



Frozen with fear, Karen  
waited

Novelette—  
Complete

# Black Panther

By JUDSON P. PHILIPS

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*Fifty savage jungle beasts loose in a tranquil Catskill artist colony  
—and the man who freed them was a murderer*

## CHAPTER I.

### WILD ANIMALS.

OLD Adam Barth's eyes twinkled as he looked at the three guests sitting at the luncheon table on the terrace of his magnificent house. Steve Blake and Karen Marsh were in love with each other, and it pleased old Adam to have them around to remind him of his own lost youth. Lucien Stone, gray, fifty-five, with a deeply lined face, was a newcomer in Stockford, and as such old Adam had to find out about him. Stockford was an artist colony, and the grim-faced Mr.

Stone, who walked with a pronounced limp, was certainly not an artist.

"I don't see anything queer about it," old Adam said.

Karen Marsh laughed. "It doesn't seem queer to us, Mr. Barth," she said. "We're quite used to it by now. But I don't blame Mr. Stone for feeling a little odd about having cages full of man-eating wild animals located so close to his house."

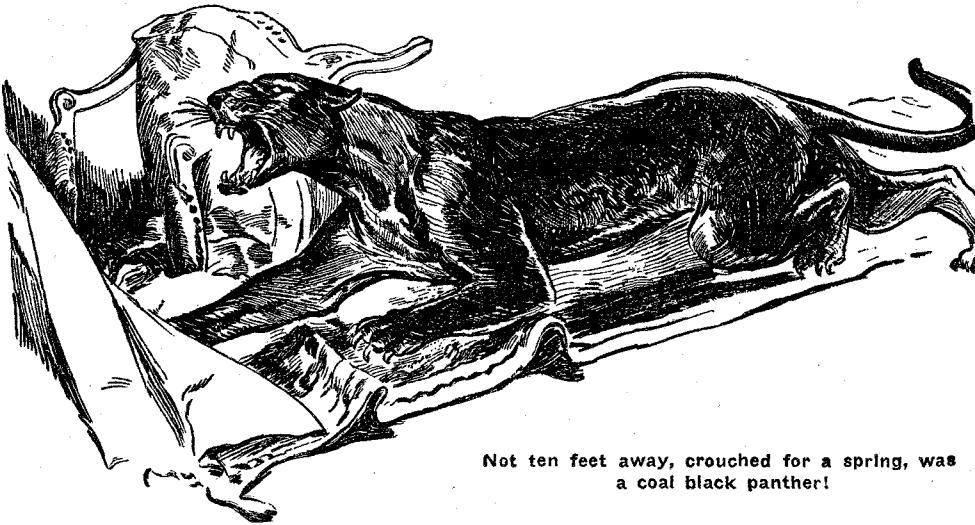
"You must admit, sir," Steve grinned, "that you hardly expect to find lions and tigers located in a peaceful Catskill village."

"But they're pets!" old Adam pro-

tested. "I like having 'em around. I spent all my life hunting animals for circuses, and if I couldn't hear a lion roar once in a while I'd shrivel up and die. I sleep better for the sound and the smell of 'em."

them . . . they hate you! I still think it's a mighty queer sort of fad."

Old Adam chuckled. "Mr. Stone, you have a passion for opera. Right in the middle of this hot weather you drive a hundred miles to New York



Not ten feet away, crouched for a spring, was a coal black panther!

Mr. Lucien Stone regarded the ash on the end of his cigar, a tight smile on his thin lips. "I walked between those rows of cages on my way here to lunch," he said. "They looked to me to be about as mean and keyed up a lot of 'pets' as I ever laid eyes on."

"Hot weather makes 'em cantankerous," said old Adam. "It's just as good to stay away from 'em during the month of August."

"What would happen if they ever got loose, Mr. Barth?" Karen asked.

Old Adam sipped his mint julep. "They'd raise almighty hell!" he said grimly. "But you needn't worry about that, Miss Marsh. They're securely padlocked in those cages, and Griswold, my keeper, examines the locks twice a day."

"But what fun do you get out of them?" Mr. Stone asked. "You can't play with them . . . you can't pet

and a hundred miles back to hear some fifth rate summer company perform in a stuffy theater, when you could be sitting in the cool of your own front porch looking at the stars. That seems just as queer to me, sir."

"I suppose it does," agreed Stone. "You see, I never could afford the money or the time to hear opera when I was a kid. Now I can't get enough of it, good or bad."

"And Blake, here, is an artist," said old Adam. "You somehow wouldn't expect a big, husky looking specimen like him to paint pictures! But he does—and damn good ones, if I know anything about it!" He chuckled again. "Music for one of you and painting for the other. But for me it's wild animals. I've hunted 'em, and brought 'em back alive to this country for thirty years. I just have to have 'em around."

Steve Blake stood up. "The queerest thing of all," he said, "is that I must leave this charming company. I started a picture this morning down in your south field, Mr. Barth. It's still sitting on its easel down there, and I've got such a good start on it I want to do a little more before the light fails. See you to-night, Karen?" he asked.

"Come for supper if you're not too hungry," said Karen.

Steve left the others and, whistling, made his way down across Adam Barth's lawn toward the field where his canvas stood. As he had told Adam, he had a good start on this landscape, and he thought it had promise. He felt very pleased with life at that moment. And then, as he came up to his picture, he suddenly stopped whistling and stared at the canvas in amazement. Some one had deliberately, and painstakingly, wiped out the entire right hand half of the picture while he was gone. When he examined it more closely he saw that evidently an attempt had been made to paint it out with black paint, and then the person had taken the rag and smeared out the entire half of the painting!

"Well, what the hell!" he said softly.

## CHAPTER II.

### OPENED CAGES.

STEVE BLAKE tamped down the tobacco in his pipe and leaned back comfortably in the steamer chair on Karen Marsh's porch. She, too, was a painter, which was another bond between them—if any were needed. It was usually at this point in the evening that Steve proposed, but tonight he sat frowning silently, blowing puffs of blue smoke at a persistent mosquito.

"That business about my picture has got me licked," he said finally.

"Some stupid act of vandalism," said Karen. "It's a rotten shame, darling."

Steve clicked his teeth against the stem of his pipe. "But why only half the picture?" he said. "And why so careful about it? If it was some fresh kid, he would have messed up the whole thing. But this was just half—and very, very carefully erased! And if it was someone who wanted to be mean he could have gone to my studio and destroyed something that was finished. This was hardly beyond the sketch stage. There doesn't seem to be any possible reason for it."

"There's hardly any reason for anything," said Karen lightly. "For instance, there's no reason for my wanting to take a walk. But I do . . . up to the knoll to watch the moon rise over the lake."

"*Everything* I do has a reason," said Steve. "Because you want me to do it. Let's go."

So they sat on the knoll and watched the moon rise—and Steve proposed, and Karen said, "Some day," as usual, and then they started home.

"Old Adam's pets seem to be raising particular hell to-night," Steve remarked, as they walked slowly along the road toward Karen's house. A fierce roaring and snarling split the hot stillness of the evening.

"It sounds as though they were fighting amongst themselves," said Karen.

"They're all in separate cages."

They turned into Karen's driveway and went up onto the porch of her cottage. "How about a Tom Collins?" Karen asked. "It's hot, even when you walk so slowly."

"Swell idea. I'll help." And Steve

sauntered into the house after her—sauntered, and then, across the threshold, stopped abruptly, the hair suddenly standing up on the back of his neck, the palms of his hands clammy. There was no mistaking it! He would have known it anywhere. The smell of the *big cat! Inside this house!*

"Karen!" he said sharply.

"Yes, darling?" She paused at the kitchen door.

