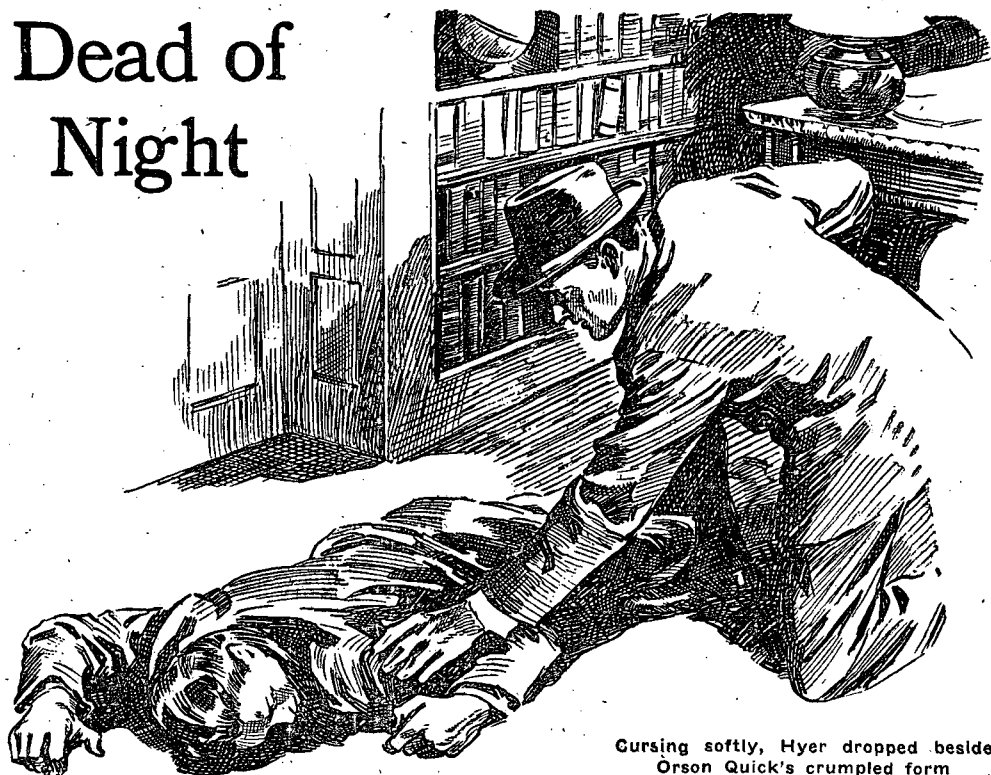


Dead of Night



Cursing softly, Hyer dropped beside Orson Quick's crumpled form

By KURT STEEL

INVESTIGATING the disappearance—possibly the murder—of publisher NAT THAYER, sleuth HANK HYER runs into as fantastic a collection of human beings as he has ever encountered. First there is—or was—Thayer himself, lately addicted to worrying his partner, PIERRE DAWSON, by running their publishing business according to horoscope. There is BERYL THAYER, his second wife, flighty, eccentric and even more devoted to star-gazing than her husband. There is the prankish and irresponsible RICH LANNING, Beryl's nephew, who is engaged to MARCIA, Thayer's daughter. And finally brooding over all their lives is that eminent racketeer of the planets, the astrologer CLEARSE OWEN.

Before Hyer is called in, Thayer has been missing for five days, last seen on Tuesday morning when he left his Adirondacks camp after an overnight conference with Owen,

for whom he has built an elaborate observatory on the grounds. The subject of the discussion was Rich Lanning's inheritance, and Lanning had warned both Thayer and Owen to cease interfering in his affairs.

Two days later, Dawson had received instructions supposedly from Thayer to cash two large checks and mail the money to Thayer in Washington. Thayer had also made an appointment with Lanning at the same time. Someone had called for the cash at the Washington post office, but Lanning had seen no sign of Thayer.

HYER, when he is called into the case by Marcia, manages to plant his red-headed, freckle-faced assistant, ORSON QUICK, in Owen's employ. But before he has made much further progress, the body of KARL SANDLUND, Thayer's caretaker at the camp, is found on Hyer's doorstep. Sandlund had been dismissed by Thayer on Owen's insistence, and Hyer assumes that he has been killed because of something he saw at the camp—something connected with

This story began in the Argosy for June 29

Nat Thayer's subsequent disappearance.

Marcia and Hank go up to the camp to investigate. Beryl is already there, frantic with worry. She has cast Owen's true horoscope, which she hands over to Hyer, predicting that it will expose the astrologer for the crook she has come to realize he is.

That evening, Hyer is drugged and during the time Marcia and Rich are trying to bring him around, Beryl is shot to death while locked in his room. Hyer hastily remembers Beryl coming into the room when the drug was beginning to take effect, and Marcia assures him that before he had passed out completely in the hall, he had carefully locked the door behind him.

Hyer believes that Beryl had drugged him in an attempt to recover Owen's horoscope and that somehow the murderer, realizing she had discovered something about her husband's disappearance, had gotten into the room and killed her.

Orson Quick, while prowling through the lodge on an errand for Owen, discovers that Owen's passkey will unlock every door in the house. But he has had no chance to communicate this discovery to Hyer.

Meanwhile Dawson has come up from New York. He is convinced that Owen has traced Thayer's signature on the two mysterious checks from other checks of Thayer's in his possession. Owen denies this hotly and Hyer realizes that for the moment the case is at stalemate. He advises State Trooper McKinnon to intensify the search for Jean, the cook at the camp, who had left the same day as Sandlund and has not turned up since. Sandlund knew something, Hyer is convinced, and was killed. He believes that Jean, frightened, is lying low, but that eventually he will attempt to black-mail the murderer.

Then Jean does turn up—dead, on a train bound for the camp.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE NORTHBOUND CADAVER

JEAN'S death occasioned Hyer a shock he was unable to conceal. The manner in which the news reached him played its own part in this. For Quick had driven Hyer to Big Moose to see the forty from the south arrive. Jean, he had been sure, was too French and too thrifty to fail to show up on payday. Hank wished to be the first to greet Jean after his return from New York.

