

Kummer Frederic Arnold

The Film of Fear



Frederic Kummer

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PART I

CHAPTER I

Ruth Morton finished her cup of coffee, brushed a microscopic crumb from her embroidered silk kimono, pushed back her loosely arranged brown hair, and resumed the task of opening her mail.

It was in truth a task, and one that consumed an inordinate amount of her valuable time. And her time was extremely valuable. Computed upon the basis of her weekly salary of one thousand dollars, it figured out just \$142.85 per day, or very nearly \$6 per hour, or 10 cents per minute, for each minute and hour of the twenty-four. As a motion picture star, she had the satisfaction of knowing that she was paid a slightly larger salary than had been, until recently, received by the President of the United States.

The opening of the huge batch of letters that greeted her daily across her dainty breakfast table was very much of a duty. It was not that she felt any keen interest in the numberless notes from admirers, both male and female, from Portland, Me., to Los Angeles, Cal., to say nothing of South Bend, Opeloosa and Kicking Horse between. These might readily have been consigned to the depths of the wastebasket unopened, unread. But there was always the chance that, intermingled with this mass of adulation, there might be a real letter, from a real friend, or a business communication of importance from some picture company possibly, prepared to offer her two thousand dollars per week, instead of one thousand, at the expiration of her present contract. So the mail had to be carefully opened, at least, even if the bulk of it was tossed aside unread.

Her mother usually assisted her in this daily task, but to-day Mrs. Morton, oppressed by a slight attack of indigestion, slept late, and Ruth proceeded with the operation alone.

She was a singularly attractive girl, combining a wholesome and quite unassumed innocence with a certain measure of sophistication, gained by daily contact with the free and easy life of the studios. Her brown eyes were large and wondering, as though she still found it difficult to realize that within four years she had stepped from comparative poverty to the possession of an income which a duke or a prince might readily have envied. Her features, pleasing, regular, somewhat large, gave to her that particular type of beauty which lends itself best to the eccentricities of the camera. Her figure, graceful, well modeled, with the soft roundness of youth, enabled her to wear with becoming grace almost any costume, from the simple frock of the school girl to the costly gowns of the woman of fashion. Add to this a keen intelligence and a delightful vivacity of manner, and the reason for Ruth Morton's popularity among motion picture "fans" from coast to coast was at once apparent.

She sat in the handsomely appointed dining-room of the apartment on Fifty-seventh Street which she and her mother had occupied for the past two years. The room, paneled in dull ivory, provided a perfect setting for the girl's unusual beauty. In her kimono of Nile green and gold, she presented a figure of such compelling charm that Nora, her maid, as she removed the empty coffee-cup, sighed to herself, if not with envy, at least with regret, that the good God had not made *her* along lines that would insure an income of over fifty thousand dollars a year.

Ruth sliced open half a dozen more letters with her ivory paper knife and prepared to drop them into the waste basket. One was from a manufacturer of cold cream, soliciting a testimonial. Two others were from ungrammatical school girls, asking her how they should proceed, in order to become motion picture stars. Another was an advertisement of a new automobile. The fifth requested

an autographed picture of herself. She swept the five over the edge of the table with a sigh of relief. How stupid of all these people, she thought, to take up their time, and her own, so uselessly.

The sixth letter, from its external appearance, might readily have been of no greater interest than the other five, and yet, something intangible about it caused her to pause for a moment before inserting the point of the knife beneath the flap of the envelope. It was a large envelope, square, formal-looking. The address upon it was typewritten. Unlike the majority of the other letters, forwarded from the studio, it bore the street and number of the apartment house in which she lived. The envelope was postmarked New York, and was sealed with a splotch of black sealing wax, which, however, contained the imprint of no monogram or seal, but was crossed both vertically and horizontally by a series of fine parallel lines, dividing its surface into minute squares.

Ruth observed these several peculiarities of the letter she was about to open, with growing interest. The usual run of her correspondence was so dull and uninteresting that anything out of the ordinary was apt to attract her attention. Slipping the ivory blade of the paper knife quickly beneath the flap of the envelope, she cut it open.

The letter within, written on the same heavy paper as that composing the envelope, contained but three typewritten lines. It was not these, however, that instantly attracted Ruth's attention, but the signature appended to them. This signature did not consist of a name, but of an astonishing seal, imprinted upon a bit of the same black sealing wax with which the envelope had been fastened. And the device, as Ruth bent over it to make out its clearcut but rather fine lines, filled her with a sudden and overwhelming dismay.

It was a grinning death's head, about half an inch in width, with eye-sockets staring vacantly, and grisly mouth gaping in a wide and horrible smile, made the more horrible by the two rows of protruding teeth. The girl almost dropped the letter, as full realization of the significance of the design swept over her.

Hastily she recovered herself, and with trembling fingers raised the letter from her lap. The three typewritten lines upon the sheet were, if anything, more horrifying than the device beneath them. "Your beauty has made you rich and famous," the letter read. "Without it you could do nothing. Within thirty days it shall be destroyed, and you will be hideous."

For a long time Ruth sat gazing at the words before her. In spite of their ghastly significance she could with difficulty bring herself to believe that she had an enemy in the world sufficiently ruthless, sufficiently envious of her beauty and her success, to be capable of either threatening her in this brutal way, or of carrying such a threat into execution. So far as she knew, there was not a single person of all her acquaintance who wished her ill. Her own nature was too sweet, too sympathetic, too free from malice and bitterness, to conceive for a moment that the very charms which had brought her fame, success, might also be the means of bringing her envy and hatred in like proportion. She cast about in her mind for some possible, some reasonable explanation of the matter, but try as she would, she was unable to think of anyone with whom she had ever come in contact, capable of threatening her in this terrible way. She had about decided that the whole thing must be some stupidly conceived practical joke, when she saw her mother cross the hall and come into the room.

Mrs. Harriet Morton was a woman of fifty, handsome and youthful in spite of her gray hair, her years. That she had once been extremely good-looking could have been told at a glance; anyone seeing mother and daughter together experienced no difficulty in determining the source of Ruth Morton's charms.

"Well, dear," said the older woman, with a pleasant smile. "Haven't you finished your letters yet?" She glanced toward the clock on the mantel. "You'll have to leave for the studio in half an hour." Ruth nodded, gazing at her mother rather uneasily.

"You'll have to open the rest of them, mother," she said, indicating the pile of letters. "I – I'm tired."

Mrs. Morton came up to her daughter and passed her hand over the girl's glossy hair.

"What's wrong, Ruth? You look as though something had frightened you." Then her eyes fell upon the letter lying in the girl's lap, and she paused suddenly.

Ruth handed her mother the sheet of paper.

"I – I just got this," she said, simply.

Mrs. Morton took the letter quickly from her daughter's hand and proceeded to read it. A look of apprehension crept into her eyes, but she did her best to appear unconcerned.

"Some crank," she said, after she had mastered the sudden fear that swept over her. "I shouldn't pay any attention to it, if I were you, my dear. There are a lot of people in the world that have nothing better to do, than play silly jokes like that."

"Then you don't think it amounts to anything?" Ruth asked, somewhat relieved.

"Certainly not. Just a stupid plan to frighten you. Pay no attention to it. No" – she folded the letter as the girl put out her hand – "I'll take charge of this. Now you'd better hurry and get ready. The car will be waiting for you at nine, and Mr. Edwards expects to start that new picture to-day, doesn't he?"

"Yes." The girl rose. "It's a beautiful part. I'm the daughter of an old music teacher, who dies in Brooklyn, and leaves me in poverty. And later on, it turns out he was the heir to the throne of Moravia, and I'm a princess. Lots of adventures, and spies, and all that. Ralph Turner is the lover. He's awfully good-looking, don't you think?"

Mrs. Morton assented in rather a preoccupied way, as her daughter left the room. She was still thinking of the brutal threat which the girl had just received, and of the possible dangers to which she might as a result be exposed. Mrs. Morton by no means felt the matter to be a joke, in spite of the assurances she had given Ruth. The tone of the letter, the evident care which had been taken to prevent the identity of the writer from becoming known, filled her with the gravest alarm.