Steve moistened his lips. He mustn't frighten her. He might be mistaken. But he wasn't. *He knew it!* "I—I'll make the drinks," he said. She mustn't go out into that dark kitchen. It was a one-story bungalow, and he could see both the living room and the bedroom from where he stood. He knew that the smell of a lion will stick behind him for a long time—strongly. It might have been and gone. But there was still the kitchen.

He strode across the room to the door of the kitchen, actually pulling Karen rather roughly away from the door. The light switch was just around the other side, and he reached with his right hand—standing to one side—and switched on the light. He expected almost anything. But there was nothing. The kitchen was empty.

There were little beads of sweat on Steve's forehead as he turned away.

"Steve! What on earth's the matter?" Karen was staring at him in astonishment.

He gripped her arms very tightly. "Listen, darling. I don't want to frighten you, but—"

**H**E was interrupted by a car coming to a screeching stop in the driveway, and some one came running up on the porch and hammered on the door. Steve called out and a young man, his face the color of ashes,

burst into the room carrying a shotgun. It was Bill Medford, a young artist neighbor.

"I thought you'd be here, Blake," he panted. "My God, there's hell to pay! Barth's animals . . . they've broken out of their cages! The butler phoned . . . said he didn't know if old Adam was safe or not . . . didn't dare leave the room where the telephone is."

Steve's arm was very tight around Karen's shoulders. "That's what I was about to tell you, Karen," he said quietly. "There's been a lion or a tiger in this house." He turned to Medford. "We'll take Karen in your car to your house. She'll be safer there. Then we must spread the alarm."

"My brother and Jess Barnes are at that already," said Medford. "I—I thought," he added, his teeth chattering, "we should go up to Barth's and make sure the old man is all right."

"Right," said Steve grimly.

They drove Karen to Medford's house and there Steve picked up another gun and a flash light. Medford's brother was frantically phoning, and told them that Barnes had set out in his coupé to warn those people who didn't have telephones.

"Steve, darling! You'll be careful," Karen pleaded.

"Don't worry," he said coolly. "They can't *all* have broken out. Probably just one on the loose."

He and Medford got in the car and headed for Barth's place. As they turned in the driveway Steve's blood turned cold once more, for the headlights of the car showed three catlike shapes slinking across the road.

"Hurry!" he said tensely to Medford.

As they drew up at the house the headlights shone down the lane be-

tween rows of cages. Steve stared with his eyes popping out of his head. "My God, Medford, do you see what I see? Every single one of those cage doors is open. They aren't broken open either. *Somebody's deliberately turned those animals loose!*"

But young Medford was not looking at the cages. He was gripping the wheel of the car, white knuckled, his eyes bulging. Something lay on the road in front of them, something very still, something that might have been a man.

Steve wrenched open the door of the car. "Come on," he rapped.

Medford shook his head. "God help me, Blake, I haven't got the nerve. Why, those devils—"

"Cover me from the car, then," said Steve grimly. "And if you see an animal, shoot! And shoot straight!" He jumped out of the car and went to that figure in the road—knelt beside it. Cold, paralyzing horror seized him as he saw the mangled remains of a man—torn and ripped to pieces, lying in a darkening pool of his own blood. It was Griswold, the keeper. He was past any help.

Steve glanced toward the house, and saw, on the steps of the terrace, another figure . . . just a black hulk in the darkness . . . moving ever so slightly. He raised his gun, and then quickly lowered it. It wasn't an animal. It was a man—a man crawling up the steps with legs that dragged, horribly useless. Steve sprang forward to him, and a second later old Adam Barth was in his arms.

Steve choked back the exclamation that crowded up. Old Adam, his face gouged and torn, one arm mangled as though it had been put through a meat chopper, a dreadful gaping wound in his throat. His faded blue eyes were tortured, straining—his lips moved.

"My God, sir, what happened?" Steve asked hoarsely.

The withered lips moved, flecked with blood. Old Adam was whispering feebly. Steve lowered his head.

"The—Black—Panther!" old Adam muttered. "The—Black—Panther!"

And then he lay very still in Steve's arms. He was dead.

### CHAPTER III.

#### MURDER!

STEVE picked up the old man and carried him into the house. He had just stretched out the body on a couch in the hall when he heard shots outside. Fearing for Medford's safety, he picked up his gun and started for the door, only to see another car come up the driveway. A moment later two State troopers and Medford joined him.

"We nailed a tiger down near the entrance gates," said one of the troopers excitedly. "Where's Mr. Barth? What the hell's happened here, anyhow?"

Steve pointed to the figure on the couch. "The old man is dead," he said gravely. "Also his keeper. Torn to shreds."

"I'm Sergeant Cullen of the State Police," said the trooper. "Who are you and how do you happen to be here?"

Steve explained. "This is very much more serious, sergeant," he added, "than it would appear at first. This isn't the result of an accident. I got a glimpse of the animal cages. They've all been deliberately opened! Some one set these animals free on purpose."

The sergeant emitted a low whistle. "By God, that's murder!" he said.

"And there'll be more," said Steve,



"unless every householder for miles around is warned of the danger. There were forty or fifty of those brutes in the cages. They can cover a lot of territory."

"We've got men patrolling the roads," said the sergeant, "and going to every single house. But we've got to start a hunt for these animals."

Steve shook his head. "It's your business, sergeant, but if I were you I'd wait for daylight. You'll want a pretty large force of men, properly armed, and you want to see what you're doing. Ever hunt big game?"

"Nothing bigger than fox," said the sergeant dryly.

"A lion can cover a hundred yards in a matter of split seconds," said Steve. "Unless you're a damn good shot and you can see him coming you might as well hang up your cue then and there. If I were you I'd phone to New York for men who understand how to hunt these beasts."

The sergeant nodded. "I guess you're right, Mr. Blake. By the way, was old Barth able to explain what happened before he died?"

Steve shook his head. "He just said something about a black panther. Must have been the animal that attacked him. They're the fiercest killers of all, you know."

Steve spent the night in Barth's house. He found the butler barricaded in the library, from where he had phoned for help. He couldn't tell what had happened. The animals had suddenly made a tremendous uproar. The butler had got one look out of the window, seen them on the loose, and locked himself in the library.

Old Adam had a large collection of big game hunting rifles and guns, and Steve spent a good deal of the night cleaning and putting these weapons in

order for the next day. As he worked, one question insistently flashed before his mind. Why should any one have done this? How had any one dared do it? Each one of those cages had to be unlocked separately. What possible purpose could there have been in it? There could be no certainty that any special person would be harmed by the animals, and a grave possibility that the criminal himself would be slaughtered. It didn't make sense.

HE finally got a little sleep and at dawn Sergeant Cullen, four or five picked troopers, and three other men from New York arrived at the house to start the hunt. One of these men was Godfrey Welling, the famous explorer and big game hunter, and he took charge.

"There's to be no question of recapturing these animals . . . you want them killed?" Welling asked the sergeant.

"As dead as possible," said the sergeant grimly.

Steve was never to forget that day. Before they started they learned that six of the big cats had been killed by armed villagers at different places. But Welling was convinced that most of them would have taken to the wooded mountainsides, and it was on this theory that they worked. They moved up the mountain, spread out in a line of skirmishers, guns ready, nerves taut. They had not been under way ten minutes before Godfrey Welling brought down a snarling lioness. But after that there was little action. The sun beat down on them hotly through the trees; every clump of bushes seemed to be bristling with danger. Yet when noon came they had bagged exactly three animals. It was rather discouraging progress.

It was along in the middle of the afternoon that Steve found himself separated from the others. He could hear them thrashing through the brush, but at the moment he could see no one. Then suddenly, not fifty yards away from him in a little clearing, Steve saw a striped jungle killer—a huge, crouching beast, its baleful eyes fixed directly on him. Steve stood stock still and very slowly raised his gun to his shoulder. At the same instant the tiger began to move forward, slowly at first, treading softly. Coolly Steve pulled the trigger—and nothing happened! For a second he was like a man in a dream whose feet are irrevocably fastened to the ground. Then he sprang sideways for the protection of a huge maple tree. At that moment the tiger charged.

