FRANK
L. PACKARD

THE RED LEDGER

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Chapter I.
C,305

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Ewen Stranway slid his knife blade into the paper, and cut from the "personals" of the evening edition of the *Times-Press* the few lines at which he had been staring with startled eyes. And then, as though to focus the words and convince himself that it was not some astounding hallucination, he held the clipping nearer to him to read it again:

> "If Ewen Stranway, son of the late John J. and Mary Stranway, of Kenora, Midland County, Pennsylvania, will communicate by mail with C,305, care of this paper, enclosing his photograph, he will hear from one who is in his debt."

What did it mean? A stranger in the city, and arrived but a few hours before, there was not a soul in New York he knew—none who knew him! What did it mean? What was it? A game? A plant? Debt? There was certainly no one in his debt, worse luck! It was quite the other way around! A photograph! Why a photograph? What did it mean?

Stranway frowned as he got up from his chair, and walking to the window stood looking out on that section of Sixteenth Street, just west of Eighth Avenue, where he had taken a room that afternoon on his arrival. Only one thing was certain. The author of the "personal" was not jumping in the dark. Whoever had written it had, to a certain extent at

least, an intimate knowledge of his, Stranway's, recent family affairs. Events in the last two weeks had surged upon him with blinding force: the telegram that had summoned him home from college; his parents' death in a motor accident; his father's estate found to be deeply involved, and, in consequence, himself, at twenty-four, reduced from affluence to sudden penury—and now, as a climax, this mysterious advertisement greeting him before he had literally had time to unpack his trunk and settle himself in the new surroundings that he had chosen as promising most in opportunity for the future.

What did it mean? There was something that seemed almost uncanny about it. One person, and one only knew that he was in New York—Redell, the old family lawyer. But he had left Redell in Kenora only that morning. Redell was out of the question. Who, then?

Stranway turned abruptly from the window and began to pace up and down the room, his brows furrowed, his strong, firm jaws a little out-flung, his broad, athletic shoulders squared back with a hint of aggressiveness. Suddenly, a new thought struck him. He swung quickly to the door, opened it, went down the stairs and passed out into the street. He walked rapidly to the avenue, purchased a copy of every evening paper on the news-stand and returned to his room.

He spent ten minutes over these, and then, in spite of himself, laughed a little nervously. *Each and every one of them contained the same advertisement word for word*. Certainly, whoever had written it was leaving nothing to chance; certainly, whoever had written it was in grim earnest.

The laugh died away and his lips tightened. He crossed the room and lifted the lid of his trunk.

"I don't know what it means," he muttered; "but I'll find out, or know the reason why!"

After a little search he found a photograph of himself; then, scribbling a short note, he made a mailing package of the two, and addressed it, according to directions, to C,305, *Times-Press*. This done, he went out and posted it—and pending developments, tried to shake the matter from his mind.

But it would not "shake." It clung like an obsession, obtruding itself again and again at odd moments throughout that evening—and in the morning every paper again faithfully reproduced the "personal!"

C,305! Who was C,305? What, in Heaven's name, was at the bottom of it?

At one o clock, when Stranway returned to his boarding house for lunch—after a morning spent in an unsuccessful attempt to find anything in the way of a position that offered him more than a mere opening for the moment, for Stranway, with characteristic determination, had made up his mind to hold out, unless his resources became exhausted first and compelled him to do otherwise, for something that would afford both an opportunity for advancement and ultimate success—his first question was for a letter or message. There was nothing; and he smiled a little mirthlessly at himself for the hold he had allowed the thing, unexplainable though it was, to obtain on him. It was too soon, of course, to expect any reply!

After lunch he went out again. He made his way across town, reached Sixth Avenue, walked down two blocks, turned east into Fourteenth Street—and the next instant he had halted as though rooted to the ground, and was staring about him in all directions. The crowd was thick on every side: women, men, children, flower girls, lace vendors, a line

of pedlars banking the curb. People pushed by him; some with ungracious haste, others flinging a curious look his way. Stranway, stock-still, continued to gaze, confounded, and it was a long minute before he realised the futility of it. Some one, with quick, deft fingers, had thrust an envelope into his hand—and was gone. The man in overalls, the messenger boy with jaunty cap, that well-gowned woman there—the act had been so sudden and adroit that, so far as Stranway could tell, it might have been done by any one of these, or any one of a score of others.