As she sat pondering the matter, Nora came into the room, with Ruth's dust coat and parasol in her hands. Mrs. Morton beckoned to the girl, then spoke to her in a low voice.

"Nora," she said, "Miss Ruth received a letter this morning, from somebody who is envious of her beauty and success. I pretended to make light of the matter, but there may be something back of it. I want you to watch her carefully while you are away from the house. Be on your guard every moment of the time. Don't let anyone come near her. They might try to throw acid, or something of the sort. I shan't feel safe until she is home again."

The maid's face lit up with a significant smile. From her manner it was clear that she fairly worshiped her young mistress.

"I'll not let anyone do her any harm, Mrs. Morton," she said, earnestly. "You may be sure of that."

"And don't let her know," Mrs. Morton added hastily, in a low voice, as she saw Ruth come to the door, "that I am at all worried. She must not have a threat like that on her mind."

The maid nodded, then turned toward the door where Ruth stood.

"Well, mother, good-by," the latter exclaimed with a laugh. "You can open all the rest of the letters, and if you come across any more like that last one, please keep them. I think I'll begin a collection."

Mrs. Morton forced herself to join in the girl's laughter.

"There won't be any more, dear," she said, kissing the girl fondly. "Don't bother your head about such things. They're not worth it. And come home as soon as you get through."

"All right, mother. We're going to the theater to-night, aren't we? Don't forget to get the tickets." With a smile she left the room, and a few moments later Mrs. Morton heard the rumble of the descending elevator.

She sat in silence for a long time, thinking, a great fear clutching at her heart. Her life, she reflected, had held, until recently, but little of happiness. The long, weary days of poverty, when her husband, incapacitated by a paralytic stroke, had seen his savings slowly dwindle away; the death

of her son, and then that of Mr. Morton himself passed before her mental vision. Only Ruth had been left to her, and in the girl's happiness and success lay Mrs. Morton's whole life and being. Now, that things had at last taken a turn, and the future seemed clear and assured ahead of her, was some dreadful tragedy to change all her joy to sorrow? She turned to the pile of still unopened letters with a sigh, afraid, almost to proceed with the task of reading them. Yet, an hour later, when they had all been disposed of without further threats against Ruth having been discovered, she breathed more easily. Perhaps, after all, the horrible letter was merely a silly joke. She took it out and examined it again with the greatest care, but no clue to the identity of the writer rewarded her scrutiny. The message remained clear, terrible, full of sinister meaning. "*Within thirty days it shall be destroyed, and you will be hideous!*" The grinning death's head seal stared up at her, fascinatingly horrible. Mrs. Morton quickly placed the letter in her bosom.

Rising, she left the room, and proceeded to that occupied by Ruth. It pleased her, notwithstanding the servants, to take care of it herself. Mrs. Morton was passionately devoted to her beautiful daughter. In her, the sun rose and set.

She glanced about the daintily furnished room with a smile. The appointments were simple, almost girlish, in spite of their owner's large salary. Mrs. Morton began to set the room to rights. She had finished making the bed, and had gone over to the dressing table to arrange the articles upon it, when a square of white upon the floor attracted her attention.

It lay upon the rug in front of the dressing table, and appeared to be a letter of some sort.

Supposing it to be something that the girl had dropped in the hurry of leaving, Mrs. Morton stooped and picked it up. Then a queer feeling of dismay came over her. The large square white envelope, the typewritten address, bore a singular and disquieting resemblance to the one in which the threatening letter had been received so short a time before.

With trembling hands, Mrs. Morton tore the envelope open and removed the folded sheet of paper within. When her eyes fell upon the contents of the latter, she shuddered, and stood white with fear.

There was a message in typewritten characters upon the sheet, and Mrs. Morton read it with a groan of despair.

"*Only twenty-nine days more!*" the message said. "We shall not fail." Below the words grinned the frightful death's head seal.

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Harriet Morton was a courageous woman, but when she read the second threat against her daughter, she was filled with instant indignation and horror. The thing was so appallingly mysterious, so utterly without reasonable explanation.

Ruth had left the room but a few moments before. Certainly the letter was not upon the floor then. The maid, Nora, had gone with her. That removed her from any suspicion, even had such a thought been reasonable or possible, and Mrs. Morton felt it was not. The only other person in the apartment was Mary, their old cook, a negro from the south, who had been a faithful and patient member of the Morton household for over ten years. That she could have had a hand in placing this mysterious message in Ruth's bedroom seemed incredible, not to be entertained for a moment. And yet, there was the message, appallingly simple, direct, threatening. "*Only twenty-nine days more!*" Mrs. Morton shuddered.

She glanced about the room. How had the letter come there? Certainly not by means of the door. Yet it seemed equally out of the question that it could have been brought in through one of the windows.

There were two in the room, one facing to the front, and opening upon a court, the other in the rear, overlooking the yards of the houses on the next street. She went to the front window, which was raised only a few inches, and gazed out.

Below her stretched the wide court, flanked on one hand by the side of the apartment building, on the other by the blank wall of an adjoining house. The latter was some ten feet from where she stood, and *there were no windows in it!* She turned to the window at the other side of the room.

Here a fire escape led down to an alley at the rear of the building. Could it have been in this way that the letter had been delivered? The thing seemed impossible. Not only was the window closed, but she knew that the ladders did not reach all the way to the ground, the last section being pulled up, to be dropped only in case of fire. With a mystified look she returned to the center of the room.

The letter grinned at her from the dresser, on which she had left it. Ruth must never hear of the matter, she knew. Taking it up, she placed it in the bosom of her dress along with the one which had arrived earlier in the day. Then she sat down to decide what she had best do next.

To trifle with so dangerous a situation was no longer to be thought of. One message, the first, might have been a foolish joke. The second proved that the danger threatening her daughter was real, imminent.

At first she thought of placing the matter in the hands of the postal authorities, but would they, she wondered, concern themselves with threats delivered in other ways than by mail? This second message had not come through any such channels. In desperation she put on her hat, placed the two letters in her handbag and set out to seek the advice of one of her oldest and best friends.

Her purpose took her to a private banking house in Broad Street, upon the wide entrance doors of which was inscribed the name John Stapleton & Co. She asked to see Mr. Stapleton. John Stapleton was a man of wealth and influence in the financial world, and Mrs. Morton's husband had at one time been one of his most trusted employees. Now that Ruth had become to some extent a capitalist, it was to Mr. Stapleton that the care of her savings had been entrusted. Mrs. Morton felt the utmost confidence in both his sincerity and his judgment.

Mr. Stapleton received her almost at once, in his simply yet richly furnished private office, and rising from his huge flat-topped rosewood desk, welcomed her warmly, and asked what he could do for her.

Mrs. Morton felt confused. Her mission seemed, after all, a strange one with which to come to a leader of finance.

"I – I am in great trouble, Mr. Stapleton," she began.

"Yes?" He took her hand in his and led her to a chair. "Tell me all about it."

Mrs. Morton explained the circumstances surrounding the receiving of the two letters in detail, and then handed the documents to Mr. Stapleton.

"Do you think I had better place the matter in the hands of the postal authorities?" she said. Mr. Stapleton examined the two letters carefully then he shook his head.

"No. At least not at present. It seems to me that your daughter may be in grave danger, and under those circumstances, I think your wisest course would be to employ a private detective, an investigator of matters of this character, not only to ferret out those who are responsible for these threats, but to take steps to protect your daughter from harm."

"You think, then, that she is really in danger?" Mrs. Morton gasped.

"I do not wish to alarm you, but I very much fear that she is."

"But I don't know any private detectives," Mrs. Morton began.

Stapleton looked up from the letter.

"When I spoke," he said, "I had a certain man in mind. He is not a detective, in the usual sense of the word. You can find plenty of those, of course, but, while they are useful enough in the detection of criminals of the ordinary sort, they would probably have very little success in an affair such as this. The man I had in mind is a brilliant criminal investigator, one whose services I have more than once been obliged to make use of in matters of a personal nature. Some two years ago, for instance, my child was kidnapped, in Paris, and held for ransom. The entire police force of the French capital seemed powerless to discover his whereabouts. At last I called in Richard Duvall, and within a few days my boy was returned to me, and the criminals who had abducted him placed under arrest. It was a marvellous, a brilliant piece of work. I am not likely to forget very soon the mystery of the changing lights." He paused, and Mrs. Morton spoke up eagerly.

