

Complete Novelette

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He saw a black hooded head, mere slits of eyes, and a hand that held an automatic.

Shrieking Coffins

By G. T. Fleming-Roberts

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CHAPTER I A SCREAM FROM THE SKY

DEADER 'n a dormouse!" Campus Constable

Mundy grumbled as he impatiently stamped snow from the instep of his rubber arctics.

"Er, doornail, I think it was, Mundy," Colonel Samons corrected. The colonel had

met the constable making his evening rounds and was accompanying him across the university campus as far as Calvin Hall.

"Howsomever, I don't like it!" Mundy insisted. "These Christmas holidays! I'll be darned glad when the students get back. The campus is just too darned dead for men of action like me and you, Colonel. It's just rheumatics that keeps me here."

The campus was a rolling expanse of silent beauty. Trees bowed beneath the weight of a heavy snow. Dwarf evergreens that covered the grave of John Calvin, the college founder, presented an unbroken knoll of cold whiteness. With monotonous regularity, the ghostly finger of light from the college airport slipped beneath the black and starless ceiling of sky that pressed low against the snow-rounded roofs of the buildings.

They had nearly reached Calvin Hall when Mundy said, "I'll be turnin' off here, Colonel. No use of me ploddin' along here. Nothin' ever happens on a night like this. Wonder to me that old John Calvin ain't riz up just from bein' bored with his own company." Mundy uttered a crackling laugh and nodded towards the founder's grave.

"Well, I'm going to another of those abominable bridge games," replied the colonel. "I much prefer—"

Colonel Samons' voice suddenly chilled to silence. His breath hung, a frosty cloud in the air. Mundy's right hand, pudgy within its glove, closed over the colonel's sleeve. "God, sir!"

From above them, from out of the black void of night, came a shrill scream, unwavering, but dropping in pitch until its vibrations became inaudible. A disembodied voice, a banshee wail, knifed the sky. Then awful silence while Samons and Mundy stared and stared at the grave of John Calvin, its snowy shroud ripped wide.

For bulking obliquely from the snow-covered mound was a black, blunt-ended

object—a glossy enameled steel coffin!

Constable and colonel ran together towards the coffin, stopped a short yard from it, and looked at each other in surprise and horror. For the mound of virgin snow was unbroken by foot-steps. It seemed as though Mundy's prediction had come true and that the coffin had risen from the grave itself.

The colonel took a step nearer. His cold, fear-shaken fingers groped for matches. He scratched a light. "Why, the—the casket is upside down," he stuttered. "And what's that?"

Drip—drip—drip, sounding faintly near the coffin. Another match scuffed into yellow flame.

Mundy swore. "God, sir! Blood drippin' from that coffin!"

"Get the town marshal at once," ordered Colonel Samons. "It's murder. There can be no other explanation."

IN the hotel room where he was stopping, Paul Marco chuckled. That evening, in the Community House, Paul Marco had again assumed the role of Marco, the magician. Independently wealthy, Marco had two hobbies to which he devoted more time than another man might devote to his profession. These hobbies—curious combination!—were conjuring and criminal investigation. At one time Marco was a maker of mysteries; at another he was engaged in unraveling them. He had just concluded his performance of feats of magic before a large crowd. He chuckled because he knew that every cent of the money taken in would go to the Children's Benefit.

That Marco was an extremely tall man was concealed to some extent by a huge black fur coat that he had not yet had time to remove. A small, neatly trimmed Vandyke beard sharpened his chin. A black mustache was drawn to pin points above his too thin lips. His nose, perhaps, prevented him from

being called handsome. Yet there was something magnetic about his gray eyes; something, threatening, too, when they squinted over the bead of an automatic.

Marco was about to divest himself of his heavy coat, when the phone on his night stand jangled insistently. He picked up the instrument and, as he listened, his lips twisted in a whimsical little smile.

"Will Kemper!" he exclaimed. "Swell to hear your voice again. What are you doing in this burg? . . . The hell you say! Staying at the Delta Chi house, eh?.... Coming right over."

He took a taxi, passed through University Park until he came to the Delta Chi house. Kemper, a member of the university staff, served as faculty adviser for the Delts.

Marco had been very much surprised to learn that his old school chum had settled into the rut of a college professor. As Marco remembered him, Will Kemper was a well-knit man of average height; he had crisp red hair and an inconspicuous nose. Not the professor type at all.

After paying his fare, Marco sauntered up the snow covered walk that twisted to the door of the fraternity house. Pale yellow light passed through the panes of leaded glass in the front windows. Kemper would be alone, probably bored to distraction with the loneliness of the great house. All the students would be away for the holidays.

Marco opened the door and walked in. Silently, on soft pile rugs, he crossed the sumptuous hall. He was on the point of calling out to Kemper when he heard a voice speaking words that sent Marco's blood racing through his body.

"Do not move or speak. Do not look around if you value your life!"

The voice was low pitched and had a curiously unemotional quality that Marco could not relish. A man with a voice like that could commit ax murders!

Marco tiptoed to the curtained doorway and looked in. The lounge was fringed with shadow beyond the sphere of light cast by a green-shaded desk lamp. At the desk, pen sagging from nerveless fingers, blue eyes starting, hair upstanding, was Will Kemper. Suddenly, Kemper's head jerked. Something cleaved the air with a scintillating flash of silver and struck the top of the desk with a *whang*. A knife! It slanted obliquely from the dark wood of the desk, still quivering like a thing alive.

"There are others!" came the whispering voice. "The next knife shall pierce your neck at the base of the brain if you move or speak."

Something lurked within the shadows of that room—a living shadow among inanimate ones. Marco's long-fingered right hand flashed between the soft folds of his coat and groped in a hidden, inner pocket. He found his automatic, withdrew it, and sprang like a cat into the room. The living shadow moved again. A pale ray of light struck the prowler's face—a mere mask of dark colored silk with yellow eyes that gleamed hatefully through slits in the cloth.

"Hands up!" Marco rapped out.

But the masked man made a single, sweeping movement. Something hurtled through the air, crashed the desk lamp, and plunged the room into darkness. Marco's gun spat splinters of death-laden flame. A window burst open. The shadow passed swiftly and silently as a bat. Marco's second shot, delayed too long, screamed through an empty window frame. He sprang to the open window and looked out upon the lawn with its thick shrubbery grotesquely shaped beneath the weight of the snow. No sign of the masked man.

He turned. A mere gesture with his right hand and a flashlight dropped from the sleeve of his coat into his waiting fingers. Its beam fanned the room and came to rest upon

the startled face of Will Kemper.

"Turn on the light, Will," Marco's husky voice was low and tense. "It's your old pal, Paul Marco."

KEMPER moved from the cone of light and touched an electric switch. The room was flooded with brilliant illumination from an electrolier that hung from the ceiling. Kemper crossed to Marco, hand outstretched, lips compressed. Marco took his friend's hand and found that it was shaking.

"What the devil, Will?" he asked.

"Do I know?" snapped Kemper. "That—that man must be able to move without a sound. I simply heard a voice behind me. At first I thought it was one of your jokes. Then I thought of the cabinet where I put the envelope—"

"Slow down," said Marco. "What envelope?"

"Why the envelope that I haven't got. Day before yesterday, Professor Scholar, a crazy old fossil in the chemistry department, came in here and handed me an envelope. He told me to hide it, that it was something of value. I put it over in that cabinet and forgot about it. Then this morning, Scholar got me out of bed at dawn. He wanted his envelope. I gave it to him, and he dashed out without a word. It was pretty clear that he was worried about something. Looked as though he was half sick."

Marco stepped over to the desk where Kemper had been working. He took hold of the ivory handle of the knife and pulled it out. He tested the point of the knife with his finger, and shuddered slightly as he thought how far such a weapon could be driven into human flesh. He examined the hilt closely. It was ornately carved and clearly of Chinese workmanship. "Got any Chinks around here?" he asked.

"A few students that the Chinese government sends over. About twenty in all, I

should say. Then there's one Chinese laundry. Why?"

Marco shrugged as he put the knife back on the desk. "Nothing. Because I wear bear skin is not a sign that I am a bear. The man who would carry such a knife doesn't have to be a Chinese. However—" He stopped, head on one side, listening intently. There was someone walking softly in the next room. Without a word to Kemper, Marco tiptoed into the hall, automatic in his hand. A man with a frost-pinched nose pointing above his upturned collar stared with fear-goggled eyes at Paul Marco.

"Hands above your head," Marco whispered. "Come right in here. No funny business! I'm in pretty good practice now and I can drill those two eyes of yours in less than a second!"