He glanced now at the envelope. It was plain, sealed, unaddressed. He made his way out of the press into the entrance of a building, and opened it. The sheet within contained but a single line, written in an angular, crabbed, masculine hand:

"Come at once to 2½ Dominic Court. C,305."

But now, apart from the amazing manner in which he had received it, the message caused Stranway no further surprise, as, from the moment he had felt the envelope thrust into his hand, he had sensed intuitively that it was a communication from the author of the "personal" in the papers. Nor did he now waste time in speculating over the peculiar and curious method of its delivery, for that was at least in keeping with what had gone before, and he had indulged in enough speculation already, too much of it, indeed, for his own peace of mind. Besides, the solution was obviously imminent now; and action, once there was something concrete to base it on, was Stranway's way of doing things.

He looked again at the paper to make sure of the address, folded the sheet, slipped it into his pocket, and

walked back to the corner of Sixth Avenue. Here, he accosted an officer.

"Can you tell me where Dominic Court is?" he inquired.

The patrolman pointed down the avenue.

"Four blocks down, right-hand side," he answered tersely.

"Thank you," said Stranway, and crossing over the avenue, walked briskly in the direction indicated.

He walked four blocks, six—and reached the Jefferson Market. Either the officer had misdirected him, or he had passed Dominic Court without recognising it. He wheeled and retraced his steps slowly. Half-way back up the second block he paused before a lane, or passageway, that apparently led to the rear premises of the not over-inviting buildings that bordered it on both sides, and turned to a passer-by.

"Can you tell me if Dominic Court is anywhere about here?" he asked.

"Dominic Court?" repeated the other. "I don't know. I never heard of it."

"That's queer," said Stranway—but he was to learn in the days to come that Dominic Court, though well worth the knowing, was unknown to many others as well, very many others amongst whom were those who prided themselves on their intimate knowledge of New York's nooks and crannies, many others of those even who passed it daily in thousands going to and from their work.

With a courteous word of thanks to the man, Stranway, puzzled, stepped into a dingy little second-hand store in front of him, and for the third time since receiving the message repeated his question.

The proprietor, who had hastened unctuously from the rear upon Stranway's entrance, grunted in dissatisfaction on

learning his visitor's business, and grudgingly directed him to the lane.

"H'm!" Stranway muttered facetiously to himself, as he stepped out on the street and turned into the passageway. "So this is it, eh? Well, I can't say it looks very promising for a debtor's abode! I—*hello!*" His lips pursed into a low whistle of astonishment, and he halted abruptly.

He had come to the end of the passageway, a bare twenty-five yards from the street—and the transition was utter and complete. It was as though he had been suddenly transported from the whirl and bustle of modern metropolitan life with its high-strung, nervous tension, its endless, jarring roar of traffic, to some quiet, sequestered section of a quaint old foreign town. True, at his right, making the north side of the court and continuing the line of the lane, the ugly red brick walls, windowless, of a building rose high in air; but apart——

"By Jove!" Stranway exclaimed in amazement.

A board walk at his left circled up to a row of small, old-fashioned wooden houses set back on the west side of the court. They were built in old Dutch style, were indeed relics, probably, of the old Dutch settlers themselves, two stories high, with slanting roofs, half curved, pierced with a series of diminutive dormer windows like a row of little turrets. Over all, ivy climbed in profusion, cool and green and refreshing. The court itself was grass-covered, neatly kept, and a driveway leading from the lane made a circuit around it. Fences, ivy-clothed like the dwellings, enclosed the court on the other two sides, shutting out the rear of the abutting buildings.

Stranway started forward along the walk.

The first house was numbered 1; the next, 1½. There were four in the row. No. 2½, therefore, would be the one at

the far end.

And now, for the first time, as he passed close by the several front doors, an air of desertion about the place struck him unpleasantly. The court, in the early afternoon sun, was in shadow, but every blind in every window was closed, and not a soul was to be seen anywhere.

A sudden feeling of misgiving came over him. Before, where the quiet and peace of the place had appealed to him, it now seemed strangely unnatural and foreboding. For an instant Stranway hesitated, and then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he mounted the three steps to the stoop of No. 2½, which he had now reached, and lifting the heavy brass knocker, banged loudly several times upon the door.

Chapter II.
2½ Dominic Court

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Stranway's knock was answered almost on the moment. The door swung back seemingly of its own volition, and a dim, narrow hallway was revealed. Stranway stepped inside—and the door closed behind him. Startled, he smiled the next instant. It was simple enough, the door was operated by a cord attachment, that was all.