Steve frantically ejected the shell that had refused to fire . . . raised his gun . . . the tiger was in the air. He pulled the trigger once more . . . there was a burst of flame . . . and the tiger struck him. One slashing claw knocked him flat on his back, and only the partial protection of the tree saved him from receiving the full impact of that murderous charge.

He lay on the ground, a nasty tear in his arm, waiting for the tiger to finish the job. There was no chance to reload that double-barreled elephant gun, no chance to get away. But the tiger was thrashing feebly in the bushes.

Very slowly Steve got to his feet. As he picked up his gun he heard some one walking through the bushes. He called out. There was no answer. Then, for an instant, he caught a glimpse of a man . . . *a man moving hurriedly away!*

"Wait!" Steve shouted.

The man broke into a run and dis-

appeared without Steve ever being able to identify him. Steve stared after him in puzzled amazement. A man, certainly not one of the hunters, had been a witness to his close call, and had deliberately gone off without offering assistance or disclosing his identity.

Welling and a couple of the others joined him presently and heard his strange story. The big game hunter was incredulous. "You must have been mistaken," he said.

"It was a man," said Steve grimly. "A man who didn't want us to know he had any interest in this business. I'd bet several brand new hats he could have explained how those cages were opened!"

It was along about dusk when the hunting party got back to Barth's place with a record of having bagged eleven of the escaped animals. Only three more had been shot around the town since morning, which meant that twenty or twenty-five of them were still at large. Steve was exhausted, and his arm pained him severely, although the tiger's claws had inflicted only a surface wound. Young Medford was waiting for him at the house.

"Came to drive you home," he said. "Incidentally, Karen has gone back to her own house. She felt she would be as safe there as anywhere."

Steve's lips tightened. "I wish you hadn't let her go," he said. "I'll run down and make certain she's all right, but I'm coming back here as soon as I've cleaned up a bit."

"Take my car, then, and I'll wait here," said Medford. "I'd like to hear about the day's hunting."

THERE were only the last vestiges of daylight as Steve drove Medford's car along the road to Karen's house. As he approached it he

saw a thin spiral of blue smoke curling up from the chimney, but no lights in the windows. He frowned. She should have been warned to keep her lights burning brightly after dusk, for it would serve to keep any stray animal at a distance. He turned into her driveway, stopped the car, and climbed out, still carrying the gun.

"Hi, Karen!" he called.

There was no reply. He wasn't disturbed. Possibly she had gone back to the Medfords' as darkness came on. He wished, however, that she wouldn't run the risk of wandering around alone. He walked up onto the porch wearily, just to have a look inside to make sure. She might have left a note for him. Then suddenly, as he stood by the screen door, the thing he saw froze him with horror. In one corner of the bedroom, hiding behind the upturned iron spring of the bed, was Karen, her face white as death, an expression of strangling fear in her staring eyes. Not ten feet from her, his tail lashing viciously back and forth, crouched for a spring, was a coal black panther!

Steve knew better than to cry out or make any sound. He knew that Karen's life depended on his accurate shooting—and shooting before that black devil on the rug made up his mind to attack.

"Karen, you mustn't move, darling!" he prayed softly. "You mustn't move!"

Very slowly he raised the gun to his shoulder, drawing a careful bead on the panther. At the same instant the beast turned its head and saw him. It was suddenly a flying black streak in the dusky gloom. It sprang, not at Karen or Steve, but straight at the closed living room window. There was a crashing of glass, a splintering of wood, and the panther was gone.

3 A—I

Steve sprang off the porch, his gun ready, but the panther was already thrashing its way off through the woods. And then he saw another figure, the figure of a man. In the dim light he recognized him as the same person he had seen a few hours before in the woods, the man who had refused to lift a finger when the tiger was attacking him. Steve could not see his face, but the hat, the outline of the figure, were the same.

"Stand right where you are!" Steve rapped, swinging his gun into line.

The man turned and started to run. Steve pulled the trigger of his gun, and it roared and reëchoed in the twilight stillness. He must have missed, for the man went plunging off through the bushes.

"Stop, or I'll blow your brains out!" Steve shouted.

But the man kept running. Steve fired and the man took a headlong fall, but he scrambled to his feet immediately and went on. He was gone before Steve could reload his gun. Steve stood peering into the darkness after this sinister man who seemed to be present at these critical moments with no idea of lending assistance.

He dared not leave Karen to follow, now.

He turned back to the house to find Karen still sitting on the floor behind the upturned bed, her face sunk in her hands, sobbing. Very gently he took her in his arms and lifted her to her feet.

"It's all right now, darling. He's gone—and I won't leave you again, angel. I promise you that."

"It was terrible," the girl sobbed. "That animal crouched there for an hour, Steve. And then—then a man came and looked in the window. I couldn't see his face, but he stood there



watching. And—and he didn't make a move to help me!"

Steve's teeth gritted hard together. "Some day," he said softly, "I'm going to catch up with that guy, and when I do, God help him!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### A NEW THEORY.

IT was about nine o'clock when Steve got back to Barth's house that night, after returning Karen to the Medfords and getting himself cleaned up a bit. As he came into the big entrance hall where Sergeant Cullen had established his headquarters Steve saw a figure that brought a smile of pleasure to his lips.

"Johnny Tyson! You old so-and-so!"

Tyson gripped his hand warmly. They had been very close, these two, in past years when Steve was cartoonist for a big New York daily and Johnny had been a promising young reporter. Tyson was still in the newspaper business, star feature writer for the *Morning Standard*, with a reputation of having one of the sharpest noses for a criminal in the country. On more occasions than they might have cared to admit, the New York police department had been indebted to Tyson for some essential clue, or piece of reasoning, in a critical case.

A cigarette dangled between Tyson's lips, and his hat was pushed carelessly back on his head. "We've been waiting for you, Steve, old son. What's your slant on this? You were a friend of Barth's, weren't you?"

Steve nodded. "But before I give you any slants, I've got something to tell Cullen." Briefly he told the sergeant of the strange man who had

twice fled when Steve had discovered him.

"You couldn't identify him, Mr. Blake?" the sergeant asked.

Steve shook his head. "I can't give you any description that will help," he said. "Medium height, black felt hat, dark suit . . . and he can run like the devil! Maybe I'd know him if I saw him again, maybe not."

"The thing's incredible!" said a hard, cold voice. For the first time Steve noticed that Mr. Lucien Stone was among those present. "That a man should have seen Miss Marsh in such a terrible predicament and done nothing about it!" He limped slowly across to Steve. "Surely, if it was any one who lives in Stockford, you would have recognized him."

Steve shrugged. "I only got a fleeting glimpse of him the first time; he was running through the woods. Tonight, at Miss Marsh's, it was almost dark. He was scarcely more than an outline."

"Did you notice whether or not he was armed?" Johnny Tyson asked.

"He wasn't carrying any kind of a rifle," said Steve. "Of course, he might have had a revolver on him without my knowing it."

"I shouldn't think any one in the community would be wandering around without some means of protecting himself," said Tyson dryly. "Not with twenty-five or more killers floating around loose."

SERGEANT CULLEN slammed his fist down on the table behind which he was sitting. "There's something a hell of a lot more important than just catching these animals," he said. "You were right, Mr. Blake, about their having been purposely freed. Every one of those

cages was fastened with a padlock, and every one of those padlocks has been opened—with a key."

"Who had keys?" Lucien Stone asked.

