

Jimmie Lane came out of the Palling gate. There was no need to ask a question. His gloomy face told Highway what he wanted to know. Kitty McKay was still unconscious. He wondered if she would ever waken. He was beginning to wonder if someone intended that she never should.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MONK WAS CLEANING the preparation-room when Mafia Breene came back from the funeral. He turned off some of the lights the fellow was burning, disregarding his disgusted grunt.

He stood watching Monk as the latter gathered up the shabby heap of clothing which had belonged to Sarah Reckon. Monk went out, carrying the garments. Slowly Breene crossed to the preparation-table, his eyes vacant. With the palm of his hand he stroked the marble, trying to visualize the slender body of Kitty lying there.

It was going to be a pretty tricky business pretending the girl was dead and going through all the movements. He hoped nothing would go wrong. They were lucky to have got her into Palling's house. Very few people would see her. Once Palling thought it was safe to announce her death, he could go right in and get her. From the moment she came down here into the preparation-room, they were out of danger. After that it would be simple routine up to the moment when she went on view in her casket. They'd have to let people see her, of course, but that's what all the experiments with the dog had been for. She would go into her casket and people would look at her and there she'd be lying dead. Lane would see her and the minister and maybe that bearded tramp. It would be like him to come spying around. Sleep, too; but under the circumstances he didn't think the old man would be hard to convince.

But was it? He began to worry about the thing. Suppose Palling's experiments with the dog didn't work out with a human being? The animal certainly looked dead, and there had been no respiratory movement. But could they do the same thing with a girl and get away with it? Things had gone too far, of course, to stop. They'd have to go through with it and take a chance. Breene tried to fix his thoughts on Kitty and forget the other things.

He couldn't separate them. He was worried about the operation Palling would have to perform. First he would inject the sodium luminal to the point of anesthesia. After that he would fix a tube in the trachea, just as he had in the dog. That was the part which worried Breene. Palling's knives were going to mar Kitty's lovely body. He had to do that, of course, because through that tube the oxygen would find its way into her lungs from the small tank hidden at her feet in the casket. Just enough oxygen to keep her alive without respiratory movement while people looked at her after the service. He was going to make up the face himself, of course, and arrange the lights so

it would be in shadow. He mustn't forget the canister of soda lime inside the coffin to absorb the carbon dioxide after the lid was sealed. It would be horrible if it were overlooked and she died of suffocation.

There were two caskets. He must take another look to make sure they were identical, although people wouldn't be likely to notice a small difference. When the one with Kitty was wheeled from the chapel, it would be switched and the other carried into the cemetery with its load of bricks. Then he and Palling would have to do some grave-robbing at night with all the chances of discovery.

He wondered how much of an incision Palling would make for the tube. It was a pity, he thought, to mar that beautiful body, but there was no alternative. It was that or kill the girl outright as Palling proposed to do in the first place. He'd talked him out of that because he wanted her for himself. It had seemed a little thing then, a scar; but now he thought of it at close range, as it were, he didn't like it. And there'd be a wound requiring care and constant dressing afterwards. Palling would have to do that, of course, so he couldn't take the girl away until it was healed. That would mean locking the little room again where they'd kept the dog. He wondered how he was going to keep Cora from finding out what was hidden there. He wished there was some way of sending her off on a trip, but he knew she wouldn't go without Him. He wondered how much money she had in that package under His bed. He'd always intended to have a try at counting it, but was never able to co-ordinate opportunity and courage. Cora wouldn't be a pleasant person to annoy. People were never pleasant when anyone interfered with their money.

For that matter, Old Man Sleep mightn't be exactly genial either. Palling seemed very confident he could be induced to give up without much trouble, but Breene wasn't sure. Palling had promised him the girl and half of what he got. He didn't know the amount, but from one or two hints Palling had given, he supposed the total was somewhere around twenty-five thousand. Very generous of Palling to give him half and the girl too. He could live a long time in that cabin high up in the Sierras on twelve thousand. It was a perfect spot for such a hideout, three miles up a grown-over mountain-trail where no one ever came. He could keep Kitty there with no one the wiser. If he ever got tired of her, which didn't seem possible the way he felt now; there would be an easy way out. He didn't think he would hesitate if it was a case of choosing between her safety and his. But that was something in the future. Just now he felt he must find out what was going on in the Palling house.