"This way! This way!" a man's voice called to him from an open door just down the hall.

Stranway moved forward, turned into the room—and came to an abrupt stop barely across the threshold.

Before him, in the centre of the room, stood a clean-shaven little old man in a red velvet smoking jacket, his feet encased in red leather slippers, his scanty fringe of hair surmounted by a red skull-cap with bobbing tassel.

"What," demanded this personage sharply, as he fixed Stranway with bright, steel-blue eyes, "what is your favourite colour—h'm?"

Stranway drew suddenly back. So this was it! This was what was behind it all—a madman!

"No," said the little old man quickly. "No; you are quite wrong. I am not at all mad. It is a question I always ask. I see you have not studied the significance of colour. I recommend it to you as both instructive and of great value. There is no surer guide to the temperament than colour. For instance, blue is a cold colour, whereas orange is warm."

"Oh!" said Stranway; and then, with a whimsical smile at the red slippers, the red jacket, and the red skull-cap: "And

red—what is red?"

"Red?" replied the little old man instantly. "*Red is neither warm nor cold*."

Stranway, again taken aback, stared for an instant, nonplussed, at the other; then, mechanically, his eyes swept around the room. It was as curious as its occupant—and here, too, red was everywhere predominant. The heavy silken portière, that hid what was, presumably, another door opposite to the one by which he had entered; the carpet, a rich fabric of the Orient; the curtains which were drawn back from the single window that evidently gave upon the rear, since the shutters there were swung wide open to admit the light; the bookshelves, that filled in the spaces beneath and around the window as also the entire length and breadth of one side of the room; the huge safe in one corner; the upholstery of the chairs—all were red. It was very strange! A disordered pile of books on the floor, and the sliding ladder before the shelves suggested the student; a ponderous, large and very modern filing cabinet, together with the two telephones upon the desk suggested the busy man of affairs; the desk itself suggested the dilettante—it was of very old mahogany, with slender curving legs, and wondrously inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

The little old man came abruptly nearer and gazed into Stranway's face.

"Yes, yes," he said; "the photograph had the Stranway features; your father's mouth, your mother's nose. You are the original of the photograph. I am perfectly satisfied. You are Ewen Stranway. Sit down, sit down in that chair." He pointed to one facing the desk chair, which latter he took himself.

"And you," suggested Stranway bluntly, as he seated himself, "would you mind introducing yourself? I suppose

you are C,305. But that, you will admit, is a trifle vague and unsatisfactory."

"Yes, I am C,305." The little old man chuckled dryly. "My name, however, is Charlebois, Henri Raoul Charlebois, descendant"—he drew himself up with a quaint air of pride—"of the Norman Counts of Charlebois."

"You speak like an American," commented Stranway.

"I should"—the blue eyes twinkled—"for I am an American, as was also my father before me."

Stranway now settled easily back in his chair. In spite of the bizarre nature of his surroundings, the bizarre appearance of this Henri Raoul Charlebois himself, there was something about the old fellow that appealed to him and attracted him strongly.

"Ah! You feel, too, that we shall get along together!" The assertion came swiftly, instantly pertinent to Stranway's thoughts.

Keen and alert of brain himself, Stranway shot a curious, appreciative glance at the other; but when he spoke it was with quiet irrelevancy.

"You seem to know a good deal about me, a good deal that I don't understand. That advertisement, the note—how did you know I was in New York, how was I recognised on the street, and what is this debt you speak of? What does it mean?"

A hard, almost flint-like expression had crept into Charlebois' face.

"It means," he replied, a sudden harshness in his voice, "that for once I have failed—and I do not often fail. I did not know that your father was in difficulties. I believed him to be rich and prosperous."

Stranway stared in wonder.

"I don't understand," he said. "I don't understand what you mean, nor how, no matter how close you might have been to my father, though I never heard him speak of you, you could have believed anything else. Everybody thought he was wealthy. Even I, his son, never dreamed that——"

"Nevertheless," broke in Charlebois, "I should have known. It was my business to know."

"But," protested Stranway in amazement, "how——"

"Wait!" Again Charlebois interrupted him. "Wait! There is no mystery about it. Listen! The true state of affairs only reached me by wire on the morning you left Kenora—yesterday morning. Your destination was New York; your address was unknown—hence the notice in the papers on your arrival If I had failed with the father, there still remained the heir. The note you received is simply explained. My messenger knew you by your photograph. He was waiting outside your boarding house when you left there after lunch. Not wishing to become known either to you personally or to those you might question at the house, for reasons that you will come in due time to understand if you accept the proposition I am going to make to you, the messenger followed you until, in the midst of a crowd, he was able to deliver the note to you without disclosing his own identity. Is that quite clear to you?"

