

PLANNED BY THE STARS

by
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"THE DAY IS ILL-OMENED! ALL THE PLANETARY INFLUENCES ARE DARK AND EVIL. THIS IS THE STAR THAT GUIDES YOUR FOOTSTEPS THROUGH THIS CONSTELLATION. ITS SCARLET RIM FORETELLS BUT ONE THING ... MURDER!"

The sanctum of Madame Sovio was drab and tawdry. The room was small and done in faded blue draperies upon which were tinsel stars and moons.

The one window that overlooked Sixth Avenue bore the name of the astrologer in porcelain

letters and the information that her hours of business were from two o'clock to five daily. A broad table that stood in the center of the room held a plaster skull and a quantity of astrological charts. Other charts were nailed up on either side of a door that led into an anteroom. The low ceiling had once been painted to give the

impression of drifting clouds. Twin gas jets, blackening it, had long past destroyed the effect. The faint though pungent odor of gin hung on the stirless air.

The owner of the astrology parlor sat at the center table. Madame Sovio wore a flowing Egyptian kimono patterned extravagantly with the mystic signs of the zodiac. She was old, gaunt and unprepossessing. Her untidy hair was wreathed with a greasy veil; her shrewd eyes focused on the financial page of a morning newspaper. From time to time she stimulated herself with small quantities of fluid poured from a square bottle convenient to her elbow. Madame Sovio finished a perusal of the page she read and was turning languidly to the front sheet of the paper when she looked up. The door of the outer room had opened and closed. With the practice born of long experience she placed both bottle and newspaper in a lower drawer of the table, thrust a few cloves into her toothless mouth, and stood up.

The "waiting room" of the establishment was even smaller than the inner room. It contained nothing save a number of rickety chairs and a red-faced youth who was pinching out a cigarette ere consigning the stub to a coat pocket. The caller was tall, bulky and unattractive. He wore a rusty brown suit and stained yellow brogans with bumpy toes. A celluloid collar held a stringy purple cravat; from under the sagging peak of a shoddy cap a low, protruding forehead, dark, crafty eyes and a loose, rapacious mouth were visible. It was evident to Madame Sovio that the youth was flotsam cast up by the turgid rivers of subterranea.

He met her gaze and shuffled forward.

"You the one that slides out the dope on what's gonna happen?"

The woman inclined her head.

"Yes. Come in."

The visitor stepped into the room hung with the faded blue draperies. Madame Sovio closed the door after him. She indicated he should take the chair opposite her across the table.

"Do you wish a horoscope or a reading?" she inquired as he sat down.

He stared.

"A spinner on the docks give me the gab that you had steered him straight on the bang-tails. I'm due to gay-cat tonight on something important. I want a frame telling me how my luck is gonna break."

Madame Sovio twined her claw fingers together. She understood the youth to mean that some client who had sought her advice as to making bets on the races had recommended him to her.

"The stars," she began, following a usual procedure, "plan and compel! Their influence falls directly on each mortal. What is planned cannot be changed. A man's planetary destiny is as inflexible as Fate. It is Fate. I charge one dollar for a reading."

The red-faced youth produced a crumpled dollar and pushed it across the table.

"Give me the dope on how I'm gonna make out. Am I gonna be lucky or not? Get the hop working and give me a buzz. Should I or shouldn't I?"

The seamy lips of the astrologer came together.

"What is your name?" she asked in a business-like voice. "What is the date of your birth? Upon what hour of that day or night were you born? I must know these things before I read the messages of the heavenly bodies."

The youth continued to stare at her for a long minute. He muttered the name of Joe Carney, informed her of the date of his natal day and, without hesitation, said he had been born at the precise hour of midnight.

Madame Sovio became engrossed in a deep study of her charts.

While she bent her gray-crowned head over the table Joe Carney settled back in his chair. He glanced about idly and wrinkled his nose at the familiar odor of gin that could not be disguised by the perfume of the cloves. He sat patiently until a slight exclamation moved his eyes to the woman across the table. He was surprised to see she was staring at a chart with every indication of horror. r

"Not one hour of the twenty-four is propitious! The day is ill-omened! All the planetary influences are dark and evil. Mars, Saturn, Uranus and Mercury are adverse. Jupiter is in a hostile position and is ringed with red. This is the star that guides your footsteps through this constellation. Its scarlet rim foretells but one thing."