The man walked on trembling legs towards Marco. "See here," he said in a voice that was intended to convey threat, "you can't do this to me, Mister. I'll have you in jail!" The man's eyes looked past Marco and encountered Will Kemper. "Say, Mr. Kemper, this guy can't do this to me," he whimpered.

"Why hello, Mundy," said Kemper. Then to Marco, "It's just Mundy, the campus constable."

"I just wanted to use your phone," Mundy explained, "to call the hotel and see if I could get that magician guy that I've heard of havin' remarkable success solvin' crimes in the big cities. His name's Polo—"

"You mean Marco?" Will cut in. "If you do, you're looking right at him."

"By the great horn moon!" Mundy exclaimed.

"What's up?" asked Marco. "More mystery?"

"More?" Mundy gasped. "Don't know what you're referencing to, but you ain't seen *any* yet. Old John Calvin got cavortin' in his coffin and kicked it clean out of the ground, seems like!" Mundy snapped the elastic that

held his earmuffs, crawled a little farther down into his collar. He turned towards the door. "Come on, you gents, if you want to see the gol-darnedest thing that ever happened since Joshua fought the battle of the—the—"

"Marne?" suggested Kemper jocosely. "Wait until I get my coat" To Marco he whispered, "Mundy sometimes has spots in front of his eyes, if you get what I mean."

CHAPTER II COFFIN OF HORROR

"OUT of that selfsame sky, gentlemen, that's yawnin' up there black as a basket of monkeys, we heard a yell that was the god-awfullest thing ever heard!" whispered Constable Mundy as they left the house.

"Probably the wind," said Will Kemper lightly.

But Marco knew that his companion's attitude was assumed. He knew that Kemper was thinking of the mysterious prowler who was so proficient with the knife. After another moment, his beliefs were confirmed by a question from Kemper.

"Do you suppose whatever Mundy has reference to could have some connection with the man who threw that knife at me?"

Marco nodded vigorously. "Bet on it. After all, this is supposed to be a peaceful university campus. Two such unusual happenings have to be associated."

They rounded the L of Calvin Hall and came abruptly upon the snow covered bed of evergreens that marked the grave of John Calvin. Huddled closely about an up-ended coffin were four men. Yellow lantern light scintillated on snow crystals and lent a ghoulis cast to the horrified faces of the men.

"Gents," called Mundy, "here's a man who can tell us all about this in short order. You've all heard of Mr. Marco."

A dark skinned man, rather plump, clean-shaven, and having features that Marco

immediately pigeon-holed as being Slavic, stepped forward. "Hello, Mr. Kemper," he said. His voice had a slight accent. Probably Russian, Marco thought.

Kemper nodded at the man. "Let me introduce Mr. Marco, Dr. Kaslof."

Marco grasped the man's plump, unpleasantly soft fingers.

"I've heard a great deal about you, Mr. Marco," said Kaslof with a smile.

"You can't believe more than half of it," replied Marco. He stepped briskly across the trampled snow to the coffin. "What the hell?" he asked softly.

An elderly man wearing the uniform of a policeman said. "We can't make it out, Mr. Marco. Be proud to have you help us. My name's Kvale, town marshal around here. This thing's a coffin!"

"So I see. But after all, it's in a strange place—on top of a grave."

The constable nodded his head vigorously. "Yes, the grave of old John Calvin who started this whole shebang a hundred odd year ago. Looks as though he just riz right out of his grave, that's what!"

"Nonsense!" snapped a serious-faced young man who leaned callously against the coffin and puffed at a pipe. He shook hands with Marco. "My name is Durn. I'm the university physician. I wish you'd use your influence, if you have any, Mr. Marco, with these two men who are our police force! They don't want to open the casket. Don't want to touch a thing until the sheriff comes here. Please don't think that the rest of us share Mundy's inane view."

The fourth man whose lower jaw was heavily bearded and whose eyes were shy and furtive, commented, "It's fairly obvious that this coffin is not that of John Calvin."

"Yes," Marco interrupted dryly. "But if none of you have any explanation—well, you with the beard, give me a hand with this coffin. We'll move it down on the level."

"I'd—rather not," the bearded man stuttered. He melted back from the black coffin until he was hardly visible among the shadows.

"That's Professor Letchman, the man with the beard," whispered Will Kemper. "He's something of an egg—the queer variety."

Marco seized the frosty handles of the coffin and gave it a tug. It slid smoothly across the snow and to a lateral position. He turned it over, noticing the blood that streaked the snow beneath, fumbled at the clasp and suddenly threw back the lid. Marshal Kvale crowded in, lantern above his head. A guttural oath from Dr. Koslof. Then moments of horrified silence.

The white satin cushions of the coffin were sodden with blood. Inside was the cramped and twisted body of a man. His face was a hellish contortion with a grimacing mouth and death-glazed eyes.

"It's Professor Sclar!" gasped Dr. Koslof. "Murdered!" His fat hands gripped Marco's furry shoulder. "You will help us, Mr. Marco?"

Marco grumbled. "Give me a hand with the body, someone. Dr. Durn, you're used to death. Let's lift this out."

Marshal Kvale put a detaining hand on Marco's arm. "I don't think you ought to do that, Mr. Marco," he said timidly. "It's very irregular. The coroner—"

"I'll be entirely responsible," said Marco firmly. He could tell by the degree of blood coagulation that Professor Sclar had not been long dead. Marco was for hunting clues while the trail was hot. "You see," he explained to the marshal, "I think we can learn something pretty definite as to how the professor met his death."

"Isn't that obvious?" asked the bearded Professor Letchman. "Stabbed, I should say."

Marco pursed his lips. "We can't be sure," he muttered. Then realizing that he

would wait a long time for anyone to help him, he dug both hands in under the bloody corpse and lifted the body from the casket. He carried it twenty feet away and placed it gently in the snow.

"Dr. Durn, I believe you could render your medical opinion as to cause of death. That will convince the coroner, when he arrives, that we are not too neglectful."

Marco then searched in his pocket and took out a pocket knife. He opened it and returned to the coffin. He pushed his flashlight into Will Kemper's hand. "You can hold this. I'm going to examine that coffin. There's a chance that we can find something quite significant about it. You see—"

MARCO stopped. There was something about the lid of the coffin that he had not noticed before. The lining had been stripped from the lid and the metal top plate had been drilled. There were several holes in the steel just about where the professor's head had rested. Through these holes drops of blood had passed.

"Very odd," remarked Dr. Koslof who had come up behind them. "What is your opinion, Mr. Marco?"

Marco pointed to the holes. "I do not think that the body was placed in the coffin," he said with a significant raise of the eyebrows.

Marshal Kvale laughed harshly. "You'll be telling us that the coffin was built around the body next."

Marco shrugged and dropped to his knees in the snow. Will Kemper knelt beside him.

"Marco, do you suppose Professor Sclar was murdered because of that envelope, you know the one he left with me?"

"Shsh," Marco cautioned. A sudden movement at the other side of the casket. He looked up. Professor Letchman was staring at the coffin. His eyes seemed to crawl from

their sockets. He tottered, pitched suddenly backwards.

They crowded around the fallen professor. Mundy was gibbering, "The killer, by gum! He couldn't take it!" He thrust in past Marco and Will, seized Letchman by the collar, and tried to pull the man to his feet.

"Leave him alone, Mundy!" Marco ordered. "Letchman is sick. He's fainted."

"And if that ain't a confession, then I don't know one when I see it."

"No-no," Marco contradicted. He knew that he must manage Mundy with flattery or threat. He resorted to the latter. "You don't want to arrest him. Do you know what he could do to you for preferring false charges? You haven't a shred of proof, you know. Many a man faints at the sight of blood." He turned to the university physician. "Am I not correct, Dr. Durn? Letchman has merely fainted. I suggest that he be taken to the infirmary until he has recovered."

Dr. Durn nodded. "If Dr. Koslof will help me, I'll take Letchman over to my office. I don't think there is anything seriously wrong with him."

The Russian agreed, and together Durn and Koslof picked up the limp form of Letchman and started across the campus towards the infirmary. Doggedly, Mundy followed them. He evidently had no intention of letting his chief suspect slip out from under his sight.

Marco motioned Kvale and Kemper back to the coffin. "I've found the weapon—or at least a part of it," he confided. "Look." He raised the loosened lining of the coffin and displayed a sharp steel spike fully eight inches in length that was welded to the side of the coffin. It was darkly stained with Professor Scolar's blood. He looked from Kemper to the marshal. "Now do you understand what I meant when I said the *body* was not placed in the coffin?" He took out a cigarette case, selected a cigarette, and lighted it with

provoking slowness.

