell!" Sally cried, stepped forward and then stopped as if undecided.

"You're Sally, I suppose," Steve said. "Did they bury the old man yet?"

"Yes, he was interred in the crypt this morning. That's the way he wanted it. I suppose we should have waited until you came back, but—"

"Who cares?" Steve grunted. "The old fool didn't pay much attention to me while I was in stir. Neither did anybody else, but now this place is mine. I say who stays and who goes. Furthermore, I don't want anybody pointing guns at me."

"I'm sorry." Lane lowered the rifle. "You see, there's been some trouble. Your father was murdered. The killer is still loose and we think he's mad."

Steve bit his lip. "Yes, I know. Licho killed the old man for what I did. He'll try to kill me too, but I'll be ready for him. Come on, Sally, take me to the house. You're one inmate who won't get the gate."

Lane trailed well behind while Steve took Sally's arm and led her up the path. She seemed to resent the grip he had on her, but made no attempt to pull away.

"Certainly is nice to see a girl as pretty as you, Sally."

She looked at him for a moment. "They tell me Alice Licho was pretty too—or have you forgotten about her, Rex?"

Steve grimaced. "The one I killed? Wild oats, you know. You're different, but I'm beginning to think you don't like me."

"Did you expect me to throw my arms around you?" she asked hotly. "All my life I heard stories about you. None of them have been any good."

She led him into the house. Aumont shook hands with Steve, but said nothing. Hanline didn't even offer his hand, just looked and then turned on his heel and walked out.

"How do you like that 1" Steve said grimly. "Hey, Aumont, I'm hungry. Get the best and get it fast—if you want to work around here any longer."

They all sat down to dinner which was a

glum affair. Steve made certain he was next to Sally, but he noticed Charlie Lane on the other side of her.

Hanline finished his coffee, took a few drops of brandy and rolled it around on his tongue. Then he arose.

"If you don't mind," he told Steve, "I'll be going back to the city. I was your father's friend, Rex, not yours."

"Sit down," Steve shouted. "So I'm not good enough for you. An ex-con who served twelve long years finally comes home and the guests walk out. You're not going any place, Hanline."

"Do you really think you can stop me?" Hanline asked.

"I know it." Steve finished his coffee and leaned back. "You see, Hanline, I don't think my father was murdered because of what I did."

"Rex," Sally exclaimed quickly, "you weren't here. You didn't see Licho—"

"Oh, I'll admit that Licho did the actual murdering," Steve said. "Even the cops must be satisfied on that score, but my idea is that somebody put it up to Licho. Goaded him into doing the job. Otherwise, why would Licho have waited twelve years before he murdered my father out of revenge?"

Aumont stepped forward. "May I speak, sir?"

"Shoot," Steve answered.

"I don't want you to think I'm presumptuous, Mr. Rex, but it's only fair that you know the truth. Your father was aware that you were to be released from prison soon. He promised to see that you obeyed parole. Licho knew that and might have become very angry because you didn't serve out the full sentence."

Steve tapped the edge of the table. "Maybe you're right, Aumont, but I still insist that no one leave here."

Hanline sat down. "What do you intend to do, Rex?"

"I don't know," Steve replied. "But Licho

must be hiding somewhere and our job is to find him. By daylight, of course. Aren't the cops looking for him?"

**C**HARLIE LANE made a derisive sound with his lips. "Cops! A lot of good they are! I saw Licho running across the estate. He went into the mausoleum back of the house and he didn't come out again. The cops practically told me I was crazy."

Steve took Sally's arm when they all arose. Aumont began clearing the table. They walked into the long, huge living room. Hanline went to the far end of the room and sat down to enjoy his cigar. Charlie Lane leaned against the wall and watched Steve and Sally.

Sally said, "Rex, you've changed."

"Thanks," Steve said. "I understand you worked for my dad only four years. How come you can remember me as I was twelve years ago?"

Sally flushed prettily. "I'm only going by what I heard. I never knew you. . . . Oh, Charlie, may I speak to you for a moment?"

She walked away from Steve and he frowned. There was something wrong with that girl. She'd left to avoid further questioning.

Steve walked along the room and stopped to admire a Mexican basket, woven of leather thongs and gayly decorated. It hung on the wall near the chair where Hanline sat. Lane and Sally were at the further end of the room and Steve saw that Lane was holding both her hands and talking spiritedly. Steve suddenly hated Charlie Lane.

Aumont came in with a tray of brandy inhalers and passed them around. He gave Hanline the last one and then went to a window where the curtain was being whipped by a very cool breeze. Aumont closed the window with a slam.

Steve had the brandy inhaler up to his lips when every light in the house went out. One of the brandy glasses crashed to the floor. That

would probably be Sally's. Steve said nothing, but he moved quietly toward the fireplace in the center of the room.

The moment he reached that spot, something came slinking against the opposite wall. It was a shadow – an eerie, blood-tingling thing. It moved soundlessly. Steve looked for the cause of the shadow, but in the darkness he could see no one. He reached down and grabbed a heavy poker, raised it high and waited until the shadow was directly opposite him. That meant the man who cast it must be very close by.

Steve swung the poker blindly and swept through nothing but air. He watched the shadow again. It was that of an enormous man with two, ungainly arms spread wide as if to seize his prey and squeeze it to death.

The room was so silent that this intruder should have been heard, but he seemed to move about with the same lightness of his shadow. It had slowed up a bit now. The enormous head was turning from side to side as if the man could actually see in the dark.