Joe Carney met her gaze.

"What's that?"

Madame Sovio moved her hand slightly.

"Murder!" she said quietly. "At midnight you came upon this earth and at midnight the stars plan you shall be removed from it. Uranus intrudes and blurs the horoscope. I can read no further. That is all."

Joe Carney laughed harshly.

"The hell it is! I pay a dollar for that song and dance? Give me the money back. You're a robber!"

Madame Sovio pushed the dirty bill he had laid on the table across to him.

"Take it! It will bring you no good. You are in the shadow."

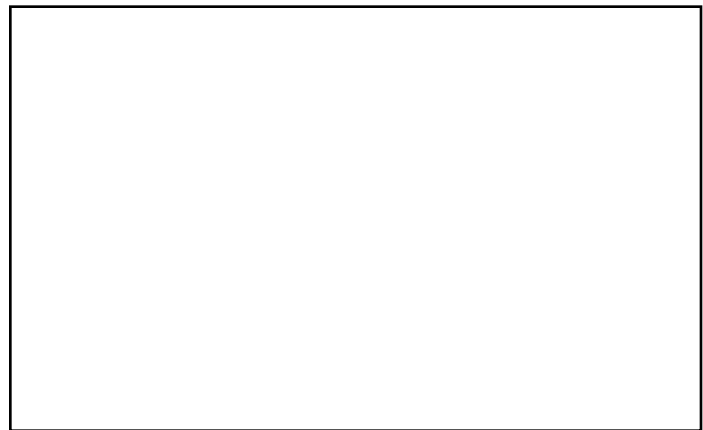
The red-faced youth pocketed his money, shrugged with contempt and slouched out, banging the door after him. For an interval the woman sat motionless, fingers picking at the thumb-marked chart before her.

"The red ring," she said half-aloud. "Blood on the stars—murder on earth—"

Emerging onto Sixth Avenue, from the narrow entrance of the building housing the two rooms of the star-reader, Joe Carney laughed under his breath.

"A hell of a spiel!" he said to himself. "I should get glomed for a bone to get that bunk dished out. » The old dame is nuts."

He crossed to the west side of Sixth Avenue and walked north. A firm believer in the Black Arts, he wished he had not listened to the dock-walloper who had told him of the astrologer. He could



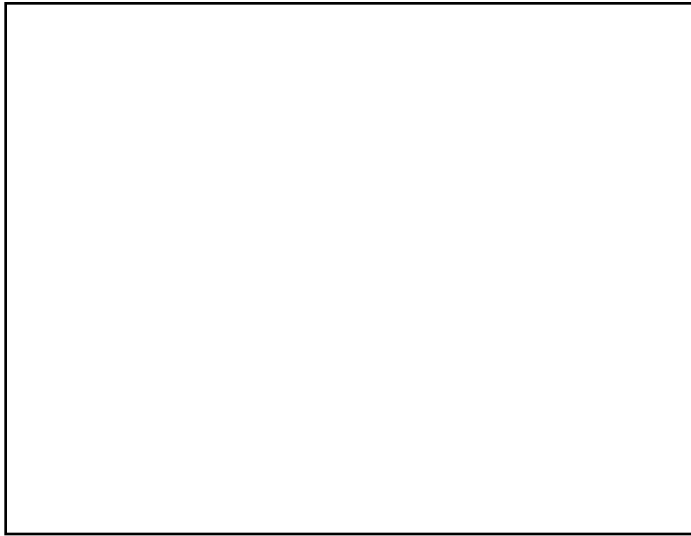
have interviewed a palmist or crystal-gazer and not wasted his time. He knew nothing, and now it

was too late to seek another seer. Within twenty minutes he had an appointment with Stanley Ray, the leader of the Duster Band; final plans for the night's adventures were to be unfolded to him.

