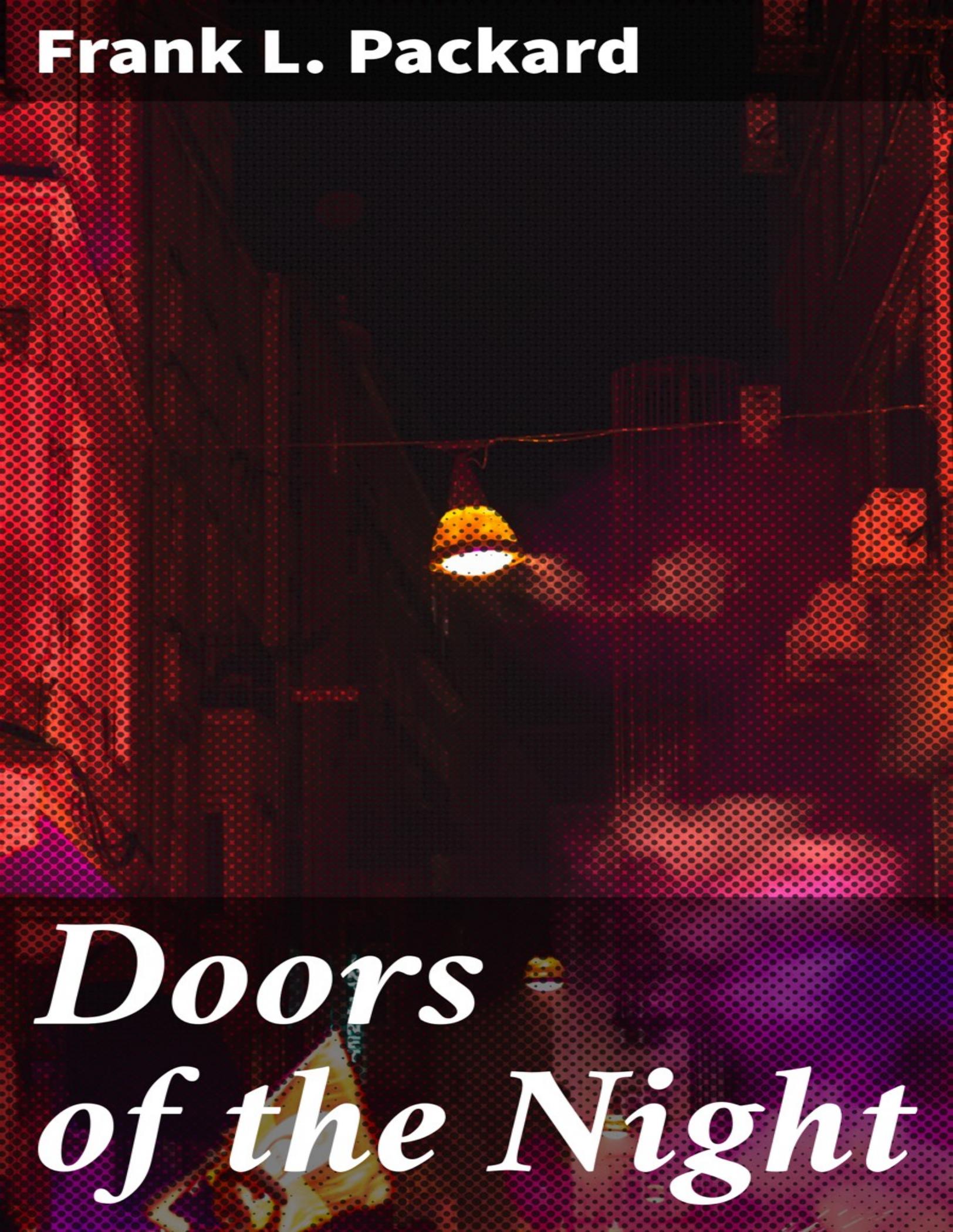


Frank L. Packard



*Doors
of the Night*

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Doors of the Night



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I—ACROSS THE THRESHOLD

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Billy Kane paused for an instant in the doorway of the room before him, as his dark, steady eyes travelled over the appointments in a sort of measured approval such as a connoisseur who knew his art might bestow upon a canvas in which he found no flaw. The apartment was quite in keeping with everything else that pertained to the palatial residence in that upper Fifth Avenue section of New York. The indirect lighting fell soft and mellow upon the priceless Oriental rug, the massive desk of dark, carved wood, the wide, inviting leather-upholstered chairs, the heavy portières that filled the window spaces and hung before the doors, the bookshelves that lined the walls almost ceiling high and that were of the same dark, polished wood as the desk and chairs. There was luxury here, and wealth; but it was luxury without ostentation, and wealth that typified only good taste and refinement.