"What do you mean?" snapped Kemper. "Why must you speak in riddles? Give it to us straight"

"All right. The holes in the lid—what were they placed there for? To permit Scolar to breathe!"

Kemper's face suddenly paled. "God! You mean that he was put in there alive?"

Marco nodded. "Entombed alive—the most hellish kind of mental torture. And coupled with the horror of his situation, Scolar must have been conscious of impending doom. The holes were placed there so that he might live until he could be of no more use to the killer. After he had given the killer what was wanted, probably as a last resort to gain his life and liberty, then he was promptly murdered!"

"Then it was that—"

A look from Marco silenced Kemper. Marco, too, suspected that the cause of Professor Scolar's death was that mysterious envelope that Scolar had entrusted to Kemper for a while. What it could have contained, he had no idea. Something with enough value to motivate murder in its most dreadful form. Marco, however, had no desire to discuss the secret envelope with Kvale. The town marshal would only hamper Marco's actions if Marco told him everything that he suspected.

SUDDENLY Marco's keen ears sensed a movement behind them. He turned, flashlight beaming through the darkness to strike the short, stumpy figure of a man. The spot of light lingered upon the newcomer's face. Skin like yellow satin, wide mouth, yellow-brown almond eyes. "A Chink!" Marco husked.

The Chinese regarded them with unblinking eyes. "Is there some trouble, sirs? An accident? I trust nothing serious?" The Chinese approached the coffin warily. A jack-o-lantern smile split his yellow face. "Ah, good evening, Mr. Kemper. I have not seen

you for some time.”

“I wonder,” whispered Will Kemper. Then aloud, “Hsin, this is Mr. Marco, the detective.”

Hsin bowed. “Charmed,” he said.

“Mr. Hsin is president of the Chinese Student Club,” explained Kemper.

Marco nodded absently. He was wondering if Hsin’s voice really did resemble that of the man who had thrown a knife at Will Kemper that evening. He stepped over to Hsin and took him firmly by the arm. He guided the wondering Chinese over to the spot where the body of Professor Scholar lay. His gray eyes watched the Chinese narrowly. “Ah, how unfortunate,” said Hsin. The words might have come from a phonograph. Hsin’s face was void of expression. “How did it happen?”

Then, on the sidewalk that stood out black against the snow that covered the ground, Marco saw something that demanded his immediate attention. Steam pipes, he knew, in a tunnel beneath the sidewalk, kept it always dry. But what had attracted him was the iron manhole cover set in the concrete. Either he was dreaming, or it had raised a few inches, then been softly lowered back into place. Marco masked his astonishment. He addressed Mr. Hsin. “You can find out the details from Marshal Kvale. Mr. Kemper and I have an appointment.”

“Eh?” Will asked bewilderedly.

Marco gave his companion’s arm a pinch. “Quiet,” he whispered. He steered Will to the sidewalk and marched him briskly around behind a hedge of evergreens that bordered the walk at that particular point.

“There’s someone down in the steam tunnel beneath this sidewalk,” he said. “We’ll run ahead to the next manhole and see if we can head him off.”

Kemper jumped like a sprinter from the starting line and dashed down the sidewalk. That was like Kemper, acting on impulse.

By the time Marco caught up with Kemper, he was on his knees, scratching along the concrete with his fingers, trying to get a grip on the edge of the manhole cover. “Got it!” he cried triumphantly. With a sudden jerk, he threw the iron cover over. It fell with a resounding crash.

Marco scowled. “I’d hate to go hunting with you, Will,” he said sternly.

Kemper paid no attention to Marco. Instead, he dropped his legs through the opening and jumped into the tunnel. Marco followed more cautiously. His feet struck the cold concrete floor of the tunnel, sending needles of pain prickling up his legs. He was literally smothered in a darkness that was almost tangible. Furthermore, he had completely lost his sense of direction. He knew that they were farther away from the power house, the source of the steam tunnels, than their quarry. But which direction led to the power house?

“Where are you, Marco?” came Kemper’s stage whisper from down the passage. Marco turned to follow the sound and suddenly ran into something—something that had life and was moving. The blow of a heavy fist pounded into Marco’s mid-section. He grunted, led out with both arms, felt his right fist smash against somebody’s chin. The man groaned. His feet shuffled on the floor. Then there was the sound of a heavy body falling. Marco snatched his flashlight from his pocket and sent its searching beam in the direction of the sound. The spot of yellow light centered upon the face of a middle-aged man who sat with his back against the wall. He was tenderly feeling the point of his chin.

“Why, it’s Colonel Samons!” exclaimed Kemper as he came up. “What’s the matter, Colonel?”

The man called Samons snorted. His gray mustache worked up and down as his lips formed oaths. “You, Will Kemper, mixed up in this criminal plot! I tell you, sir, you’ll have

a lot of explaining to do!”

Will Kemper flushed angrily. “I should explain? Well, at least I am in the company of a reliable criminal investigator. This is Mr. Paul Marco.”

Colonel Samons picked himself up, smoothed his white mustache, and looked daggers at Marco. “I should be pleased to meet you in the boxing ring any time, sir. That was a nice blow you handed me. I really could not retaliate as I otherwise would have, I assure you.”

“I think,” said Kemper, “that you’ll have a little explaining to do on your part, Colonel Samons. Isn’t it a bit unusual to find a man of your dignity wandering around a place like this?”

“Unusual, perhaps,” agreed Samons. “I was going to a game of bridge—”

“Through a sewer?” Kemper cut in.

“Nothing of the sort! I was walking with constable Mundy when it happened. We heard a most unearthly noise, and suddenly there appeared on the grave of John Calvin a black steel coffin.”

“Yes, we know all about that,” declared Kemper.

“Indeed?” said Samons icily. “Then will you be so good as to tell me how the coffin got there?”

Marco laughed gently. “We don’t know all about what has turned out to be the most gruesome murder that I have ever encountered. To be perfectly frank, I have been so intent on the coffin itself that I haven’t stopped to think how it got there.”

Colonel Samons looked shocked. “Murder, you say? And who was the victim?”

“A professor by the name of Sclar. You’re probably acquainted with him.”

“Oh, yes,” Samons muttered. “Organic chemistry professor. You found the body in the coffin, I presume?”

Marco nodded. “And have you discovered where the coffin came from?”

The colonel nodded confidently. “Of course. And that will satisfy you, Mr. Kemper, as to how I happened to be down here. I could see no indication of the coffin having been carried any great distance through the snow. I immediately hit upon the idea that the coffin was secreted along this steam passage and then brought to the surface through one of those manholes.”

Marco shook his head. “Afraid you’ve had your prowl for nothing. You didn’t find any trace left by the coffin down here?”

“Why—er, no! I must confess that my search was for nothing as far as actual proof is concerned. However, I am perfectly certain that the coffin was brought through here.”

Marco motioned with his head. “Come back this way; I’ll show you something.” He walked back the way they had come. His flashlight pointed at the ceiling of the tunnel and at the round manhole. He smiled gently. “I am afraid that you’ll never make a detective, Colonel. A coffin is simply too big to get through such an opening!”

CHAPTER III THE THEFT OF COFFINS

A FEW minutes later, they were out in the open again. Marco considered the colonel an unfathomable enigma. Was his pompous attitude, his self-confidence, merely a guise hiding other qualities even more disagreeable? His explanation as to how he had got into the tunnel was logical enough. Still, the greatest criminals are generally the best liars, he had discovered.

They were walking along towards Calvin Hall, Colonel Samons morose and silent, walking between Kemper and Marco. Suddenly, Kemper spoke:

“Marco, you’re holding out on me. Who is the killer?”

Marco pursed his lips and uttered a long, low whistle. “How the hell should I

know? But just permitting a guess, I think there is one person whom I should nominate for the electric chair! But isn't that our friend Mundy coming towards us?"

Marco had immediately recognized the bow-legged figure as that of the campus constable. As soon as he had sighted Marco, Mundy came running towards them. "Mr. Marco!" he gasped out. "I've gone and done it! I've let him get away—slip right through my fingers by the damndest trick you can imagine!"

"Let who slip?" rapped Marco.

"The killer, Professor Letchman! Dr. Durn revived him soon as he got him to the 'firmery. The doc goes out of the room a minute, and what should happen but when I turns around Letchman had beat it. The window was open and he had vanished. Oh, I'll lose my job!" he moaned. "I guess it's my rheumatics. Gettin' too old for this hectic business."