In sight of the shopping district Carney entered a side street. He put a number of avenues behind him, passed under the scaffolding of an overhead railroad and presently was on the threshold of the small area of the city, controlled by Stanley Ray's band of thugs and gangsters. Tenement

sat a tall, heavily built young man with a dark, sinister face in which was largely written both determination and courage. This man stood up as Carney entered, nodded his head slightly and opened a white-washed door a few feet back from where he had been sitting. When Carney had followed him into a small room that was used as a refuge for drug-peddlers and their victims, he closed the door and turned the key.

Joe Carney promptly sat down.



"Well, I'm here."

Stanley Ray inclined his head slightly.

"So I see." He pulled up a chair and

dropped into it. "Listen carefully. I'm passing you the word that you turn the job on Tenth Avenue tonight. I've never told you where you're to go or what you've to do. All that you know is you've been picked out by me to swing a deal and keep your peep closed. The frame is set so that all you have to do is to walk in, help yourself and walk out. A half-wit could turn this without a mistake. That's how soft it is."

houses stood shoulder to shoulder in flanks of brick. Down the slope of the side street an avenue where freight cars rolled was visible; further distant was the waterfront and the Hudson River. Frowsy women leaned from countless windows; children played in the gutters; the summer air was dank with the stench of salt water.

Into the avenue where the freight trains ran Joe Carney stepped. He put two blocks behind him and presently came upon a waterfront hotel—a building that had been old when the city was young. Joe Carney passed through the hostelry's yawning front door and moved into a small lobby. A few loafers, smoking nauseous pipes, played checkers silently or slumbered loudly, shaggy heads tilted forward on flannelled chests.

Apart from the group, brooding over his cigarette,

Joe Carney fished in his pocket for the half-consumed cigarette. He lighted it and inhaled deeply.

"I make you. Let's have it all."

Stanley Ray went to the door and listened. He returned to his chair and leaned forward. He lowered his voice.

"Limping Lou has turned straight— by request. He works for the gas company. Tuesday he went to a flat on Tenth Avenue to read the cellar meter. In the front basement of the place are two rooms rented by a woman called Mrs. Garber. Lou had finished reading the meter and was passing out when he heard a clinking noise. It came from inside Mrs. Garber's front room. Lou tried to look

through the keyhole, but it was plugged. So he went out into the alley and found the side window of the same room. This window was protected by bars, but was open at the top. Lou found a barrel, stood up on it and looked through the top of it."

Joe Carney drew a breath.

"What did he see?"

Stanley Ray leaned still closer.

"He saw Mrs. Garber sitting before a trunk—counting money! Lou said she was tying up bales of the green stuff in old aprons. He watched her until she put the aprons in the trunk, filled it to the top with old clothes and then shut it up! That's what he saw!"

Joe Carney dropped his cigarette to the floor and ground it out with his heel.

"What else?"

"I stuck a plant up there," Stanley Ray resumed. "I found out this Mrs. Garber is out every afternoon. She makes her money playing the stock market. It's no use trying to get into the room during the day because the janitor of the building and a bunch of ginnies are laying pipe in the cellar. I sent the Turk up yesterday. He took a fall out of the bars. He filed them to the bone. A couple of pulls will yank them out. The window's always open and you can go in over the top of it."

Joe Carney lifted his head.

"What time do I go in? Will the miser be there when I get to the trunk? How much long change do I get out of this?"

The leader of the Duster Band favored Carney with a direct, cold stare.

"You get what I give you! Have you anything to say about it?"

Before the bland stare of the gangster king Joe Carney's eyes wavered and fell.

"Nothing," he said hastily. "Put me right on it!"

Stanley Ray smiled faintly.

"I found out this Mrs. Garber gets telephone calls from Levy's Drug Store. At a quarter of twelve I'll telephone the drug store and tell them to send for Mrs. Garber. They'll shoot their kike kid over to the basement. You'll be in the alley at quarter of twelve. When she goes out you go in. I'll stall her on the wire as long as possible. It should take you just about ten minutes to grab the dough and

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exit. Do you get me?"

Joe Carney reflectively rubbed his beard-rusty chin.

"Yes," he said laconically.