Then it moved faster. Faster and Faster! It became larger until it occupied almost the full height of the wall. There was a shrill scream from Steve's left. He saw the gigantic shadow bring its arms together. There was a crunching sound—one of the most horrible noises Steve had ever heard in his life.

He started running across the room. Before he could take two steps, the shadow was wiped off the wall as if by magic. Steve yelled Sally's name. Odd, how he thought of her first.

Charlie Lane answered from the further end of the room.

"Sally has fainted. Look out, Rex. That was Licho!"

"Hanline," Steve yelled. "Aumont! Hanline, why don't you answer?"

**S**TEVE fumbled in his pocket and took out a pack of matches. He scraped one and held it high. There were two forms lying on

the floor. One was Aumont, the man of all work. The other was Hanline—or something that was dressed like him. His features were unrecognizable.

“Lane,” Steve yelled. “Lane, put Sally down. Hanline is dead. Aumont is too, I guess. Or no—he just groaned. I need help. Come here.”

Charlie Lane was hurrying across the room when the lights went on again, just as mysteriously as they’d gone off. Lane took one look at Hanline and turned away in a great hurry.

“Head crushed,” Steve said slowly. “Just as if it were caught between two ramrods with enormous pressure behind them.”

“Licho,” Charlie Lane cried. “It was Licho. You saw the shadow, Rex. Nobody but a man of Licho’s size could have cast it. Hanline died—just like your father died.”

“Yeah. Yeah—just like he hopes I’ll die too. Lane, I think Licho mistook Hanline for me. Better see to Sally. I’ll look to Aumont. He just fainted, I think.

Steve lifted the small man and carried him over to a divan. Aumont was coming out of it gradually. He opened his eyes, rolled them violently and then shrieked in horror.

“Take it easy,” Steve said. “You’re okay. Listen, you were near Hanline. What happened?”

“It is Licho. He’s back. I heard Hanline’s skull crunch and then Licho gave me a push. That’s all I remember. Hanline is dead. I know it.”

“He sure is,” Steve said, “If we don’t keep our heads, we’re likely to have them crushed too. What I’d like to know is how the lights went off and on so conveniently. And how Licho could slip into the house and move around without a sound.”

“Licho used to be a woodsman,” said Aumont. “I’ve heard of him stalking deer and killing them with a knife. The man isn’t human, Mr. Darrell. He’s a mad killer and next time it will be me.”

Steve straightened up. “You better rest awhile. I’ll see how Sally is.”

Steve looked in the direction which Lane had taken. Lane was standing beside another divan, a puzzled look on his face. Sally was gone! Steve reached his side.

“She must have awakened and gone to her room,” Lane said.

“Find her,” Steve said. “Licho can’t be far away and I’m going after him. He still lives on the estate, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, at the rear. But listen to a word of warning. Licho is slippery as a bar of wet soap. After he bumped off your father, I saw him high-tail it to the family graveyard. He went into the vault—and he didn’t come out.”

“Thanks,” Steve said. “You look after Sally.”

Steve searched for a flashlight, but there wasn’t one in the house, according to Aumont. Steve went out into the darkness anyway. He moved slowly toward the private graveyard and shivered as he saw it outlined starkly against the sky. He was beginning to get the idea he’d earn the hundred dollars a day.

Steve clambered over the cemetery railing to approach the tomb from its rear. If Licho had a hiding place there, Steve wanted to surprise him. Steve remembered that gross shadow and knew the man who had made it could outfight him in ten seconds.

Steve considered the others. Charlie Lane was here without any real identification. Now and then, he dropped his usually polished manner and talked something like the cons up in the Big House from which Steve had so recently come.

### CHAPTER III

#### CRIMSON MESSAGE

AUMONT was almost too quiet and he fainted too easily, but crushing a man’s head was the work of a brute and Aumont didn’t fall under that classification. In fact, he

looked so puny and timid that it was logical to expect he would faint.

Sally wasn't on the level either. Steve had a vague notion she knew more about this than she pretended and yet it was difficult to suspect her.

"I'm getting balmy," Steve muttered. "Why should I suspect these people when I saw Licho do it? Saw his shadow anyway and shadows don't just materialize like ghosts."

He felt a little better after this bit of self-abuse and when he reached the back of the granite tomb, he stood there quietly listening. There wasn't a sound. Even the insect life usual to nighttime was missing, as though the bugs and frogs actually knew murder stalked the grounds.

Steve sidestepped toward the door of the tomb. As he neared it, he saw the gate was ajar. Steve sucked in a quick breath. He didn't care much about this fooling around with houses of the dead—in the middle of the night. Too many things could happen—unexplainable things. And Steve had a solid notion that he wouldn't enjoy having his skull crushed between two gigantic hands.

He reached out, grasped the grilled door and gave it a shove outward. The hinges creaked dismally and jarred his already raw nerves. He cursed his lack of a flashlight, lit a match and held the tiny torch high. The tomb was empty.

He hurried away and looked for Licho's cottage far at the rear of this big estate.

He found it easily because there was a well-worn, carefully tended path leading up to the house. Steve wondered how a man could nurse flowers, arrange them so beautifully and yet be a murderer. Most of the flowers were dead, but he could visualize what this garden and path had looked like a month before.

It made Steve realize he was really free. The stain had been removed from his name and, with that memory, came more puzzles. The warden had said two crooks opened that bank vault by knowing its combination.