He closed the door behind him, and began to pace slowly up and down the room. And now he frowned a little. He had dined alone with his employer as usual, for Mrs. Ellsworth being an invalid was rarely in evidence, and David Ellsworth usually so genial an old gentleman, had not been entirely himself. From the pocket of his dinner jacket Billy Kane took out his cigarette case, selected a cigarette, and lighted it.

Mr. Ellsworth had lingered in the dining room, and had said that he would come presently to the library—that there was a little matter he wished to attend to. There was nothing strange in that, for they often worked together here in this room in the evenings, and yet Billy Kane's puzzled frown deepened. There was something certainly amiss with the old multi-millionaire tonight, and that anything should disturb the old philanthropist's tranquillity, except when his sympathies had been aroused and the man's heart, that was softer than a woman's, had been touched by some pathetic appeal, was decidedly strange.

Billy Kane continued his pacing up and down the room in long, athletic strides, the great, broad shoulders squared back as his hands were thrust into the pockets of his jacket. It was far more than a feeling of respect or mere liking that he held for his employer, for there had come esteem for the old gentleman's sterling qualities, and with the esteem a sincere affection, and out of it all, very curiously, a sort of fathering, or protecting interest for this man of millions.

The frown passed away, and Billy Kane smiled a little whimsically at the somewhat quaint conceit. Fathering! Nevertheless, it was true! There was scarcely an hour of the day that some appeal for charity, ranging from a few cents to many thousands of dollars, was not made upon David Ellsworth—too many of them spurious, and it was his, Billy Kane's, self-appointed task to stand between his employer

and these fraudulent attempts. All the world, at least all the world within reach, seemed to be thoroughly conversant with the old gentleman's ask-no-questions liberality—and to lose no opportunity in taking advantage of that knowledge! For instance, though here he was forced to the belief that it was genuinely worthy, there was the case of the deformed beggar, one Antonio Laverto, who, during the last week, had taken up his station on the corner a block away from the house. The beggar had already secured the old gentleman's attention, and also a dollar or two every time David Ellsworth passed; in return for which David Ellsworth had become possessed of a very pitiful life history, and also possessed of a desire to set the man squarely on his feet again.

Billy Kane paused abruptly in his stride, as his eyes rested on the portières that hung before one of the two doorways at the lower end of the room. Behind that door, which was one of wood matching the other doors of the room, was a door of solid steel, and behind the steel door was one of the strongest vaults in the city of New York, and in the vault, besides the magnificent collection of rubies that nestled in their plush-lined trays, a collection that, while but a hobby, had yet made their owner even more famous and widely known than had his millions, were thousands of dollars—*the money kept there for the sole purpose of being given away!* Eccentricity? Well, perhaps—but if so, it was a very

fine eccentricity, the eccentricity of one of God's own noblemen.

One of God's own noblemen! Yes, he had good reason to call David Ellsworth that! Billy Kane's strong face softened. As a boy is acquainted with his father's companions, he had been acquainted with David Ellsworth for many years, it was true; but he had never known the other for his real worth until the last three months, during which time he had been the retired magnate's confidential secretary. His father had been an old friend of David Ellsworth; and a little more than three months ago his father had died, just as he, Billy Kane, had graduated from Harvard. His father's estate, supposedly large, had turned out to amount to comparatively nothing; the net residue of the estate, which had just been wound up, being represented by the sum now at his credit in the bank, a matter of something less than five thousand dollars. Apart from that, there was nothing. His mother had been dead many years; and, with no ties to hamper him, he had been casting around for some opening where he could utilize his university degree in arts to the best advantage, when he had received the offer from David Ellsworth to act as the latter's confidential secretary. He had accepted at once, and since then he had led a rather singular existence.