To be sure, Hyer had said this with a

tincture of amusement, but he had said it, and under circumstances that were later to prove no small embarrassment. He had said it, indeed, during the brief, ingenuously casual police investigation which had taken place under the guidance of Inspector Maline of Troop D's Bureau of Criminal Investigation.

The inspector had looked at Hyer with eager interest in his lean youngish face and had said quietly, "Drop in at headquarters and see us on your way back, will you, Hyer?"

After they were all told that they might go about their several affairs again, Marcia stopped Hyer in the east wing corridor and said incredulously, "But they didn't do anything."

"They're doing plenty. Only it doesn't show on the surface. They're not flashy, these State men, they're good. They haven't got enough evidence to lock any one of us up on, so they're using simple police strategy."

She flushed. "You mean they'll be watching us?"

Hyer said, "Don't do anything you wouldn't want published in a gossip column."

She bit her lip. "Was I wrong in breaking down and telling them about Dad officially?"

"It had to come out some time."

"There'll be ghastly publicity. It's like doing something mean and disloyal."

They were standing just inside the corridor. Hyer raised a finger and motioned with his head. Orson Quick, on his way to the veranda door, sidestepped into the corridor and came up to them.

Yes, Owen was planning to fly back to New York immediately. Yes, Quick could make some excuse to be left behind.

The boy's greenish eyes glinted. He said, "Now you're showing some sense. I knew you couldn't get along without me."

"All I need is a chauffeur. If Miss Thayer will loan us her car."

Her mouth tilted. "Help yourself."

Which explains how Hyer and Quick came to be driving out of the estate in

Marcia's maroon cabriolet half an hour later after the boy had been seized of an acute attack of imaginary indigestion and, from his bunk in the observatory, had heard the fading roar of Owen's plane as it took off from the Lake. Dawson was already on his way back to New York and Rich had driven away in Augusta's roadster three quarters of an hour earlier.

WHEN they had left the great rustic gates behind and were speeding along the narrow mountain road through the sunlit, balsam-scented forest, Quick put his hand in his pocket. He said, "I got you these, Hank, like you told me to. First chance I've had to give 'em to you." He held out his closed fist and opened it over Hyer's eager palm.

Sunlight glinted on a key in the folds of a wrinkled square of green paper. Hyer smoothed the paper out. It was a Pullman stub for a certain lower eight in car thirteen dated Monday night, May first. So Rich's claim that he had not been at the Camp on the night before Thayer's disappearance was true. He did not ask Orson where the stub came from.

"And that," the boy said grimly, "is a passkey to the whole house and grounds."

"Does he know you took them?"

The boy shrugged. "He's probably missed 'em, all right."

Hyer said, "Nice going. You'll grow up into a first class crook yet."

"I get pretty good examples set me," Quick retorted. After a time he said, "Jees, but I can't figure this Owen. You know that little entryway outside the office where you all talked to him last night? Well, that's got about a thousand drawers in it, and when I was casing the place yesterday and getting acquainted, I peeked in 'em. Know what they're full of, Hank?"

"Shooting stars."

The boy shook his head. "Little three-by-five cards. Each one's got a name and address on it and a lot of funny marks. From the samplings I made, they look like the sucker list of a mail order house."

Hyer said, "Yes?" with sudden interest.

"Folks there from practically every whistle stop in the United States, I guess. And all those funny symbols, and things like 'sister Mary died 1910' or 'owns quarter-section in Douglas County' or 'push-over for oil stocks.' Things like that on the cards. Don't make sense."

Hyer said, "What else did you find?"

"He's got a private trunk line to Montreal and his own short-wave radio station. The Indian runs it. How do you figure that?"

"Astronomers," Hyer said easily, "have to do a lot of conferring."

Quick said, "Yeah," and trod the accelerator as their road straightened. "Boy!" he murmured blissfully.

Hyer said, "Take it easy," nervously.

As they waited by the station, Quick said, "What makes you think the cook'll be on this train?"

"Maybe he won't, but he's had just about enough time for a spree after he—"

They heard a whistle.

"Well," Quick said ironically, "here comes our big moment."

They got out and walked to the cindered platform.

IT WAS clear that Jean's failure to dismount from the train disappointed Hyer. Quick, narrow-eyed and uneasy, watched the single woman passenger get off and dismay showed in his freckled face. He looked at Hyer. "What do we do next, Hank?"

Hyer shrugged. "Wait and meet the afternoon—" He broke off, his round face suddenly immobile, expressionless.

A short distance away, the station agent and train brakeman were engaged in lively gossip.

"Dead, was he?" the agent was saying excitedly. "Right there in 'is berth like that?"

"Yep. Upper seven."

"Well, I be."

Quick looked at Hyer.

Hyer looked at Quick.

"Funny," the brakeman said. "No baggage on him except his ticket and half a

sandwich. But he had a roll of bills to choke a horse. Nearly a thousand bucks. No identification. Say, come to think of it, he had a ticket right here to Big Moose. Short guy about your height with a head of black hair and a little black mustache with points."

The station agent said, "Well, I be."

"Know 'im?"

"Nope."

The down train, waiting on the siding, began to move with a stertorous puffing and clanging, and the voices were drowned out.

When he and his employer were in the car once more, Quick said, "Maybe we spoke out of turn back there to that inspector, maybe."

A mud-spattered roadster passed them, stopped, and backed. Rich Lanning was at the wheel. He looked tired and worn, but there was a light of triumph in his eyes. Stubble again darkened his square jaw.

Hyer said, "Hello, where've you been?"

Beside him, Quick muttered, "our hero," in disgust.

Rich said, "Come here, Hyer. I want to talk to you." He got out of the roadster, and when they had walked back out of earshot, he said, "I've found the missing station wagon at last. That's what I was doing all yesterday afternoon and evening," he continued rapidly. "This morning I remembered there was a garage there at Thendara—that's the next stop down the line—that had been closed when I went by yesterday. Well, it's there."

Hyer said, "When was it left?"

"Tuesday morning. Just before the train went through. Yes, I talked to the boy that took it in." Rich paused and his mouth tightened. "He's not exactly a moron, but he's low grade enough to be pretty suggestible."