They'd even known how to disengage the time lock and nobody short of an expert locksmith and safe maker would know that.

In fact, a year before Steve had been arrested, something happened whereby admission to the vault after hours was most essential. The bank president had called the safe company and then had to wait until the time lock went off by itself. Even safe experts couldn't do anything about opening the box. That seemed very far in the past, though.

Steve studied the one-story cottage. There was a faint light shining through one window. Maybe Licho was in there getting something to eat, fresh clothes or a weapon. With luck, Steve knew he might finish the job in the next ten minutes, or they'd find him with his skull crushed.

He moved up to the door, making no more noise than the eerie shadow had made. He reached the door and placed his hand gently on the knob. Suddenly, the light went out and he heard a door at the rear close.

STEVE gave up trying to be quiet now. He raced around the corner of the house. Feet, light and fast, pounded on the path for a moment and then the sound was gone. The intruder had cut across the grass, too. Steve knew how hopeless it would have been to try to follow so he went back to the cottage and walked in.

He turned on lights. As the switch clicked he heard a rumbling noise that startled him. But Steve even forgot the noise, for his nostrils flared and the sweet scent of good perfume reached his senses. Perfume meant Sally.

Steve began to search. The first thing he saw was an empty picture frame lying on its back. He opened drawers, looked into closets and found nothing.

Then he located a ladder which led to the attic. Steve climbed this, looked for a light switch and found none. He used a couple of matches to make sure he was alone and no



gigantic killer was hidden and waiting in a dark corner of the attic. .

There were two trunks, old-fashioned, round-topped affairs. These intrigued him. He broke the lock on one, raised the cover and began pawing through the contents. Within two minutes he held a photograph in his hand. It was an old one and a bit yellow, but the three figures were plain enough.

One was a massive man who could be none but Licho. There were two girls, rigidly posed beside him. Steve figured one of these was Alice Licho, whom Rex Darrell had killed during that wild, drunken ride twelve years ago. The third person in the photograph was Sally. She was just a girl, but that simple loveliness she possessed had followed her throughout the years.

Steve folded the picture and tucked it into his shirt. He started to back down the ladder, feeling for each rung. As his head came below the level of the attic floor, he was aware that the rumbling sound had died away. He decided to investigate that sound and traced it to the cellar. There he found a big gasoline powered dynamo occupying half of the cellar. Although it was an old-fashioned affair, it was apparently used to supply juice to this cottage and the big house.

There was nothing further for him to do here so he walked briskly along the path toward the big house. The thoughts running through his mind concerned only Sally. She'd been in the cottage. She'd stolen a picture which obviously must have been of herself. Steve decided he'd find out about this.

Lane too, deserved some careful study. He'd promised to keep an eye on Sally and he either failed deliberately or she'd given him the slip. Either way, he could have been looking for her. When Steve reached the house, Lane was slumped in a chair.

The body of Hanline had been covered with a portiere taken from one window. Lane glanced at Steve.

"I thought you'd run out on us," he said.

"Where is Sally?" Steve demanded. "I figured you'd be with her."

Lane shrugged. "She wanted to be left alone. What I want to know is what do we do with Hanline? You told me not to call the cops and I obeyed orders."

"That's just what I wanted you to do. Lane, haven't you any idea what this is all about?"

"Have you?" Lane parried, "Look, pal, I'm a stranger here. You at least, knew the place twelve years ago. I've been here a couple of days. Your father was a cranky sort—irritable and flighty. Hanline acted like a blue-nosed snooper, always poking himself into places where he didn't belong. Aumont turns out to be a sphinx. In fact, the only human beings here are me and Sally. That is, until you came and you're not exactly a prize."

"I know," Steve nodded. "An ex-con. I'm going upstairs. Say, where is Aumont, by the way?"

**L**ANE extended his hands in an eloquent gesture. "You got me there. Last I knew, he was in the kitchen cleaning up."

Steve went directly to the kitchen. Aumont stood at the sink, his arms immersed in soapsuds and dishes. He hastily dried them on a dish towel and walked up to Steve.

"Mr. Rex, I don't think you should remain here. It's too dangerous. Licho made a mistake in killing Hanline. He thought it was you. For twelve years he's bided his time and now you're back. He won't wait long."

"Neither will I," Steve grunted, "if I lay eyes on him first. Aumont what about Sally? How long has she been with my father?"

"Four or five years, sir, He rather astonished me when he brought her home. Your father, if I may say so, wasn't especially partial to young ladies, sir, I guess he—well, he associated them too much with you and your past."

"Um," Steve grunted. "You're probably right. Sally come from town?"

“I don’t know, sir. She never said and your father didn’t mention her background. I wonder what we should do about Hanline, sir. We can’t just let him lie there. The police won’t like it—and besides, we won’t be able to sleep—”

Steve grinned. “Sleep? Aumont, with or without a corpse present, the man who could sleep here tonight should be named Morpheus. Keep your eyes and ears open, will you? Licho might be back. It’s after midnight. Say, just what time is it?”

Aumont took a thin watch out of his pocket. “Exactly twelve-twenty, sir.”

He wasn’t sure which was his room, but he knew Sally’s. The door was closed, but light streamed from beneath it. Steve patted the photograph under his shirt, hesitated at the door and then shrugged. This was no time to question her.