"Yes," said Stranway slowly. "Yes; that is clear—but *why*? My father, his circumstances, the debt—were you his friend?"

The tassel on Charlebois' skull-cap bobbed around in semi-circles, as he shook his head soberly.

"He was *my* friend—once. My friend—when I needed a friend. You are quite right, he never spoke of me. How should he? He did not know me."

Stranway, frankly bewildered, flung out his arm in an impotent gesture, but the words on his lips were checked by Charlebois' upraised hand.

"You are puzzled," said Charlebois, with an indulgent smile. "It is natural, quite natural. But have patience. You shall see. Tell me first of yourself, your position. You are no longer independent? Your funds are not abundant?"

Stranway smiled grimly.

"I have a hundred or so, that's all, to tide me over till I find something to do."

Charlebois nodded his head acquiescently.

"Just so, just so," he agreed. "Perhaps then after all, it as well the debt was not cancelled before. It will stand you in good stead now. I will show you the account, and I trust you will consider the offer I shall make you equitable, and a full and just quittance of the debt. In any case we will not haggle—you shall be satisfied."

Stranway swung impulsively to his feet.

"That's very honourable, very generous of you, Mr. Charlebois," he began. "I do not quite know what to say. I—I——" He fumbled for his words and stopped.

Charlebois regarded him with a kindly smile.

"It is neither one nor the other," he said. "It is simple justice. But see—here is the account."

He turned as he spoke, walked to the safe, dropped on his knees before it and began to spin the dial backward and forward. An instant later, the steel door swung open, and Charlebois returned to the desk carrying in his arms a massive book, covered in red morocco leather, the edges bound with heavy brass and locked together by three strong hasps. He set the volume on the desk, returned again to the safe and from a drawer in an inner compartment took out a

key. With this he unlocked the book, opened it and motioned Stranway to approach.

Stranway, full of nervous excitement now, moved quickly to Charlebois' side, and bending over the old man's shoulder watched the other's movements intently.

The volume was indexed. Charlebois turned to the letter "S" and ran a long, lean forefinger down the column of names.

"Stranway—Stranway," he muttered. "Stran—ah—page two hundred and forty-three!" He turned the pages deftly, stepped suddenly back, and the book lay wide open on the desk.

Stranway, bending quickly forward, read the words on the page at a glance. He read them again—and now, as they seemed to leap back at him in mockery, his look of incredulous dismay became an angry flush. He had been right at first, the man was mad—or was making a fool of him. The great red book was a ledger, and on the page open before him were scarcely a half dozen words. His father's name was at the top; beneath was a date, and, opposite the date, was a credit entry consisting of the two words: "*One Dime*." The debit side of the ledger was a blank.

Without a word, just a short, savage laugh, Stranway wheeled abruptly for the door—and, as abruptly, spun around again. With a grip, surprising in its strength for one of his age, Charlebois had caught him by the arm and faced him about.

"My boy," he demanded gravely, "have I offered *you* ten cents? You are too impulsive, too emotional. Have you still to learn that value is not calculated by rule of mathematics? Listen! This book is the record of a period of my life when I was homeless, destitute, and physically unable to earn my bread because my lungs were seriously affected and I was

too ill and weak either to secure or do enough work to support me. It is a large book, is it not? Well, it would need be, for many debts, very many debts, were incurred in that period. I was careful then not to forget them, for I knew the day was to come when I should repay. You are beginning to understand—to understand what *ten cents* that your father gave me once might mean? That day, the beginning of repayment came years ago now, when wealth with a sudden flood poured upon me—but of that at some other time! You are interested now in yourself and why I sent for you. There are many names in this book, many accounts still unbalanced. In that filing case yonder are almost daily records of the lives of those men and women whose names are written here. It has grown to be a stupendous work. It has called into being a far-reaching and highly trained organisation. And now the time is here when I need some one very close to me, a confidant, one upon whom I can implicitly rely. This is what I hope to offer you—first, for your father's sake; second, because I believe I shall find in you the one I have been seeking. Should I prove to be right in my opinion of you, and should you then accept the offer, it is but fair I should tell you that I shall demand much—but also I will give much. I would demand absolute, unquestioning obedience; invulnerable loyalty; your sworn oath of secrecy under any circumstances that might arise."