"We found a bunch of keys which evidently belonged to Griswold, the keeper, lying near one of the open cages," said the sergeant. "We found a duplicate set in the desk drawer in Barth's study. It seems logical to assume that Griswold's keys were used."

"That he used 'em himself, eh?" suggested Stone.

Johnny Tyson shook his head. "If Griswold had any reason for letting 'em out he would have managed to take care of himself. But he was killed horribly. Of course, he might have made a slip. But why should he have done it?"

"There's no possible reason," said Steve flatly. "Old Adam was like a father to him, was his benefactor. I think Griswold would have given his life for old Adam."

"For that matter, why should any one turn them loose?" Tyson asked. "What was to be gained?"

"If some one hated Mr. Barth," said Lucien Stone thoughtfully, "they might have seen this as a way of getting him."

"It doesn't make sense," said Tyson. "The chances against the animals getting Barth were tremendous. He knew how dangerous they were. He had all kinds of guns and . . . By God!" Tyson interrupted himself. He looked at Steve excitedly. "You found Barth, didn't you, Steve?"

"Yes."

"Did he have a gun? Was there one lying anywhere near him?"

"No," said Steve. "I noticed that particularly. In fact, I went over his

armory later and there wasn't a gun missing."

Tyson looked at the sergeant. "Can you imagine, Cullen," he asked, "Adam Barth rushing out into the midst of a lot of escaped killers without first arming himself? He knew how dangerous they were. He would have been the last person in the world to run that risk. If I were you, sergeant, I'd order an immediate autopsy on Adam Barth."

"But why?" asked the sergeant.

"Suppose he was shot, stabbed, or killed in any way by somebody who summoned him outdoors . . . *before the animals were free?* What better way would there be for covering up such a murder than turning the animals loose and letting them tear Barth's body to pieces?"

There was a moment's silence before Steve spoke up. "You're forgetting one thing," he said slowly. "As Barth was dying he said to me, 'The Black Panther.' He said it twice. I don't see any other way of interpreting that statement than that it was the panther that got him."

"Perhaps," said Tyson, crushing out his cigarette in an ash tray on the table. "But if Barth rushed out of the house because he knew the animals were free, why didn't he arm himself? I tell you, it doesn't make sense!"

## CHAPTER V.

### "WHO PROFITS?"

IT was Lucien Stone who put them off on a new track. "Barth was a very wealthy man," he pointed out. "Who profits by his death? Who inherits his fortune? It seems to me that is something we should know."

Old Adam's butler put them on that

track. Barth's will was in his desk drawer. Tyson found it and read it. It was very brief and to the point. Barth's entire fortune and his collection of animals was willed to one Robert Carter, professor of biology at Columbia University, "the money to be used for the advancement of scientific research as my friend Carter deems wisest."

"Why, Carter has just been visiting Barth," said Lucien Stone. "He left day before yesterday, after having stayed for a week. He had every chance to familiarize himself with the set-up here. By Jove, Mr. Blake, perhaps we are getting on the trail of your mystery man!"

It was Tyson who phoned to headquarters in New York asking that Carter be apprehended and brought to Stockford. Half an hour later headquarters reported that Carter had been found at his home and was willingly accompanying an inspector to the scene of the crime.

Things were at a standstill until Robert Carter and his escort arrived, about two in the morning.

Carter was a serious, spectacled young man in his middle thirties, who seemed horrified when he learned what had happened.

"I—I hadn't seen the papers," he said brokenly. "Poor old Adam! Why, only yesterday—"

"Never mind that, Mr. Carter," Cullen cut in grimly. "Where were you last night, say about nine o'clock on?"

"That's quite easy," said Carter. "I was at a meeting of the Smithsonian Society. We had a dinner at seven thirty and I was in the company of my friends there till considerably after midnight."

"You won't be offended if we check

on that, Mr. Carter?" asked Tyson dryly.

"Not at all."

**T**WENTY minutes later Tyson had finished some elaborate telephoning. He smiled at Carter. "Your alibi is perfect," he confessed. "Not only for the time these animals were loosed, but also for the entire day to-day. Steve, your mystery man is certainly not Professor Carter."

"Mystery man?" asked Carter, puzzled.

He was told about the man Steve had seen. "You see," Tyson explained, "you are the only beneficiary under Barth's will, Mr. Carter. That is why we suspected you."

"But Mr. Barth merely appointed me executor. That is to say, the money was to be for scientific research. It was left outright to me to avoid legal complications. I might add, gentlemen, that if you were to communicate with my bankers you would discover that I am in no financial straits of any sort."

"Your alibi is enough for us," said Cullen. "You couldn't have loosed those animals and been a hundred miles away in New York at the same time."

Carter was rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "There's one thing that puzzles me," he said. "That remark you attribute to Mr. Barth when he was dying. You're sure of it, Mr. Blake?"

"He said it twice," said Steve. "'The Black Panther.'"

"The reason it puzzles me," said Carter, "is because there was *no black panther in Mr. Barth's collection!*"

"But I saw it this afternoon with my own eyes!" Steve protested.

Carter shook his head doggedly. "I can't help that, Mr. Blake. There was no black panther in the collection. That I can swear to. I visited Mr. Barth

here for a week and saw *all* the animals many times. I tell you emphatically, gentlemen, there was no black panther!"

For a moment no one spoke. Johnny Tyson's eyes were very bright. "Of course, he might have received it the day you left," he said.

"I doubt it very much," said Carter. "He said nothing about it to me. Furthermore, his interest in these animals lay in the fact that he had captured them himself. As you very well know, he had been on no hunting expeditions for a year. And besides that, every cage was occupied! I tell you, there was no black panther. Mr. Blake must have been mistaken in what he saw this afternoon. He must have been mistaken in what Barth said when he was dying, and jumped at conclusions, in the excitement, when he saw that animal in Miss Marsh's cottage."

"How about it, Steve?" Tyson asked.

"I was not mistaken," said Steve. "Barth referred very distinctly, twice, to the black panther! And the animal I saw this afternoon could have been nothing else. I'll take my gospel oath to that."

At that moment a car pulled up in front of the house and one of Cullen's troopers came in. He was white as a sheet and his lips twitched nervously.

"There's been another tragedy, sergeant," he said hoarsely. "Mrs. Irene Jackson, who lives just down the road from here, has been killed—torn to pieces by one of these animals. She's been dead for a long time, sir. Since late this afternoon the doctor thinks."

"Who is Mrs. Jackson?" Tyson asked.

"A newcomer to town," said Steve. "I haven't met her. She's only been here for a couple of weeks."

Godfrey Welling, the explorer, had listened to all the investigation without comment. Now he pulled his huge body out of a chair. "There'll be tracks around the house," he said. "Suppose I go back with your man, sergeant. Perhaps we can settle this business."

He went. Twenty minutes later he phoned the sergeant.

"Panther tracks," he said laconically. "Not the slightest doubt of it."

## CHAPTER VI.

### FINGERPRINTS.

JOHNNY TYSON went back to Steve's house with him that night and they snatched a little rest. Over breakfast the next morning Tyson marshalled the facts as they knew them.

"We're faced with one very definite conclusion, Steve," he said. "There is some one else in these parts who is collecting wild animals . . . at least one wild animal. Our friend the black panther has been imported here for a definite purpose by some one."

"What sort of purpose?"

"Murder," said Tyson grimly. "You know, I've been puzzled by that extraordinary fact that Barth rushed out into the midst of a bunch of raging animals without arming himself. I don't believe he did. I think what happened is quite clear now. He was called out by some one—some one he knew. And that some one is the importer of the black panther. When he was outside, the panther got him. After that, our villain turns all Barth's animals loose so that no one will guess that an outsider was responsible. I don't think he meant that any one should see the panther."

"But I saw it, Johnny."