He turned on lights in various rooms and discovered his. There were college banners on the walls, some old sports equipment neatly arranged on a shelf. The furniture was blond wood and well kept up. Steve sighed deeply. He was tired. Plenty had happened during the last twenty-four hours. He stripped off his coat and then started to unbutton his shirt.

He froze, one hand gripping a button, the other, the loose part of his shirt. His eyes grew wide and round while horror swept over him like an avalanche.

There, on the flat headboard of the bed, were words. Crimson words that looked as though they were written in blood.

REX DARRELL IS DEAD. I KNOW WHO  
YOU ARE.

There was no signature, but the message was clear enough. Someone knew he was a fake!

He touched the printed message gingerly. It was hard and smooth. He peered closer. This message had been written with fingernail polish, blood-red stuff.

Steve closed both eyes and murmured a single word.

“Sally!”

A moment later he changed his mind about her. How could she possibly know? Even if she had lived in this house since Rex Darrell had been a wild youth, she couldn’t be sure that Steve wasn’t Rex. Only one man knew his identity—Attorney Madden. Where was he, anyhow? Steve recalled that Madden had promised to show up and augment his identity for the benefit of the others.

**J**UST the same, Steve decided to make sure about that nail polish message so he walked softly to Sally’s room and tapped on the door. There was no answer and he walked in.

It was a pleasant room, thoroughly feminine in character. On a dressing table he saw several bottles of nail polish and he examined these. One seemed to be about the same shade as the stuff on the headboard of his bed. To make sure, Steve took the bottle of polish remover and some cotton. Those words had to be removed before someone else saw them.

He daubed polish beside the words and was positive the contents of this bottle had been used to fashion the grim message. The color was exactly the same, and most of the polish in the bottle was gone. Steve soaked a piece of cotton in removing fluid and went to work erasing the words.

This required about five minutes, and all the while Steve kept thinking about Madden. Perhaps there was something to do with Jed Darrell’s estate which gave Madden a motive for murder. Certainly it seemed impossible that anyone present during the killings had committed the hideous crimes.

Steve smiled wryly and berated himself. “I’m going nuts. Licho is the murderer. Everybody knows he killed Jed Darrell and we all saw his shadow in the living room when Hanline died. Still, Licho might have been used as a tool.”

Steve wiped off the surface of the headboard and then returned the bottles to Sally's room. He placed them on the dresser, looked up and bit his lower lip in exasperation. Framed in the door, he saw Sally Adams watching him. Her reflection in that mirror was painfully clear.

Steve turned and a slow grin crossed his face.

Sally walked toward him. "You haven't changed, Rex. You used to snoop when you were just a boy."

"Did I?" Steve never lost his smile. "They say I was a killer-diller with the women, too. Especially pretty ones like you."

He suddenly leaned forward and drew her close. He kissed her firmly on the lips and then let go. She turned alternately scarlet and white. She slapped him across the face and then gasped.

"It's all right," Steve said. "I had it coming. Just couldn't help it, Sally. But say, now that we're on the subject again, may I repeat—if you've been here only five years or so, how do you recall that I used to be a snooper besides a lady killer?"

"It was just—hearsay," she explained weakly. "People talked. I'm going to leave here, Rex. I can't stand it in this house any longer. I'm going home. You can't stop me."

Steve reached into his shirt, extracted the picture and flung it on the bed.

"If you stay, I might not insist upon an explanation of that picture, Sally. For a girl who was here only five years, you certainly knew Licho pretty well and you certainly grew up fast. Think it over."

## CHAPTER IV

### HOUSE OF THE DEAD

STEVE left her there and walked out. Something had to be done about Hanline, but what? His instructions from Madden didn't cover situations of this kind. He was

supposed to be the bait for a murderer, not Hanline. Steve decided to phone Madden. It was the only thing to do.

He skirted the corpse somewhat gingerly and entered the study. He closed the door, sat down behind a desk and called long distance. He gave Madden's office number first, got no answer and tried the attorney's home with similarly unresponsive results.

"Operator," Steve said, "this is a very small exchange. Perhaps you remember someone else calling those numbers today."

"No, sir. We've had no outgoing long distance calls to that number. The last toll call was made last night—to New York City."

"Who made it?" Steve asked quickly. "This is Rex Darrell speaking. Someone has been using my phone at my expense. I want to find the party."

"There were no names, Mr. Darrell," the operator answered. "But I'm sure it was no one that I knew."

"Not my father? Or Hanline—did you know his voice?"

"Yes, sir. I wondered at the time who was calling. It wasn't your father, nor Mr. Hanline nor Aumont. Later on, Mr. Madden phoned the police. I'm sure he didn't make that toll call either."

"But it was a man?" Steve insisted.

"Oh yes, I'm sure of that anyhow."

"Thanks," Steve said and hung up. The only other person who could have made that call was Charlie Lane. As a guest in this house, he should have asked permission of someone. Apparently, he'd made that call secretly.

Steve idly opened several desk drawers. They were filled with ancient records and catalogues. He flipped through the pages of one booklet and discovered it concerned safes. All kinds were pictured. He checked through the drawers again. All the advertising matter which he found concerned safes. Steve frowned. Why all this interest in safes?

He looked up. Attorney Madden had

quietly opened the door and stood there with a queer expression on his face.

Steve said, "Man, am I glad to see you. This job is worth a thousand dollars a day—or maybe you guessed that."

"Licho came back then," Madden groaned. "I saw the body. Steve, is anybody wise to you?"