Hyer said, "Oh. But do the suggestions stick?"

"I think so. If you ask him now, he'll tell you—or anyone that asks him—that the station wagon was left by a small, neatly dressed, gray-haired man with po-

lite manners. Not Thayer, of course. At first," Rich hesitated, and looked away. "At first he thought it had been a girl who left the station wagon. I fixed that. He was wrong anyhow."

"Confusion," Hyer murmured, "has its own uses, sometimes." Then he went on casually and without changing his tone, "Jean's dead."

Rich started. "Jean? My God. Three of them, now."

ABRUPTLY, Hyer said, "How much influence have you got over the housekeeper, Augusta? Can you persuade her over the phone to come down to New York with Marcia? I mean it," he said sharply. "I'm not anxious to have a fourth corpse on my conscience, and it may be easier to prevent that in New York where I'm familiar with the trail-blazes."

"Why do you want me to phone?"

"Because you're going down with that boy and me—pronto."

"Oh no, I'm—" Rich began furiously.

"Yes you are. You've done your share up here. That station wagon business was a good piece of police work. You need a vacation."

Rich started to put his pipe into his mouth, hesitated, and dropped it into a pocket. He ran a hand over his unshaven face, looked down at the checkered shirt under his windbreaker, the corduroy breeches, mud-caked boots. "I can't go looking like this. Let me go up to the Lake and change first."

"And walk right into a covey of MacKinnon's troopers? You know how fast news can travel. Maybe they've already put things together down there at Utica."

"Utica?"

"That's where they took Jean's body off the train. When news of that gets around, we'll be lucky if any of us stays out of jail. Come on. There's a phone in that saloon. I'll fix it up with Marcia first."

Rich gave him a quick, sharp glance, turned and walked toward the saloon.

Hyer's telephone conversation with Marcia was terse, noncommittal, guarded.

She said, "All right, where shall we meet you? Gracie Square?"

Hyer squinted. He said, "Wait a minute," tapped his temple with the receiver and scowled. "Rich got a key to the Thayer apartment? All right, you can meet us there—wait a minute— You can meet us there when you see your car parked in East End Avenue between Eighty-third and Eighty-fourth. When you see it parked there, that'll be the green light for you. You can go up to the apartment then. We'll be there."

Marcia said, "You sound like something out of a thriller."

"So does cyanide in an upper berth," Hyer snapped.

As he and Quick waited while Rich talked to Augusta Warren, the boy said, "You show poor judgment in traveling companions, Mister Hyer."

"Shut up."

Rich appeared and Hyer moved over to make room. "By the way," he said, "you two ought to know each other."

Rich acknowledged the introduction with only a momentary lessening of strain. Quick's growl was unpromising.

Hyer, feeling himself somewhat uncomfortably in the position of a separator between the positive and negative plates of a battery being rapidly charged, said, "All right. Let's go."

CHAPTER XXIX

RETURN FROM LIMBO?

SOME five miles out of town, Hyer said, "Wait a minute." Quick drew them to the side of the road, frowned.

"What's the matter?"

"Yes," Rich said, "this is the place."

"What place?" Quick demanded.

"Where they found Pierre Dawson's car. The one they arrested Lanning for stealing from Forest Hills." Hyer pointed down an unused wagon track that struck off into the forest on their right. "What's the mileage?"

Quick said, "Why?"

"The night the car was stolen, Dawson

had had it greased at Jack Boyd's in Forest Hills. They marked the mileage on a sticker. MacKinnon gave me that and how far it had been driven when it was wrecked. I'm just curious enough to try to back-track."

Quick said, "Oh."

Hyer took out his notebook and started to write the number down as Quick read it to him from the speedometer.

"Never mind," Rich said. "I'll take care of the memory department. My one and only talent," he added. He took out his tobacco pouch. "Up to now, it's been as decorative and useless as the flowers that bloom in the spring, tra-la."

Quick started them off at Hyer's gesture.

"Let's see if it's any good," the detective suggested, settling himself more comfortably. "What's the license number on that station wagon?"

Rich promptly told him.

"How many times did Eller, the chauffeur, beat you at checkers last night while MacKinnon was going over the rest of us?"

Rich grinned.

"Seven. I won six, and we drew two."

"When were you first kicked out of school?"

Rich winced. "February twenty-ninth, nineteen twenty-eight. I was ten."

Hyer said, "Leap year. That was an easy one."

"All right. The second time was January eleventh, nineteen thirty. The headmaster had a dictaphone that he used to put his Sunday chapel talks into." Rich chuckled suddenly. "He had a big, slow-witted, sissy sort of lout for a secretary to transcribe the dictaphone cylinders, and we knew he didn't read 'em over again until he got up in the pulpit on Sunday."

"The food in that place," Rich said, "was terrible. Well, the headmaster was a little surprised when he found himself up in front of the whole school one Sunday complaining about the food, in," he chuckled again, "rather well-chosen words, if I do say so."

"What time did Eller say he heard the

shot that killed Beryl Thayer last night?"

For an instant Rich's face darkened. Then, after a brief hesitation, he said, mimicking the chauffeur with startling fidelity, "'I told you when I heard it. I did not look at the clock.' Then Arch said, 'Listen, if you think I—' Is that what you mean?"

Hyer said admiringly, "That was a good deal more than I meant. You do it pretty well."

"Believe me, do you?"

Hyer said, "I believe you."

"I remember things," Rich said, lighting his pipe. "Always have. Beryl used to say it's because my censor isn't normal."

At that point conversation came to a full stop.

Afterward, Hyer tried, without effect, to interest Rich in a further exploiting of his memory, but the young man merely answered in monosyllables, and when Hyer's social attentions became too obviously one-sided, Quick muttered something about "people who collect watches." This obscure reference to the fact that the watch that Thayer carried right up to his disappearance had been found on Rich Lanning angered Hank. He kicked Quick's shins smartly.

Rich, on the point of a reply, controlled himself with an apparent effort.

At length, Hyer gave up and went to sleep.

THE trip could scarcely be described as a social success, but they reached the city without being stopped and this achievement made any temperamental discomfort somewhat less important than the hum of a fading swarm of gnats.