A whim? A vagary? No; it was more than that. There was no feebleness of brain behind the steady eyes that played on Stranway and seemed to read him through to his soul. Resolve, purpose, inflexible will, and a grim something he could not quite define were written on the other's face.

"And also," added Charlebois quietly, "it would be equally unfair before we go farther to disguise from you the fact

that, should you associate yourself with me, you face the possibility of grave danger, of perhaps even death."

Death! Danger! The words struck Stranway with a cold shock, just as it seemed he was beginning to understand a little something of this quaint character before him.

"Death? Danger?" he echoed in a bewildered way.

The hard, flint-like expression was back in Charlebois' features.

"Even so—death and danger," he repeated. "You have only seen one entry in the ledger, and that was on the credit side. *There are debit entries there as well*. Debit entries, as surely debts as the others; as surely to be settled, to be balanced as the others—and with the same impartial justice. Should I forget the one and not the other? I have forgotten neither. They are all there—all!" His clenched hand fell suddenly upon the Red Ledger. "And all are paid—at maturity. Powerful men to-day are amongst those names on the debit side, men who strike in the black of night, who fight with unbuttoned foils, who turn like rats at bay to save themselves; and from these, their craft and resources, comes the danger I have warned——"

Charlebois stopped abruptly. One of the two telephones on the desk—one of a style and manufacture generally used for connecting up different parts of an establishment—rang sharply. Stranway had not noticed the difference in the instruments before, and now he did so with a curious sense of surprise. The house was very small for such an installation; there were, he judged, perhaps four rooms in all, there could hardly be more.

His eyes, from the instrument, lifted to Charlebois' face—and he stepped back involuntarily. It seemed as though it were another man who now stood before him. Old before, Charlebois' face appeared aged almost beyond recognition;

the hand that held the receiver to his ear was trembling violently; the other hand, still on top of the Red Ledger, opened and shut, opened and shut spasmodically; the man's stature seemed absolutely to shrink, and his whole frame shook as with the ague. Spellbound, dumb with amazement, Stranway stared. The receiver clattered from a nerveless hand to the desk. Charlebois tottered, recovered himself, and with a wild, hunted look around the room, turned to Stranway.

"Wait! Wait!" The words came stammering through twitching lips, and the next instant Charlebois had darted behind the red silken portière and was gone from the room.

For perhaps a minute, Stranway stood there motionless, confused, his mind in turmoil—and then, suddenly, like a galvanic shock, clearing his brain, stirring him to action, a wild scream rang through the room.

It came again—from behind the portière—full of terror, agony, despair—a *woman's* scream. A bare second, every muscle rigid, Stranway stood poised; then with a spring he reached the portière and tore it aside. A door was before him, its upper portion glass-panelled.

"My God!" he cried fearfully, and wrenched at the door with all his strength. It would not yield. Sweat beads of horror sprang out upon his forehead.

Before him, in the room beyond, two forms were struggling—that of Charlebois and a woman; a woman, young, slender, lithe, with a face that even in its pallor now was beautiful; a woman, gowned in black, without touch of colour about her save, grim in irony, a delicate purple orchid that, half wrenched from her corsage, dangled now from its broken stem. Charlebois' hand, clutching a revolver, tore suddenly free as they swayed. Like a madman Stranway flung himself at the door again. And again it resisted his

attack. There was a flash, a puff of smoke, a sharp report. He heard a gurgling cry from the woman's lips. She reeled, crumpled up, pitched forward, lay a motionless, inert heap upon the floor—and a dark crimson stain gushed out upon the carpet.

Instantly, then, Stranway turned and raced back across the room to the other door. He had not closed it after him when he had entered—*but now it was locked*! He wasted a minute in a blind, futile effort to force it; then, his brain working rationally again, he jumped for the desk, snatched up the city telephone and whipped off the receiver.

"Hello! Hello! Central!" he called frantically. "Cent——"

"*Put that down!*" The words came in a monotone, deadly cold, as Charlebois, with working face, his revolver covering Stranway, stepped into the room, and whipped the portière violently across the glass-panelled door behind him.

Stranway's hand dropped.

Charlebois came nearer, close to the desk, and a paroxysm of fury seemed to seize him.

"You have seen! You have seen!" His voice, high-pitched, was almost a scream. "You would give me to the law, you would send me to the chair! Your oath, your solemn oath that no word of this will ever pass your lips, or you shall not leave this room alive!"