"Yes, somebody knows I'm not Rex Darrell. The guy painted an advertising poster all about it on my bed. Madden, did you tell anyone?"

"No," Madden said. "Why should I?"

"I'm just trying to make sense out of this," Steve grunted. "What about Sally? Who is she?"

Madden gave Steve a sharp look. "You can trust Sally. I won't answer your questions about her quite yet. Not until I've had a talk with the girl."

"One more thing," Steve persisted. "How did Jed Darrell get all his money? What kind of business was he in?"

"Safe manufacturing. He made all kinds of safes—called them Iron Watchmen, I think. Picturesque name and not very modern, but Jed dissolved the business soon after Rex was sent to prison."

"Iron Watchmen." Steve said those words like a prayer. "Listen, Mr. Madden, I—"

"Later," Madden waved a hand impatiently. "There are too many things to be done right now. First, we'll all have a talk and then I'm going to call in the police again. By the way, Steve, we may have to reveal your true identity."

**L**ANE and Sally came downstairs arm-in-arm. Sally gave Steve a peculiar look, but remained with Lane. They sat down on a divan. Aumont bustled in with a tray and drinks. Steve took his with fervent thanks.

Aumont served Sally and Lane. He approached Madden who sat close by Hanline's corpse and started to walk around the sprawled-out, covered figure. Aumont

couldn't quite make it so he simply stepped over the body. Then he stepped back again over it, put the tray down and stood respectfully near the wall.

Madden sat in the same chair which Hanline had occupied. He fussed with his glasses, surveyed the little group and cleared his throat.

"We have many things to talk about, my friends. The main issue remains Licho. Until he is captured, nobody is safe in this house. I think Licho is on a maniacal warpath. You're sure he killed Hanline?"

"We were all in this room," Lane said. "We saw Licho do it."

"We saw his shadow," Steve put in quickly.

"Shadows are not figments of one's imagination," Lane said caustically. "Of course it was Licho."

"Very well." Madden waved a hand impatiently. "Let's get down to business. The first thing we must do is notify the police. Also it is time the truth was told about some people in this room. I—"

The lights suddenly winked out. Steve jumped up. Madden's voice came, demanding to know who was responsible for this. At least, he was safe.

"Sally," Steve called. "Sally, are you all right?"

"Yes—yes, Rex. Charlie is beside me."

"Aumont, where are you? Are there any candles?"

"I haven't moved, sir," Aumont answered. "Candles? I'll try to find some right away—Look! Licho!"

Steve twisted his head quickly. There, on the further wall, was the shadow of the gigantic killer. It sent Steve's blood pounding to his temples and he knew beads of sweat were breaking out on his forehead. He turned the gun slowly in the direction of the shadow, and watched it, fascinated.

The shadow moved across the wall just as before, without making a sound. The huge

arms slowly raised and were extended. The shadow stopped, looking around as if to select its next victim. Steve held his breath until his lungs ached.

The shadow moved again, a little faster this time. Then still faster until it was just a blur—and it moved in the direction of Madden or Aumont. Sally screamed. That cry made something snap in Steve's brain.

"Lane, post yourself at the hall door, Aumont, guard the door to the study."

There was a scurrying of feet. The shadow was still moving and then it seemed to converge on the chair where Madden sat. He screamed, but the cry was stifled instantly. There was a crunching sound. Steve raced toward the chair. He ran full tilt into a small table and went down with it, crushing the furniture to bits. He was up again in a flash, but before he could even get started, the lights came on once more.

Steve saw Madden lying on the floor beside Hanline's corpse. His head was horribly crushed and the rug was getting its second baptism of blood. Aumont stood in the doorway to the study, eyes wide in horror, face ghastly pale. Lane occupied the hall doorway. Sally still sat on the divan, her face covered with her hands.

STEVE knelt beside Madden for a few seconds, though he knew there was nothing to be done for the man. Then he arose and faced Aumont.

"You didn't move from the doorway?" he asked.

"No—no, sir. I—didn't m-move, sir."

"And you?" Steve turned to face Lane.

"I've been here all the time."

Steve groaned. "Then how did Licho leave this room? There are only two doors, both guarded from before the time of the murder. The windows are all locked on the inside. I made sure of that some time ago."

"M-maybe," Aumont gulped. "Licho is a-a ghost."

"Well, he acts like one," Steve said. "But I don't believe in them."

Something glittered on the floor. Steve picked up a tiny fragment of enamel. Not nail polish, but real enamel and colored a bright yellow. He could have thrust the whole piece beneath his thumbnail.

He turned on his heel and went into the study. He knew only too well that added minutes of delay meant more and more trouble with the police. Yet Steve was determined to go through with his plans and they didn't include calling the police.

He got on the phone and the same operator answered.

"This is Rex Darrell again," he said. "You have a record of the call made last night after my father was murdered. Dig it out and connect me with that number. It's important, girl. Don't ask questions."

She gave him the number a moment later and then put through the call.

Steve's fingers were white at the knuckles where he held the phone. If this ruse failed, he was in a hot spot.

A man's voice answered. Steve talked very fast.

"No time to answer questions," he said. "I had to call again. Hell to pay here. Two more guys bumped off and pretty soon the cops will be here with plenty of heat. What'll I do?"

The man at the other end cursed fluently and then gave some instructions.