Hyer's sleep had freshened him noticeably, and even Quick responded to the relaxed strain when, a little after dark, he drew up, at Hyer's direction, in East End Avenue just a little south of Eighty-fourth street.

"What's the point of stopping here?" the boy objected. "Why not drive up in style? Lanning could be on his way to a fancy-dress ball, you know." But his sar-

casm was only tone-deep, and after a brief scornful survey of the corduroy breeches timber shirt, and windbreaker, he glanced up and caught Rich's eye. He chuckled. Impulsively he said, "Boy, you're a sight. If Marcia could see you now."

"You're no Beau Brummel, yourself," Rich retorted and grinned.

Hyer, grateful for this rapport, breathed more easily. "The point of stopping here," he said, following Rich to the sidewalk, "is to give Marcia her bearings. When she sees the car here, she'll bring the rest of the troupe up."

They crossed the street.

"Why all the precautions?" Quick asked.

"If I'd started taking them a little earlier," Hyer said testily, "we might still have Jean around to ask questions of."

They were halfway down the block toward the grotto-like entrance to the apartment house, when Rich said suddenly, "Look here, wouldn't I better wait outside? I could go over and sit in the park there."

Hyer took his arm. "Come on. I want to see what's upstairs, and I don't want to worry about any side issues."

Whatever surprise Hyer may have anticipated upstairs in the Thayer apartment, the news that met them in the lobby clearly left him as non-plussed as his two companions.

Mr. Thayer had called at 9.30 the morning before and dismissed all the servants. A messenger had delivered their salaries two hours later and collected the keys.

"Where'd the messenger get the money?" Rich demanded.

"I don't rightly know that, sir." The elevator man was increasingly unhappy. "I'd feel better if you talked to the management about it, Mr. Lanning. I don't know if Mr. Thayer would have liked me to say anything."

The elevator stopped and the door slid open.

Rich said, "That's all right, Miller. We'll forget you mentioned it. As soon as we find the place empty, I'll call the manager and get the news that way."

AT LAST when the three of them were standing in the small decorous seventeenth-floor foyer out of which a single entrance door opened. Rich swung his latch key and looked from Hyer to Quick and back. "If I tell you I don't like this," he said, "I suppose you'll rag me."

Hyer said, "You'll be voicing a general sentiment. Open the door."

Rich turned his key, pushed open the door, strode into the dark hallway.

A switch snapped and the hallway leaped alight, spacious, chaste, unchanged apparently by so much as a mote of dust since Hyer had walked out of it at daybreak forty hours earlier. The rosewood paneling glowed softly, the staircase curved silently upward. But two of the four doors, all of which were normally kept closed, now stood open, and of the three aquatints along the unbroken wall the center one was clearly and unblushingly askew.

Rich said, his voice lowered, "Someone's been here all right. Regan wouldn't have left a picture hanging like that. He'd straighten a wall calendar on his way to a cyclone cellar."

Hyer said, "Let's see."

They went into the drawing room where Rich pointed out further minute evidence of intrusion. "That needlepoint chair," he said, "always sat square with the design in the carpet. Look at it. There's another picture hanging cockeyed. And that cope always came within exactly three inches of the windows on each side of the fireplace. Nice to know the cops have been around. In the movies," he added, grinning, "the first thing police look for is a wall-safe. God knows why."

They went into the dining room where Rich, at Hyer's question, indicated the telephone in its concealed nook. Hyer took it out, listened, said, "Well, it's still alive," and gave a number. Presently he said, "Hello . . . That's right. We just got in . . . Up at the Thayer apartment. It seems he called up yesterday morning and paid off the help for some reason. Nobody tried to get in touch with you? . . . All right, why don't you? . . . Yes, Rich is with me. The

rest are coming . . . Fine. We'll be expecting you." He hung up.

"That was Dawson," he said. "He's coming over."

"Well," Quick said, and his greenish eyes had an eager professional glint, "let's look the joint over."

Hyer shrugged. "Go ahead. I want to go down and have a talk with the manager."

This functionary, a small nervous man with a gray pompadour and prominent ears, Hyer found somewhat loath to discuss the situation. Nathaniel Thayer's disappearance ardently associated by the press with two violent deaths, had already brought considerable notoriety into the small nervous man's life, and he answered Hyer's questions sharply and uncoöperatively.

Some ten unfruitful minutes had passed when Hyer again went up to the apartment. To his ring there was no answer.

Miller, the elevator man, who was waiting, stared wide-eyed across the foyer, and thin color ebbed from his sallow cheeks.

Hyer looked over his shoulder. He said, "Go on. If I can't get in, I'll call you."

Miller popped back into his car like a startled prairie dog.

The moment its door slid shut, Hyer was at work on the lock, murmuring profanely to himself, his fingers unsteady at first. It was a good lock. Another five minutes passed before it gave.

Hyer's breath came rapidly as he walked into the apartment. The lights were on as he had left them.

He paused, listened. Then, walking lightly and warily on the balls of his feet, he made a quick inspection of the first floor. Coming back into the rosewood hall, his round face now a rigid, expressionless mask, he ran up the stairs, pushed open the first door he came to, snapped on the light.

This was the missing publisher's library. It was empty. The bedroom adjoining it was also empty.

The third room Hyer entered testified to the wide range of Beryl Hawtrey Harnett Thayer's interests. Partly salon, partly

curiosity shop, one full wall solidly ranged with books, it was a chamber striking enough in its own right.

But just then Hyer was oblivious to the room's proper décor.

He was on his knees beside the unconscious form of Orson Quick.

CHAPTER XXX

THE STARS FELL ON ALOYSIUS

IN CHASE REMSEN'S curtained, smoke-filled study, where, at five o'clock in the morning two days before, Hyer had given the mathematician Clearse Owen's true horoscope with instructions to work it backward, the detective put down the telephone for the third time and moved his hand aimlessly among a litter of papers on the desk. He drew a long breath and rubbed his eyes.

From the morris chair, Remsen watched him. The mathematician's high narrow forehead and thin, knife-edged features were in shadow, but in their sunken sockets his lively eyes glowed with what a moment before had been a dry academic triumph and was now, as he waited for Hyer to speak, quick sympathy.