CHAPTER II

The night was hot and unstirring. A full moon rode high in a cloudless sky. The dank smell of the river grew more pronounced. The streets werelined with coatless loungers sprawling at ease in doorway or on stoop.

Joe Carney, shuffling up Tenth Avenue, searched each store window for a clock to tell the hour by. It could not be very late. The avenue was well filled' —a number of shops were open and doing business. Again he regretted some prophet had

not been employed to prognosticate the fortunes attending the enterprise. In every task he had set out to accomplish he had been warned in advance as to the condition of his luck. If he had been told it was not favorable he had postponed the event. And never once had he been apprehended.

He walked on, hands rammed in the pockets of his coat. He eyed the numbers of the buildings as he passed them, still searching for a clock, growing aware his destination must be only a few blocks distant. He saw the moon creep up over the sullen rooftops and perceived the canopy of brightly shining stars. He thought of the astrologer of the early afternoon and the jumble of her words.

"A murder!" he chuckled, touching the automatic revolver hung under his left arm. "Swell chance!"

A faint odor of gin assailed his nostrils. Faint stirrings tuned his nerves to a high pitch. With a sense of direction fixed firmly in mind, he crept forward. The treasure chest, Stanley Ray had told him, rested to the right, against the room's north wall.

Two more blocks traversed, he came abreast the building in whose basement the wealthy Mrs. Garber resided. And at the same minute his eyes fell upon the face of a clock in a store of the tenement and he started.

The hands of the clock pointed to five minutes of the midnight hour!

Guiltily realizing he had been delinquent and heedless of time, Carney descended a number of steps that led down into the basement. He found himself in a cement-lined passageway. He followed it to its termination and found himself in the clothesline-hung backyard in the rear of the building. An alley ran into the backyard, presided over by a lean cat. Carney removed the animal from his path with a toe of his boot and crouched

against the face of the alley's brick wall, ceasing to curse the vivid moonlight only when a barred window of translucent glass leaped out to meet him.

A tingle of anticipation ran through Joe Carney. Hex found the same barrel Limping Lou had made his observations from and wheeled it close to the window. He mounted it cautiously and applied an ear to the aperture in the window's top. All was quiet within. Obviously, he decided, Mrs. Garber was in the drug store or on her way to it. He was ten minutes late and would have to work rapidly.

The window bars yielded instantly to his grasp. He tore them roughly away, one by one. When the last bar had been wrenched loose, Carney pressed the top half of the window lower and poked a head into the inky blackness of the room.

Low but distinctly he heard the monotonous ticking of a clock.

Satisfied that no menace crouched in the gloom, Carney threw a leg over the sash and lowered himself into the room.

Until his eyes could grow accustomed to the murk he stood motionless. A faint odor of gin assailed his nostrils. Faint stirrings tuned his nerves to a high pitch. With a sense of direction fixed firmly in mind, he crept forward. The treasure chest, Stanley Ray had told him, rested to the right, against the room's north wall. As the thought flashed through his mind, his knees came in contact with some low-set object. His outstretched hands clasped the top of something he knew immediately was the trunk, and he exhaled a breath of relief.

The cover of the trunk swung upward at his touch. He felt to make sure that the connecting arms were firmly fastened and delved into a mass of soft garments, placed layer upon layer. These he dug out and flung to the floor, burrowing, mole-like, to reach the apron-wrapped treasure. The scent of gin seemed to envelop him. He wondered why this odor should stir odd recollections—

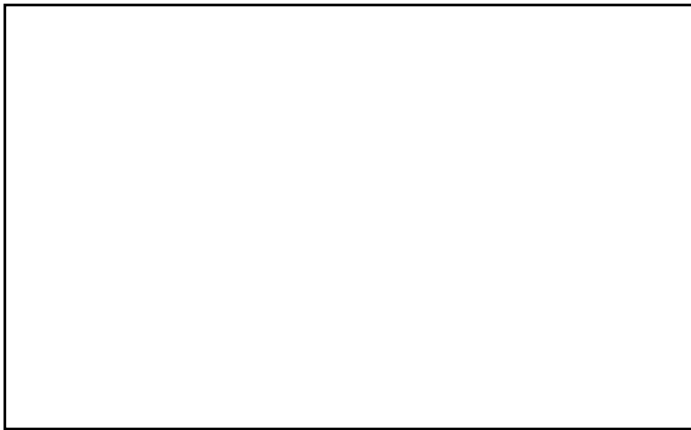
recollections he could not piece together.