"Work fast. Grab somebody and make him talk. You know how to use a knife so it hurts like blazes. Make the guy sing and then get that stuff. If you fail, so help me—"

"I won't fail." Steve said and hung up quickly. He leaned back and grinned. There was something behind those murders then. Something that concerned "stuff" and that word in the parlance of crooks referred only to valuables.

There was money, diamonds, gold—something valuable hidden on this estate and one of the persons present was after it. Lane?

Of course it was Charlie. He was here without a good reason, had practically forced his way into the house by pretending to be a hunter and agreeing to shoot woodchucks for Jed Darrell. What kind of a hunter would come all this way to shoot woodchucks when the forests abounded with deer?

And, Steve knew, there was still Licho. He had to be found. Steve walked back to the dining room.

"I'm going out," he said. "Alone! In a short time the State Police will be here. Meantime, watch out for Licho."

Steve hurried straight to the little private cemetery. He had plenty of matches and a stub of a candle which he'd found in the house. He brought the candle closer to the niche into which the body of Jed Darrell had been placed. The niches were arranged four in each wall and in two rows. Jed Darrell had been buried in a line with his great grandfather. Or so the inscriptions read. The old one, carved many years ago and the new one, inscribed only this morning.

**I**T OCCURRED to Steve that usually a husband and wife were interred next to each other, yet Jed's wife was in the other side of the vault. Steve found the inscription referring to her. She'd been dead for years.

He remembered seeing a tool shed about five hundred feet to the rear of the graveyard and there he found a heavy crowbar and a chisel. He returned to the tomb quickly.

Steve raised the crowbar and started to pick away at the seating cement. He tackled the niche which had been closed up only this morning. The cement was very hard, but he kept at it, using the sharp chisel and the hammer for a while. Then he picked enough of the cement away to thrust the crowbar inside and gain leverage.

He leaned against the bar, exerting all his strength. The candle was fastened with its own melted wax to the wall beside him. It flickered weirdly and Steve felt all the pangs of horror

creeping through him. He kept on stubbornly.

The lid raised, but it was extremely heavy. He worked the crowbar further in and leaned again. This time the lid lifted about a foot. After a few more minutes, he succeeded in raising it still higher and holding it there. He propped the lid up by using the chisel.

Then he wiped sweat off his face, yanked the candle from the wall and, drawing a deep breath, he stepped closer to the opened niche. The first thing he noticed was that there was no coffin inside.

Warding off a feeling of revulsion, he thrust one hand into the niche and encountered a body. He yanked his hand out again and shivered violently.

Seizing control of his nerves, he thrust the candle into the niche and peered inside. The body that occupied the niche was crammed into the space. Crammed in because it was too large to fit. Steve moved the candle closer to the man's head. He'd never seen Licho, but Steve knew this was the supposed killer. The body of Jed Darrell must have been placed alongside that of his wife, after all.

The huge head, scraggly beard, long hair, all answered to Licho's description. Steve placed a hand lightly on the dead man's face. It was stone cold—and bluish. Licho had been dead for many hours—ever since he entered the tomb after Jed Darrell's murder.

Steve gasped. How then, had Licho risen from the tomb to murder Madden and Hanline?

Then something else attracted Steve's attention. Licho was gripping a piece of lacy cloth. Steve forced the fingers open. There was little resistance because rigor mortis had passed off long ago. The cloth turned out to be a lady's expensive handkerchief. Steve thrust it into his pocket, lowered the lid and hurried to Licho's house at the rear of the estate.

Steve stepped into the house and turned on the lights. He listened for the hum of the dynamo in the cellar, but none came. He went down to the cellar. Here, certainly, lay the

secret of how the lights in the house went on and off with such convenience. Steve had possessed the idea that Licho took care of that, but now he knew differently—unless the dead really walked.

Steve knew little about mechanical things like this, but he did realize that a small alarm clock certainly had no place in the workings of a dynamo. The clock was wired to the machine, and the alarm was set at approximately the moment when Madden had been killed.

Steve checked the alarm clock with his wrist watch and found it was ten minutes slow. He knew his watch was accurate, but then it made little difference.

At least, he'd found something tangible and it didn't concern dead men who walked and created shadows. Rather, it concerned Charlie Lane and some gang of crooks with whom he was working.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CROOKED COMBINE

CHARLIE LANE was going to do some explaining even if Steve had to back up each question with a poke on the nose. Steve still resented Lane's patronizing manner with Sally.

Steve frowned a little at thoughts of Sally. She wasn't too aboveboard about all this. She'd offered no explanation of how her picture had been taken with Licho and his daughter. And that handkerchief Steve had found in Licho's hand. It was a woman's and Sally was the only girl around these parts. What would Licho be doing with her handkerchief and how did he get it?

The answer to all these questions lay inside the big house and Steve was now determined to get those answers no matter whom he had to hurt doing it.

Aumont was in the kitchen when Steve reached the house.

"Where are Lane and Sally?" Steve asked.

"Upstairs, sir. They didn't want to remain here with two dead men—"

"I know," Steve said. "You're all right, Aumont. Plenty of nerve for a little guy. I—What was that?"

Steve seized Aumont and shoved him into a corner. He gripped the man by his left wrist and Aumont was wide-eyed.

"Must be hearing things," Steve grunted. "I could have sworn somebody crossed the front porch. Go into the living room. Hey, what's wrong? Oh, my sleeve got tangled up with your wrist watch strap. Sorry, Aumont. I'll be right back with Lane and Sally."

