

CHAPTER V

THE PHANTOM THAT ROSE FROM THE BOTTLE

THE demon of the flute laughed and fell silent. The house grew very quiet. A fresh log built its ragged shell of color within the library and Carl drank again and again, watching the play of firelight upon the amber liquor in his glass. It pleased him idly to build up a philosophy of whiskey, an impudent, fearless reverie of fact and fancy.

“So,” he finished carelessly, “every bottle is a crystal temple to the great god Bacchus and who may know what phantom lurks within, ready to rise and grow from the fumes of its fragrant incense into a nebulous wraith of gigantic proportions. Many a bottle such as this has made history and destroyed it. A sparkling essence of tears and jest, of romance and passion and war and grotesquerie, of treachery and irony and blood and death, whose temper no man may know until he tests it through the alchemy of his brain and soul!”

To Starrett it gave a heavy courtesy; to Payson a mad buffoonery; to Wherry pathos; to Carl himself—ah!—there was the rub! To Carl its message was as capricious as the wind—a moon-

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mad chameleon changing its color with the fickle light. And in the bottle to-night lay a fierce, unreasoning resentment against Diane.

"Fool!" said Carl. "One mad, eloquent lie of love and she would have softened. Women are all like that. Tell me," Carl stared whimsically into his glass as if it were a magic crystal of revelation, "why is it that when I am scrupulously honest no one understands? . . . Why that mad stir of love-hunger to-night as Diane stood in the doorway? Why the swift black flash of hatred now? Are love and hatred then akin?"

The clock struck three. Carl's brain, flaming, keen, master of the bottle save for its subtle inspiration of wounded pride and resentment, brooded morosely over Diane, over the defection of his parasitic companions, over the final leap into the abyss of parsimony and Diane's flash of contempt at the mention of his mother. Half of Diane's money was rightly his—his mother's portion. And he could love vehemently, cleanly, if he willed, with the delicate white fire which few men were fine enough to know. . . . In the soft hollow of Diane's hand had lain the destiny of a man who had the will to go unerringly the way he chose. . . . Love and hunger—they were the great trenchant appetites of the human race: one for its creation, the other for its perpetuation. . . . To every man came first

the call of passion; then the love-hunger for a perfect mate. The latter had come to him to-night as Diane stood in the doorway, a slender, vibrant flame of life keyed exquisitely for the finer, subtler things and hating everything else.

Still he drank, but the fires of hell were rising now in his eyes. There was treachery in the bottle. . . . Diane, he chose to fancy, had refused him justice, salvation, respect to the memory of his mother! . . . So be it! . . . His to wrench from the mocking, gold-hungry world whatever he could and however he would. . . . Only his mother had understood. . . . And Diane had mocked her memory. Still there had been thrilling moments of tenderness for him in Diane's life. . . . But Diane was like that — a flash of fire and then bewildering sweetness.

There was the spot Starrett's glass had struck; there the ancient carven chair in which Diane had mocked his mother; there was red — blood-red in the dying log — and gold. Blood and gold — they were indissolubly linked one with the other and the demon of the bottle had danced wild dances with each of them. A mad trio! After all, there was only one beside his mother who had ever understood him — Philip Poynter, his roommate at Yale. And Philip's lazy voice somehow floated from the fire to-night.

“Carl,” he had said, “you've bigger individual

problems to solve than any man I know. You could head a blood revolution in South America that would outrage the world; or devise a hellish philosophy of hedonism that by its very ingenuity would seduce a continent into barking after false gods. You've an inexplicable chemistry of ungovernable passions and wild whims and you may go through hell first but when the final test comes — you'll ring true. Mark that, old man, you'll ring true. I tell you I *know!* There's sanity and will and grit to balance the rest."

Well, Philip Poynter was a staunch optimist with oppressive ideals, a splendid, free-handed fellow with brains and will and infernal persistence.

Four o'clock and the log dying! The city outside was a dark, clinking world of milkmen and doubtful stragglers. Carl finished the whiskey in his glass and rose. His brain was very drunk — that he knew — for every life current in his body swept dizzily to his forehead, focusing there into whirling inferno, but his legs he could always trust. He stepped to the table and lurched heavily. Mocking, treacherous demon of the bottle! His legs had failed him. Fiercely he flung out his arm to regain his balance. It struck a candelabrum, a giant relic of ancient wood as tall as himself. It toppled and fell with its candel branches in the fire. Where the log broke

a flame shot forth, lapping the dark wood with avid tongue. With a crackle the age-old wood began to burn.