"Quite so. You see, there was one little slip up. Barth wasn't quite dead when you found him. He spilled the beans about the black panther to you, but none of us placed any special importance on it, assuming there had been a black panther in the collection."

Steve looked at his friend sharply. "But if the black panther is under the control of this murderer, then it must have been deliberately set on Karen! The man who looked in the window must have meant the panther to kill Karen."

"Precisely. And also Mrs. Jackson."

"But in God's name why?" Steve asked.

Johnny Tyson studied the end of his cigarette. "Don't forget that he also stood by and watched a tiger attack you in the woods without helping you. Tell me, Steve, do you and Karen know anything that nobody else knows? Something that might give the murderer away?"

"Good Lord, no!"

"Think," said Tyson earnestly. "It's the only explanation. You and Karen either know something or have seen something that would give the murderer away. You may not be aware of it consciously, but I'll bet a hat it's the answer. Think back over the last few days. Has anything unusual happened? Have you seen anything out of the way? It may not have struck you as important at the time, but it may be the key to the whole business."

"But, Johnny, if I'd seen anything I'd have remembered, wouldn't I? I'd have remembered when all this happened, at any rate."

"Think!" said Tyson grimly.

Steve looked around him a little helplessly. "There hasn't been any-

thing," he said. "Well, as a matter of fact, something odd *did* happen to me that I told Karen about, but it can't possibly have any bearing on this business."

"What was it?" Tyson demanded.

"Why, I was painting a picture over in one of Barth's fields. I left it standing there on the easel while I went up to old Adam's for lunch. When I came back some one had deliberately wiped out half of the picture. It was simply a wise trick—somebody trying to be smart."

TYSON scowled, sucking in a deep lungful of smoke. "What were you painting?" he asked.

"Just an ordinary landscape."

"What was in the half of the picture that was wiped off?"

Steve rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Nothing special. I was painting the mountains and the lake, with part of the village in the foreground. Whoever did it tried to paint it out in black first, then they wiped the whole thing off with a paint rag."

"Have you got the canvas here?" Tyson asked. "Let's look at it."

Steve brought it out and put it down against a chair for Tyson to see. He hadn't touched it since he had come in from the field that afternoon. "It's just as I found it," he said.

Tyson studied it, frowning. "Now why the hell would any one do that? I mean destroy just half of it. Are you sure there was nothing special on that half of the picture?"

"Nothing that I recall," said Steve. "A couple of houses and barns, and the mountains and lake in the background."

Tyson looked closer at the picture. "There's a smudge of black here below the horizon line," he said. "He



must have squeezed quite a lot of paint out of the tube. Steve, try to remember every detail of that half of the picture! There's only one possible explanation of this, if it had anything to do with the crimes. You had painted something into that picture that would be a damning record of something which might trap the murderer."

"Nuts," said Steve inelegantly. "I tell you, Johnny, the things have no connection."

"Then why did your mysterious man stand by and watch both you and Karen in danger of death without lifting a hand? I tell you, Steve, there's a tie-up here somewhere. Something in my bones tells me this is a vital link." He looked down at the open box of paints on the floor beside the picture. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. "Is that tube without the paper label on it the black that was used?" he asked.

"Yes."

"My God, Steve, did you touch it after you found out what had happened?"

"Why, I—I don't think so. But what of it?"

Tyson hurriedly took his handkerchief from his pocket. "What surface could possibly be better for retaining a fingerprint impression than that oily lead sheet?" he asked. "If you haven't handled it, the prints of the person who defaced your picture are probably on that tube. It's worth a chance, anyhow."

"But what possible good would it do you if they are?" Steve asked. "You'd have to fingerprint everybody in the community to identify them. And it wouldn't prove anything."

"Maybe, and maybe not," said Tyson. He was carefully wrapping the tube in his handkerchief. "If you did

paint something in your picture that might have given the murderer away, and it was the murderer who defaced the picture, then we have him. What you've got to do, my lad, is remember what *was* in the picture. Go out to where your easel was—now! Sit there and look at that landscape until you remember every detail you painted into your picture. I'm sending this off to headquarters. See you later."

STEVE went and sat, as Tyson had directed. He sat there for almost an hour, and at the end of that time he was no wiser than he had been. Nothing was changed that he could see. There wasn't a single thing about the whole countryside that could have anything to do with the crimes.

Johnny waited impatiently to hear from New York about the fingerprints on the tube, if any. Steve joined him at Barth's, which was a sort of headquarters for police and hunters. As the day wore on reports came from Welling and his men that indicated they had rounded up all but one or two of the escaped animals.

Meanwhile Sergeant Cullen had gained some information about Mrs. Irene Jackson, the woman who had been killed by the mysterious black panther.

"She's an ex-circus queen," he told Steve and Johnny. "Used to be a famous bareback rider until about five years ago. Retired, and just bought this place down the road about a month ago. As far as I can make out she didn't know any one here."

"Just the same," said Johnny, "it *has* a link with Barth. He caught animals for circuses. She was a circus performer. It looks as though she belongs in a definite scheme of the murderer's."

Just how definite Johnny was to learn a few minutes later. There was a long distance call for him from New York. When he rejoined Cullen and Steve his face was very grim. He sat down and deliberately lit a cigarette.

"Steve, there were prints on that tube," he said slowly. "The prints of a well known murderer—a man who is wanted badly by the police!"

"For God's sake, Johnny. Well, anyhow, it's a relief to know it's no one in Stockford."

"Wait," said Tyson, "till I tell you the story. Those prints were identified as belonging to a man named Tate Randall, who fifteen years ago murdered his wife in a little town in California. He was tried and convicted, but on the eve of his execution he somehow managed to escape. He has managed to elude capture all these years, by completely changing his identity. The New York police have warrants for his arrest, extradition papers from California, and they are very anxious for information as to his present whereabouts."

"There's nobody named Randall around here," said the sergeant.

"Naturally not," said Tyson dryly. "Randall has been somebody else for fifteen years. But I haven't told you half the story, gentlemen. Could you, do you suppose, guess at Mr. Randall's occupation at the time he murdered his wife?"

"I'll bite," said the sergeant.

"Mr. Tate Randall," said Tyson, "was an animal trainer! He was a very famous animal trainer, my friends. The reason he was so famous was because he was one of the few men who ever successfully tamed a black panther!"

"Good Lord!" Steve ejaculated.

"And that's not all," said Tyson.

"Because of his success in this peculiarly difficult feat he was known and publicly referred to as 'The Black Panther'! You see the implication, Steve? When Barth lay dying in your arms he was not only referring to the animal that had killed him . . . he was referring to Mr. Tate Randall!"

"But why should this man Randall track Barth down here and kill him? Why should he have turned his panther loose on Mrs. Jackson?" Cullen asked.

TYSON inhaled on his cigarette. "Maybe he didn't track them down, sergeant. This is my theory about it, at any rate. Some one living in this peaceful little town of Stockford, under another name, is Tate Randall. After fifteen years there is very little danger of Randall's being caught unless some one recognizes him. Now we can assume that he is completely disguised, but any one who had known him fifteen years ago might penetrate that disguise, might recognize some little mannerism that he had not altered. Well, living here in Stockford were two people who might have seen through him: Barth and Mrs. Jackson. Barth, an animal hunter for the circus, may actually have supplied Randall with panthers for his act. Mrs. Jackson may have played in the same circuses with him."

"Of course," said Steve, "if they recognized him it would mean the chair for him!"

Tyson nodded. "I don't think they had actually recognized him," he said. "I think either Mrs. Jackson or Barth suspected. They may have conferred together and decided to watch this man, whoever he is. You see, it must have been like that, for Randall had plenty of time to plan a way out. He managed to import a black panther,

train it, and finally turn it loose to kill his victims. If Barth, for example, had been certain of this man's identity, he would have notified the police at once. No, they weren't sure. And while they were watching this man, he was planning cleverly to kill them."