Billy Kane tamped out his cigarette on the edge of an ash receiver, and stood leaning with his back against the desk, facing the hall door. Yes, it was a

very singular existence! His new home was veritably a palace, with servants at every beck and call. His work was not onerous; and his salary was overgenerous. He, in turn, had a private secretary, or at least a most capable stenographer, who, having been long in David Ellsworth's employ, took care of the daily routine; and it was mostly routine as far as business went, for the millionaire had long since retired from any active participation in the various interests through which he had acquired his fortune. But the work, that is the bulk of it, had now taken on quite a different angle, due to his, Billy Kane's own initiative, than had been thought of when he had accepted the position. He had not been there a week before he had realized that the old philanthropist was being victimized right and left by fraudulent appeals for money. It had been sufficient simply to excite David Ellsworth's sympathy in order to open the ever-ready purse. David Ellsworth had inquired no further. He, Billy Kane, but not without protest from the old gentleman, to whom the loss of the money was nothing, but to whom the uncovering of some pitiful fraud was a cause of genuine distress, had instituted a new régime, and had undertaken to investigate every case on its merits.

The whimsical smile came back to his lips. Born and brought up in the city, he had imagined that he knew his New York; but the last three months had opened his eyes to a new world around him—the world of the Bad Lands, with its own language, its

own customs and its own haunts. He knew his New York a great deal better now! Those three months had brought him into intimate touch with the dens and dives, and many of the habitués of the underworld, since it was amongst those surroundings that his investigations had mainly led him. He had even been in the heart of that sordid world no later than that afternoon.

Behind his back, Billy Kane's fingers were drumming a meditative tattoo upon the desk. His train of thought had brought him back to the crippled Italian beggar, Antonio Laverto. The man was a pitiful looking object enough—one of those mendicants commonly designated in the vernacular as a "flopper." His legs were twisted under him in contorted angles at the knees, and his means of locomotion consisted in lifting himself up on the palms of his hands and swaying himself painfully along a foot or so at a time. Laverto's story, told in halting and broken English, was equally pitiful. The man had been a photographer, an artist he had called himself, and he had come to America a few years before from some little town in Italy, lured by the high prices that he had heard the rich New World would pay him for his work. But within a few days of landing he had met with an accident in a tenement fire that had crippled and maimed him for life. He had been practically destitute, his sole possessions being the camera and a few of the cherished photographs he had brought with him. The camera

had gone to pay for his support during convalescence; and subsequently, reduced to beggary, most of his pictures had gone the same way.

That, in substance, was the Italian's story. Billy Kane shook his head impatiently. The man bothered him. He had been frankly skeptical and wholly suspicious at first; but investigation had only confirmed the man's story. Certainly, an Italian by that name, newly arrived in the country, had been badly hurt and crippled in a tenement fire a few years ago, and had been treated in one of the city hospitals. That much, at least, he had discovered! Also, no more than a few hours ago, he had gone to Laverto's home and found the man existing in a small, miserable room on the East Side, and surrounded by every evidence of squalor and abject poverty; and the man, he was obliged to confess, had got his sympathy too. There were two exquisite little photographs, landscapes, real gems of art, wrapped up in fold after fold of newspaper. Laverto had shown them to him, and had told his story again, begging him to buy one of the pictures—and when he had produced the money the cripple had drawn his treasures back, and had clutched them to his breast, and had cried over them, and finally had refused to sell at all.

Billy Kane's fingers continued to drum on the desk. David Ellsworth would undoubtedly want to know about Laverto to-night—and the man bothered him. He had no grounds for further suspicion,

fairness compelled him to the admission that the man's story seemed true; and yet, based on nothing more tangible than intuition, there still lingered a doubt about the whole matter in his mind.

Billy Kane straightened up from the desk. Jackson, one of the footmen, had opened the door from the hall, and David Ellsworth, an immaculate little gray-haired old gentleman, in evening clothes, stepped into the library.

The footman closed the door silently.

David Ellsworth wore glasses. He took them off, polished them with nervous energy while his blue eyes swept around the room, fixed on Billy Kane's face, and swept around the room again. He cleared his throat once or twice before he spoke.