Carl watched it with a slight smile. It pleased him to watch it burn. That would hurt Diane, for everything in this beautiful old Spanish room linked her subtly to her mother. Yes, it would hurt her cruelly. Beyond, at the other end of the table, stood a mate to the burning candlestick, doubtless a silent sentry at many a drinking bout of old when roistering knights gathered about the scarred slab of table-wood beneath his fingers. A pity though! Artistically the carven thing was splendid.

Cursing himself for a notional fool, Carl jerked the candlestick from the fire and beat out the flames. The heavy top snapped off in his hands. The falling wood disclosed a hollow receptacle below the branches . . . a charred paper. Well, there was always some insane whim of Norman Westfall's coming to light somewhere and this doubtless was one of them.

The paper was very old and yellow, the handwriting unmistakably foreign. French, was it not? The firelight was too fitful to tell. Carl switched on the light in the cluster of old iron lanterns above the table and frowned heavily at the paper. No, it was the precise, formal English of a foreigner, with here and there a

ludicrous error among the stilted phrases. And as Carl read, a gust of wild, incredulous laughter echoed suddenly through the quiet room. Again he read, cursing the dizzy fever of his head. Houdania! Houdania! Where was Houdania? Surely the name was familiar. With a super-human effort of will he clenched his hands and jaws and sat motionless, seeking the difficult boon of concentration. Out of the maelstrom of his mind haltingly it came, and with it memory in panoramic flashes.

Once more he heard the clatter of cavalry galloping up a winding mountain road to a gabled city whose roofs and turrets glistened ruddily in the westering sun. There had been royalty abroad with a brilliant escort, handsome, dark-skinned men with a lingering trace of Arab about the eyes, who galloped rapidly by him up the winding road to the little kingdom in the mountains. Houdania!—yes that was it—of course. Houdania! A Lilliputian monarchy of ardent patriots. There had been a flaming sunset behind the turrets of a castle and he had climbed up—up—up to the gabled kingdom, seeking, away from the track of the tourist, relief from the exotic gayety of his rocketing over Europe. And high above the elfin kingdom on a wooded ravine where a silver rivulet leaped and sang along the

mountain, a gray and lonely monastery had offered him a cell of retreat.

Houdania! Yes, he had found Houdania. Philip Poynter had told him of the monastery months before. Philip liked to seek and find the picturesque. Thus had he come into Andorra in the Pyrenees and Wisby in the Baltic. And he—Carl—had found Houdania. But what of it? Ah, yes, the burning candlestick—the paper—the paper! And again a gust of laughter drowned the fitful crackle of the fire. There was gold at his hand—great, tempting quantities of it!

“When the test comes, you’ll ring true,” came the crackle of Philip’s voice from the fire. “Mark that, old man, you’ll ring true. I tell you, I know.” Well, Philip Poynter was his only friend. But Philip was off somewhere, gone out of his life this many a day in a characteristic burst of quixotism.

Carl laughed and shuddered. For a mad instant he held the tempting yellow paper above the fire—and drew it back, stared at the charred candlestick and laughed again—but there was nothing of laughter in his eyes. They were darkly ironic and triumphant. There was blood in the fire—and gold—and Diane had mocked his mother. With a groan Carl flung his arms out passionately upon the table, torn by a con-

flict of the strangely warring forces within him. And with his head drooping heavily forward upon his hands he lay there until the melancholy dawn grayed the room into shadowy distinctness, his angle of vision twisted and maimed by the demon of the bottle. The candlestick loomed strangely forth from the still grayness; the bottle took form; the yellowed paper glimmered on the table. Carl stirred and a spasm of mirthless laughter shook him.

“So,” he said, “Philip Poynter loses—and I—I write to Houdania!”

So from the bottle rose a phantom of glittering gold and temptation to grow in time to a wraith of gigantic proportions. In the bottle to-night had lain tears and jest and love unending, romance and passion, treachery and irony—blood and the shadow of Death.