"But who is he?" Cullen asked.

"That is something we have to find out," said Tyson. "But he is the man who defaced your picture, Steve; the man who stood by and watched that tiger attack you; the man who set that panther on Karen Marsh."

"But why me and Karen?"

"Steve," said Tyson decisively, "you painted something in that half of your picture which might have given Tate Randall away. He happened to come along when you were gone, saw what you had painted, and then wiped it out. He knew you had told Karen, and his whole safety depends upon our not delving into what it was."

"But if there was something in the picture," said Steve, "it is still there . . . I mean in the landscape itself. I spent an hour looking this morning, but perhaps you can see something."

Tyson shook his head. "Whatever it was, you can be sure it is no longer there. Randall has removed it or changed it. What we've got to do, Steve, is go back to that spot and you've got to remember what this missing thing is. When you do remember I think we will have Mr. Tate Randall!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE MURDERER.

STEVE took Tyson down into the field where his canvas had been set up. It was about four in the afternoon and the sun was glaring

bright against the waters of the distant lake. They stood for a while in silence. Finally Tyson spoke.

"It must have been something in the foreground, Steve," he said. "There would be no detail in your painting of those distant hills. It was something close at hand that had interested you sufficiently to paint in some detail. Something that you won't see if you look now. What was it?"

Steve shook his head. "No soap," he said. "There were a couple of horses down there grazing that are missing now. That's all."

"What houses or buildings were in your picture?"

"There was Karen's house there to the left; Medford's studio and Lucien Stone's barn over there to the right."

"Uh-huh." Tyson was thoughtful for a moment. "How about Karen's house? See anything about it that's different from the morning you painted it?"

Steve grinned. "I know every detail of that house, inside out. If there was anything different about it I'd know it in a minute."

"How about Medford's place. Think, Steve. There may have been an automobile there that isn't there now. There may have been something or some one in the yard that you painted into your picture."

Steve shook his head after a long pause. "Not a thing," he said.

Tyson crushed out his cigarette impatiently. "Damn it, there *has* to be something, Steve."

"I'd remember if it was a person or a car or something of that sort," said Steve. "You see, it would have involved certain technical problems that wouldn't escape my memory now. If it's anything, it's something that must have seemed quite natural at the time."

"Well, how about Stone's barn?" Tyson asked.

Steve studied the barn for a long time, his brow puckered in a frown. "There's something," he said slowly. "Something missing, Johnny. But I'm damned if I can think what it is."

"You've got to," said Tyson grimly. "Was there some one by the barn? Was there a box or crate out in front of it? That panther had to be brought here *in* something, you know."

"You needn't worry about Stone," Steve said. "He's got a short leg and that guy that I shot at at Karen's had nothing the matter with his underpinning. He ran like a deer."

Tyson ignored this comment. "Was there a light in one of the windows?" he persisted. "Was there a door or window open that is closed now?"

"I've got it!" Steve said triumphantly. "You see those two loft doors above the main doors below? They were open, Johnny, and there was a block and tackle rigged up from the top beam!"

**T**YSON gripped Steve's arm. "You've hit it!" he cried.

"That *must* be it, Steve. Stone was having something put in that loft—something that needed a block and tackle to lift it. And he didn't want any one to know about it. When he stumbled across your picture he saw the block and tackle painted in and he erased it. He didn't want a single clew to the fact that he had used it. I tell you, Steve, unless I'm a mile off, Mr. Lucien Stone is none other than Tate Randall, the murderer."

"Hey, wait a minute," said Steve. "Stone couldn't have rubbed out that picture. He was at old Adam's for lunch with me and Karen."

"Was he there when you got there,"

Tyson asked, "or did he turn up later?"

"As a matter of fact," Steve admitted, "he *did* come afterwards. About ten minutes afterwards."

"Plenty of time to deface the picture," Tyson pointed out.

Steve was still unconvinced. "But I've told you, Johnny, he's lame! The man I saw was sound of wind and limb, and I don't mean perhaps!"

"Don't be an ass," said Tyson shortly. "Wouldn't Randall disguise himself completely? What better disguise than an apparent game leg? Steve, we are going to have a look at Mr. Lucien Stone's hay loft."

"What do you expect to find?"

"Who knows?" said Tyson. "But let's go!"

They walked down across the field toward Stone's barn. As they approached they could see no sign of its owner. In all probability he was up at Barth's house; he had spent a great deal of time there since the investigation had started. Somehow it seemed incredible to Steve that Lucien Stone could be the man they sought. Barth had liked him; had him at his house. Surely if he had suspected him of being Tate Randall in disguise he wouldn't have had him around! Then logic forced him to admit that if Barth had only *suspected* Stone that is exactly what he would have done—had him around as much as possible to see if he could catch him out.

As they approached the barn Tyson drew a revolver from his hip pocket. "There's just a chance that we may run into our friend the panther," he said.

"If we do, I hope to God you know how to use that thing," said Steve, grimly. "I've seen that animal move, and it's very like chain lightning!"

Stone used the main floor of the barn as a garage, but his car was not there now. The barn completely concealed the house which stood behind it, and they could not see whether or not the car was parked there. Tyson did not want to risk exposing himself to make sure.

"We'll just have a look around," he said.

There was nothing on the stable floor of the barn. At the back was a narrow flight of wooden stairs leading up to the loft. The two men exchanged glances, and then slowly and quietly Tyson led the way up. As Steve stepped into the dimly lighted loft he felt his heart suddenly begin to beat a little faster. Something about the place seemed to make the hair rise on the back of his neck.

"Smell it?" he said softly to Tyson. "Cat! There's been some kind of a jungle animal up here."

At the far end of the loft was a door which evidently led into what had once been a hired man's room. But before they reached this they saw something that made them pause. There was a heavy iron ring in one of the upright beams, and to this ring was attached a chain.

On the floor were several large bones from which the meat had been completely chewed, and there was also a large tin pan of water.

"The home of our friend the panther," said Tyson grimly. "I wonder where he is now?"

"Curiosity," said a cold voice, "often brings disastrous results."

They had neither of them heard that little door at the end of the loft open. As they swung around they saw Mr. Lucien Stone, his eyes burning with fury, and crouching at his feet, fangs bared, a huge black panther.

"God, Johnny, you were right!" said Steve.

Tyson nodded grimly. "Mr. Stone . . . or should I call you Tate Randall . . . ? I think the game is up."

Lucien laughed very softly. Then he uttered a sharp, guttural command. The black panther was suddenly a murderous streak in mid air! Johnny Tyson fired, emptying the six bullets in his gun straight at the charging beast. At the same instant both he and Steve sprang away. The panther fell to the floor, screaming and writhing in mortal agony. Tyson swung around just in time to see Mr. Lucien Stone coolly jump out the loft door—a drop of some fifteen feet to the ground. He pulled the trigger on his revolver, but there was a dull click. He had emptied it on the dying beast.

"After him!" he shouted, and tore down the narrow stairway with Steve in his wake.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### QUICK CHANGE ARTIST.

MR. LUCIEN STONE was not limping now. He was running like an antelope toward the roadster that was parked in front of his house. Johnny Tyson saw that there was little chance of catching him before he got under way, and he had no more bullets for his revolver. Steve's car was parked back down the main highway.

"Quick! We must get your car," Johnny yelled at Steve. And they headed pell mell across the field away from Mr. Stone.