Stranway's face, already colourless, greyed; but, now, his lips straightened doggedly in a firm line and he looked Charlebois steadily in the eyes—it was answer enough.

"You won't?" snarled Charlebois. "You won't? I will give you until I count three. It is my life or yours. My life or yours, you fool, do you not see that? *One!*"

Stranway's mouth was dry. The room was swimming around him.

"No!" he said hoarsely.

"*Two!*"

There was only one chance—to launch himself suddenly at the other and risk the shot. Stranway's muscles tautened—but he did not spring.

With a broken cry, Charlebois suddenly thrust the revolver into his jacket pocket, and, lurching forward into the desk chair, buried his face in his hands.

"I can't—I can't! No, no; no more blood!" He was half moaning, half mumbling to himself. "No, no; no more blood! There has been enough—I have taken life—she is dead—come what may, no more blood." He looked up suddenly into Stranway's face. "See! See!" he cried, and jumping to his feet, ran with quick, short steps to the safe.

Staggered for a moment at this sudden change of front, weak from the revulsion of feeling brought about by the reprieve from what he had felt was almost certain death, Stranway hung against the desk, following the queer, grotesque figure with his eyes. He saw the other swing wide the door of the safe; and then, almost on the instant, it seemed, Charlebois came running back to the desk with laden arms.

"See! See!" he cried again. "Your oath, your oath that you will say nothing, and this is yours—all of it—all of it!" He tumbled great packages of banknotes on the desk, and his fingers fumbled with the string around a canvas bag. "All—all!" From the bag poured a glittering pile of gold.

All! Immunity for a grovelling wretch from the crime of *murder*! Stranway's hands clenched. A fierce resentment sent the blood whipping to his temples. Hush money! Money to buy his silence! Money to turn him, too, into a craven thing. His lips tightened into a straight line.

"Is it not enough?" Charlebois was pushing the notes and gold with nervous haste along the desk toward Stranway.

"Then you shall have more. It is very easy money for you—very easy. You have only to say nothing, just that little thing is all I ask of you—to say nothing. You have never been here. You have seen nothing. Who will question you? There are thousands of dollars here—thousands. Take them! Take them, and go away! And there will be more each month, each week. I will make you rich! Take them, and——"

With a sudden leap, Stranway caught the other's wrists in a vice-like grip.

"I'll take your revolver," he said, his voice out of control and rasping strangely in his own ears. "I don't think I'd care to touch anything else of yours!" Mercilessly he jerked the old man around, and, holding Charlebois now by the collar of his jacket, snatched the revolver from the other's pocket. "Now then! You'll either open that door, which someway or other you locked, and march out to the first policeman, or I'll telephone the police from here. You can take your choice."

"Money!" The old man choked from the tightening grip. "Listen! Don't be a fool! You are young! I will give you anything in the world you want. You shall live in luxury. Do you know how much is there on the desk? Look at it! All big bills! Big bills! There is a fortune even there—and that is only a beginning. Monday——"

With his grip still upon the other, Stranway reached for the telephone.

"You are an old man," he said between his teeth, "or I would ram your money down your throat! As it is, I'll do it anyhow if you——"

His sentence ended with a low, startled cry. His hand from Charlebois' collar dropped nervously away. He was staring like a man bereft of his senses at the red portière before the glass-panelled door. It had swung wide again—and standing there, brown eyes fixed upon him, half

challenging, half coyly demure, was the woman with the orchid who, but a moment since, he would have sworn had been murdered before his eyes.

And then Stranway burst suddenly into a harsh, savage laugh. Perhaps *he* was mad, too! Certainly, at least, he had been made to play the part of a fool!

But it was Charlebois who spoke—in a strangely gentle way, as he adjusted the ruffled collar of his red velvet jacket.

"My boy," he said, "you are piqued. You feel that, whether I am mad or not, the prank has been carried a little too far at your expense."

Stranway did not answer. He looked at the girl. Her eyes met his again, but very steadily now; great, self-reliant, deep brown eyes—and, curiously putting a curb upon his anger, they seemed to hold now a strange sincerity.

But now, with a little flush of colour mounting to her cheeks, she turned quickly away, and the red portière dropped into place behind her. He heard the glass-panelled door close softly. She was gone.

He bit his lips. If this Henri Raoul Charlebois was mad, *she* wasn't. But what was the meaning of it all? Who was she?

Again it was Charlebois who spoke—-as naturally as though Stranway had asked his question aloud.

"She is very fond of that flower you saw her wearing," said the little old gentleman quietly; "and so here we call her—the Orchid."