"Some stupid interne that time," Hyer said moodily. "No change yet. I couldn't get the doctor." There was a moment of silence. Hyer rubbed his eyes again. "He's got a private room."

He rose abruptly, took a few steps, came back, and sat on a corner of the desk. He took out a cigarette, studied it a moment, broke it in two. "All right," he said in a lifeless voice. "Go on."

Remsen glanced at his notes. "Saturn in Cancer, Neptune in Taurus gave high probability of the year. Eighteen ninety-six."

Hyer nodded, preoccupied with the cigaret he was shredding.

"Pluto three degrees forty-three minutes forty-five seconds Virgo made that certain. Sun in Scorpio ten degrees and six minutes—obviously November second. November, second, eighteen ninety-six."

Again Hyer nodded.

"Comparison with Moon twenty-seven degrees thirty-four minutes Capricorn gave one forty-five Greenwich mean time." The mathematician paused, turned his pencil minutely. "Thus time coördinate determined almost to the minute. Century, year, day, hour."

Hyer, interested despite himself, said, "Good."

"Could be any spot on the globe?"

Hyer's nascent interest faded. He shrugged. "Well, at least you did the best you—"

"But precise Scorpio ten degrees six minutes rising—"

"Wait a minute!" Hyer sat up, eager. "You said Sun was ten degrees six minutes Scorpio."

"Precisely."

"Then it means sunrise?"

Remsen nodded.

"Sunrise," Hyer said, excited, "could have been only one place at one-forty-five Greenwich time that day."

"Not one place, Henry. Band varying from a foot to twenty miles wide—pole to pole—along longitude one hundred degrees twenty minutes west."

Hyer sat back, sighed. "Well, it was a good—"

"So had to get latitude," Remsen broke in.

Hyer's jaw dropped.

"Up to this point," the mathematician said, "pure astronomy. Now," distaste touched his thin lips, "astronomy gets muddy. Astrology. All right, astrology. Still accurate, but—" he moved his hand, "muddy. Table of houses. Never mind. Table of houses. All right. Cusps. Remember cusps listed in that memo? Second house fifteen degrees fifty-four minutes Aries, third house eighteen degrees fifty-five minutes Taurus. Others, too." His shoulders twitched. "Muddy—but accurate."

"Go on."

"Reduce Greenwich mean noon, November second, eighteen ninety-six to sidereal time. Sixteen hours, forty-one minutes, fifty-nine and fourteen hundredths seconds

after intrapolation for one forty-five. Consult tables of houses. Gives latitude, of course."

Hyer said, "Of course," weakly.

"With all corrections made, that is."

Hyer nodded.

"Well, latitude comes out forty-four degrees twenty minutes north. Defines precise area forty miles square on earth's surface, six-forty-five—sunrise there—November second, eighteen ninety-six. Elementary."

Hyer slipped off the desk and dropped into a chair. He murmured, "My God." Then he sat up. "Where?" hoarsely.

Rensen nodded. "Get out the atlas. From then on," he concluded, and his staccato manner had a trace of scorn, "nothing more to be done."

"What?"

REMSSEN shrugged. "Police work, Henry. Shoddy police work. That parallel runs through sparse section of western South Dakota—eastern Wyoming. One town—only one—in whole belt fitted. Pierre."

"Pierre?" Hyer said, "Oh, South Dakota."

"Telephoned the recorder in Pierre. Seemed to have some difficulty, but they found what I wanted." Rensen rubbed his sharp, high-bridged nose, and his eyes bored brightly at Hyer with a gleam that belied his protestation of distaste. "At four-thirty on the morning of November second, 1898, one Widow Cleary bore a son. Duly christened, three days later, Aloysius Cleary. My informant," he went on with dry amusement, "proved a garrulous chap. Something of a local chronicler. Name unlocked a freshet of reminiscence. Proceeded to give it to me—tune of five dollars every three minutes."

"I'll pay the toll," Hyer said hastily. "What?"

"Young Aloysius a provincial Lothario from the age of ten. When he was nineteen he had twice left town until scandals blew over. Two years later he was clerk in the local bank and a large sum of specie dis-

appeared one Friday afternoon. So did Aloysius. They caught him. Tried him. Some melodrama in that. Two prairie belles threw themselves at the judge and begged for mercy when the jury came in. Sentenced to twenty years in the state penitentiary. Served," Rensen concluded, "three. Details of the escape quite ingenious." He waited.

Hyer was staring down at the map and the sheets of notation on the desk, his mouth a rueful line. "Twenty-four hours ago," he said softly, "all that might have been worth ten thousand dollars, Chase." That was what Beryl had agreed to pay him for discrediting Clearse Owen. He shrugged.

When he looked up, Rensen was already deep in the problem Hyer had interrupted with his stealthy entrance half an hour earlier.

He looked at his watch, nervously reached for the phone again. After a moment's wait, he said huskily, "I want to talk to Dr. Roberts. . . Hello, doctor. I'm calling again about that Quick boy in 314." He listened, paled, said, "Fractured skull?" his voice breaking in a near falsetto. "But you think— You don't— Well, look doctor, don't spare anything, will you? Not anything."

He replaced the phone, jerked it again from the cradle and called Clearse Owen's number. No, the astrologer had not come in.

On a sudden impulse he telephoned the Organdy Club, and then, the furious light in his eyes, tempered with a nervous caution, he called police headquarters and asked for Inspector Turner.

"This is Hyer," he said briskly. "Have you combed that hideout in Queens, yet? One I told you about, on Bowery Bay. . . So Owen hasn't showed up? . . . Never mind where I am. I'll come in when I've got time."

He jammed the phone down impatiently, studied a sheet of figures for a time, and took out his pencil to make a note. The pencil was leadless. Absently he picked up an oversize fountain pen from the desk, wrote *Jailbreak 1921*, in red ink, absently

capped the pen and slipped it into his pocket.

Hyer slipped off the desk, stood irresolute a moment.

Remsen, engrossed in his work, paid no heed.