"It looks bad, all right," said Marco. Then seeing the look of dismay on Mundy's face, he hastily added, "I meant bad for Letchman, you understand. No one could blame you. Why, I don't suspect Letchman any more than I do the colonel, here."

Colonel Samons snorted.

"Thanks, sir, for makin' light of my fault," said Mundy, fervently. "But what I was sent out here to tell you was that Dr. Koslof is callin' a conference. He would like to talk to you about somethin'. Him and I got an idea, that may help out. 'Course Colonel Samons and Mr. Kemper can come along if they want."

"Try and keep me out," said Kemper.

Marco shrugged. "Where do we go?"

"The physics building, sir," replied Mundy. "You can see the light shinin' from his office window through them trees. You'll find Dr. Koslof a pretty smart man."

There were two other men in the Russian's office when they got there. Marco

was surprised to see the Chinese student, Hsin, and with him a bespectacled and determined little man introduced as Mr. Welsh of the history department.

Dr. Koslof waved them all to chairs and, while he was passing his flat black Russian cigarettes among his guests, he said, "Mr. Marco, have you ever heard of that interesting little mystery that happened here about a week ago? Our local paper dramatically labeled it 'The Case of Six Coffins.'"

Marco shook his head. "Please enlighten me. You think it may have some bearing on the murder of Professor Sclar?"

Dr. Koslof nodded. "The local undertaker was expecting a shipment of six caskets. They were to come overland by truck. Truck, truckster, caskets, and all disappeared. That's all there is to it."

"Not by a ding sight!" exclaimed Mundy. "That ain't the third of it. The driver of the truck was a man by the name of Winters. He had been seen in the line-up?"

"You mean he had a police record?" asked Marco.

"That's exactly what I mean!"

"You see. Mr. Marco," said bespectacled Mr. Welsh, "it is logical to assume that the coffin in which the body of Professor Sclar was found was one of those stolen ones."

Colonel Samons slapped his thigh. "I have it! Find this Winters and you'll have the killer!"

"Tell you what I think," said Constable Mundy. "I think that when I pick up Professor Letchman, I'll have the murderer. Looks mighty suspicious for him to jump out the window in Dr. Durn's office."

"I think not."

"All heads turned towards Mr. Hsin. The Chinese, who evidently was a strong believer in the value of silence, was grinning like a jack-o'-lantern. "I think not. Professor

Letchman very wise. Wise men keep on right side of the law. I think Professor Letchman probably at home in his own bed.”

Dr. Koslof regarded Hsin through squinted eyes. “We can find out at once. I shall call Professor Letchman.” The Russian went to the phone that was located directly behind Marco.

From force of habit, Marco consulted the open palm of his own left hand. Attached to the gold band of a large cameo ring that he always wore, was a small, convex mirror. Marco used the mirror in many stage tricks. It was almost as good as having eyes in the back of his head. He thought it extremely odd that Koslof dialed a number beginning with three. But he was not at all surprised when Koslof hung up to announce that Letchman had not answered. He was about to question the Russian, when something happened that knocked all thought from his head.

OUT of the night, tocsining across the cold, black sky, came a soulless wail that ended abruptly in a dull, clumping sound.

Marco’s eyes flicked from one face to another. With the possible exception of Hsin and Will Kemper, stark terror was written on every face.

Marco found his tongue. “Is that the noise, Mundy? Is that it? The sound you heard just before—”

“God, sir!” breathed Mundy. “It’s the very same!”

To a man, they sprang from their chairs and started through the door. The seven men stood for a moment on the steps of the physics building. Seven pairs of eyes scanned the white campus, looking for the ugly, black, and foreboding bulk of another coffin. But the white blanket was unmarred save for shadows of snow-covered shrubbery.

“Scatter!” Marco commanded. “You’ll find another coffin somewhere not far away. I hope to heaven we don’t find Professor

Letchman in it!”

“Don’t worry,” Mr. Welsh sneered, “you won’t!”

Though somewhat puzzled by Welsh’s speech, Marco ran down the steps and rounded the corner of the physics building. Behind the building, sidewalks ended, and running became difficult because of the deep snow.

For ten minutes, he weaved in and put between buildings. Every shadow in the snow he expected to reveal another coffin and some gruesome, once-living contents. He had just skirted the university power house when he saw something that put coffins momentarily out of his mind. Perhaps a hundred yards ahead of him, a tall figure wandered aimlessly near a snow-laden clump of pines. Suddenly, from among the trees, a shadowy form appeared—a man crouching in the attitude of a hunting beast. The man sprang like a cat, lighted upon the back of the tall man, and bowled him over.

Marco shouted hoarsely. He started across the snow, running, plowing through deep drifts. He jerked out his automatic, fired three times straight up in the air. The tall man and his assailant rolled in the snow, arms and legs tangling so that Marco dared not risk a shot. But as he approached, the shorter of the two leaped to his feet. Marco fired low and missed. The man was gone running in his crouching attitude back through the clump of pines.

Marco followed, saving his shots until he reached the open. Pine branches tore at his clothes, deluged him with snow. Suddenly, he broke into the open. The little man was ahead of him, running along the sidewalk. Marco fired again at the man’s legs, saw him stumble, and fall forward. Had his shot landed? Then suddenly Marco stopped, rubbed his eyes.

The man had vanished! A manhole! He saw the round black opening directly

ahead of him. Could it be that the man whom he pursued had deliberately prepared this avenue of escape?

Marco approached the manhole, walking cautiously, lest his footsteps on the sidewalk warn the man in the steam tunnel below. He stooped to the manhole, realizing at the moment what an excellent target his head would make had the man in the tunnel wanted to shoot at him. He beamed his flashlight down through the opening. Snowy footprints on the floor below. Marco put out his light, dropped to the sidewalk, and let himself down through the manhole. For an instant, he flashed his light to determine which direction the man had taken. Then he started up the dark tunnel.

Ahead of him came a steady hissing sound—the rush of steam, perhaps. Then he came to a dead stop and flattened himself against the wall. Something was moving just ahead of him—soft, padded footsteps. Marco inched his way forward, suppressing his breath, flash and automatic ready for instant action.

A momentary flash of orange-red flame, and the tunnel was filled with the roar of a shot. Another and another shot crashed out. A bullet struck the wall opposite Marco. Ahead of him, something struck the floor—a dull, slumping sound, like that of a body falling. At the risk of drawing fire, Marco pressed the switch of his flashlight. The passage ahead was clouded with escaping steam, and beyond the cloud something blocked the tunnel. A section of the concrete sidewalk and a battered mass of gray steel that was a coffin!

But between Marco and the coffin was the form of a man. Blood crawled along on the passage floor from beneath the body. Arms and legs twitched convulsively. The broad yellow face was twisted in agony. Hsin!

THEN Marco saw that between the coffin and

the side wall was a small opening, large enough to permit a small person to pass through, but too small to permit Marco to follow Hsin's slayer. He saw, too, a black hooded head, mere slits of eyes, and a hand that held an automatic. Marco switched off his light, dropped flat on the floor, and rolled to the other side of the tunnel. A bullet flattened against the side of the opposite wall. Marco retaliated with two quick shots that he hoped found the opening and the sinister eyes that had watched him with intent to kill. A sharp, grating laugh echoed along the tunnel.

"Another time, Marco!" a voice called. Then there came the sound of running feet quickly diminishing into silence along the passage ahead that was blocked off by the coffin.

Marco drew a little sigh. It was evident that the masked man had followed Hsin into the tunnel, entering by another manhole. Perhaps the killer actually feared Marco. Perhaps the killer was saving Marco for a more horrible death. He shuddered as he thought of the coffin that bulked ahead of him.

Marco turned on his light, got up, and went over to the Chinese. Hsin was dead. Two of the masked man's slugs had drilled his chest. Marco began a deliberate search of Hsin's garments. Two narrow knives of the same pattern as the one that had been thrown at Will Kemper were tucked in the Oriental's sleeves. The inner pocket of his coat revealed two narrow folded papers sealed with wax and bearing Chinese characters. These Marco put into his own pocket. Then he got up and went over to the coffin.

He realized that the heavy coffin must have dropped from considerable height in order to break through the sidewalk. It had struck one of the steam pipes and caused a small leak. One end of the coffin was crimped, and the hinges had sprung beneath the strain. He was about to attempt to pull the coffin down where he could open it when his eyes

lighted on something else—a brown, steer-hide wallet lying on the floor near the coffin. Marco picked it up and unfolded it. It contained a few bills, an identification card that proclaimed the wallet the property of Colonel Ramon Samons.