Stone leaped into the roadster, the motor snapped to life, and the tires spun a cloud of gravel up behind as he jerked forward. For a moment it



seemed that Lucien Stone's attempt at flight would end almost before it started, for as he tore around the driveway and out to the wooden gateway entrance, he was driving much too fast for safety. The car skidded as he jammed on the brakes to make the turn into the highway, and the front wheel crashed into one of the gate posts. But it was the post that gave, after crumpling the right front fender, and the car, swaying drunkenly for a moment, turned into the road and was off!

Steve and Tyson must have been almost a quarter of a mile behind when they got rolling themselves.

"We ought to telephone to Cullen," Steve said, gripping the wheel tightly.

"No time," snapped Tyson. "We've got to see where he's headed for first. He'll be at the State road in a minute and he may turn toward New York or head upstate. We've got to know."

Stone headed south and they kept on his trail. The next forty minutes were the most hair-raising Steve had ever been through. Stone drove like a madman, but somehow they managed to cling on his trail, never gaining much, but managing to keep him in full sight most of the time. He suddenly cut off the main road toward the toll bridge at Poughkeepsie.

"We've got him now," said Tyson grimly. "They'll stop him at the other end of the bridge."

But Mr. Lucien Stone was not to be stopped by any one. He drove straight past the frantically waving officers at the toll gate. Steve and Tyson were not so lucky, for by this time the police officers at the gate had drawn their guns and were blocking the way.

"Say, what the hell . . . ?" one of them shouted.

"The man in that other car is wanted for murder!" Tyson rapped.

"Climb on. We can't let him get away."

One of the policemen was evidently convinced, for he swung up onto the running board and they were off once more. But the delay had been too great. As they turned into the main street of Poughkeepsie the roadster was for the time being lost to view. Then suddenly Tyson let out a shout:

"Over there! Pulled up at the curb."

Across the street Steve saw a roadster exactly like Stone's, parked near a hotel. A man was getting leisurely out of it. Before Steve brought his machine to a full stop Tyson and the cop had jumped to the sidewalk and were making for the man. Steve came puffing up behind just in time to see Tyson staring at a complete stranger. The stranger looked inquiringly at Tyson and the policeman, both of whom were brandishing revolvers.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir," said Tyson, a little breathless. "We're after a criminal who was escaping in a car exactly like yours. We lost him a little way back, and when we saw your car we thought you were he."

The man smiled faintly. "It's a quite usual make of car," he said. "But since you do not, obviously, want me . . ."

"Of course you're at perfect liberty to go, sir," said the policeman.

"Thank you." And the stranger walked into the hotel.

Tyson stood with his hat pushed back on his head. "I'd have sworn this was the same car," he said. He wandered slowly around toward the front of it. "Great God!" he shouted. "It is Stone's car. There's the fender he smashed on the gate as he left his house. And the motor's red-hot!"

They dashed into the hotel, but the stranger was nowhere to be found.

**I**NSPECTOR CROWELL, of the New York Homicide Squad, listened to the story that Steve and Tyson had to tell.

"It's in character with everything we know about Tate Randall," he said. "The man is a genius at make-up and disguise. You can testify to that if he could so completely alter his appearance that you didn't know him . . . and alter it while he was driving a car at breakneck speed."

"It was amazing," Tyson admitted. "So amazing that I didn't bother to examine the car closely before we let him go."

"That's been the history of a fifteen year chase," said Crowell. "He's always given us the complete slip just when we thought we had him. The trouble is we know almost nothing about the man, his habits, his likes and dislikes. We've never had a clew as to where he might spend his time."

"I think I know something about him," said Steve. "He is passionately fond of the opera. He used to drive to New York three or four times a week just to hear that fifth rate company that's performing at the Madrid. He told me he never got enough of it when he was a kid, and now he goes every chance he gets."

"The Madrid, eh?" said Inspector Crowell thoughtfully. "There's a performance there to-night. Do you suppose he might show up for it?"

"Even if he did," said Tyson, "the odds against spotting him are tremendous. He will have assumed some new disguise and will walk by us quite simply."

Inspector Crowell nodded. "He can change his face and his figure all right,

Mr. Tyson. But he can't change his finger prints." He looked at his watch. "Suppose every ticket stub turned in at the Madrid to-night were dropped in the box at the door . . . and down to the basement to a squad of finger print men? We instruct the doorman to make each ticket holder drop his own stub into the box. There's an outside chance that we'd get a clear enough print to identify."

"It would take a frightful amount of preparation and work," said Tyson. "And suppose he wore gloves?"

"Suppose he didn't?" said Crowell. "I tell you, Mr. Tyson, after fifteen years we're not overlooking a single bet."

**I**T was an elaborate machinery Inspector Crowell put into operation at the Madrid theater that night. A special box for ticket stubs was installed at the door—a box with a chute in it which led to the basement. And in the basement, equipped with everything necessary, were a dozen finger print experts. Steve, Tyson and the inspector waited anxiously for results as the stubs began to come down the chute to the men at the long table. They came much faster than the men could pass on them. Thus it was that the performance of "Boheme" was well under way before one of the men turned to Crowell.

"I think we've got it," he said. "It's not a complete print, but there is enough similarity to the part we have to take a chance."

"Where's he sitting?"

"Row C, Seat 114."

Crowell nodded grimly. "Are you ready, gentlemen? There's a cordon of police around the house in case he makes a break for it."

Crowell led the way upstairs and

Steve, Tyson and two plainclothes men followed him. The house lights were dimmed, the finale of the first act was approaching, as they walked down the aisle to Row C. In seat 114 sat a man—a man Steve had never seen before.

There were four or five people between him and the aisle. Crowell called out sharply, "Randall, I want you!"

The man looked up quickly, the light of a hunted animal in his eyes. He saw Crowell, Steve and Tyson. He stood up, looked the other way, and saw the plainclothes men in the other aisle. Quick as the panthers he had trained the man sprang to the back of the seat in front of him, and, like some monstrous ape, began to run . . . over people's heads . . . leaping from row to row . . . to the orchestra pit and up onto the stage.

"Don't shoot!" Crowell snapped to one of his men who had drawn a gun. "You'll wing somebody else. He can't get out of the theater."

"Boheme" was completely disrupted as Tate Randall, alias Lucien Stone, alias The Black Panther, darted across the stage and into the wings with Crowell and the others in hot pursuit. The audience shouted hysterically; the orchestra stopped playing; singers fled for points of safety as they saw policemen brandishing guns. The place was pandemonium.

Back stage, carpenters and stage hands shouted instructions to Crowell.

"He went up the dressing room stairs!"

"He went toward the property room!"

Steve and Tyson, hot on Crowell's heels, chased up the iron stairway to the dressing rooms. A white-faced woman, plastered with grease paint, pointed to a door at the end of the hall. "He went into the property room."

"Better stand back," said Crowell grimly. "If he's cornered he may get tough."

The inspector walked calmly forward and flung open the property room door, his gun ready for action. But the room was empty . . . empty of The Black Panther at least. Hundreds of costumes, trunks, boxes, wigs, old swords, shields, a litter of odds and ends were there, but there was no sign of the escaped criminal. Methodically Crowell searched everywhere . . . everywhere but in one trunk on which a flower pot with a bright red geranium in it stood.

"You can't climb in a trunk and then put a flower pot on top of it," he reasoned to himself.

But Steve was staring at that flower pot, fascinated. He saw that it was not real . . . that it was a papier-mâché stage prop. And he saw, on a little table beside the trunk, a glue pot, the brush thrown carelessly beside it on the table cover. Steve took a quick step toward the trunk and tried to lift the flower pot. It came away, after a sharp tug, but it had been firmly glued to the top of the trunk. *The glue was still wet!*

"I think, Inspector, if you look in that trunk," said Steve quietly, "you'll find your man."

Crowell yanked up the lid, and very slowly Mr. Lucien Stone emerged, his hands held above his head.