"I've kept you waiting, Billy," he said abruptly. "You must have noticed that I had finished dinner at the same time as yourself; but I have been very much disturbed and perplexed all day, and I have been trying to solve a problem before saying anything to you."

"I hope there's nothing seriously wrong, sir," Billy Kane answered quickly. "May I ask what——"

"Yes," said David Ellsworth, a sort of curious reluctance in his voice. He took a letter from his pocket, and handed it to Billy Kane. "It's this."

Billy Kane opened the letter—and, staring at the type-written words on the sheet in his hand, suddenly an angry red tinged his cheeks and

mounted to his temples. His eyes mechanically travelled over the lines again:

Like father like son may be an old adage, but like a good many old adages its face value is not always to be relied upon. It might pay you to keep an eye on your confidential secretary—and on the contents of your vault.

A Friend.

Billy Kane laid the letter down upon the desk without a word—but his lips were tight.

“You understand, Billy,” said the old millionaire eagerly, “that the only reason why I did not show this to you immediately when I received it this morning was because I wanted, if possible, to formulate a definite conclusion as to the motive that prompted the writing of the contemptible thing. You understand, my boy, don’t you? I could talk to you then about it without hurting you. As for the actual letter itself, there is, of course, but one answer, and that is—this!”

David Ellsworth reached out for the letter—but Billy Kane had already picked it up.

“You were going to tear it up, sir,” he said deliberately. “I’d rather you wouldn’t. There may be a chance some day of showing this to the cur who wrote it—and I wouldn’t like to lose that chance.”

“Then keep it, by all means!” agreed David Ellsworth. He nodded his head in vigorous assent, as

Billy Kane restored the letter to its envelope, and placed the letter in the pocket of his dinner jacket. "So much for that! But what do you make of it, Billy?"

"It's object is obvious enough," Billy Kane replied savagely. "Somebody appears to have it in for me."

David Ellsworth was polishing his glasses again.

"You've told me that I was the most guileless man you ever knew, Billy," he said, shaking his head slowly; "and perhaps I am, and then again perhaps I'm not—and perhaps it isn't always because I'm guileless that I close my eyes to many things. But I guess, after all, that I can peer as far through a stone wall as the next man. I've had to do some pretty stiff peering in the days gone by to get the few millions together that I've got now. I mention this, Billy, so that you may not confuse my idiosyncrasies with—well, whatever you like to call it. Those dollars, my boy, didn't just drop into my hands—they were *thought* there. And so you think that letter means someone has it in for you? Think a little deeper, Billy."

"I don't quite follow you," said Billy Kane, in a puzzled way.

"And yet it is quite simple—although I've spent a day over it!" returned the old millionaire, with a wry smile. "I have known you from a child. Nothing has ever occurred to shake my confidence in you. The person who wrote that letter was obviously acquainted with my past friendship for your father

and my long knowledge of yourself, and, with nothing to back it up, he would be a madman indeed who would expect a scurrilous missive such as that to have any weight with me. Am I right—or wrong, Billy?”

“Well; yes, sir—I suppose you’re right,” Billy Kane answered.

“I am sure I am,” declared the old gentleman decisively. “Quite sure of it! But suppose, Billy, that to-morrow, or at any time *subsequent* to my having received that letter, something *did* occur here—what then?”

The old millionaire’s face was grave. Billy Kane leaned sharply forward.

“What do you mean?” he questioned in a startled tone.

“Sit down there at the desk, Billy, and I’ll tell you,” said David Ellsworth; and then, as Billy Kane obeyed, he stepped swiftly across the room, opened the hall door, looked out, closed the door softly again, and from there walked to one of the two doors at the lower end of the room, opened this, looked into the room beyond, and closed it again.

Billy Kane watched the other in frank amazement. The door that David Ellsworth had just opened was the door of the “office”—the room that during working hours, which were from ten to five, was occupied by the stenographer. True, the room opened on the back hallway and had a separate entrance from the courtyard in the rear, an entrance always

used by the stenographer, but it was always locked by Peters, the butler, at night, and he, Billy Kane, had the only other key.