“Samons!” Marco muttered. “Could he have been the masked man and did he drop the wallet in this passage, or did Hsin steal the wallet from Samons and drop it when he was shot?” If he knew that, he’d know enough to hang somebody!

He was about to put Samon’s wallet in his own pocket, when a small piece of paper dropped from one of the compartments. He picked it up and examined it. The writing was almost as puzzling to him as the characters on the paper he had taken from the body of Hsin. The scrap had apparently been torn from a larger piece of paper and was covered with chemical symbols that had little meaning for Marco. But certainly, providing that the wallet had been stolen from Colonel Samons, this scrap from a chemical formula was the only thing that could have had enough value to motivate theft.

Marco folded the scrap of paper into a tiny square. Then he inserted his fingernail beneath the black cameo setting of the ring on his left hand. He flipped back the cameo and revealed a small compartment. He often used this compartment to conceal small objects that constituted parts of his sleight-of-hand performance. He put the folded piece of paper into the opening in his ring and closed the cameo setting over it.

Marco turned his flashlight on the floor. There were footprints of Hsin’s small shoes and of someone’s rubber-soled arctics.

Suddenly Marco heard footsteps directly above his head. A voice swore hoarsely. He looked up through the opening made by the coffin and saw Will Kemper’s red head.

“Damn it! That you, Paul? What have

you got down there?”

“Come down and give me a hand,” called Marco. “Here’s another hellish coffin and something else.”

Kemper’s legs dangled for a moment through the opening. Then he dropped to Marco’s side. His startled eyes looked bewilderedly about the tunnel. “Hsin!” he exclaimed. “What happened?”

“Don’t ask questions. Give me a hand with this coffin.”

“Okeh. But take it easy. We don’t want the rest of this sidewalk down the back of our necks.”

They took hold of the coffin, one on each side, tugged it away from its supporting piece of concrete, and brought it down to the floor. The lid pulled away easily. It contained the twisted, horribly broken body of an old man whose cheeks were gray with a two days’ beard stubble.

“God! Ifs Professor Brandon!” exclaimed Kemper. “And,” he breathed in a horrified whisper, “he must have been kept alive in that coffin for some time. He was always so careful, about his appearance. See what I mean?”

Marco nodded. “The stubble on his face. If it hadn’t been for the lining of the coffin, he would have been smashed beyond recognition, I’m afraid. You see, in the previous instance, that of Professor Scholar’s murder, the coffin fell upon a snow-covered bed of evergreens.”

“Fell?” gasped Kemper. “You mean that the killer drops the coffins—from airplanes or something?”

“I don’t know, Will. Might have pitched them from the roof of a building. To tell the truth, I’m a little more mixed up than I was at the start. But let’s get out of here. We are going to take a run over to the bearded man’s house—what was his name? Letchman? He’s kept himself pretty quiet during all this. But it really wasn’t odd that Dr. Koslof

couldn't reach Letchman by phone."

"Why?" asked Kemper.

"Because he didn't call Letchman's house. In looking up your telephone number when I first struck town this afternoon, I noticed that all the residences in the University Park section are on the same trunk line and have the serial number 5. Koslof called a number beginning with 3. Maybe there is no such number; I'm not sure."

CHAPTER IV SINISTER SLIPS

TT was ten minutes later. Marco and Kemper had crawled from the tunnel and were walking across the campus towards the physics building.

"Things are getting pretty thick," Marco muttered. "I'd like to see two men—Colonel Samons and Professor Letchman."

"You're going to get a chance at Samons then. Isn't that the colonel standing under that light talking with. Dr. Koslof?" Kemper hailed the two men.

"You gentlemen find anything?" Dr. Koslof called back.

"Yes, quite a bit," said Marco as they approached. "Exactly two corpses—one Professor Brandon and our friend Hsin."

"Hsin?" Koslof gasped. Then, with an angry snarl, "Killing young students now!"

"If Hsin was only a student," Marco muttered. He felt certain that Hsin had had other purposes for attending the college—others that were in no way related with education. Aloud, he said, "If we could put our fingers on a motive! By the way, where were you, Colonel Samons, during the search?"

The colonel took off his hat and tenderly patted a blackening lump on the top of his head. "Unconscious most of the time. I was attacked by someone who leaped from a grove of trees near the power house."

"Hsin," Marco thought to himself, "unless Samons is a very good liar."

"And," Dr. Koslof added, "Colonel Samons has lost his wallet"

"No!" exclaimed Marco in mock surprise. "Nothing of value, I hope?"

"No-no," said Samons hastily. "Purely of sentimental value. A few dollars change in the wallet. I really think I shall get along home now. If you gentlemen need me, you will know where to find me."

"You don't happen to be going by the Chinese Student Club?" Marco asked.

The colonel nodded. "You would like me to tell the members of Hsin's death?"

"And something else." Marco took the papers he had found on Hsin from his pocket and handed them over to the colonel "I would like you to get me a translation from these papers. There's an official air about the way they're done up."

Samons took the papers. "Oh, gladly. But I can attend to the translation for you. I spent a good many years in Hong Kong."

Marco frowned. After all, he didn't know- but what the colonel was a member of the criminal group. It might have been Samons who had followed Hsin and killed him. That Samons had lived in China threw a new light on the case. Regretfully, Marco handed the papers to Samons. He could hardly refuse without openly accusing the colonel. Marco knew that his dangerous game could not be fought in the open.

When the colonel had left them, Dr. Koslof drew Marco and Kemper close to him. "I am about to break the confidence of a dead man," he said in a mysterious whisper. "You have been unable to find a motive for these heinous crimes. Then let me tell you of Professor Trim, my former colleague and friend.

"Dr. Trim was a genius in the fields of chemistry and physics," Koslof explained. "Mr. Kemper will remember that he died

about two years ago. At that time, it was rumored about the country that Dr. Trim was about to disclose a very wonderful discovery—something that would revolutionize war. It was only a few hours before his passing that he called me to his bedside. Dr. Trim, gentlemen, realized the wonder of his new discovery, yet at the same time, I believe, he was fearful that it would jeopardize the peace of the world. He did not explain to me the exact nature of his discovery. Only this I know: Trim had invented a formula for poison gas or perhaps an explosive that was much more lethal than anything so far discovered. In addition to its power, this concoction from Trim's laboratory could be prepared so cheaply that almost any nation could afford war.

"This formula was like a Frankenstein monster to Trim. He dared not publish it, but in case of war, he wanted his own country to have all of its advantages. He hoped that the United States could hold this new weapon over the heads of the belligerents as a threat and restore peace. He divided the paper upon which his formula was written into five parts. He gave one to each of five friends with the instructions to take the scrap of paper to Washington in case of war between the United States and any other country.

"Each of us was pledged to secrecy. None of us knows who else possesses the sinister slips. No single slip is any good without its four companions. This I confide in you—I have one of those slips! It is my belief that it will be my death warrant. Both Scholar and Brandon were great friends of Dr. Trim. Both may have possessed a part of that dangerous formula.

"I have told you this," Dr. Koslof concluded, "so that you will clearly understand what you are up against. The formula is worth millions of dollars to any government or to anyone who might sell it to a government!" Then Dr. Koslof entered the

physics building.

FOR a moment, both Marco and Kemper stared at each other.

"God!" Kemper exclaimed. "To think that Scholar's part of the formula was in my cabinet for two days!"

Marco gulped. "Be thankful, old son, that you haven't got one of them now!" The cameo ring on Marco's left hand seemed to be burning his flesh. He knew that he skated on thin ice as long as he held that slip of paper he had taken from Samons' wallet in his possession.

Marco took a deep breath of the stinging cold air. He reached in his pocket and pulled out an automatic. "Hope you know how to use this, Will." He passed the gun over to his companion. "I've got an extra one. Right now, we're going over and see if we can find Professor Letchman. He keeps too far in the background to suit me. If he won't let us in his house—well, we'll get in all right!"

They had reached the campus gates. Marco paused to light a cigarette. "Anyway, one bit of mystery is cleared up—Mr. Hsin. We know damned well that Hsin was the boy who tossed that knife at you. Just what Hsin's capacity was, we don't know. I think he was working for some Oriental political group. Hsin was killed because he knew too much about some one, or perhaps because he stood in the way as a competitor to the real criminal gang in getting those sinister slips."