"Give me Mr. Duvall's address," she said, "and I will see him at once."

"That," Mr. Stapleton smiled, "is, of course, the great difficulty. Duvall, who is married, lives with his wife on their farm near Washington. They both have plenty of money, and he has practically retired from professional work."

"Then of what use is it to suggest his name?" asked Mrs. Morton, quickly.

"He had already retired," Stapleton rejoined, "at the time of my boy's kidnapping, but I prevailed on him to take up the case. His retirement merely means that he is not in the active practice of his profession. But exceptional cases, cases which by reason of their novelty interest him, he may be persuaded to undertake. I fancy this matter of your daughter's would prove attractive to him. It is unusual – bizarre. I strongly advise you to see him."

"To do that, I must go to Washington?"

"Yes. I will give you a letter which will insure you an interview, and, I hope, enlist his services in your behalf." He pressed a button on his desk, summoning a stenographer. "I sincerely hope that you will be successful."

Mrs. Morton sat in silence while the letter of introduction to Richard Duvall was being written. Then she rose to go.

"I will leave for Washington this afternoon," she announced. "I feel that there is no time to waste."

"You are quite right. And be sure to tell Mr. Duvall that you are a close personal friend of mine, and that anything he can do for you I shall appreciate to the utmost."

Mrs. Morton went back to the apartment, and made her preparations to start. She determined to take a train leaving at half past three, and as Ruth would not return from the studio until later, she called her up on the telephone, and told her of her sudden determination.

"It is a matter of business, dear," she explained. "I will be back to-morrow. Good-by." The girl's cheerful voice reassured her. At least nothing had happened up to now, to give cause for alarm.

It was only when Mrs. Morton was about to leave for the train that her nerves were once more subjected to a severe shock.

The telephone bell rang, and she went to answer it, thinking that Ruth might for some reason have called her up.

Over the wire came a thin, queer voice.

"Beauty is only skin deep," it said. "A breath may destroy it." After that, silence.

Mrs. Morton made a frantic effort to learn the number of the station from which she had been called, but without success. In a rather depressed state of mind, she made her way to the train.

It was half past eight at night when she arrived in Washington, and she at once called up Richard Duvall on the telephone.

To her disappointment, she learned that he was out, and was not expected back until late. There was nothing to do but wait until morning. She retired to her room, full of hope that the following day would bring an end to her fears.

Immediately after breakfast she called again, and this time was more successful. Duvall himself answered the telephone.

"I am Mrs. Morton, from New York," she said, eagerly. "I would like to come out and see you."

"What do you wish to see me about?" the detective inquired.

"It is a personal matter. I will explain when I arrive. I prefer not to do so over the telephone. I have a letter to you from Mr. Stapleton."

"Mr. John Stapleton, the banker?"

"Yes."

"Come, then, by all means, at any hour that suits you. Mr. Stapleton is one of my best friends."

Mrs. Morton hung up the receiver, after assuring him that she would start at once. Then she went out and engaging an automobile, set out for Duvall's place.

CHAPTER III

Richard Duvall and his wife, Grace, lingered rather later than usual over their breakfast that morning.

It was a warm and brilliant day in May, and the blossoming beauty of the spring filled them both with a delightful sense of well-being.

Duvall, however, seemed a trifle restless, and Grace observed it.

"What's the matter, Richard?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing." Her husband picked up the morning paper. "They are still looking for the woman in that Marsden case, I see," he remarked.

"Do you know, my dear," Grace said, "I sometimes think that you made a mistake in coming down here to the country to live. Your heart is really in New York, and every time there is a murder case, or a bank robbery, or a kidnapping up there, you are restless as a hen on a hot griddle until the mystery is solved. Why don't you take up your professional work again?" Duvall laid down his paper and regarded his wife with a look of surprise.

"Because, Grace," he said, "you especially asked me, after that affair of the missing suffragette, to finally give up my detective work and content myself with a quiet existence here on the farm. You said, on account of the boy, that I ought not to take such risks."

"Well – suppose I did. You agreed with me, didn't you?"

"Yes – I guess so." Duvall once more picked up the newspaper. "But, naturally, I can't help feeling a certain interest in any striking and novel case that I may read about."

"And I haven't a doubt," laughed Grace, "that you wish that you were back in harness again a dozen times a day. Come now – 'fess up. Don't you?"

"Sometimes," granted her husband, with a smile. "You know I loved my work. It always seemed to take me out of the dull routine of existence, and give me a new feeling of interest. I shouldn't mind if I had a novel and interesting case to work on right now."

"Would you take one, if it were offered to you?" asked Grace quickly.

"No – I guess not. I haven't forgotten my promise."

"Well – I've decided to release you from that, Richard. I really think you need a little mental exercise and diversion. All play and no work, you know – " She began to arrange the dogwood blossoms she had gathered before breakfast, in a big vase on the table.

Duvall laughed.

"I'm getting along very well," he said. "Don't forget I'm expecting to have that corner lot planted in potatoes to-day." He rose, and coming over to his wife, playfully pinched her cheek. "What's the matter, dear?" he asked. "Are you pining for a little trip to New York yourself? We don't need a murder mystery to make that possible, you know."

Grace shook her head. As she did so, the telephone bell in the hall began to ring. "That may be your murder mystery now," she said, with a laugh.

"More likely the Clarks asking us over to dinner this evening," he returned, as he made his way into the hall.

Grace continued to arrange her flowers. Presently Duvall re-entered the room. There was a curious smile upon his face. "Well," Grace remarked, glancing up. "Which was it? The murder case, or the Clarks?"

"Neither. A mysterious woman, this time, saying that she must see me at once. I told her to come on out."

"Ah! This *is* serious," his wife laughed. "A mysterious woman! I suppose I ought to be jealous. Didn't she say what she wanted with you?"

"No. But we'll know soon enough. She'll be here at half past nine. Suppose we go and take a look at those Airedale pups." Together they crossed the veranda and made their way toward the barn.

Richard Duvall had changed but little since the days when he had served on the staff of Monsieur Lefevre, the Prefect of Police of Paris, and had taken part in the stirring adventures of the Million Francs, the Ivory Snuff Box and the Changing Lights. The same delightful spirit of *camaraderie* existed between his wife, Grace, and himself, a spirit which had enabled them, together, to solve some of the most exciting mysteries in the annals of the French detective service. It had been nearly two years, now, since the affair of the Mysterious Goddess, the last case in which Duvall had been concerned, and he was beginning to feel that he would welcome with outstretched arms a chance to make use once more of his exceptional talents as an investigator of crime. Hence he had received Mrs. Morton's telephone call with more than ordinary interest.

The latter had told him nothing of her reasons for interviewing him, contenting herself with the bare statement that she had a letter to him from Mr. Stapleton. This, however, had been enough to set Duvall's nerves to tingling and to cause him to conclude that the mysterious woman who desired to interview him in such a hurry came on no ordinary business. Hence he waited with some impatience for the arrival of half past nine.

A few moments after the half hour, a large automobile swept up the drive, and Duvall, with a nod to his wife, went back to the house to receive his guest. She was waiting in the library when he entered.

"I am Mrs. Morton, of New York," his caller began, handing him Mr. Stapleton's letter.

Duvall read it, but it told him little.

"Mr. Stapleton informs me," he said, looking at his visitor, "that you are in some difficulty or other, and asks that, if I can possibly do so, I try to help you out of it. Did he not also say that I have for some time past given up the active practice of my profession?"

Mrs. Morton nodded, then bent eagerly forward.

"Yes, Mr. Duvall. He told me that. But he also said that, when you heard the circumstances, you might be persuaded to assist me. I am in very deep trouble, and I fear that there is not a moment to be lost."

"What is the nature of your difficulty, madam?" Duvall asked.