He went through the underground passage. Outside His door he stopped, listening. There was no sound inside. Cautiously he opened the door and went in. The room was in semi-shadow, but he could see the wasted form under the covers. The eyes were closed. Swiftly he tip-toed across the room. Without hesitation he reached stealthy hands under the mattress. He had just touched the package when a sobbing cry startled him. Frantic eyes stared at him from under the pillow. The cover on the bed writhed as the thin form underneath threshed wildly. Breene turned and fled,

the spectacle of frothing fear printed on his mind. He heard the door bang thunderously behind as he went down the hall. Not until he reached his own front gate did he stop to mop his face with shaking hands.

What a fool he had been to disturb that frantic creature. Fortunately, Cora didn't seem to be around the house. Marketing, probably. If she didn't return until He quieted down, she wouldn't be any wiser. He peered along Poldrate Street. It wouldn't do for her to see him leaving the house. She would connect the creature's agony with him and suspect the truth. The street was clear. Feeling relieved, he walked towards Palling's. It was a silly thing to have done, but he knew now exactly where the package was.

He was surprised to see the hands of his watch pointing to the noon hour. Kitty had been in Palling's care for twelve hours. It would happen now, he thought, very soon. He knew it was against the law for a physician to issue a certificate as to the cause of death unless there had been medical attention for more than twenty-four hours. If they stayed within the law, it would be the undertaker's duty to notify the coroner and have a medical examination. They didn't dare do that, of course, and he hoped no one would notice and check them up on it.

He hoped no one saw him enter the Palling garden. It might seem odd and people would remember afterwards they had seen him going in *before* the event. He had an excuse, of course. He could say he simply wanted to know how the girl was getting on. And he did. By God, he did!

Lane came around the corner of the house and almost bumped into him. "Hello," he said. "What do you . . ." He hesitated. Going to ask me what I wanted, Breene thought. Damned impudence.

"You were going to ask me something?"

Lane shifted his feet and spoke in a low voice, glancing uneasily at the Palling windows. "Say, Breene, do you know what *status lymphaticus* is?"

Breene stared at him in amazement. And then suddenly he understood. Palling had been laying the ground-work. He was going to say the girl died of an irregularity of the thymus gland. Better be careful. Let Palling do the talking. He shook his head. "No," he said. "Is it a flower?"

Lane shrugged impatiently. "Flower nothing," he growled. "Palling says that's what's wrong with Kitty. She just lies there as if she was dead."

Breene nodded. "I see. A coma. Well, probably she'll come out of it."

"You think so?" Lane's face showed eagerness.

"I'm sure I can't say, Lane. Not being a medical man, I wouldn't know. I usually come along after the medicos have given up." He was pleased to see the look of anxiety follow hope in Lane's eyes.

He entered the Palling door without ringing. Violet was coming down the stairway. He looked at her curiously. He could tell by the lithe gliding movement and the slight swaying of the hips, she was on the make again. That meant Palling was

engaged for the time being and not likely to interfere. A month ago he would have welcomed the prospect of having that dark devil in his arms, but now he cursed the ill luck which had brought them together. He allowed her to sweep him into an embrace and hoped he did it convincingly.

Presently he checked her with a faint withdrawal. She looked at him inquiringly. "Where's Ivar?"

"With Kitty. He's sent for a nurse."

What was Palling thinking of, bringing in a total stranger? How could they expect to get away with what they planned when they had an outsider watching every move? A trained nurse, too. Why, the woman would have to be the worst ignoramus not to realize they were doing something off colour. Could it be that fool Palling was so cocksure of himself he wanted an outside witness just to make things appear on the up and up?