Stranway, with a little start, lifted his eyes from the red portière upon which they had been fixed, and looked at the other. Tempted to nurse back his waning resentment, he was minded to make no reply. And yet, was it curiosity that was the stronger—or what?

"And—the Orchid"—he stumbled over the name—"is a member of this organisation of yours that you spoke of, I suppose?"

"She is more than that," replied the little old gentleman softly. And then suddenly he came forward and laid both hands on Stranway's shoulders. "My boy," he said earnestly, "it was all necessary. There has been no jest, no mockery, no intention to hurt or wound your pride. There was far too much at stake for me to base my decision in reference to you on anything but certainty and proof. Do you not remember that I said I *hoped* I should find in you the one I have been seeking? And so I risked giving you offence to prove you. You have shown that neither fear nor bribery will move you to an act that is foreign to your conscience, as acquiescence in a demand such as I made upon you *must* be foreign to the conscience of any decent man. You have shown—what I require most of all—that implicit confidence can be placed in you. And so I ask you now to come here and join me in a very intimate way in my work; to come here and share with me the burden that in these later years, I might almost say the closing years during which that book there will be balanced forever, have grown too heavy for me alone. We will not speak of material recompense, for money will be the consideration of least importance between us. I promise you adventure, I promise you romance; and I promise you that you will never be called upon to participate in any act of which you do not conscientiously approve. But again, too, I must warn you that you will not be free from the dangers that surround me—and they are many and grave."

The little old gentleman's hands fell from Stranway's shoulders, and he stepped quietly to the door and opened it.

"I do not want you to answer now," he said. "You are mentally disquieted for the moment. Think well about it—and come to me to-morrow morning with your decision."

And Stranway, finding himself a moment later in the sunlight of the quaint courtyard, rubbed his eyes. It was as though he had been dreaming.

Chapter III.
A Month Later

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It was night in the Red Room of 2½ Dominic Court; but it was Ewen Stranway, not Henri Raoul Charlebois, who sat now at the antique desk under the soft glow of the red-shaded lamp. A strange, quickened sense of excitement was upon him. Before him lay a note written in Charlebois' angular, crabbed hand. So the time had come at last! This was to be his first active participation in——

He leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head, and stared musingly around him. A month had gone since that morning when, following his strange afternoon experience in this same room here, he had entered the service of Henri Raoul Charlebois. He had done so after a night of troubled mental debate, prompted to his final decision by he could not exactly have explained what, except that perhaps a dogged determination to see the thing through, a vividly aroused curiosity, and, perhaps too, a haunting recollection of brown eyes that had looked at him very steadily, had all played their part. And, having come to Dominic Court, he had remained—he smiled gravely—because almost from the first moment he had become lost, engrossed in his surroundings and his work, and because as the days went by he had come more and more to know and respect and admire that little old white-haired gentleman in the red velvet jacket and shoes, and the red skull-cap with its bobbing tassel, whom once he had thought mad.

His mind, harking back now over the weeks that were gone, lingered upon the picture that was conjured up. Reality and unreality seemed curiously blended. The composite picture was strange indeed! Far from being all that it seemed was this row of four old-fashioned, ivy-coloured houses here that faced the neatly kept, but obscure little courtyard. True, to the outsider, it was but a row of four quaint old Dutch dwellings, each with its separate stoop and porch, each with its separate door and ponderous brass knocker, each with its separate and distinct ménage. And so, too, it was to the tradesmen, the grocers and the butchers; to the postman in his daily rounds; to the patrolman who, strolling leisurely along Sixth Avenue, turned off, walked up the few yards of passageway between the buildings abutting on that thoroughfare, cast an accustomed glance around the court, perfunctorily twirled his stick, and went back to his beat again. Four to all of these; one to those within! The mail delivered at 1, 1½ or 2 Dominic Court came quickly through the inconspicuous connecting doors at the lower end of each hallway to this desk here in the Red Room where he sat to-night.

Curious, too, were the inmates! Of many walks in life, of many nationalities, they came and went, bewildering, almost kaleidoscopic in their shifting changes—changes that embraced both numbers and personnel. And here, too, should this by any chance be remarked by the profane, a most commonplace, uninteresting explanation blunted at once the edge of one's appetite for information. At 1 Dominic Court, Mrs. Morrison, a middle-aged widow, kept lodgers; at 1½ Dominic Court, a young French couple, Pierre Verot and his wife, kept lodgers; at 2 Dominic Court, Miss Priscilla Bates, an elderly lady from whose gracious air of dignity and culture one said at once, "she must have seen

better days, poor soul," kept lodgers. And 2½ Dominic Court? Ah, that was apart! There an eccentric little old gentleman, who bothered no one and was bothered by no one in return, lived alone with a housekeeper and his books.