David Ellsworth returned, and halted before Billy Kane's chair.

"No, I am not in my second childhood, Billy," he said quietly. "That letter was certainly not written without a purpose; and yet from every angle that I have been able to view it, except one, it would have been exactly that—without purpose. I believe it is the first step in a carefully laid plan that will divert, or fix, suspicion upon you."

Billy Kane shook his head in perplexity.

"A plan?" he repeated. "I don't understand."

David Ellsworth's only reply was to jerk his head significantly toward the other of the two doors at the end of the room.

Mechanically Billy Kane followed the direction of the gesture with his eyes; and then he was on his feet, his face suddenly grim and set.

"My God!" he murmured under his breath. "You mean——"

"Yes," said David Ellsworth evenly. "Why not? I couldn't tell you myself exactly how much those stones in there are worth, but they are ranked as one of the most valuable single collections of rubies in existence, and certainly the figures would run somewhere between two and three hundred thousand dollars. Besides, there's always a little cash

there—you know better than I do precisely how much at the present moment.”

“Fourteen thousand five hundred odd,” Billy Kane answered automatically.

“Quite so!” nodded the old millionaire. “Well, it’s worth it, isn’t it, Billy? I’ve never been afraid of any ordinary cracksman’s attempt against that vault; but, if I am right now, this wouldn’t be any ordinary attempt. I believe we are dealing with—*brains*. I believe, further, that instead of you and I being the only ones who know the combinations, as we have imagined, they are known to someone else. Suppose, then, that the vault is found empty some morning? I immediately recall to mind that letter. I remember that you are the only one to whom I have confided the combinations. And suppose that some additional clue pointing to you is left on the scene of the robbery? It would look pretty black for you, Billy, would it not? Naturally the stolen stones and money would not be found in your possession; but the plain, logical supposition would be that, not being a fool, and believing that you were above suspicion, you had secreted the proceeds of the robbery, and were pursuing what you considered the safest course—that is, to brazen it out and indignantly proclaim your innocence. The object of all this, of course, being immunity for the real authors of the crime, for if you were accused and convicted it is obvious that the police would look no further and consider the case closed.”

Billy Kane did not reply for a moment. He had been startled at first, but now he was conscious rather of a slight sense of inward amusement. The old millionaire's deductions were, of course, plausible and possible; but, also, they appeared to be a little labored, a little far-fetched, a little visionary. Apart from being based on a premise that entailed somewhat elaborate preparations, there was one very weak point in the old gentleman's argument. The combinations being known only to the two of them, David Ellsworth had failed to explain how, or where the combinations had been obtained by a third party; and Billy Kane was even more than ever confirmed in his mind that there was a very much simpler, and a very much more creditable motive for that letter—spite. Through his efforts there was more than one none too reputable a character who otherwise would have partaken liberally of the old philanthropist's bounty; and that was probably the secret of the letter. That the day's cogitations of David Ellsworth had resulted in the discovery of a mare's nest was the way it struck Billy Kane now; but if the old gentleman found satisfaction in his deductions, he, Billy Kane, was of no mind to dispute them. There was nothing to be gained by it, and on occasions he had known even David Ellsworth to grow stubborn and most unpleasantly irascible.

"You may be right, sir," Billy Kane said deliberately.

David Ellsworth's two hands fell on Billy Kane's shoulders, and pressed him back into his chair again.

"So you think I may be right, do you?" There was a twinkle in the blue eyes. "Tut, tut! You can't fool the old man, Billy, my boy! What you really think is that I've got a brain storm. But"—his voice grew suddenly grave and agitated—"I *know* I'm right, Billy—I *feel* it. I'm as sure now, as though it had already happened. But we'll beat them, my boy! Take your pen, and a blank card—there are some in the top drawer there. Being forewarned, all that's necessary is to change the combinations. And I guess that will be an answer to their letter that they didn't expect!"

David Ellsworth was already across the room. Billy Kane took a small blank card from the drawer of the desk, picked up a pen, and, without comment, turned in his chair to watch the other. After all, little as he shared the old millionaire's alarm, the changing of the vault's combination was a precaution well worth while under any circumstances. If it even became a habit, so much the better!