HYER went to the window, drew the muffling curtains open a crack and peered obliquely up Bank Street. Just this side of his own house stood a black sedan, a sedan which certain subtle marks identified to him as a police car as clearly as if it had borne an official label. In the car he could barely distinguish two men. They had been waiting there when he dodged up Remsen's steps thirty minutes before.

He stiffened. A limousine passed slowly in front of the window and drew up in front of his own stoop.

Hyer dropped the curtains, reached the telephone in three long strides. In a moment he said swiftly, "Tony, this is Mr. Hyer. Do me a favor, Tony, will you? There'll be a big black limousine with a man and two women in it come by your shop in a minute. Tell 'em I said to leave the car, take a cab, come back to Number twenty-three, and ring Remsen's doorbell twice. . . . Never mind your customer, Tony. . . . All right, all right, so she wants avocados. I'll buy every avocados in your place tomorrow. . . . Yes, bananas, too. . . . Tony," sharply, "you're a Sicilian pirate. Get out and stop that car."

Hyer's manner was marked by no fine warm glow of hospitality when he opened Remsen's living room door a few minutes later and greeted his four callers. The Thayer chauffeur, Eller had accompanied his passengers, and stood a little to the rear, his cadaverous face putty-colored, his dark sunken eyes burning.

Marcia was pale, worn, anxiety bitter in the set of her young mouth.

Augusta Warren, at Marcia's shoulder, gave Hyer a hard hostile scrutiny. A man's heavy overcoat lent new bulk to her massive frame, made comic contrast of the small nondescript black hat atop her gray hair.

As Hyer motioned them into the room, Dawson said, "We hear the boy—"

"He's in the hospital."

Marcia wheeled. "But where's Rich?"

Augusta looked accusingly at Hyer. "Yes," she rumbled, "Where's Rich? And where did *you* go?"

"To a hospital," Hyer snapped. He looked at Dawson, "Well, what had happened when you got there?"

"Marcia and Gussie had just arrived," Dawson said. "The place was full of police. Among other things, they were curious about what had happened to you."

"What else?"

"How could he have got out of the apartment?" Dawson said, frowning.

"Service door. It's got a chain, but the chain wasn't on." His eyes narrowed. "Or was it when you people got there?"

For a moment no one answered.

Eller said quietly, "No sir, the chain lock was off."

"We've got to find Rich," Marcia said desperately. "They're already saying he's the one who attacked the boy."

Hyer's bloodshot eyes rested on her briefly. "Somebody did."

Marcia bit her lip.

"Where are you people staying?" Hyer asked. "Dawson's?" —

Dawson said, "No, I suggested that but—"

"We've rooms at the St. Julian," Marcia said.

"Have any of you seen or heard from Owen?" Hyer saw passion flicker an instant in Eller's shadowed eyes.

No one had.

"Has he disappeared?" Dawson demanded.

"Temporarily."

Marcia said hoarsely, "You're not going to help us find Rich?"

Hyer's manner eased. "The best thing you can do is get some sleep." Then to Eller, "Where are you staying?"

"At the St. Julian, sir."

Hyer said, "Then you'll all be together in case I want to get in touch with you?"

He opened the door, walked down the

hall with them. Then, as he was on the point of ushering them out, he stepped to one side and peered through the narrow pane beside the door. The loitering sedan with its two occupants still waited outside his house.

Over his shoulder to Dawson, Hyer said hurriedly but with decision, "How about putting me up for the night?"

As she and Augusta rode to the St. Julian in a cab, Marcia replied in monosyllables to the older woman's few rumbled comments.

Her mind was made up. Wild and improbable as it seemed, she knew that there was something there in the house on Gracie Square—something she must find, something she could not find while the others were there, but only now when she could return alone.

With amazement she saw that the big woman beside her was weeping. Mechanically she said, "Rich is going to be all right, Gussie," and could think only of what she herself must do.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE SECRET ALIBI

IT WAS surprisingly easy. Augusta, dazed and docile after her show of grief, was persuaded to go to bed at once in one of the adjoining rooms Marcia had engaged at the St. Julian. A scant twenty minutes after their arrival, Marcia was slipping out of the other room, walking toward the elevators.

The problem of reëntering the apartment house was a minor one. No police detail had been left, and both Peters the doorman and Miller the elevator boy readily accepted her story of the headache powders which she found herself in desperate need of.

"I'll wait, Miss Thayer," Miller said, as she stepped out of the elevator on the seventeenth floor.

"Oh no, you really needn't, Miller. I'm not quite sure where they are. It may take some time."

But he was still watching her anxiously

as she turned her key in the lock, and nearly thirty seconds passed after she entered the dark hall before she heard the elevator descend.

Her heart pounding, she listened. There was no sound. She tiptoed into the drawing room where a faint, uncertain dusk came from the night sky, on through the arch into the dining room, fear slipping over her like an ether bath.

It was worse, far worse, than she had anticipated.

She was numb when she stood at last in the embrasure of the windows and stared with hot smarting eyes over the night-shrouded river. Far below, Welfare Island thrust its sharp weathered spur upstream, the small lighthouse on its tip like the fo'c'sle lamp on a prow stubbornly breasting the tide rip. A mile downstream the lights on Queensborough Bridge twinkled, and Marcia half imagined she could see the familiar lifting tracery of its spire-like girders. A tug hooted on the dark river directly below her window. Lights of three laden barges slipped sedately past.

Gradually the familiar sights and sounds quieted her and the paralysis that had gripped her mind began to relax. It was as if she were picking up a surreptitious thread she had laid down when the thought had first come to her and the apartment was filled with people. Now there was no one to stop her, no one to ridicule what she was about to do, no one to come to her aid if—

She shook her head and went quickly toward the kitchen before that thought could form.

THE kitchen was pitch dark, and for a moment she hesitated. But some furtive caprice prevented her from turning on the light. Noiselessly she picked her way across the room, skirting table and range, her knuckles slipping along the cool smooth surface of the big refrigerator, finding at last a door that led to an entryway on which the service entrance opened and where back stairs ascended to the floor above.

She let herself into the entryway, into the faint sickish odor of mops and polishing compound. Here she struck a match, and in its flicker dimly discerned cupboards, the back door, steps leading up.