"It – it concerns my daughter. I am the mother of Ruth Morton." She made this announcement as though she fully expected Duvall to realize its significance at once, but the latter's face remained quite blank.

"Yes?" he replied, vaguely. "And who is Ruth Morton?"

Mrs. Morton looked at him in pained surprise. The thought that anyone could possibly be ignorant of her daughter's fame and success seemed unbelievable to her. Was not Ruth's name a household word among moving picture "fans" from coast to coast? "Why – Ruth Morton – the motion picture star," she replied. "Surely you must have heard of her."

Duvall smiled, but shook his head.

"I never go to motion pictures," he said. "But that is of no importance. What has happened to your daughter?"

"Nothing. At least I hope not – yet. It is what *may* happen to her that frightens me so." She took the two threatening letters from her handbag and gave them to the detective. "These came yesterday," she said, simply.

Duvall took the letters, and proceeded to read them with the utmost care. When he looked up, his eyes were sparkling with interest.

"The first letter, I observe," he said, "was mailed night before last, at half-past six, at the general post office. How was the other letter delivered?"

"I do not know. I found it, yesterday forenoon, upon the floor in my daughter's bedroom, an hour or more after she had left the house. She has not seen it. I kept all news of it from her, as I did not wish her to be frightened."

"That was wise, of course," Duvall said. "But how could the letter possibly have been placed where you found it, without your knowledge? Who, beside yourself, was in the apartment at the time?"

"No one but an old negro cook, who has been with me for years. I am quite certain that she had nothing to do with it."

"And the maid of whom you speak?"

"She had left my daughter's room, and come into the dining room, where I was sitting, before Ruth left the bedroom. They went out together. The note could not have been in the bedroom then, or my daughter would certainly have seen it. The thing seems almost uncanny."

Duvall began to stroke his chin, a habit with him when he was more than usually perplexed. Presently he spoke.

"One thing I have learned, Mrs. Morton, after many years spent in detective work. There is no circumstance, however mystifying it may at first appear, which is not susceptible of some reasonable and often very commonplace explanation. You find this letter on the floor in your daughter's bedroom. It was placed there, either by someone within the apartment, or by someone from without. Now you tell me that it could not have been placed from within. Then I can only say that someone must have entered the room, or at least managed to place the letter in the room, from outside."

"That may be true, Mr. Duvall," remarked Mrs. Morton, quietly, "but when you consider that our apartment is on the fourth floor, that one of the windows of the room was closed, and the other only open a few inches, and that the blank wall of the opposite house is at least ten feet away, I fail to see how what you suggest is possible."

Her words filled Duvall with surprise. If what his caller said was true, the case might have elements which would make it more than usually interesting.

"Has your daughter any enemy, who might envy her her success, and wish to deprive her of it?" he asked.

"None, that I know of. But since these two letters came, I feel convinced that someone, whom, I cannot imagine, *does* feel that way toward her, and that on account of it she is in the gravest danger. Don't you think so, Mr. Duvall?"

"I think it highly probable. And what, Mrs. Morton, would you like to have me do in the matter?"

"Why – come to New York, take up the case, and find out who these wretches are, so that they may be prevented from doing my daughter any harm. There is no time to lose. They may carry out their threats at any moment. You will observe that in the first letter they said that her beauty would be destroyed '*within thirty days*.' One of those days has already passed. To-day is the second. At most, we have but twenty-eight days left in which to find out who is responsible for this outrage. Investigation may consume a great deal of time. I hope that you will consent to come to New York and take charge of the matter at once. I am returning this afternoon, as soon as I can get a train. Can you not return with me? As for the matter of expense, I place no limit upon it. There is nothing I would not sacrifice, to save my daughter from the fate they have threatened. Think what it would mean, Mr. Duvall. A young, beautiful, innocent girl, scarcely more than a child, to go through life with her beauty taken from her, made hideous by some fiendish device, blinded and scarred by acid, her features crushed – gashed by some sudden blow. Can you imagine anything more terrible?"

Duvall thought for moment of his own lovely child, now almost three years old, and shuddered. Bank burglaries, thefts of jewels, seemed relatively of small importance compared with such a situation as this. His feelings of chivalry rose. He felt a strong desire to help this young girl.

"Here is her picture," Mrs. Morton continued, taking a photograph from her handbag and extending it to Duvall.

The latter gazed at the charming features of the young actress, and nodded.

"She is lovely – exquisite," he murmured. "I don't wonder you feel as you do. I did not intend to take up any detective work at this time, but I have decided to assist you in this matter in any way that I can."

"Oh – thank you, Mr. Duvall." There were tears in Mrs. Morton's anxious eyes. "I can never repay you for your kindness – never. But if you can save Ruth from these scoundrels, I will gladly spend – "

"Never mind about that, Mrs. Morton," Duvall observed, with a friendly smile. "It is scarcely a question of money with me. If I had not felt a keen interest in your daughter's welfare, I should not have agreed to take up the matter at all. As it is, you need not worry about the expense. I am going to take the case largely because it has interested me, and it will be a pleasure to work it out, not only on your daughter's account, but on my own. You know, to me, such matters are of absorbing interest, like the solving of some complex and baffling puzzle."

"Then you will go back to New York with me this evening?"

"I can hardly do that, Mrs. Morton. But I can agree to call on you there to-morrow. It will take me some hours to arrange matters here so that I can leave. I do not think you need worry for a few days at least. If these people had meant to act at once they would not have named the period of thirty days in their threats."

"Very well." Mrs. Morton rose, and held out her hand. "I will expect you to-morrow. Will it be in the morning?"

"Very likely. In any event, I will first telephone to you." He entered the address in his notebook. "By the way, perhaps you had better let me keep that photograph."

"Certainly." Mrs. Morton handed it to him, and he thrust it into his pocket. "The letters you already have?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes. One thing. Do not tell your daughter that you have employed me in this case. It – it might alarm her."

"Certainly not. And that leads me to say that you, on your part, will of course observe the utmost secrecy. Even with Mrs. Duvall."

"That goes without saying, madam. My professional secrets I share with no one. Even between my wife and myself there is an unwritten law which is never broken. Unless we are working on a case together – unless she can be of service to me, she asks no questions. She would not speak to me, or even recognize me, were we to meet, while I am engaged in work of this sort. You need have no fear on that score."

"I am very glad to know that. Were these people to suspect that I have placed the matter in the hands of a detective, they would be instantly on their guard, and all means of tracing them might be lost."

"That is undoubtedly true, and for that reason, I may appear in other characters than my own, from time to time, disguised perhaps, in such a way that even you would not recognize me. Under those circumstances I will suggest a password – one that will not be known to anyone else. Should occasion arise in which I desire to acquaint you with my identity, without making it known to others, I will merely repeat the words – twenty-eight days, or twenty-seven or six or five, as the case may be, on that particular day, and you will know that it is I, and act accordingly. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Duvall."

"Very well. Then we will leave further details until to-morrow." He shook hands with his caller, escorted her to her automobile, then returned to the library and began a careful study of the two notes which Mrs. Morton had left with him. Here Grace found him, half an hour later.

"Well," she said, coming up to him with a smile. "Shall I begin to pack our things?"

Duvall put his arm about her.

"Yes, dear," he said. "We'll leave on the sleeper to-night. You can get Mrs. Preston to come and take charge of the house while we are gone. It may be two weeks. That is, if you want to go along."

"Want to go along? Why, Richard, I'm just dying for a trip to New York. I haven't been there since before Christmas, as you know, and I've got to get a spring outfit. Of course I'm going." She went gayly toward the hall stairs.

"Then you must be ready right after lunch," he called after her.

"But why so soon, if we are taking the sleeper?"

"Because we are going up to town this afternoon and see a few moving pictures."

"Moving pictures?" Grace paused at the door, an expression of the utmost astonishment upon her face. "Why, Dick, you never go to moving pictures. You've always said they didn't interest you."

"We're going, just the same."

"What's come over you?" Grace asked.