## CHAPTER IX.

### STONE CONFESSES.

THERE was a look of burning hatred in the man's eyes as he looked at Steve. He paid no attention to Crowell, who snapped a pair of handcuffs over his wrists.

"Damn you, Blake!" he said savagely. "You've stuck your nose into this from start to finish! You, with your picture . . . and your memory of what was in it after I'd destroyed it! You, with your memory for the fact that I had a passion for the opera! You, who noticed that flower pot was glued to the top of the trunk! I wish to God I hadn't trusted to luck that day in the woods! I wish to God I'd finished you with my own hands!"

"I wish," said Steve grimly, "you'd tried. I regret, Mr. Stone, or Randall, or whatever your name is, that the law won't permit me to settle accounts with you personally. I haven't forgotten that you killed my friend, Adam Barth! I haven't forgotten that you tried to kill my fiancée!"

A cunning smile flickered across Stone's lips. "Ah, but I didn't kill Barth, my friend," he said sardonically. "It was the panther! I trained it myself . . . brought it to Stockford, drugged, in a sack. I called Barth out into the night, and he came . . . the suspicious old fool! He walked out like an innocent child, and in a second that panther was at his throat! Lord, it was quick, amazingly quick!"

Tyson regarded the murderer with a shudder. "Barth had guessed that you were Tate Randall?" he asked.

"He wasn't sure," said Stone, licking his thin lips. "It was the Jackson woman who first suspected it. She went to Barth, and they decided to watch me. Oh, I knew it! They were so transparent. They'd ask me sudden questions—try to trap me. And all the time it was I who was plotting to trap them, the fools!"

"Did you know that Barth and Mrs. Jackson were in Stockford when you came there to live?"

"Certainly not, but when I met

Barth I saw that he didn't know me from Adam! Ha! No pun meant. I was safe with him . . . I was so completely changed. And then Irene turned up, and right away she suspected, went to Barth. Women are like that—they see through everything. They started laying traps for me, and I knew I had to get them."

"How did you get the panther?" Crowell asked.

"I stole it," Stone chuckled. "Stole it from a circus. A friend of mine in town kept it—never mind who! Every time I came to town to the opera I worked with him till he was ready. Then I drugged him and carried him to Stockford in a sack. There was no other way to get him there without attracting attention, and I didn't want any one to know about him."

"You meant to use him to kill Barth and Mrs. Jackson, and then get him out of town?" Tyson asked.

"Exactly—after turning the other animals loose to cover up. When I got him to my house I had to hide him somewhere. He was too heavy to lift, and I rigged up a block and tackle to get him into the loft. It was late . . . five in the morning. I was tired, and I didn't bother to take down the tackle that night. And then, the next morning, there was Blake, painting in the field, and I couldn't do anything till he left."

"After you'd taken it down you happened by his canvas, saw the block and tackle painted in, and wiped it out?" asked Tyson.

"What else could I do? I didn't dare have that record left in paint! Suppose the panther were discovered . . . as it was? Blake would see that tackle in his picture . . . put two and two together . . . and where would I be? Then, when I learned that Barth

lived long enough to mention the Black Panther, I got scared. I knew they'd find out he'd had none in his collection. I knew they'd guess some one had imported one for the express purpose of killing Barth and Mrs. Jackson. I decided to get rid of Blake and Miss Marsh before they talked about the picture." His teeth gritted together. "I failed in that, and here I am!"

"How did you let the animals out without danger to yourself?" Steve asked.

Stone grinned, a cruel twisted grin. "I had intended to get Barth's keys from the house. But while the panther was working on Barth, Griswold, the keeper, attracted by the noise, came

along. I turned the beast on him. You saw him, Blake? My God, what a job that panther did on him! I took his keys. I took off all the padlocks, but I didn't open the doors. I knew presently one of the animals would discover that his door was open and in a minute they'd all be out."

"Weren't you afraid they'd attack you?" Steve asked.

"Even a lion," said Stone grimly, "hesitates to attack a black panther! I had him on a chain . . . and they cowered back in their cages. You should have seen. Lord, Tyson, I'm sorry you shot him." A note of macabre tenderness crept into his voice. "He was a lovely animal!"

THE END



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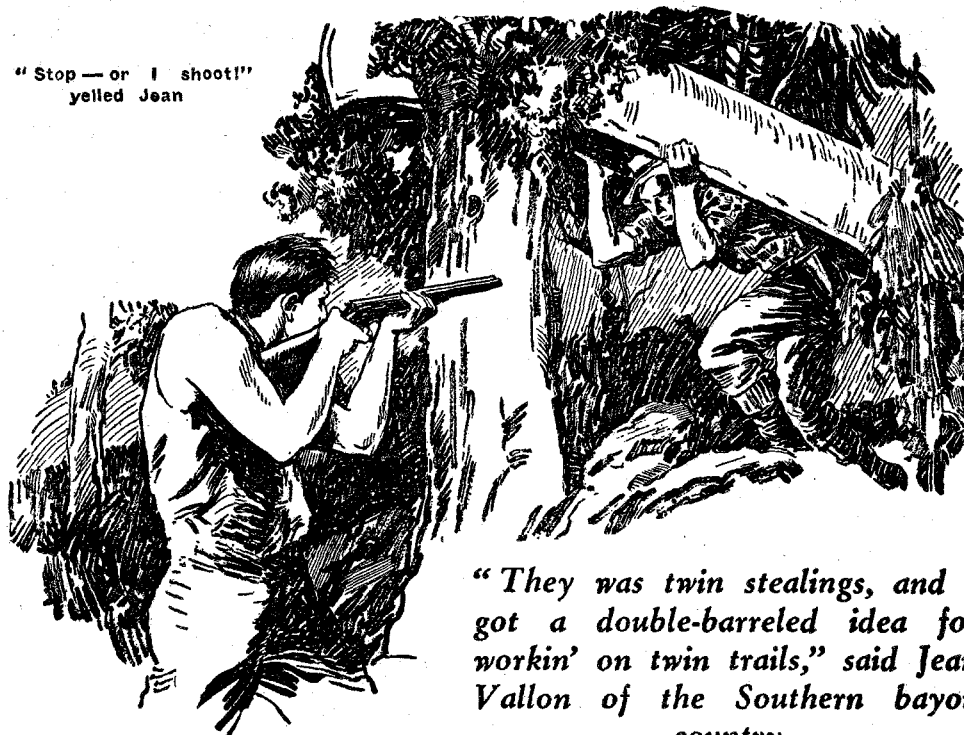
**STRAIGHT KENTUCKY WHISKEY**

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"Stop — or I shoot!"  
yelled Jean



"They was twin stealings, and I  
got a double-barreled idea for  
workin' on twin trails," said Jean  
Vallon of the Southern bayou  
country

## Twin Trails

By FRANK DEL CLARKE

LONG red rays of a setting sun followed the slim craft of Jean Vallon as it slipped rapidly down-bayou. The early evening was still and quiet. Jean sent his *piroque* forward with slow, skillful strokes, and with such ease that the boat and the man seemed to be a part of each other. No premonition of trouble crossed his mind until the dusky silence was broken suddenly by the sound of high-pitched, angry voices which came to him across the water. Clearly, they came from his father's boat shed which squatted on the bayou bank, thirty lengths or so ahead.

Jean quickened his stroke until he

felt his slight craft almost shoot out from under him. Obeying a final deft twist of the paddle, the *piroque* slid half its length up onto the muddy slope below the boat shed which was their landing place. Jean leapt out and ran toward the wide, open end of the shed. Loud voices still issued from inside, and one of them was certainly his father's.

Jean brought up short just inside, and at his sudden appearance the voices stopped abruptly. Papa Vallon was a leather-skinned little man with a gray moustache so flowing that it could be seen from behind. Just now he was poking an angry, wagging fin-