Professor Letchman lived alone in a small cottage that stood shyly back from the street. Its windows were so heavily frosted that it was impossible to see if any light was burning in the house.

"It's past two o'clock, Marco," Kemper whispered. "Letchman will be in bed."

"Perhaps," replied Marco. "We'll try to wake him up. I want to ask questions and put my nose as far into his affairs as I can."

They crossed the narrow veranda and Marco smashed the bell push with his thumb. For nearly a minute they waited. Then, with a sigh, Marco drew a set of master keys from his pocket. He handed his flashlight to Will.

"You hold the flashlight." Marco was coolly examining the lock. His key scraped the eye of the lock. He felt it take hold and gave it a sharp turn. He opened the door and stepped into the darkened hallway.

"Where are we likely to find Letchman's valuables?" he whispered to Kemper who followed him.

"Doesn't have any to my knowledge. But he has a mussy old desk back in his study. I'll show you the way."

They found Letchman's study empty and all the curtains drawn. A roll top desk that approached a piano case in size stood against one wall. Marco sat down in the swivel chair and pushed back the top of the desk. He unceremoniously shuffled through the papers and found nothing of interest. He smashed the lock of one of the smaller drawers and pulled it open. There he found some long folded sheets of blue-print paper banded with rubber.

"Inventions," said Kemper vaguely.

"What kind?" asked Marco as he stripped off a rubber band and prepared to find out for himself.

"Oh, some fool thing he works on out at the airport."

Marco looked up. His black brows contracted above his piercing gray eyes. "Airport?"

Kemper bobbed his head. "There's a school of aeronautics in the college. Just new. Maybe you noticed the beacon light shining over the campus tonight"

Marco nodded. He had turned his attention to the blue print spread out on the desk. Suddenly, he stood up and ran long fingers through his black hair. He uttered a low whistle, and pointed at the blue print. "There you have it!" he exclaimed. "A

catapult!"

Kemper scowled. "I always knew Letchman was batty! Imagine! In this day of modern warfare, that old fossil monkeys with pre-gunpowder weapons, and—"

"No—no, nothing of the kind!" Marco interrupted. "It's an aircraft catapult to be used in launching airplanes."

"Oh, that." There was a note of disappointment in Kemper's voice. "I could have told you that. He's got it rigged up out at the airport. On top of a building or some place. Why didn't you say you wanted that sort of information. He spends most of his time out there tinkering with it. Don't know whether he ever got it working."

"Sap!" Marco exploded. "You've seen what happened tonight and you don't know whether or not Letchman got it to working! Why, that's what the coffins were thrown with! The killer simply forces his victims into coffins and puts the coffins on the catapult. After he got what he wanted, he simply sprang the catapult. That would be the end of everything for the man inside the coffin—body and evidence removed from the actual scene of the crime. He probably forced them to give up their part of the Trim formula under threat of death and then failed to keep his part of the bargain."

"The screaming sound that was heard every time one of the coffins made its mysterious appearance was caused by the air traveling at high velocity through the holes drilled in the top of the casket."

Marco reached across the desk and picked up the telephone directory. He leafed through it and scanned the "A" column. "Right!" he snapped. "It was the airport that Dr. Koslof called tonight—not Letchman's house. He thought that Letchman would be there tinkering with his invention. And that's where we're going right now." Marco listened for a moment, head on one side.

Kemper scowled. "What the hell?"

Marco's voice became a scarcely audible whisper. "Someone is trying to get into that next room, I think. Working on the window or something. Come on. But softly, Will. No lights. If we can catch this prowler—"

MARCO tiptoed through the door. Kemper pressed closely behind him. They entered the next room. Marco held his breath. Outside the window was a man. The window was open and he could see the head and shoulders of the prowler. Marco hugged to the wall and drew flashlight and automatic.

Then, Will Kemper sneezed. Marco cursed, flicked on his light, and raised his gun. Only for a moment did the light shine upon the bearded face of Professor Letchman. The man's black hair was bristling on his scalp; his eyes were black pools of fury. Then he was gone.

Marco pushed Will Kemper out of the way, ran to the window, and leaped over the sill. Footprints in the snow were made by Professor Letchman's rubber soled arctics. Marco's light swung along the fresh trail. No sign of the man! But he could follow as long as that trail held out. He swung around the corner. Still he was unable to see the bearded professor.

And Marco had the sudden disappointment of seeing the trail of the arctics hopelessly muddled by hundreds of other footprints. Letchman had wisely taken to the street and disappeared down its shadowy length. A squad of police—something that the town did not possess, might have found Letchman. But Marco alone hadn't a chance.

He turned disgustedly to meet Will Kemper—Kemper with a handkerchief to his nose.

"I'm afraid I'm catching cold," said Will.

Marco groaned. There was no doubt about it—Kemper was cut out for a professor after all!

CHAPTER V MURDER MACHINE

THEY were hurrying across the campus intent on reaching the airport just beyond.

"Has it occurred to you," Kemper asked, "that you shouldn't have handed those Chinese papers to Colonel Samons? We don't know much about him. He was just a soldier of fortune. He taught the cadets their gunnery. He would know just where to point that catapult to make the coffins land where he wanted them."

"Possibly. But right now we want to see that murder machine."

"You don't think there will be any more killings, do you?" asked Kemper.

"Any more? Why there were five slips of paper that carried parts of the Trim formula. If I'm a judge, there will be three more coffin killings unless we put a monkey wrench in the machinery."

Marco stopped. If he had not been looking skyward, he would not have seen it—a clumsy, black projectile hurtling over the top of Calvin Hall. Another casket!

It crashed into the eaves of the old building, bringing down a shower of brick work and snow. Its lid sprang open. Its contents—a sprawling, twisting, turning corpse—smashed to the sidewalk. The hideous sound of that poor tortured body falling on the pavement was masked by the din of the casket as it struck the sidewalk and bounded over and over until it reached the snow.

Marco sprang forward, covering the space between the startled Kemper and the body in long strides. The man had landed flat on his face. Marco, holding a light that trembled in his left hand, seized one flesh-warm hand and turned the man over. A shudder of nausea passed over him. He let the body fall back, hiding the gory mass that had once been a face.

"Wh-who is it? Kemper panted as he came up.

"God only knows," Marco husked. "Features utterly wiped out—pulped!" He forced his horrified eyes from the gruesome spectacle.

Kemper was twisting nervously at a scrap of paper that he had picked up. Then he seemed to suddenly become aware of what his fingers were doing.

"Look here, Marco!" he exclaimed. "I found this paper right here on the sidewalk. It—it's got blood on it. Looks like a scrap from a note book—"

Marco snatched the paper from his friend's hand. "Might have been in the coffin."

He stared in silence at the two words scrawled across the paper: "*Sin—Letchman.*"

"Got it!" Marco rapped. "Whoever this poor devil was, he tried in his last moments, inside the coffin, probably, to tell us who his killers were. Hsin and Letchman!"

"B-but—" Kemper sputtered, "Hsin is dead!"

"Of course, but remember the man who wrote this note might have just made a wild guess. We've no way of knowing."

"Then—then this," Kemper indicated the corpse, "this means that the killers have another one of those coveted slips. That makes the third! Two more to go, Marco. We've got to get busy!"

Yes, this was the third. Their puny efforts to halt the murder machine seemed futile. Those who possessed the sinister slips from Trim's formula were marked for murder. A cold shudder trailed along Marco's spine. He fought back the temptation to throw away the little scrap of paper that was hidden in his cameo ring. He had a hunch, a vague hunch, that that slip of paper would be his ace in the hole.

"The airport, Will," he said grimly. "The killer and his crowd must be out there

right now. We've got to nail this thing! It's more than murder. It's race suicide if Trim's formula is put together and sold for military purposes.

IN another minute or so, they were crossing the light-bordered field of the college airport. The electric beacon continued its tireless sweep across the black sky. Strategic approach would be impossible. The combined hangar and aviation building was dotted with a few lights. Marco asked Kemper if there was a ground crew on duty.

"No," came the reply. "Just one man. You see the port is off the regular air lanes and was placed here just for the students who are studying flying."

They entered the door at the foot of a field observation tower that reared its square bulk five stories into the air. Dim lights burned in the hall and stairway. The very silence was foreboding.

"Catapult is on the roof of the hangar," explained Kemper. "There's a door leading out on the roof from the third landing of this tower."

"Quiet," cautioned Marco. He was mounting the stairs swiftly, silently, senses alert to catch any sound from within the building.