She stopped, listened. Not a sound came to her. As her hand touched the knob of the back door, she gave a start. She thought, "Some one could open that door and seize me and I could scream and no one would hear," and she pictured the blank elevator door, the iron stairway descending in its sharp square spirals to the street level, seventeen floors below. She shivered as she hurried on.

But just as she started up the stairs to the second floor, she stopped again, her heart fluttering, a thickness at the base of her tongue. Overhead there had been a sound at last, a hushed, evasive noise, scarcely audible in the stillness.

Gripped anew by the paralyzing fear, she was about to turn back when she caught herself. She listened. The sound was not repeated. She had imagined it, of course. That was it, she had imagined it. Left hand clenched, right grasping the stair rail convulsively, she fought herself upward step by step.

She thought, "Rich was here . . . Here in this house . . . Four hours ago . . ."

As she emerged from the stairs she stopped and listened again, unconsciously flattening herself against the wall. Before her lay the invisible hall. So familiar was she with its every detail that she could all but see the wallpaper where galleons endlessly buffeted a static sea. Ten steps away was the door to Beryl's room.

Beryl's room. Where it had happened. Where Orson Quick had been struck down.

It was as if a hand urged her forward.

At last her fingers felt the smooth panel of her stepmother's door. She stopped once more, held her breath, listened. Then she gritted her teeth. The door was ajar. But when she would have pushed it open, revulsion seized her and she drew back. Summoning every trace of her courage, she pushed the door and entered the dark room.

Again she hesitated, quivering.

Here. Here, where Quick had lain. Where it had happened. Where Rich might have stood. This was a dead woman's room. The scenes at Manitou Lake rushed back over her. In the darkness she felt her eyes film with quick, unaccountable horror.

Then she stiffened and a scream caught in her clogged throat.

Her hand had brushed warm, living flesh.

Delirious panic was followed at once by a surge of excitement, for the voice at her ear, saying, "Marcia," guardedly, was Rich Lanning's, and the hand which her fingers had brushed was closing firmly upon her own.

Choking, she cried, "Rich—Rich—" Because for the moment she knew only her unspeakable relief and joy at finding him, she could but strain to him. Her face pressed hard into the rough woollen wind-breaker, her trembling fingers sought his face.

"Where is Hyer? And Quick?"

SHE pushed herself away, and the strain began to return. "Hyer is all right," she said, when he repeated his question insistently. "Quick—Quick's in a hospital." Thinking, fearing, seeing the white aseptic room, the nurses, the cool benign bright instruments and what it might mean to them, she clung to him again.

"You came here—alone?" Rich whispered.

She nodded against his hand, strove to repel the thoughts that now with the clarity of wakefulness assailed her openly.

"Why?" he asked.

She said, "I was looking for you. I thought if I came here—here where it happened, I might—something might—" Ashamed of herself as she tried to tell him, she stopped. "I was foolish."

"You were game. I love you for it," he whispered.

She gave herself up to one final moment of peace, and then the clamorous problem was upon her again. She said, "They mustn't find you here. If Quick

should—Quick may be dead. They'll say you killed him, just as they're saying—They mustn't find you here."

His hand tightened on her arm. "Let me show you something."

He put her down gently. She heard him walk across the room. Light blinded her and she shut her eyes. When she opened them, he had taken her hands and was drawing her to her feet. With his arm about her shoulders, he led her to a closet door that stood ajar.

"This," he said. He opened the door, pushed aside the gowns that hung from hangers, and drew her inside.

Marcia gasped. It was a roomy closet, some five feet wide. The end wall had swung in like a door. She could see that behind it was a recess. Rich thrust his arm through the opening and turned a switch. The light revealed a narrow cubicle, as wide as the closet and seven or eight feet long. A cot took up most of the space.

"But how—?" Marcia began, incredulous. "The contractor who built the house wouldn't have—" She stopped. "I know. This is why she had the carpenters here the summer Dad and I were gone. There's another closet in her bedroom that meets this one—or did. She had a section taken out of each and the space made." She shivered. Then she frowned. "But what's that?"

At the head of the cot, supported on brackets, was a small telephone switchboard. In its center was a recessed mouthpiece. On a hook hung headphones.

She said, "A switchboard?" in amazement. "She could listen in when anyone used the other phones." Her eyes widened, filling with deliberate anger.

"Apparently she could."

"But the telephone company, Rich. They wouldn't have allowed it. It's wire-tapping."

"The telephone company needn't have known about it, dear. There was already a switchboard in the butler's pantry. The house is full of phones. The difference in resistance wouldn't have shown up, and

if the wires were carefully concealed no one would ever find it."

Marcia was thinking. She bit her lip. The anger kindling in her blue eyes glowed brighter. She said, "That explains something. My telephone calls used to be cut off. Oh, not many times, but oftener than accident would account for. Once I remember she came on the line immediately afterward and gave me the devil because I'd used unladylike language. I told her what I thought of eavesdroppers, but I never suspected—this." She turned to him. "You were in here—just now?" and it was as if she stumbled and had to clutch him for support.

Rich nodded. "Tied up, with a bandage over my mouth." He pointed to the floor. She saw strips of sheeting and a wide crumpled piece of adhesive tape.

"I was knocked out when Quick was," Rich continued. "When I came to, I was bound and lying on that cot. I managed to work the ropes off a little while ago. God knows, how I found the catch that opens the wall."

MARCIA was not listening. She said, "You must get out of here. Quickly, without anyone seeing you. The police are looking for you. We'll go straight to Hyer. He'll know what to do."

Rich shook his head. "If the police are looking for me, I'd better—"

"No. No. They mustn't find you, mustn't know you've been here. We'll make up some kind of a story. Hyer will be able to do that. Look," she said rapidly. "The service stairs."

"Thanks. I'm not sneaking out—"

"You're doing exactly what I say." Then, her voice catching, she said, "Please, darling. If Quick should—die, you'd be—"

He put his arm about her, drew her toward him, tipped her face up. He smiled, said, "All right."