The portières were swung back now, the innocent looking door that matched the others in the room was opened, and the nickel-plated knobs and dials of the massive steel inner door glistened in the light. Came a faint musical tinkle, as the dial whirred under David Ellsworth's fingers; then, presently, a soft metallic thud, as the old millionaire swung the handle over and the bolts shot back. The heavy door moved slightly inward, there was the click of an electric-

light switch, the vault was flooded with light, and from where he sat Billy Kane could see into the interior. It was as large as a small sized room, and built of the finest steel throughout. Steel shelves piled with document cases lined the vault, and at the far end was a huge safe of the most modern and perfected design. Billy Kane smiled a little to himself. In one thing, at least, that David Ellsworth had said, the old millionaire had indubitably been justified. The vault was as impregnable as human ingenuity and skill could make it, and there was very little indeed to be feared from any ordinary attempt upon it.

A few minutes passed while David Ellsworth worked with the key used for changing the combination and with the mechanism on the inner side of the door, and then he began to call out a series of numbers. Billy Kane jotted them down on the card.

“We’ll test it now—call them back,” said David Ellsworth; and then, as Billy Kane obeyed: “All right, Billy. Now we’ll do the same thing with the safe.”

He moved down to the end of the vault, spent a moment or two over the safe’s dial; and, as this door in turn was swung open, Billy Kane caught a glimpse of the tiers of plush-lined trays that held the famous ruby collection, and of the score of packages of banknotes that lay neatly piled in the compartments inside the safe.

Again David Ellsworth called out a series of numbers, and as before tested the new combination;

and then, from beside the open door of the safe, he spoke abruptly:

“Before I lock up again, Billy, what about our friend Laverto? You went down there this afternoon, I believe?”

“Yes,” Billy Kane answered—and frowned. “But there’s no hurry about it, is there? I’m bound to confess that his story seems to be straight enough, and that I can’t find anything wrong, but——”

David Ellsworth chuckled suddenly, as he reached inside the safe and took out a package of banknotes.

“You’ve been laughing at me up your sleeve for fussing around with those combinations, my boy—I know you have. But you’re the old woman of the two, Billy. If you couldn’t find anything wrong, I guess everything is all right. If it isn’t”—he chuckled again, as he closed and locked the safe—“it would do my heart good to see someone put something over on you!”

The light in the vault went out. The vault door was closed and locked, the outer door shut, the portières drawn back into place, and David Ellsworth, coming back across the room, dropped the package of banknotes on the desk.

“Take ’em to him, Billy,” he smiled; “and take ’em to him now. He’ll have twelve hours more joy out of life than if you waited until to-morrow morning.” He picked up the card upon which Billy Kane had written the combinations, and placed it in his pocket. “You’ve got a better memory than I have, Billy,” he

observed, "and I guess you've got this down pat now; but I'm afraid I'll have to study the memo over a few times before I take a chance on destroying it."

Billy Kane was paying little attention to the other's words; he was riffling the banknotes through his fingers—they were of all denominations, from hundred-dollar bills down to fives. It was, in fact, a package of loose bills that he remembered having counted that morning.

"Do you happen to know how much there is here, Mr. Ellsworth?" he inquired abruptly.

"Not precisely"—David Ellsworth peered over the rims of his glasses at the package—"but I should say around a couple of thousand dollars. I—er—promised him that, if he turned out to be deserving, and I'd —"

"There are two thousand dollars here exactly," said Billy Kane a little curtly. "What I understood that you promised him was that you would start him up in life again, but it doesn't require two thousand dollars to start a man of his type going as a photographer."

"H'm! Don't you think so, Billy?" David Ellsworth's blue eyes were twinkling, and he was drawling his words. "Well, let's see! Now, first of all, judging from the photographic landscape he showed me, the man's a real artist, and he ought to have the best of tools to work with. A good lens is a rather expensive commodity. I'm not much up on photographic apparatus, but I'll bet you could pay as high as a thousand dollars for one outfit. And then there's all

the paraphernalia, and a little place to furnish, and a little something to keep things going until returns come in. Two thousand dollars—shucks, my boy! Indeed as a matter of fact, now that you call my attention to it and I come to think it over, Billy, I'm not sure that two thousand dollars is——”

And then Billy Kane laughed, and picked up the money, and went to the door.