"Nothing. I'm curious to see some of them, that's all. Never too old to learn, you know. If I am not mistaken, I saw a new feature film advertised in the newspaper this morning." He took a paper from the desk and glanced through it. "Here it is. Ruth Morton, in *The Miser's Daughter*. Have you seen it?"

"No. But I've seen Miss Morton often – in pictures, I mean. She's a lovely creature, and a splendid actress, too."

"Then this film ought to be a good one, don't you think?"

Grace burst into a rippling laugh.

"You're getting positively human, Richard," she exclaimed. "Here I've been telling you for months past what a lot you've been missing, and you only made fun of me, and now you actually suggest going yourself. Was the lady who called interested in the motion picture business?"

Duvall laughed, but made no reply.

"What's the mystery?" Grace went on, with an amused smile. "You haven't told me, you know. Has she lost her jewels, or only her husband?"

Duvall raised his hand.

"No questions, my dear. This is a professional matter. But I don't mind telling you this much, if I ever become a motion picture 'fan,' you'll have her to thank for it."

"Really. Then I'm glad she came. I hate going alone. And it seems I shall also have to thank her for a trip to New York. She has my eternal gratitude. Now I'm going up to pack."

Duvall resumed his seat, and once more took up his examination of the letters Mrs. Morton had left with him, but they told him little. There were the usual individual peculiarities in the typewritten characters, but that was about all he could discover. The letter paper, while of excellent quality, was such as might be bought at any first-class stationery store. The death's head seal, of course, was highly individual, but to trace anyone by means of it presented almost insuperable difficulties. To find the seal, one must of necessity first find its owner, and then the chase would be over. He replaced the letters in his pocket book, and went to his room to make ready for their journey.

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Morton returned to New York that afternoon, greatly pleased with the results of her trip. That she had been able to enlist the services of Richard Duvall gave her a sense of security. She found Ruth at home, safe and well, with no further threats or warnings to disturb her peace of mind. The girl was absorbed in her new rôle. The picture promised to be the most successful of her career.

The following morning Mrs. Morton rose early, in order to go through the mail before Ruth had an opportunity to do so. The shock caused by the first threatening letter had passed from the girl's mind. The second she knew nothing of. Mrs. Morton was determined that if any more arrived, she should not see those either.

Trembling with eagerness she opened the pile of letters, but found nothing. With a sigh of relief she turned away. Perhaps, after all she had exaggerated the importance of the matter. Half an hour later, while Ruth was eating her breakfast, a messenger boy arrived with a telegram, addressed to Miss Ruth Morton. The maid, seeing no reason to do otherwise, brought it to the girl as she sat at the table. Mrs. Morton, who had been at the rear of the apartment, hurried in as she heard the sound of the doorbell, but by the time she had reached the dining room, Ruth had already opened and read the message. She sat staring at a bit of yellow paper, her face pale and drawn.

"What is it, dear?" Mrs. Morton cried, hurrying to her side.

Ruth picked up the telegram and handed it to her mother.

"Another threat," she said, quietly. "These people, whoever they are, seem to be in deadly earnest."

Mrs. Morton took the telegram and hurriedly read it.

"Even the beauty of the rose," the message said, "cannot endure for twenty-seven days." There was no signature to the telegram.

A look of the deepest apprehension crept into Mrs. Morton's eyes, but she turned away, so that Ruth might not realize her fears.

"Pay no attention to the matter, Ruth," she said, in tones suddenly grown a trifle unsteady. "It is certainly nothing more than a stupid joke."

"Well, mother, of course you may be right, but for my part, I have a feeling that it isn't a joke at all, but a real and very terrible threat. What is to prevent these people, whoever they are, from attacking me – sending me some infernal machine in the disguise of a box or package, which, as soon as I open it, might burn or blind or otherwise disfigure me so that my life would be ruined?" She rose and glanced at herself in the mirror which hung over the mantel. Already there were deep circles of anxiety beneath her eyes, while the lines of her face, usually sweet and placid, were now those of an anxious and frightened woman. The first threat had upset her far more than her mother had realized. The one just received had intensified the effect a hundredfold.

"But you mustn't open any packages, my child. Be very careful about that. And Robert must not stop the car, under any circumstances, in going to or from the studio. There, at least, I believe you are quite safe. I will have a talk with Mr. Edwards to-day, and explain matters to him. And here you cannot possibly be in any danger. Meanwhile, in spite of what you say, I still beg you not to let this matter prey upon your mind. I cannot, will not, take it seriously." Poor Mrs. Morton, herself thoroughly frightened, strove with all her might to convince Ruth that she had nothing to fear. She knew the girl's intense, high-strung nature, and feared that constant worry, ceaseless anxiety, might readily so work upon her as to reduce her to a nervous wreck long before the expiration of the thirty days named in the first threatening letter. She found herself wishing devoutly that Duvall would appear.

As she finished speaking there came a ring at the doorbell, and Nora started to answer it. Mrs. Morton stopped her.

"Nora," she said. "Listen to me. You are not, under any circumstances, to admit anyone – no matter who it is – until I have first seen and talked with them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. I understand," replied the girl, as she went out into the hall.

A moment later Mrs. Morton, hearing a man's voice, hurried after her. Nora, with the door but slightly open, was speaking with a rough-looking fellow, a workman, apparently, who stood in the hallway outside. He was a man of thirty-five, with a reddish moustache, wearing working clothes and a cap. This he removed, as Mrs. Morton came to the door.

"Is this Mrs. Morton's apartment?" he asked.

"Yes. What do you want?" Mrs. Morton's voice and manner were far from encouraging.

"There seems to be a leak in the plumbing somewhere on this floor," the man went on. "There's trouble with the ceilings in the apartment below. The superintendent wants me to go over the connections and see that everything is all right." He lifted a canvas bag containing his tools from the floor, and made as though to enter. Mrs. Morton, however, did not open the door any wider.

"You can't come in now," she said. "Come back later – in an hour. My daughter is not dressed yet." She seemed ready to close the door entirely, but the man again spoke.

"Can't afford to wait, ma'am," he said, with a significant smile. "I got every apartment in this building to go over before the end of the month, and there are *only twenty-seven days left*." He emphasized his concluding words, at the same time looking Mrs. Morton squarely in the eye. The words, the man's look, brought sudden recognition. Mrs. Morton drew open the door.

"Very well," she said. "Come in." She realized that the supposed workman was no other than Duvall.

The latter went quietly toward the kitchen at the rear of the apartment, and occupied himself by examining the connections of the sink. He seemed to work slowly, unconcernedly, whistling softly to himself as he moved about. His eyes, however, were very bright and keen, and no detail of the room, the negro cook who occupied it, or the buildings in the rear, escaped his attention.

Mrs. Morton came back presently and addressed him.

"My daughter has gone, now," she said. "You may look over the plumbing in the bathroom whenever you are ready."

With a nod Duvall picked up his tools and followed her to the front of the apartment. As they left the kitchen, Mrs. Morton closed the door leading from it to the hall.

"I want you to stay here for the next hour, Sarah," she said, as she left the kitchen. "If anyone rings, I will answer the bell." A moment later she and Duvall were in the library.

The latter pretended to be busy inspecting the connections of the hot water radiator.

"Have you received any more threats?" he asked, in a low voice, without turning his head.

Mrs. Morton took the telegram that Ruth had received a short time before, and placed it in his hand.

"This came half an hour ago," she said, without further comment.

Duvall read it, then thrust it into his pocket.

"Did your daughter see it?" he asked.

"Yes. It had been delivered to her before I could prevent it."

"That is too bad. Was she much upset?"

"Yes. The thing is beginning to get on her nerves."

Duvall rose, and placed his tools in the kit.

"Please take me to your daughter's bedroom," he said. Mrs. Morton led the way.

The room was a fairly large one, situated in an ell at the rear of the building. Of its two windows, one, as has already been pointed out, overlooked the court between the apartment building and the house next door. The other faced toward the rear. Duvall placed his kit of tools upon the floor, and began an examination of the room. After a quick glance about, he turned to Mrs. Morton.

"Where was the letter found – the one that did not come through the mails?"