Lane was in his room, pacing the floor and looking out the window from time to time. He spun around as Steve stepped in.

"Looking for someone, Charlie?" Steve asked.

"Of course I am. What happened to those police you called? Rex, I don't think you called them."

Steve glanced at his own watch. "Why, I told you it would take an hour for them to arrive. What time have you got?"

"Three-twenty," Lane said sullenly. "It's over an hour since you said you phoned. Why don't you do something? This is your house."

"I found Licho," Steve said slowly.

Lane gasped. "Where? That man is a killer."

"Licho is dead," Steve said. "Go down to the living room. I'll bring Sally and tell you all about it."

"I'll get Sally," Lane snapped.

Steve ambled slowly up to the man. Lane wet his lips, backed away and then made a beeline for the door. Steve walked to Sally's room. She let him in promptly. Her eyes were red-rimmed. Steve's right hand was behind his back and he held the handkerchief he'd found in the crypt. Turning a bit, he dropped the handkerchief on the floor, but Sally could not see him do this.

"Rex," she said, "what did you find? I've

got to know.”

Steve bent down and picked up the handkerchief. “This yours, Sally?”

“Yes.” She took it. “But what about Licho? Rex, you must tell me. You’re not the Rex of twelve years ago. He would have taunted me because he knew I’d be hurt. I know you’re different.”

“Licho was your father, wasn’t he?” Steve said slowly. “The other girl in the picture was your sister—the one Rex—I killed. You didn’t think I recognized you, all grown up, but you were afraid if I saw the picture in Licho’s house, I’d guess.”

She nodded. “All right, I was here under false pretenses. I had to be near him. They’re saying my father is crazy and is a murderer. He isn’t. No matter how big he is—whether he could crush a man’s head or not—he couldn’t kill, Rex.”

“I know,” Steve said quietly. “Your father murdered no one—but he was murdered. That handkerchief you just claimed—I found it in his hand. He must have taken it as a memento.”

**S**ALLY sat down on the edge of the bed. Now that the truth was out, she didn’t cry. She just stared up at Steve as if she was trying to comprehend him.

“I expected that,” she said. “If Dad knew I was in danger, he’d have been here to help me. When he didn’t come, I knew he must be dead. Rex, I’m sorry I worked here under another name, but we needed the money, Dad and I. Your father let him live on the estate and putter around, but he stopped paying him after you went to prison.

“I went away soon after all this happened. I grew up. Your father, whose eyesight was failing, didn’t recognize me when I applied for the position. He was very bitter toward my father and he had no right to be. No right, do you hear me? You did kill my sister.”

“No, Sally. I didn’t kill anyone. I’m not Rex Darrell. He died in prison yesterday. I

took his place to help trap the murderer.”

Sally arose and walked slowly toward him. “I knew it,” she said. “I could sense you were not Rex Darrell. But Dad—who killed him?”

Steve took her arm. “Come downstairs and I’ll tell you.”

She nodded. They went downstairs, walked into the living room and found Lane sprawled on the divan, smoking a cigarette nervously. Aumont stood quietly beside him.

Steve leaned idly against the edge of the protruding fireplace.

“It seems,” he said, “that we’ve a murderer and a crook in our presence. Or should I consider myself and say two crooks? While I was in prison, serving time for the accident in which Licho’s daughter died, I carried on a neat little racket. Naturally, I came into contact with all kinds of crooks and I managed to make some money for myself.”

“Are you admitting you’re a thief?” Lane shouted.

“Yes. Jed Darrell once ran a safe manufacturing business. As his son, I knew all about it and I had access to the records in the office. Being gifted that way, I memorized the combinations of the larger vaults from those records. I even devised a way to get around the time lock. In prison, I told certain crooks how they could get rich quickly. I gave them safe combinations, they broke into banks or big stores, opened the safes and cleaned them out. My share was a third and I insisted they hide it right here on the estate.”

“What kind of a fairy tale is this?” Lane demanded. “You’re talking yourself right back into a cell.”

“Be quiet,” Steve insisted. “Before my trial and sentence I had all this schemed up. I even arranged a hiding place for the money. My crooked friends came here to conceal my share. This required many trips and someone saw them, found out what was going on and decided to do something about it. That man was Licho. Naturally, he didn’t want Rex Darrell released from prison before his term



was up and if he stayed there ten years longer, that was okay too.

“So Licho decided to tell Jed Darrell about it before he went to the cops. However, a second person knew of it too. Had known of it for a long time, but did nothing because the loot was piling up faster and faster.

“Then complications resulted. Through the prison grapevine, certain crooks heard that Rex Darrell was to be released. They determined to get this money before he did. They sent a messenger up here to do it. A man named Charlie Lane.”

Lane didn't move, but his lips were tight. A tiny muscle in his right cheek kept twitching.

STEVE went on. “Licho burst in on Jed Darrell to tell him his son was still no good, even, while he was in prison. However, I think Jed knew this all the time. I think he also spotted those crooks bringing money here. I think he told Hanline about it because Hanline was his best friend. Certainly, he informed Attorney Madden and that was the reason they were killed.”

“If you accuse me of killing them, you're all wrong,” Lane shouted. “Okay—I admit the rest of it, but not murder. I didn't kill anyone.”

“I'm not accusing you,” Steve said. “Now, I'll also confess. I'm not Rex Darrell. My name is Steve Bishop and I was Darrell's cell mate for four months. I got to know him well and that's why Attorney Madden asked me to come here, pose as Rex and see if I could draw the murderer out. Madden thought he was Licho. So did I, but Licho has been dead for some time.”