“All right, sir, I'll go—at once,” he said, laughing again.

II—THE CRIME

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Upstairs in his room Billy Kane changed from his dinner clothes into a dark tweed suit, a very less noticeable attire for that neighborhood where Antonio Laverto had his miserable home, and choosing a slouch hat, left the house. A bus took him down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square, and from there, crossing over Broadway, he continued on down the Bowery.

It was still early; and it was as though the night world here had not yet awakened from its day's slumber. The "gape wagons" had not yet begun to bring their slumming parties to rub shoulders with the flotsam and jetsam of the underworld, and to shudder in pharisaical horror at "planted" fakes; true, the ubiquitous gasoline lamps glowed in useless yellow spots against the entirely adequate street lighting in front of many shops of all descriptions, and the pavements were alive with men, women and children of every conceivable nationality and station in life, but—Billy Kane smiled a little grimly, for he had learned a great deal, a very great deal in the last three months, about this section of his city—it was still early, and it was not yet the Bowery of the night.

Some half dozen blocks along, Billy Kane turned into a cross street and headed deeper into the East Side.

And now Billy Kane's forehead drew together in puckered furrows, as he approached the lodging of Antonio Laverto, the cripple. In the inside pocket of his vest were two thousand dollars in cash, for the outlay of which, in spite of the old millionaire's attitude in reference to it, he, Billy Kane, held himself morally responsible. The frown deepened. It was strange, very strange! He had logically convinced himself that Laverto's was a worthy case—but the intuition that something was wrong would not down, and the nearer he approached the miserable and squalid dwelling in which the Italian lived, the stronger that intuition grew.

And then Billy Kane shrugged his shoulders. He could at least put the case to one more test, and if Laverto came through that all right that was the end of it, and the man got the money. Laverto would certainly not anticipate another visit this evening, so soon after the one of the afternoon; and if he could come unawares upon the man, and observe the other unawares perhaps, the chances were decidedly in favor of Laverto being caught napping if he were sailing under false colors.

Billy Kane, reaching his destination, paused in front of a tumble-down and dilapidated frame house, and glanced around him. The little side street here was dirty and ill-lighted, but populous enough. Small shops, many of them basement shops with cavernous, cellar-like entrances opening from the sidewalk, lined both sides of the street; for the rest,

it was simply a matter of two rows of flanking, dingy tenements and old houses—save for the usual saloon, whose window lights were bright enough on the corner ahead.

The house door was wide open, and Billy Kane, pulling his slouch hat down over his eyes, stepped into the dark unlighted interior. The place was a hive of poverty, a miserable lodging house of the cheapest class; and the air was close, almost fetid, and redolent with the smell of garlic. How many humans eked out an existence here Billy Kane did not know; but, though he knew them to be woefully many, for he had seen a great number of them on his visit here that afternoon, the only evidence of occupancy now was the occasional petulant cry of a child from somewhere in the darkness, and a constant murmuring hum of voices from behind closed doors.

Antonio Laverto's room was the second one on the right of the passage. Billy Kane moved quietly forward to the door, and stood there in the blackness for a moment listening. There was no sound from within; nor was there any light seeping through the keyhole or the door panels, which later, he remembered, were badly cracked. Satisfied that the cripple, unless he were asleep, was not inside, Billy Kane tried the door, and, finding it unlocked, opened it silently, and stepped into the room.

He lighted a match, held it above his head, and glanced around him. It was a pitiful abode, pitiful enough to excite anyone's sympathy—as it had his

own that afternoon. There was a cot in one corner with a thin, torn blanket for covering, a rickety chair, and an old deal table on which stood a cracked pitcher and wash basin, and the remains of a small loaf of bread.

The match went out, and Billy Kane retreated to the door, and from the door, to the street again. It was pretty bad in there, and evidently just as genuinely on the ragged edge of existence as it had been that afternoon—but still the persistent doubt in his mind would not down. It was a sort of dog in the manger feeling, and he did not like it, and it irritated him—but it clung tenaciously.