Who would have dreamed that, behind its mask of peace and quiet, slumbering old Dominic Court, in the dead of night, at noontime, at dawn, at all hours and as a single entity, would suddenly and often awake to busy and restless activity, not with confusion or commotion, but as some high-powered, sleek and well-groomed piece of machinery, confident in its own mighty force, starts with eloquent serenity into motion!

Charlebois! Stranway's face softened. He had come to *know* Charlebois. He had come to understand the meaning of that massive, brass-bound Red Ledger which contained those strange accounts contracted in the years before when, sick and destitute, without means of sustenance, some in sympathy and love and kindness had held out a helping hand to Charlebois—and some had spurned him in his misery, callously, indifferently, plunging him into still blacker depths of despair, turning from him as from an unclean, leprous thing, remembering never the tie of human kinship, and even using his helplessness on occasions to further their own nefarious ends. He had come to understand how the stumbling upon gold in the far Northland, the foundation of that fortune which had multiplied and re-multiplied into untold wealth, had been devoted to the building up of a stupendous system whose ramifications spread out limitlessly, secretly keeping Charlebois in intimate touch with those, widely scattered now, whose names were written on the Red Ledger's pages. And thus, lavishing thousands if need be, lavishing endless time and effort, where perhaps the original obligation had

been no more than a cheery word of comfort and encouragement, Charlebois counted never the cost that at the psychological moment he might bring joy and happiness and peace into the lives of those who once, in his dire need, had brought a ray of sunlight into his own; and, too, *as red was neither warm nor cold*, the symbol of impartiality which Charlebois had adopted, with equal tenacity of purpose, with an equal outpouring of his wealth, immutably, yet without malice or vindictiveness, governed only by a broad and discerning sense of justice, where only retribution was merited an hundredfold, he settled at maturity those grimmer entries on the debit side.

Mad? Charlebois mad because of this? Stranway shook his head. Was there anyone, indeed, into whose mind this very idea had not come as a fascinating subject for speculation—what it would be like if all the good and all the ill one enjoyed and suffered through life at the hands of others should be tabulated and repaid in kind? He, Stranway, had thought of it. Everybody had! But only Charlebois out of all the world had put into practice what dreamers dreamed of. Mad? He had found Charlebois a strange and complex character perhaps, eccentric perhaps; but a man full of sterling honour, of wondrous human sympathy and love, gentle, tender-hearted as a woman, fleeing in almost ridiculous dismay from a word of thanks, panic-stricken at the first expression of gratitude from those he so nobly served—and yet ever ruled by the same inflexible purpose to pay impartially each and every account no matter what it might be, a purpose from which he neither swerved nor admitted appeal, and which was the foundation and basis whereon was built each of the human dramas that, finding birth in the pages of the Red Ledger, Charlebois

played out to their fruition with master strategy on the stage of life.

A strange month! And strange too his, Stranway's, part in it! It had been the busiest month that he had ever known, crowded with a multitude of diverse employments. From Pierre Verot he had learned the use of skeleton keys, and somewhat of the art of facial make-up; he was still studying "morse" under the tutelage of Miss Priscilla Bates. The secret codes of the organisation Charlebois himself had explained. The daily reports that came by mail from those at work outside were open to his inspection; the key to the Red Ledger itself was his at will; the safe, always stored with great sums of money, was his to command. The implicit confidence of which Charlebois had spoken had been given in the most literal sense. Nor had his personal comfort been overlooked. He had found, already prepared and waiting for him, a tastefully, even luxuriously furnished apartment near at hand on Sixth Avenue.

"Learn!" Charlebois had said. "And as soon as you are ready, the active work, the real work before you will begin. Learn—that you may be able to take my place itself when necessary."

Stranway stirred in his chair, and looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes past eleven. Too early yet!

He glanced around the room, frowning now a little in a puzzled way. Yes, it had been a strange month! A month that he counted the best he had ever lived, and yet it had plagued him somewhat in that it had held back something from the fullness of what had seemed its first promise. He would have liked to have seen those brown eyes again. He had counted on seeing them. The Orchid! But there had been no sign of her. She certainly did not live in Dominic