"Here." Mrs. Morton indicated a spot on the floor near the small enameled dressing table that stood against the east wall of the room. Its position was midway between the two windows. It was clear that whoever had entered the room might have done so through either of the windows; at least, the position in which the dressing table stood afforded no indication as to which one it might have been.

"Which of the two windows was open, when you found the letter?" Duvall asked.

Mrs. Morton indicated the one facing the court.

"This one," she said. "Not wide open. Perhaps six or eight inches."

"The other was not fastened, I suppose?"

"No. Ruth always keeps it raised during the night, but usually closes it while dressing."

Duvall went to the window, and opened it. It was well balanced and moved easily.

"Anyone coming up by way of the fire escape could, of course, have raised the window from the outside, and closed it again after leaving the room," he said, more to himself than to Mrs. Morton. Then he got out on the fire escape and made a careful examination of its surface.

"When was this ironwork painted?" he asked Mrs. Morton, through the window.

"About ten days ago."

"H – m." Duvall examined the newly painted iron surface with rather a blank expression. That anyone had walked upon it since it had received its newly applied coat was, he felt, out of the question. The paint was so new, so shiny, so yielding in its fresh glossiness that, even treading as lightly as he could, the marks of his shoes were plainly visible. He leaned over and pressed the palm of his hand upon the grated iron floor. The pressure of his hand was sufficient to dull the freshly painted surface. It seemed impossible that anyone, even in bare or stockinged feet, could have been upon the fire escape, without having left tell-tale marks upon it. He re-entered the room, and turned his attention to the other window.

Here the opportunities for entrance seemed even more unfavorable. The window was situated on the fourth floor. There was still another floor above, with a window similarly located. Anyone might, of course, have been lowered from this window above, to the sill of the one at which he now stood, and entered the room in that way. He examined with care the white woodwork of the window sill, also freshly painted. It showed no marks. This, of course, was not conclusive. He determined to investigate the occupants of the apartment on the top floor.

The wall of the brownstone dwelling house next door, which formed the east side of the narrow court, was of brick, covered with ivy. There were no windows in it whatever. Apparently it had once adjoined the wall of a similar house, where the apartment building now stood, and when the second house had been torn down to make way for the new building, the partition wall had remained as originally built, without windows.

Duvall examined this house next door with a great deal of interest. It was four stories high, with an attic, and rose to almost the same height as the fifth floor of the apartment house, owing, no doubt, to its ceilings being somewhat higher. In the sloping roof of the attic were three small dormer windows, facing the court, but the nearest one was perhaps twenty feet from the window of Ruth's room, in a horizontal direction, and some eight or ten feet above it. There was no way in which anyone could have passed from the attic window to that of Ruth's room, even supposing such a person to be an expert climber. Anyone lowered from this window by means of a rope would merely have found himself hanging against a bare brick wall, twenty feet from the window of the girl's room. Duvall, accompanied by Mrs. Morton, made his way back to the library.

"You feel quite certain about the cook?" he asked.

"Sarah?" Mrs. Morton smiled. "What do you think? You've seen her."

"She certainly appears to be above suspicion," Duvall replied. "But one can never be sure. Suppose you send her out on some errand. I should like to search her room."

Mrs. Morton left him for a few moments, and presently the old colored woman passed down the hall and left the apartment. Then Duvall, accompanied by Mrs. Morton, made a thorough examination of the woman's room.

His search disclosed nothing of interest, nor was a similar search of the room of Nora, the maid, productive of anything that could in any way connect her with the mysterious warnings. There remained only the occupants of the fifth floor apartment. Duvall requested Mrs. Morton to summon the janitor of the building, and explain to him, in a guarded way, that he wished to ask him certain questions.

The janitor proved to be a good-natured fellow, who seemed extremely anxious to please Mrs. Morton in every possible way. In answer to a question from the latter, he said that the apartment on the top floor was vacant, and had been vacant for nearly two months.

The family that had occupied it, he explained, had moved away, and had requested the management of the building to sublet it. This they had not yet succeeded in doing.

"May I go up and look it over?" Duvall asked.

"Sure you may," the janitor replied, and he and Duvall went to the elevator, leaving Mrs. Morton waiting in the library.

The apartment on the top floor had been newly done over, and smelt of fresh varnish and paint. The shiny floors had scarcely been walked upon, since they had been refinished. The air was close and warm, by reason of the tightly closed windows. Duvall proceeded at once to the room directly over Ruth's bedroom.

To his disappointment the two windows were not only closed and fastened, but so tightly stuck on account of the fresh paint that it required the combined efforts of the janitor and himself to open them. That they had been opened, since the painting had been done, some ten days before, was clearly out of the question. Duvall made up his mind at once that however the person who had placed the mysterious message in Ruth's room had effected his or her entrance, it had not been by way of the apartment on the top floor.

Somewhat disappointed, he went to the floor below, and thanking the janitor for his kindness, rejoined Mrs. Morton.

"What have you discovered, Mr. Duvall?" the latter asked, eagerly.

"Nothing, so far. I confess the thing is somewhat of a puzzle."

"Someone *must* have been in Ruth's room."

"Not necessarily."

"But – why not?"

"You will remember that you found the letter on the floor. That would seem to me to indicate rather the opposite. If anyone had actually been *in* the room, they would have been far more apt to place the message on the dressing table. That it was found upon the floor indicates to my mind that it was in some way inserted – thrown, perhaps – through the window from without." He took the letter in question from his pocket, and sitting down, gazed intently at the surface of the envelope. Presently he passed it over to Mrs. Morton. "What do you make of that?" he said, indicating with his finger a curious row of indentations, extending in a semi-circular line about midway of one of the longer edges of the envelope.

The marks were very faint, but by turning the letter about in the light, Mrs. Morton at last managed to make them out. What they were, how they had been placed there Duvall could not say. Yet their presence indicated something of value, of that he felt sure.

"I don't understand them at all," Mrs. Morton replied, returning the letter to him. "It looks as though someone had held the letter in a – a pair of pincers."

The suggestion conveyed by her words interested Duvall greatly. The same thought had been forming in his own mind.

He rose to his feet, his eyes shining with interest. Why could not such a pair of pincers or forceps have been attached to a long pole, such as a fishing rod, and the letter in this way pushed through the window and released by pulling on a cord attached to one of the forceps' handles? The thing was perfectly practical, except for the fact that there seemed no place from which such a pole or rod might have been extended. He gazed out of the library window, across the court to the row of dormer windows in the house opposite. The distance from the nearest of them, to Ruth's window was, as he had before observed, at least twenty feet horizontally, or some twenty-three feet on the diagonal. Then there was the distance from the window to the dressing table, at least eight feet more, to be added, making necessary a rod over thirty feet long. And he saw at a glance that even could a rod of this length be secured and handled, the angle made by a line from the dormer window through Ruth's window was such that the end of the rod or pole would strike the floor only a few feet beyond the windowsill, and in no possible way could its further end be elevated sufficiently to deposit the letter in front of the dressing table. The thing was manifestly out of the question, even had the window of the girl's room been *wide open*. And Mrs. Morton had assured him with the greatest positiveness that it had been open, at the time the letter was found, *but a few inches*. He returned the letters to his pocket and rose.

"The thing is astonishing – remarkable," he said to Mrs. Morton, who was regarding him intently. "I confess that so far I am quite in the dark. I feel sure that whoever entered the room, or left the message, must have done so by means of the fire-escape, and yet, how was it possible, without marks having been left upon the paint? I think I shall make another and even more careful examination, in the hope that some slight clues may have escaped me." He once more made his way toward the girl's room, followed by Mrs. Morton.

The room was precisely as they had left it. The window facing to the rear was wide open, Duvall having omitted to close it after his examination of the fire escape. The window fronting on the court was raised perhaps six inches. And yet, to the utter amazement of them both, there lay on the floor of the room, near its center, a square white envelope, addressed in typewriting to Ruth Morton.

Duvall sprang forward and seized it with an exclamation of astonishment. It bore the same seal, in the same black wax, and upon it was the same semi-circular row of indentations. He tore the letter open. Its typewritten message was brief but significant. "Only twenty-seven days more," it read. The grinning death's head seal seemed to Duvall's astonished eyes even more terrifying than before.