Waiting in her car at the dead end, with the river lapping softly on the rocks twenty feet below and the endless interwoven murmur of the city's night sounds about her, Marcia clenched her hands on

the wheel and counted slowly. The low, flat-arched exit from the house's carriageway was but a few yards beyond, and any moment Peters might step out for a contraband smoke and see her waiting there. A loitering car would certainly attract the attention of the policeman on the beat if he should pass the street entrance.

Her hands grew icy and she breathed in short, light gasps like a spent runner.

Then her heart leaped. The service door was opening. A moment later Rich was beside her and they were moving away, past the carriageway exit, across East End Avenue, westward, gathering speed, hurrying away, away from—what? Hurrying into what?

She refused to think further.

WHEN they stood at last at Dawson's door in Forest Hills, a reflex caused her to glance at her watch just before she touched the bell. It was a few minutes past three. As they waited, she felt Rich's arm about her, knew in swift intuitive certainty that he was afraid, that at last the many piling incidents had told, had struck through that gay resilient defense and quickened within him the same fear that had been with her constantly now for two days, since first in a moment of flawless insight she had grasped the whole tangled ominous pattern.

If some cunning hand were intent on fixing guilt upon him . . .

A furious anger quenched her fear.

Then Dawson had opened the door and she was hastening past him, scarcely conscious of his excited, "Why, Rich, boy. It's good to see you."

Hyer, wearing a blue and white bathrobe, his hair touseled, looked at her from the stairway. He saw Rich, said, "Hello."

"I heard you say you'd be here. I found him," Marcia cried. "I went back to the apartment. He was there. He'd been knocked out. The same way Quick had. Tied up."

Behind her Rich said, "How is Quick?"

Hyer came down the stairs slowly. "Ten minutes ago, he was still unconscious."

Dawson and the detective listened while she told her story, listened while Rich described, accurately and directly, what had happened to him. Hyer showed neither curiosity nor especial interest when they told him of the concealed cubicle.

Gradually it came to Marcia that Hyer was showing little enough interest in anything they were saying. Her first, quite normal resentment, was followed at once by a tightening sense of caution. As Hyer asked a question and Rich answered it, she studied the detective intently.

There could be no doubt about it. Hyer's manner had none of its usual sanguine liveliness. He stared at the lengthening ash on his cigarette, and Marcia realized with a start that from the time she had made her announcement when they entered the room, Hyer had avoided meeting her eyes directly.

The feeling she had was not a novel one. Years of experience had trained her to sense the precise instant when remedial measures were necessary lest a situation go completely out of hand, and always before she had been able neatly, urbanely, to shift the conversation away from a dangerous topic.

Now she was helpless. She could only sit and listen, her infallible intuition dining into her that something was wrong.

The answer when it came was so disturbing that for a moment she refused to trust her own perception. Watchful, silent now, her eyes narrowed and intent, she looked from Hyer to Rich and back, assaying her problem.

If Rich suspected the same thing she did, he did not show it. He talked easily, candidly, answering Hyer's questions without hesitancy or strain.

But now she knew. *Hyer did not believe Rich.*

"I WANTED to go right to the police," Rich was saying, "but Marcia lured me out the back way and brought me here."

"Well," Hyer said wearily, "perhaps you were right."

A quiet implacable fury began to rise in Marcia, but because the fear was still there and because she knew that protest would only strengthen Hyer's suspicions, she merely nodded when Rich looked at her quickly and smiled.

"Tell 'em the whole thing, the way you've told it to us," Hyer added.

"What if they don't believe him?" Marcia protested. "What if they want to say that Rich is lying? He has only his word—no witnesses, no proof."

Hyer put out his cigarette. "It might have helped if you'd actually found him tied up, yes. It wouldn't have helped much, though. Well," he went on before this innuendo could bring a burst of resentment from Marcia, "do you want to start for Mexico, Lanning?"

"No, thanks."

"You want to give yourself up then?"

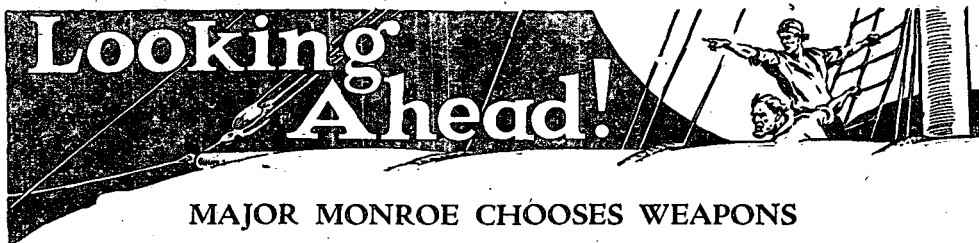
"Do you think I'd better?" He glanced at Dawson and his eyes were worried.

Hyer rose. He said, "I'll call Inspector Turner. He's the one you'll want to talk to."

Vaguely, through her preoccupation, Marcia heard him call a number on the telephone in the hall. Her fury had passed. She was accustomed to being thrown back on her devices. Her only mistake had been in trusting him too naively. It was a mistake she rarely made. Coolly, objectively, she measured this new problem and set herself to planning the next move. Of one thing she was certain. From now on she would play a lone hand.

She smiled swiftly at Dawson. Then, her face settling again into lines of fatigue and disappointment, she looked toward the door beyond where Hyer was talking, and her calm blue eyes were touched with hostility. Hyer had made the deadliest kind of enemy. . . .

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



MAJOR MONROE CHOOSES WEAPONS

Aggressor nations still listen to his voice. But there was a day, before he became president, when he might have been afraid to fight a duel—and not because of personal cowardice either. Another fine novelet of what-may-have-been, by

THEODORE ROSCOE

UPSET IN UTOPIA

Don't look now, but that wasn't no lady—that was a spy. San Utopia, which should be devoted to good clean roulette, is crawling with 'em. But—ssh!—the guy with her is a Br-t-sh S-cr-t Ag-t; he'll fix it. Beginning a new novel of wacky people and fast-action intrigue by

D. L. AMES

TRAITOR'S ARROW

Today the Highlanders take up their arms; they march to battle for Scotia, and their leader has quaffed the heady brew of the gods. Another fine novelet in the Odin's cup series, by

PHILIP KETCHUM

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—AUGUST 10