Breene's nervousness became acute. He felt a positive nausea at the close contact of the woman in his arms and shoved her aside. The resentment in her eyes made him worse. "I'm sorry, Violet. I — I was thinking about that girl. She must be very ill."

"Well, what if she is? She's nothing to you. Or *is* she?"

He tried to banish her suspicion by taking her in his arms again, but she no longer yielded with abandon. He felt like choking her, but instead he tried to make her yield. Damn Palling! What was he thinking about, anyway?

Footsteps above made them draw apart. Instinctively he began scrubbing his lips. Violet shook her head. "There's no lipstick," she said.

He saw her eyes shining with excitement. Almost caught in his arms, and she loved it, gloried in the dangerous game right under Palling's eyes. It never seemed to occur to her she might get someone else into trouble.

Palling came down in a stumbling run, calling Violet's name. The urgency in his tones startled even Breene. He stopped at the foot of the steps, balancing against the newel post. "She's gone," he said. His voice was little more than a whisper, but it carried. Breene felt himself believing it, and checked himself suddenly. Of course. It was just as they arranged. But Palling was a damned good actor.

He could feel the searing curiosity in Violet. "What happened to her?"

Palling mopped his forehead. "*Status lymphaticus*. Enlargement of the thymus gland. Sudden shock brought on the coma. She got away from me without coming around."

He glanced thoughtfully at Violet. The woman drew back on the defensive. "What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"We'd better keep that part to ourselves," Palling said in a low voice. "Nobody heard the shots, so we won't have to explain them. Just say she succumbed to shock from Lane's love-making. It won't be hard to make him take the blame for that."

"What about the nurse?" Breene asked.

Palling looked at him, and only because he knew the man so well was he able to

detect the faint smile hidden under his beard. "She's coming up the garden path," he said. Breene had a sudden conviction Palling had seen her from an upstairs window, and timed his announcement of Kitty's death accordingly. At that moment they heard the rusty scraping of the door-pull and the bell jangled in the kitchen.

"There she is now," Palling said quietly. As he went towards the door, he glanced at Breene.

"You'll take charge, of course, Mafia."

Breene realized he'd have to do it all himself. Never do to let Monk get anywhere near the girl. He'd know at once she wasn't dead, only in some kind of a drugged sleep. That must have been powerful stuff Palling put in her drink last night. He'd have to get along and bring the service-wagon himself. Send Monk on a message somewhere. Then Palling could help him carry the girl out.

Palling stopped half-way to the door and looked at Violet. "Would you mind going over to Sleep's house and telling him, Violet?"

Violet looked at him angrily and then shrugged. "I'll have to dress first."

"Thanks," Palling said, and opened the door.

He seemed a little taken aback at the sight of Lane. Beside him stood a woman in the neat costume of the professional nurse. Behind them, half-way up the steps, stood the bearded tramp, smoking. Palling bowed to the woman.

"I'm afraid you've had a useless trip, Nurse. Your patient has just gone."

Lane gasped at that, and seized Palling's arm. "Do you mean she's — she's . . ."

Palling nodded gravely. Breene was conscious of the tramp removing his pipe from between his lips. He was staring intently at Palling. Lane was babbling incoherent questions, but stopped at the doctor's lifted hand.

"Please, Lane. I'll explain presently. You too, Nurse. Mafia, I think you'd better get along with your work."

Breene went down the steps. He had to pass within a few inches of the tramp who made no effort to give him room. He was conscious of the fellow's steady stare as he went by. Almost insolent, he thought resentfully. At any other time he would have asked the fellow what he meant, but just now there was too much on his mind. He had to get Kitty out of there and down to the preparation-room before anyone had a chance to see her. He could trust Palling to have them all out of the way when he got back. In another twenty minutes he'd have Kitty in the preparation-room, alone.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KITTY WAS BACK in the sycamore tree again, watching Jimmie Lane and Violet Palling. Then, by a dizzy flight, she found herself down on the edge of the fountain with Jimmie's arms around her and his voice crying, "Yes — yes," in her ears.