With a bound he reached the rear window, and swung himself upon the fire escape. There was no one in sight. The gray surface of the ironwork showed not the slightest scratch, save those made by his own heels earlier in the day. The steps of the ladder leading up to the next floor were glistening, immaculate. Those of the one to the floor below were equally so. He re-entered the room, and going to the opposite window, threw it wide open. The three dormer windows of the adjoining house were gray, dusty, as though they had not been opened for years. He turned to his companion with a look of amazement.

"In all my experience, Mrs. Morton," he said, "I do not think that I have ever encountered anything quite so astonishing. That letter must have been placed there while I was in the apartment above. Your cook, your maid, are out. Certainly you did not place it there yourself. And yet we know that someone has been in this room, or at least delivered the letter, during the past fifteen minutes. Had I not found it here myself, I should have been almost tempted to disbelieve it, but I am forced to admit its truth."

Mrs. Morton stood wringing her hands.

"It – it seems almost supernatural," she exclaimed. "Poor Ruth. What are we to do?"

"There is nothing supernatural about the matter, madam," Duvall remarked. "I don't doubt the explanation is simple enough, could we but hit upon it. But so far I confess I am unable to understand it." He went over to the wall which adjoined that of the house next door, and sounded it, inch by inch, with a small hammer he took from his bag of tools. The operation required several minutes. When he

had completed it, he tossed the hammer back into his kit in disgust. "Brick, of course," he said, "and perfectly solid." He turned toward the door. "What are you going to do now?" Mrs. Morton asked.

"Try to find out something through this telegram. And also, investigate the house next door."

"But, you will come back? I am afraid."

"I shall be at your call at all times, Mrs. Morton. If anything of interest occurs, notify me here." He drew a card from his pocket and wrote upon it the name of his hotel. "Say nothing to your daughter about these new threats. I shall probably see you again later in the day." Shouldering his kit of tools, Duvall left the apartment. He was by no means satisfied with the results of his visit. In fact there had apparently been no results at all.

CHAPTER V

Duvall's first move, after leaving Mrs. Morton's apartment that morning, was to enter the taxicab which had been waiting for him at the door and return to his hotel. A light overcoat which he had in the vehicle concealed his workman's disguise sufficiently to enable him to reach his room without exciting comment. Once there, he changed his clothes, putting on a professional looking frock coat, and adjusting a pair of shell-rimmed eyeglasses to complete the slight disguise. Thus equipped, he once more set out.

Grace had left a note for him, saying that she had gone shopping. Beside it lay the photograph of Ruth Morton, which he had, he remembered, left on his chiffonier while putting on his workman's clothes that morning. At the foot of her hastily written note Grace had added a postscript. "Is *this* the reason for your sudden interest in motion pictures?" it read. "Well, I'll admit she's a raving beauty, Richard, but I'll bet she isn't half as nice as I am." Duvall read the note with a smile. Grace was always such a thoroughly good comrade.

Leaving the hotel, he went to the telegraph office from which the message to Ruth Morton had been delivered that morning. It was on Columbus Avenue, some four blocks from the Mortons' apartment.

"Can you tell me where this telegram was sent from?" he asked. The message showed that it had been filed, as well as delivered, within the city limits.

The man behind the desk looked up his records.

"It was sent from the main office on lower Broadway, at 8.30," he said, briefly.

Duvall thanked him, then turned away. Although he realized that he could scarcely hope to obtain even a scanty description of the sender of the telegram from the main office, he determined to go there. First, however, he walked back toward the Mortons' apartment, and going up the steps of the brownstone house adjoining, rang the doorbell.

A neat maid-servant opened the door. Duvall favored her with a smile, at the same time taking a notebook and pencil from his pocket.

"I am making some corrections in the city directory," he said. "Will you please give me the names of all the persons living in this house." The girl stared at him for a moment, but his prosperous appearance, his businesslike manner, disarmed any suspicion she may have felt.

"There's – there's Mr. William Perkins," she said, "and Mrs. Perkins, and Mr. Robert, that's Mr. Perkins' son, and – and Miss Elizabeth, although she's away at boarding school, and – and Emily Thompson, the cook, and – and me. My name's Mary. Mary Wickes."

"Thank you, Mary," Duvall replied, entering the names carefully in his notebook. "And Mr. Perkins, the elder Mr. Perkins, I mean, is he the lawyer?"

"No, sir. It's Mr. Robert that's the lawyer, sir. Mr. William Perkins is in the leather business."

"Ah, yes. I see. Thank you very much indeed. And there are no boarders, or other persons whatever living in the house?"

"No, sir. Not any, sir."

Duvall closed his book and put it carefully in his pocket.

"Now, Mary," he continued. "Just one more question. Does any one sleep in the attic?"

"The attic, sir? Why, no sir. Cook and I sleep on the fourth floor, sir, but the attic isn't used, except for storage, sir. Are you going to put that in the directory too, sir?" The girl regarded him with wondering eyes.

"No, Mary. Not in the directory. But we want to be sure not to omit any names, and I thought that if there was anyone living in the attic – " he paused.

"No one, as I've told you. Nobody ever goes up there, so far as I know. Is that all, sir?"

"Yes. That's all. Thank you. Good morning."

Duvall went down the steps, and proceeded to the subway station, somewhat mystified. He had handled many curious cases in the past, many that had been notable for their intricacy, their complexity of motive and detail. But here, he felt, was a case of a very different sort, the peculiarity of which lay in its astonishing lack of clues of any sort. Usually in the past there had been motives, evidence, traces of some kind or other, upon which to build a case. Here there was nothing, except the three mysterious letters, the one equally mysterious telegram. He felt baffled, uncertain which way to turn. In rather a dissatisfied frame of mind he made his way to the telegraph office in lower Broadway. There were several clerks engaged in receiving messages. He approached one of them.

"This telegram," he said, holding out the slip of yellow paper Mrs. Morton had given him, "was sent from this office at half past eight this morning. Can you by any chance give me a description of the person who sent it?" He leaned over and addressed the clerk in a low tone. "I am a detective," he said. "The telegram is part of a blackmailing scheme."

The man looked at him for a moment, and then consulted with an older man, evidently his superior. The latter came forward.

"I received this message myself, sir," he said. "I remember it, because of its peculiar wording. What is it you wish to know?"

"I would like a description of the person who sent it," Duvall told him.

The man thought for a moment.

"I'm not able to tell you much," he said. "It was a woman – I didn't notice particularly whether she was young or old. In fact, she didn't give me a chance, just laid the message and the money down and went right out. She evidently knew the rate, for the amount she left was correct. I took the message and read it, without noticing her particularly, and then, when I had finished reading it and looked up, she had gone."

"Then you can't tell me anything about her?" Duvall asked, greatly disappointed.

"Not a thing. I remember it was a woman, and my general impression is that she was rather young and small, but I can't be at all sure. You see, sir, a great many persons come in, during the day, and we haven't time to take note of them particularly. As I say, I read the telegram first, and counted the words. By that time she had left the office."

Duvall thanked the man for his information and made his way to the street. Something at least had been gained. The person who was hounding Ruth Morton was a woman.

By this he was not at all surprised. He had felt for some time that Ruth's enemy was, in all probability, some jealous and envious movie actress who, herself unsuccessful, resented the youth and beauty of her successful rival. He called a taxi and directed the driver to take him out to the studio of the company with which Ruth was connected. Here, in all probability, was to be found the woman he sought.

The journey consumed considerably over an hour, and it was lunch time when he finally drew up before the entrance to the series of studio buildings. Before entering he went to a nearby restaurant to get a bite to eat.

It was a small and rather cheap place, but at this hour was crowded with the employees of the big company. Duvall at first could not find a seat, but presently discovered one at a table not far from the door, at which were seated some young men, apparently stenographers or clerks.

While waiting for his order of sandwiches and milk, the detective occupied himself with a newspaper. He was not reading it, however, although he pretended to be deeply engrossed in its contents. He was in reality listening to the gossip of the studio, which rose in a chorus about him.