At the third floor landing, Marco stepped out on the roof. It was a broad, flat, snow covered surface, a miniature landing field in itself. Two extension lamps sent feeble illumination across the roof. At one end, directly over the hangar door, was a steel crane. Probably it had been used to raise supplies to the roof where Letchman had constructed his catapult. The curious machine itself, that had been so fiendishly employed, consisted of a long steel track that extended over the edge of the roof and tilted towards the tower of Calvin Hall.

This, Marco decided, was the track from which the coffins had been launched by

means of a complicated system of weights and levers. Marco played his flashlight on the murder machine. Propulsion power, it seemed, originated at a central piston and cylinder, arrangement operated by compressed air. This power would be tremendously amplified by means of the lever system. Compressed air, it appeared, was piped from somewhere in the lower part of the building.

"You see, Will," he explained, "the coffins are placed on that track in front of the propelling lever."

A chuckle from behind Marco. "Maybe you'd like a demonstration."

That wasn't Kemper's voice! Marco pivoted and bumped into a shadowy-figure. Something descended upon his gun wrist with bone shattering force. His gun dropped soundlessly into the snow. Right arm temporarily crippled by the blow, Marco pounded into the man's middle with his left fist. His assailant recoiled and Marco leaped to push his vantage point for all it was worth. His arm flexed for another blow that never went across. Fingers of steel gripped Marco from behind. A second man was upon him. The icy nose of an automatic pressed into the back of Marco's neck. A muffled voice spoke:

"Hold it, bo! Want a slug in your noggin?"

There's a coffin waiting for you, Mr. Marco. Get him over to the catapult, Winters," ordered another man.

"Don't be so glib wit' my monicker," grumbled Winters, evidently the same man who had disappeared with the load of coffins.

The other man seized Marco's arm and shoved him back towards the catapult. It was then that Marco saw that both of his captors wore black hoodlike masks. Where was Will Kemper?

"Now," said the man who had first attacked Marco, "put up your hands. We'll search you thoroughly. If you haven't got what we want, you'll tell us where it is."

A knife slashed Marco's coat down the back. Rough hands peeled it from his shoulders. Marco saw that a third hooded criminal had joined the others upon the roof and was busily engaged in ripping Marco's coat to shreds and examining the lining. Marco's suit coat underwent a similar examination and he was left standing in his shirt sleeves, shivering in the cold.

"If you're looking for the piece of Trim formula that came from Colonel Samons' wallet, save your time," he said. "I haven't got it."

"We'll find out," grumbled one of the men. And without a word of warning, his right fist came up in a cruel slashing blow to Marco's chin. The detective reeled backwards. His knees struck something and he fell full length into something soft. His hands, grasping frantically, seized the cold, metal edge of—a coffin! He tried to sit up. Somebody's foot kicked him in the chest. He fell back on the soft death-cushion. The heavy lid dropped, crushing his finger tips, smothering him in a blackness that was literally sepulchral.

Marco gasped, kicked madly within his narrow confines. Then he relaxed. Something was pricking painfully into the flesh of his side. He knew that beneath the deceiving soft cushions were steel spikes hungry for his blood. Above his head, a small row of holes were drilled in the lid of the coffin.

Someone outside the coffin was speaking. His voice sounded far away. "Mr. Marco, as soon as we have the slip you took from Colonel Samons' wallet, you will be permitted to go free."

"Like hell!" Marco retorted. "You got similar slips from Scolar and Brandon. If you hadn't, you wouldn't keep on trying to get the missing pieces."

"I suppose you realize that we can keep you there indefinitely," the voice went

on. "A living man finds a coffin a tiresome place to rest. Especially is it tiresome when we attach a little electric hammer to the lid of the coffin and let it tap-tap-tap just above your head until the persistent, monotonous sound drives you mad. Brandon held out just thirty minutes under such torment. It will be easier for you to tell us where the slip is now."

INSIDE the coffin, Marco's hands were moving rapidly. His fingers trembled along his vest. His fountain pen! They had left that! He jerked it out, unscrewed the cap, remembering ruefully how he had used that pen in a sleight-of-hand trick early that night. He flipped back the cameo setting of his ring and took out the scrap of paper. In the dark, he scribbled a line on the paper with his pen.

He could feel the coffin being raised. He heard the clash of steel as it was lowered to the track. He knew that as soon as he handed over the paper, the fiends would pull the lever, sending him hurtling through the freezing dark with air screaming through the holes in the coffin lid threatening to burst his eardrums. Then a last sickening crash.

"Hey," he shouted, "I'll come across! Can't stand this any longer."

A chuckle from outside the coffin. "He hasn't the guts like them seedy profs." It was the truckster, Winters, who had spoken.

A whispered conversation outside the coffin. Footsteps across the roof. Then another voice spoke. "Tell us, Mr. Marco, where the slip is."

"I've got it here with me," Marco replied.

"Impossible! We searched you thoroughly."

Marco forced a laugh that echoed hollowly. "Remember, I'm a magician. Open the lid and I will give it to you."

"It's a trick," someone whispered.

"Never mind. Stand by the lever! I'll cover him with the gun."

Marco tensed himself. Slowly the lid raised a crack. "Hand the paper to me," the leader commanded.

Marco's arm snaked through the opening. His fingers extended the slip of paper to meet the killer's hand. Then Marco moved! With a desperate heave, he threw back the lid of the coffin and sprang to his feet. A cry of alarm from the masked man. "Power!" he screamed.

A lever crashed into place. Marco leaped clear just as the coffin shot screeching into space. He landed in a maze of snarling machinery. A moving lever knocked him flat, but saved his life, he knew, as a bullet shrilled above his head. Marco rolled under a beam, seized a guy wire, and pulled to his feet. Then he raced across the roof, zigzagging through snow while two automatics barked and bullets whined inches from his body.

He gained the door and was alternately striding, falling, stumbling down the steps. He did not know where he was going. He only knew that he could not land in a hotter spot than he had been in. Marco crashed through a door and found himself in a basement.

A shadowy form, a hooded, fiendish devil leaped, out at him. Marco led with his right to the man's head. The hooded killer ducked and yelled, "Marco, you jackass!"

Marco reined in his second blow. He stared at the masked face. "Will!" he whispered huskily. "You?"

"Hell, yes. In another moment, if I'd met that haymaker of yours, I'd have been candidate for a coffin." Will's hand came up and jerked off the hood-mask. "Swiped this from a friend of ours. I was afraid you'd get in a tight spot and I was going to be the hero and come to the rescue. When you started up the stairs, I suddenly decided I'd look around below. I do things like that I came down here, found some of those hi-jacked coffins. I was looking them over, when a masked man came in. Well, I closed in fast. It didn't last long. I

beat a lot of things out of that masked devil before he tried a getaway. Then I think I broke his neck. Come take a look at him.”

Kemper pulled back a door and pointed to a huddled heap of flesh.

Marco gasped. “That little shrimp was in it too?” For in spite of the fact that the man’s head was turning blue-black from Kemper’s pommeling, Marco recognized Mr. Welsh, the history instructor.

Suddenly he remembered the scene in the steam tunnel when he had come across the body of Hsin. He remembered the masked man who had shot at him from the other side of the coffin. He remembered that the passage had been so nearly blocked off that he could not follow the slayer. Only a very small man like Welsh could have got through that hole.

“The coffins weren’t hijacked,” explained Kemper. “Welsh confessed, before he caved in, that Winters, the truck driver, had been employed by them. He simply drove the truck and all over here to the airport to join the gang. Someone in the crowd decided that they could make good use of those coffins. Burk, the airport attendant was in it, too. Trim gave one of his formula parts to Welsh so that gave them something to start on. But the real leader of the pack remains a mystery. Welsh went out before I could get that out of him.”

Marco nodded. “I know who he is. My case wouldn’t stand against him in court, but we’ve trapped him pretty neatly if—”

Marco stopped. Above them, a motor sputtered, coughed, and broke into a roar. “A plane, Will! They’ve taken one from the hangar. They’ve got the slips for the Trim formula. We’ve just seconds in which to try to stop them!”

He sprang up the stairs, taking them in a dozen strides. Will Kemper was pushing behind him, shouting, “Turn left! Get out through the hangar!”

Marco threw open a door and collided with a man wearing a hood-mask. The man

cursed in a hoarse voice that Marco recognized as belonging to Winters. A gun in the truckster’s hand nosed threateningly at Marco’s middle. One glanced across the field through the open door and Marco saw a plane taxiing across the field. He ignored the gun in the truckster’s hand, led a chopping blow to the man’s jaw, at the same time seizing Winter’s gun wrist. A bullet creased Marco’s shoulder. Another shot crashed out. The criminal doubled, dropped his gun, and clutched at his belly. Will Kemper came out of the basement way, red hair upstanding. Smoke dribbled from the nose of his automatic.