“Dead!” Aumont exploded. “But, sir, we all saw him. He came here to kill Madden and Hanline. It was Licho—nobody else could be so huge, or have the strength to commit those murders that way.”

“Licho is dead,” Steve repeated. “His body is in the tomb. You see, Licho told his daughter everything.”

Suddenly, all the lights went out again. Aumont gave a squeal of alarm. Lane stayed where he was. Sally uttered a sharp cry. Then Steve saw that vast, grim shadow moving across the wall again. Slowly, deliberately it came.

Surely this must be Licho—or his ghost. The outlines were perfectly clear, vivid and horrible.

The shadow seemed to be approaching the spot where the two dead men lay. Then it stopped, only a few feet from Sally. The big arms moved outward once more as if to encompass her in a mighty, crushing embrace.

Steve moved fast then. Fast and softly. He reached the chair where Sally sat, seized her arm and at the same moment clapped a hand over her mouth. His tips touched her ear and he spoke in a whisper. One moment later, Steve sat in the chair, tense and waiting.

Something moved close by. Steve raised both hands to a point just above his head. The shadow lurched closer. At the same time, something came down and encountered Steve's upraised hands. His fingers closed around the object and tore it free.

Then Steve arose like a flash. His left hand darted out, met someone's chest and secured a grip on the man's clothes. His right fist drove straight to the killer's jaw. Bone cracked. The killer hurtled backwards and fell heavily.

Steve said loudly, “Don't move, anyone. The lights will be back on in two or three minutes. The danger is over. Just remain quiet.”

The minutes crawled by. Someone was breathing raucously from the other side of the room. Steve heard a movement at his feet and bent down. His hands closed around a man's throat and stayed there.

When the lights went on again, Steve was straddling his victim, ready to knock him cold if he tried to squirm free. Sally stood across the room, frightened tense. Charlie Lane had drawn into a corner and seemed to be trying his best to merge with the wall paper.

Steve arose. "Get up, Aumont," he snapped. "The party is over."

AUMONT got to his feet. He'd changed, this formerly suave, meek sort of man. He had his lips drawn back in a snarl of hate, but there was fear in his eyes. Fear of Steve Bishop.

"You can't blame me," Aumont said. "You can't. I had a right to have that money. Licho would have taken it if I didn't."

"Licho had nothing to do with it," Steve said curtly. "Perhaps he knew. Perhaps you told him and also mentioned the fact that Rex's father was trying to get him out of prison. That would have roused Licho's anger and brought him to the house. You went into the study with Licho and Jed Darrell. Licho threatened Darrell—perhaps he punched him. Then Licho left through a window which you smashed later on—after you murdered Darrell."

"How could I murder him?" Aumont yelled shrilly. "I couldn't crush the head of a cheap doll, let alone the skull of a grown man."

"Ah—but you did," Steve corrected. "Licho went to the mausoleum, intent on getting that loot hidden there. Not to steal for himself, but to turn over to the authorities and show them Rex Darrell still belonged in prison. Not long after, you went there too. You tricked Licho somehow, into the niche, closed it on him, and left him there to suffocate."

Aumont licked his lips. "Licho killed them. You saw him do it."

"I saw a shadow do it," Steve said. "Shadows can be formed with the hands and even better with some kind of a prop. Like the glove you put on when the lights went out. By standing near a window you could throw a lifelike shadow—and give it apparent life. I found the glove in your pocket just now."

"The lights were arranged by timing the dynamo to have it short at a certain moment

and then go on again so many minutes later. I know you planted the timing device because the clock is ten minutes slow. So is your watch, while mine and Lane's are accurate. That clue gave you away. That—and one other."

"You still haven't explained how a little guy like him could crush the heads of three men," Lane said.

Steve walked over beside the chair which he'd occupied after Sally left it. He picked up the highly colored basket made of leather. Holding this, he approached Aumont and started to bring the open part down over his head. Aumont screamed and tried to back away. Lane grabbed him.

Steve turned, stepped up to a tall, narrow vase and slammed the basket down on it. The basket contracted suddenly and metal cracked.

"This basket," Steve explained, "is the lethal weapon. It looks as though it is made of leather, but woven into that leather are powerful steel springs and plenty of them. When the basket is its normal size, the springs are stretched. When a certain part of it is touched, they give way and a steel band closes around the victim's skull to crush it. I found bits of the enamel paint from it on the floor near the spot where Hanline and Madden died. The only article that matched the colored enamel was this basket."

"Aumont wasn't sure who I was so he tried to frighten me away by anonymously writing a message on my bed. It didn't work. He was afraid Sally also knew the secret of the tomb so he decided to kill her too."

"The rat," Lane said.

"Call the cops," Steve said. "By talking, you'll probably get off lightly, but don't try to get away, Lane."

Sally came over to Steve. "You told me a little while ago that you had been in prison too. I don't care, Steve. It doesn't make any difference."

"I hoped you'd say that. But, Sally, I'm one man who has an explanation for being in

prison unjustly. I was accused of robbing a safe, but Rex Darrell and the crooks working with him were responsible for that. Rex knew all about 'Iron Watchmen' safes—the kind in

the bank where I worked. When this is all over, I'll prove I'm no heel. Meantime, you won't mind if I stay on the job and hold Aumont for the cops."