He lighted a cigarette, and, frowning, flipped the match stub away from him. In any case, he had to find the man before he went home, whether it resulted in his paying over the two thousand dollars or not. His eye caught the lighted window of the saloon, and he started abruptly forward in that direction. If there was anything at all in his suspicions, the saloon was the most likely place in the neighborhood where they would be verified; but in any event, the barkeeper, who probably knew everyone in the locality better than anyone else, could possibly supply at least a suggestion as to where the Italian spent his evenings and might be found.

Billy Kane chose the side entrance to the saloon—it would probably afford him a preliminary inspection of the place without being observed himself—and

entered. He found himself in a passageway that was meagerly lighted by a gas jet, and that turned sharply at right angles a few steps ahead. He reached the turn in the passage, and halted suddenly, as a voice, curiously muffled, reached him. The passage here ahead of him, some four or five yards in length, was lighted by another gas jet, and terminated in swinging doors leading to the barroom; but halfway down its length, in a little recess, most thoughtfully situated for the privacy and convenience of the saloon's perhaps none too reputable clientele, was a telephone booth.

Billy Kane drew back, and protected from view by the angle of the passage while he could still see the telephone booth himself quite plainly, stood motionless. The booth, like a good many others, was by no means sound-proof, and the voice, though muffled seemed strangely familiar to him. Billy Kane's brows drew together sharply. Through the glass panel of the upper portion of the booth he could see the figure of a man of about his own height, and he could see, as the man stood a little sideways with his lips to the transmitter, the man's profile.

And then Billy Kane, with a grim smile, reached suddenly up to the gas jet over his head and turned it out. This left him in darkness and made no appreciable diminution in the lighting of the passage leading to the barroom. The man who stood upright in the booth at full height, and who was speaking

most excellent English, was Antonio Laverto, the maimed and broken cripple whose pitiful and heart-rending story had been so laboriously told in the few halting and hardly understandable words at his command!

And now, Billy Kane, listening, could make out snatches of what the man was saying.

“... That’s none of your business, and I guess the less you know about it the better for yourself.... What?... Yes, Marco’s—the second-hand clothes dealer.... What?... Yes, sure—by the lane.... The back door’s got a broken lock—it’s never been fixed since he moved in two weeks ago. All you got to do is walk in. It’s a cinch.... Sure, that’s right—that’s all you got to do. Marco don’t keep open in the evening and besides he’s away, you don’t need to worry about that.... Eh?... No, there won’t be no come-back.... You pull the break the way I tell you, and you get a hundred dollars in the morning.... What?... All right then, but don’t make any mistake. You got to be out of there before a quarter of eleven! Get me? Before a quarter of eleven—that’s all I care, and that’s give you all the time you want.... Eh?... Yes—sure.... Good-night.”

The grim smile was still on Billy Kane’s lips, as he crouched back against the wall. The door of the telephone booth opened, and Laverto stuck his head out furtively. The little black eyes, staring out of the thin, swarthy face, glanced up and down the passageway, and then the head seemed to shrink

into the shoulders, the body to collapse, and, with legs twisted and dragging under him, there came the *flop-flop* of the palms of the man's hands on the bare wooden flooring, as he started along the passageway.

But Billy Kane was already at the side door of the saloon—and an instant later he had swung around the street corner, and was heading briskly back in the direction of the Bowery. He laughed shortly, as his hand automatically crept into his inside pocket. The two thousand dollars were still there—and they would stay there! His intuition, after all, had not been at fault. The man was a vicious and damnable fraud, and, as a logical corollary to that fact, was moreover a dangerous and clever criminal. What was this “break” that was to be “pulled” at Marco's before a quarter of eleven?

Quite mechanically Billy Kane looked at his watch. He and David Ellsworth had dined early, and it was even now barely eight o'clock. Billy Kane's face hardened, as he walked along, reached the Bowery, and, by the same route he had come, gained Washington Square, and swung onto a Fifth Avenue bus. Why Marco's? There was surely nothing worth while there! Marco's was little more than a rag shop. He happened to know Marco, because on the corner next to the tumble-down place that, as Laverto had said, Marco had rented a week or so ago, there was a small notion shop kept by an old Irish widow by the name of Clancy, where, more than once on his visits to the East Side, he had dropped in to buy a paper or