He had pulled the last article of clothing from the trunk when the door of the room vibrated with a sudden staccato rapping. Ere its first echoes throbbed into silence, a nasal voice sup-planted the loud knocks with an insistent statement:

"Mrs. Garber! Somebody wants you on the telephone down at Levy's!" / Joe Carney's hands closed convulsively. The clock he had looked upon had been fast or the telephone had marred Stanley Ray's message!

In either case, Mrs. Garber must be within a few feet of him!

The messenger from the drug store began his rapping again. Stiff as stone Joe Carney sought to think. Then, as the knocks ceased for the moment, he heard, from some quarter close at hand, the creak of a bed, a soft footfall—a sibilant swish



that told of a garment being donned. Followed at once the rasp of an opening door. A vagrant air current, stirred to new action, touched Carney's forehead—cold against the sweat that had gathered upon it.

Breathless questions rushed through the mind of the intruder. Should he allow the woman to answer the messenger? Or should he strike before she reached the door?

Another series of footfalls wheeled him silently

about. Someone was approaching—had stepped through the door. He thought he could detect a muffled shape of shadow moving closer to him. The suspense of waiting was agony. A breath caressed his hot face and a hand touched his arm. Someone gasped.

At the same moment he sprang forward.

With a low growl he felt his fingers dig deep into a soft, stringy throat. Eyes glared into his own; for all of the fact she was a woman, the figure he clutched fought desperately, Carney released his left hand to bring it down with crushing force on the jaw of the struggling figure. Before he had crashed it savagely into the upturned face the woman managed to wrench a scream from between her lips.

Cursing, Carney struck again. He gripped the throat again with the hand he had used with hammer force and shook the woman as a terrier shakes a rat. As if from a distance he heard fresh raps falling upon the door—the voice of the messenger:

"Mrs. Garber! Mrs. Garber!"

Then silence.

Carney relaxed the gripping pressure of his death-working fingers. He found he was talking but knew not what he said. He had killed a woman, but it was her own fault. Hot blood pounded within him—rage and a gloating satisfaction. He felt that at that moment he wished she possessed the nine lives of the cat he had kicked from his path. He would strangle each from her.

And then he realized the apron-wrapped loot would never be his if he stood longer, clutching the limp figure. He opened his hands. The body slumped to the floor. The moon, swinging around, entered the alley and crept into the room, lighting it up like a pale arc lamp. Carney looked down at the huddle of his victim.

The woman had fallen on her back. Her face was upturned to him—wreathed with a horrible, fixed grin. He stared, fascinated, eying, too,

greasy gray hair that seemed strangely familiar. For a full watch-tick he stared, rigid. The odor of gin—the gray hair—the gaunt face, painted with the ghastly moon glare. All at once knowledge flooded him.

Mrs. Garber wore the face of the Madame Sovio who had read the stars for him that afternoon in the Sixth Avenue room!

“Murder!” Carney whispered. “She had the right dope!”

Something, as he straightened up, stopped the flow of the incoming moonlight. He raised his eyes and turned them to the window. His gaze flashed and fell upon a helmeted head looking in over the lowered top of the translucent window. His right hand darted under his jacket and gripped

his automatic. In some blind, dizzy fashion he managed to drag it out.

But before he could pull the trigger the yellow glare of an electric torch smote him directly between the eyes. A voice, curt and imperious, bade him throw up his hands. Carney, blinking like an owl drenched in sunshine, fell back. His weapon crept up to firing position.

Then the heavy silence was shattered by the sound of six shots, so rapidly fired that they merged as one.

The automatic fell from Carney’s hand. He wondered vaguely if he had been shot—why his legs seemed to be melting away. Cursing again, his brain reeled and scintillated with sparks. He groaned and fell heavily across something softly yielding. . . .

The clock that had ticked monotonously whirled and struck the hour of twelve.

The End