From a nearby table came the voice of a woman, evidently a great admirer of Ruth Morton.

"I tell you," she said, "that new film that she finished last week, *An American Beauty*, is going to be a knockout. She's the swellest thing on the screen. Got 'em *all* faded, *I* think."

"Think so?" questioned one of her companions. "I'm pretty strong for Helen Ward, myself."

"Ruth Morton won't last," remarked a third, in a petulant voice.

"Course she'll last. Say – ain't that a bear of a title? An American Beauty. She always seems like a beautiful big rose, to me."

"Well, roses don't last, do they?" asked the petulant voice again. "Not very long, anyway."

Duvall turned suddenly in an effort to see the face of the speaker, but try as he would, he was unable to do so. Two of the girls sat with their backs to him. He could not manage to catch a glimpse of either of them. Almost as he turned, the three rose and made their way to the street. For a moment he thought of following them, but the idea seemed absurd. These twelve dollar a week stenographers or clerks could have no part in the plot against Miss Morton. And yet, there was something startling in the young woman's words. "Roses don't last." The telegram received by Ruth Morton that morning had contained almost the same phrase. "Even the beauty of the rose cannot endure." Then he remembered the title of the new film of which the girls had spoken, and smiled at his own suspicions. "An American Beauty." It would be natural, perfectly natural for anyone to refer to Ruth as a rose, with that title for her latest picture. He dismissed the matter from his mind, and proceeded to make a hasty lunch.

At the entrance of the studio he explained that he was a writer of special articles for the Sunday papers, and had come to "write up" the life at the studios. He was promptly turned over to one of the officials who, after a few inquiries, seemed delighted at the opportunity to obtain free publicity for his company and its stars.

"I want particularly to give a sketch of Miss Ruth Morton," he said. "She seems to be such a universal favorite."

"A most delightful and charming woman," his companion asserted, with a pleased smile. "Come this way. You may be able to see her at work." He led Duvall down a long corridor, and into one of the big studio rooms.

The first impression Duvall got was that of utter confusion. People were darting here and there, in ordinary clothes, or in all sorts of makeups. Stage carpenters were creating a terrific racket, building a new scene. A tangle of electric light cables, a blinding glare from the arcs, a confusion of voices, a wilderness of scenery and "props" all combined to create an impression quite the reverse of what he had expected. Here, he felt, was something very different from the theater, something bigger, yet more elemental, in which vast sums were expended daily to amuse a vaster indeed, a world-wide, audience. He sat down upon a box, and inspected the scene before him.

"Miss Morton will be on in a few moments," his guide said.

Duvall nodded. His attention was fixed upon the little drama going on before him. He knew nothing of the plot of the play, but the mechanical features of the operation held his interest keenly. The brilliant electric lights, the setting of the little room, the actors in their ghastly greenish makeups, the camera man, grinding stolidly away at his machine, the director, hovering about like a hawk, watching every movement, every gesture, with a superlatively critical eye, all spoke to him of a new world, and one with which he was not in the least familiar.

Suddenly he saw the lovely face of Ruth Morton, as the girl appeared from an open doorway. She did not take part in the picture at once, but stood chatting with the director, awaiting the moment when she would make her entrance. Duvall watched her intently. Her face, he thought, was drawn, nervous, her expression one of fear. She seemed suspicious of every one who came near her, as though she suspected that every stage hand, every electrician or helper, had in his possession a bottle of vitriol, which he only awaited the moment to hurl in her face. That the girl's nervous manner, her strained and tense expression, was evident to others as well as to himself, he realized from a remark his companion made to him.

"Miss Morton doesn't seem herself to-day," he said. "She must have something on her mind. I shouldn't be surprised if she has been working too hard lately."

Duvall made no reply. He was watching, not only Ruth, but those about her. In particular he observed the other women in the cast. It seemed not improbable that among them he would find the one whose envy had led to the sending of the threats Ruth had been receiving.

Presently the scene was finished, and Ruth, in response to a call from Duvall's companion, came toward them.

"Miss Morton," the latter said, "let me present Mr. Richards." This was the name Duvall had given. "He is anxious to meet you, and write you up for one of the newspapers."

Ruth gave him her hand with a smile which Duvall saw clearly enough was forced. The girl was palpably worn, *distrain*.

"I'm not going to interview you now, Miss Morton," he said. "I can understand that you must be tired, after posing all the morning. Let me come and see you sometime when you are more at leisure."

She thanked him with a smile, this time quite genuine.

"I'm not feeling very well this afternoon," she said. "Come to my home some evening, or better still, on Sunday, and I'll tell you all I know about being a 'movie' star. So glad to have met you." She was just about to turn away, when a small boy came up, carrying in his hand a flat package, wrapped in brown paper. Duvall observed that the package had upon it a typewritten address.

"Something for you, Miss Morton," he said, and placed the package in Ruth's hand.

The girl looked at it for a moment in dismay. Then realizing that the eyes of the two men were bent curiously upon her, she recovered herself and tore open the brown paper envelope. Duvall, with one eye on the boy, saw that he had disappeared through the door leading to the company's executive offices.

Suddenly Ruth, who had been examining the contents of the package, gave a faint cry, and swayed backward, as though about to fall. Duvall's companion sprang to her assistance, while Duvall himself snatched the object which had so affected her from her hand and hastily examined it.

It was a photograph of Ruth Morton herself, but Duvall, as he gazed at it, comprehended instantly the effect it had produced upon the girl's over-wrought nerves. Some clever hand had been at work upon the photograph, retouching it, changing its lovely expression, until the portrait, instead of being a thing of beauty, grinned up at him in frightful hideousness. The blank, sightless eyes, the haggard cheeks, the thin wasted lips, the protruding and jagged teeth, all created an impression shocking beyond belief. And yet, the result had been obtained by the addition of but a few simple lines and shadows.

Along the blank space at the bottom of the picture a line of typewritten characters had been placed. Duvall glanced at them. "As you will look soon," the words read. Below them was fixed the grinning Death's head seal. Unobserved in the confusion, Duvall thrust the photograph into his pocket, and turned to Ruth and the others.

The girl had recovered herself by now, and was being conducted to her dressing room by a solicitous crowd. So far as Duvall would see, she had said nothing to those about her as to the cause of her sudden indisposition, and with the exception of the man who had been Duvall's guide, none of them had observed the opening of the package containing the photograph, nor its immediate effect upon her.

The latter, however, whose name was Baker, came over to Duvall and addressed him.

"What was it about that photograph that upset Miss Morton so?" he asked. "And what has become of it?"

Duvall drew him to one side.

"Let us go to your office, Mr. Baker," he said. "I have a most important matter to discuss with you."

Baker regarded the detective for a moment in surprise, then, seeing that Duvall was very much in earnest, he led the way to his private office.

"I am not a newspaper writer, Mr. Baker," Duvall said, as soon as they were seated. "As a matter of fact, I am a detective, in the employ of Mrs. Morton, Ruth Morton's mother."

"A detective?" he questioned. "Why has Miss Morton's mother employed a detective?"

"Because someone is persecuting the girl, by sending her threatening letters, saying that her beauty is to be destroyed. This photograph" – he drew the hideous picture from his pocket – "is a sample of their work."

Mr. Baker regarded the photograph for a moment in silence, then rose with a growl of rage and struck his clenched fist upon the desk.

"This is outrageous – damnable!" he cried. "It cannot go on. No wonder the poor girl looked tired out. We will put the matter in the hands of the police. We will spend any amount of money – "

"Wait a moment, Mr. Baker," Duvall interrupted, urging the angry man back into his chair. "Nothing is to be gained by giving any publicity to this matter. The scoundrels who are at the bottom of it will at once be warned, and then our chance of catching them will be small indeed. So far, not a soul knows that I am working on this case, outside of Mrs. Morton, and yourself. Even Miss Ruth does not know it. I have already unearthed some very surprising things connected with the case, although I have been occupied with it only since this morning. Within a few days, I have no doubt, I shall be able to place my hands upon the person or persons responsible for the trouble, but I must insist that I be given a free hand."

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