Marco scooped the wounded criminal’s gun from the floor and ran from the hangar. The plane was taxiing into the wind.

“They’re going to get away, Marco!” shouted Kemper.

CHAPTER VI THE MAN WHO LIED

BUT Marco saw something that Kemper had evidently failed to see. A big touring car was plowing across the landing field. Its powerful headlights were suddenly switched on, cutting a clean swath to the nose of the airplane. Men spilled from the car—men with rifles, automatics, machine guns.

“State troopers, Will,” shouted Marco.

The plane swerved to miss the oncoming car. The pilot jazzed his throttle as if he were going to make a break for it. The machine-gun started talking. Leaden hail slashed through the plane’s radial engine and killed it. The snow dragged the plane to a standstill. The pilot vaulted over the cockpit wall and yanked out his automatic. One of the men from the car dropped him in his tracks with a quick, well-aimed shot.

The plane’s other occupant was standing up in the cockpit, waving manacled hands above his head and shouting, “Don’t shoot, for God’s sake!”

"It's Dr. Koslof in the plane!" Kemper shouted. "The gang was taking him prisoner. They must have known that the troopers were coming and they were going to clear out. They would have tortured Koslof until he gave them the other part of Trim's formula."

Marco and Kemper reached the plane just as the troopers were helping Dr. Koslof out. The Russian was pale, haggard-eyed.

"Thank God, gentlemen, that you are safe," he said to Kemper and Marco as soon as he was on the ground. "And thanks to you members of the police force who saved my life."

Kemper was tugging impatiently at Marco's sleeve. "Some detective you turned out to be!" he scoffed. "There's Letchman now!"

"Where?" Marco turned to look about him.

"With the troopers. See, he's got an automatic in his band. By the great horn spoon, as Mnndy would say, I think he's the man who shot down the aviator. Why, the note with the unidentified body must have just been planted to divert suspicion from the real criminals!"

The bearded Professor Letchman came up to them. Above his black beard, a smile twisted his lips. "Mr. Marco and Mr. Kemper, I had to do something to prevent myself being branded as a coward. I was afraid of everyone—even Dr. Durn. I ran from the infirmary tonight just as though Durn intended to harm me! Tonight, when I saw you gentlemen in my house, I was afraid again. But I thought I might sneak through that window to get my gun, and hold you till the police arrived. I thought you were criminals!"

"Yes," said Marco. "But how did you happen to bring the troopers here?"

"The catapult, of course. I suddenly realized that my catapult must be throwing the coffins from the airport to the campus."

"Did you know that Mr. Welsh was in

the gang?" asked Kemper excitedly.

Letchman shook his head. "He could have been easily enough. He was a great friend of Dr. Trim and might have known something about Dr. Trim's explosive. If he could have obtained all of the formula, any government would have paid him royally for it."

"How did you know the formula was that of an explosive?" Marco asked abruptly.

"Why, I had one of the slips myself. It was stolen from me about a week ago. I had it in my desk together with some blue prints. It was not difficult to learn what the formula was for, after seeing the portion of nitrogen compounds used in its preparation."

Marco nodded with apparent satisfaction. He crossed over to where Dr. Koslof was standing, telling the story of his capture to the police.

"And I saw with my own eyes," Koslof was saying, "the criminal gang execute their own leader. Welsh, Winters, and Burk were not satisfied with the amount of money Colonel Samons intended to pay them for the job. They put Samons in the coffin and hurled him—"

"You mean," Marco interrupted, "that Samons is the unidentified man who fell from that coffin not more than an hour ago?"

"I do not know the condition of his body," replied Koslof. "But he was thrown from that catapult."

Marco hummed softly for a moment. "And did the criminals succeed in making you give up your part of the Trim formula, Dr. Koslof?"

"Why, no. I would not be alive at this moment if they had. They were too great cowards to risk tale-telling after they had taken the formula parts from their victims."

"I suppose that's true," said Marco. "However, there are some points to clear up. For example, why did you call the airport tonight when you wanted to get in touch with

Professor Letchman?”

“Because Letchman spent most of his time out here. Isn’t that true, Letchman?”

The bearded professor nodded.

Marco persisted, “But no one answered your call, Dr. Koslof. The ringing of the telephone bell in the air hangar could have easily been a signal to Burk and Winters to shoot the coffin containing Brandon from the catapult. Brandon was killed only seconds after your call.”

“A mere coincidence,” replied Koslof brusquely. “How could I have had anything to do with it? I was their prisoner!”

Marco frowned. “Apparently. But a man can put handcuffs on himself. The fact that you appeared to be a prisoner makes a pretty good alibi with all the rest of the criminal gang either dead or dying.”

“See here, Mr. Marco,” one of the state troopers cut in, “I know you by reputation—a darned good reputation, too. But it looks as though you had a grudge against Dr. Koslof.”

“I have!” declared Marco. “I hate all murderers. *And Dr. Koslof was the brains and leader of this gang!*”

“The man is mad!” Koslof sneered.

“Yet you do not deny having one of the slips from Dr. Trim’s formula in your possession?” Marco asked. “Does it seem logical that Dr. Trim, an American citizen in possession of a secret of great importance to his country’s war department, would entrust a portion of that secret to a foreigner?”

KOSLOFS face flushed. “I was Trim’s friend. I fully intended to take out citizenship papers as soon as possible. Why, Colonel Samons—”

“Colonel Samons,” Marco interrupted, “was murdered because he was in possession of certain Chinese papers compiled by Mr. Hsin. Hsin, I believe, can be proved an agent of the Chinese central government. Hsin, it is true, was trying to get the Trim formula for his own country. But he would not have killed to

get it. Hsin, a master of espionage, had learned of your criminal organization. That is why Mr. Welsh shot Hsin. And Welsh knew that I would pick up Samon’s wallet which Hsin had dropped after stealing it from the colonel. You believed that that wallet contained a portion of the Trim formula. You confided in Kemper and me because you hoped to scare me into giving you the slip of paper from Samons’ wallet as soon as possible. And I did give it to you to avoid being tortured in that coffin. I demand that you submit to a search.”

Koslof shrugged and raised his hands above his head. “You may search me. You will find only the slip of paper that Dr. Trim gave to me in the first place.”

The leader of the state police watched Marco carefully as the latter looked over Koslof’s belongings. Marco found a folded bit of paper in Koslof’s vest pocket.

“Okeh,” he said. “You insist that this was given to you by Dr. Trim?”

Koslof nodded his head. “Certainly!”

Marco took a match from his trousers pocket. He lighted it and held it beneath the formula-covered scrap of paper. “Watch,” he said.

The policeman stared in wonder as slowly, very slowly, heat from the match brought brown pen lines out on the paper. The trooper cursed. “Why, it’s invisible ink!”

“Read what it says,” Marco directed.

The trooper read aloud:

This paper taken from Marco by means of extortion under threat of death by Dr. Koslof and his gang.

“Watch Koslof!” Will Kemper shouted.

Marco whirled, saw Koslof break through the ring of state police and run towards the motor car. A hoarse command from the troopers’ captain. Automatics roared, Koslof staggered threw his hands above his

head, and pitched forward on his face.

"You see, Will," Marco explained softly, "I wrote that addition to the Trim formula inside a coffin! The fountain pen I used contained invisible ink that I used in my show this evening for "spirit writing."

"But what made you suspect Koslof in the first place?" asked Kemper.

"The coffin killings. It was an old Russian custom during the terrible days of revolution. Ammunition came dear. Enemies of the revolutionists were sometimes nailed in coffins and dumped over a convenient wall without bothering to execute them first. Koslof, of course, wasn't associated with any government in this business. He wanted to sell the Trim formula to the highest bidder, I suppose. But he was a Russian and knew all

the terrors of the revolution. The truck load of coffins suggested a very convenient method of torture and execution."

"And where are the other slips of the Trim formula?" Kemper asked.

"Hidden around here somewhere. I'm not interested because they're no good without the fifth slip!" Marco was lighting a cigarette from a little paper twill.

Kemper stared at the detective. "Lord! That's a part of the Trim formula. It's worth millions!"

"Perhaps," Marco said coolly, "but not worth millions of lives." Grimly he watched the paper burn to frail black ashes that crumbled and fluttered down upon the trampled snow.