



The DAY OF DAYS

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

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CHAPTER VI.

Burglary Under Arms.

HE doubted suddenly to the back door, swung it open and threw himself out into the black strangeness of the night and at the same time into the arms of two burly plain clothes men.

Strong arms clipping him, he struggled violently for an instant.

"Here!" a voice warned him roughly. "It ain't goin' to do you no good."

Another interrupted with an accent of deep disgust. "Hanged if it ain't a patrolman!" in patent recognition of his borrowed plumage.

"Why didn't you say so?" demanded the first as P. Sybarite fell back, released.

"Didn't have time," panted the latter. "Here," he added quickly, "give me a leg over this fence, will you?"

"What for?"

"They've got a door through to the next house—getting out that way. That's what I'm after—to stop 'em. Shut up!" P. Sybarite insisted savagely. "and give me a leg."

Curiously complaisant for one of his breed, the detective bent his back and made a stirrup of his clasped hands, but no sooner had P. Sybarite fitted foot to that than the man started and straightened up abruptly, throwing him flat on his back.

"You a patrolman! Whatcha doin' in them pants and shoes if you're a patrolman?"

"Hello!" exclaimed the other indignantly. "Impersonatin' an officer, eh?"

With this he dived at P. Sybarite, who, having bounced up from a supine to a sitting position, promptly and peerishly swore, rolled to one side and scrambled to his feet.

Immediately the other closed in upon him, supremely confident of overcoming by concerted action that smallish pale and terrified body. Whereupon P. Sybarite stepped quickly to one side and, avoiding the rush of one, directly engaged the other. Ducking beneath a stilet play of arms, he shot an accurate fist at the aggressor's jaw. There was a click of teeth, the man's head snapped back, and, folding up like a tripod, he subsided at full length upon the ground.

Then swinging on a heel P. Sybarite met a second onset made more dangerous by the cooler calculations of a more sophisticated antagonist. Nevertheless deftly blocking a rain of blows, he closed in as if eager to escape punishment and planted a lifted knee in the large of the detective's stomach, so nearly that he, too, collapsed like a mangled presidential boom and lay motionless.

him down to rest.

The next moment, spurred by an alert discretion, P. Sybarite scaled the fence with the agility of a back yard tom cat.

Hard flags received him on the other side. Stumbling, he lost balance and sat down with an emphasis that drove the breath from him in one mighty "Ooof!"

There was a simultaneous confusion of new, strange voices on the other side of the fence; cries of surprise, recognition of the two detectives, followed by:

"Gimme a back up that fence!"

P. Sybarite picked himself up with even more alacrity than if he'd landed in a bed of nettles, tore across that terra incognita, found a second fence and was beyond it in a twinkling.

Swift as he was, however, detection attended him—a voice roaring, "There goes wan av thim now!"

Blindly clearing fence after fence without even thinking to count them, P. Sybarite hurried onward.

With a jerk up went his hands high above his head. Blinking furiously, he comprehended his plight.

The lights he found so dazzling blazed from sconces round the walls of a bedroom more handsome than any he had thought ever to see—unless perhaps upon a stage. The voice belonged to a young woman sitting up in bed and coolly covering him with the yawning muzzle of a peculiarly poisonous looking automatic pistol.

It was astonishingly evident that she wasn't at all frightened. The arm that leveled the weapon—a round and shapely arm, bare to the shoulder—was admirably steady, the rich coloring of her distinctly handsome face showed not a trace of pallor.

Abruptly she dropped her weapon and sat up yet straighter in her bed, her head tilted, mouth and eyes widening with astonishment.

"Well," she said quite simply, "I'll be hanged if it ain't a cop!"

P. Sybarite immediately took occasion to lower his hands to a more comfortable position.

"Thank God," he exclaimed fervently. "You're the one woman in a thousand who knows enough to look before she shoots! Phew!"

Quite naturally he drew a braided blue cuff across a beaded forehead.

"That's all very well," the woman took him up sharply—"but be careful! I don't shoot after looking. Cop or no cop, you—what do you want in my bedroom at this hour of the night?"

"Madam," P. Sybarite expostulated aggrievedly, "with an air of the utmost candor—"my duty—"What do you think you mean by that?"

"Perhaps," he countered blandly, "you're not aware a burglar has passed through this room?"

"A burglar? What rot!"

"Pardon me, madam," P. Sybarite lied nonchalantly, "but five minutes ago I was called in by the people in 233 Forty-fifth street to nab a burglar who'd broken in there. They thought they had him locked up safe enough in one of the rooms, but when they came to open the door and let me at him—the bird had flown. He'd taken a long chance—swung himself from the window ledge to a fire escape five feet away. I saw him climb your fire escape, and so I came after him."

The woman frowned. Would she or wouldn't she accept that wildly fanciful yarn? He made another quick survey of the room and a second and more shrewd appraisal of this admirably self possessed creature.

A lit too florid and ornate, he concluded; woman and lodgings alike were somewhat overdone. A superabundance of gilt and pink marred the color scheme of the apartment, and there was ostentatious evidence of wealth lavishly expended on its furnishings.

Sitting up in bed in silken nightgown, she looked P. Sybarite up and down with wide eyes, as if she were a woman of life, shrewdly judicious of mankind.

"Maybe you're telling the truth, at that," she announced suddenly, eyes coldly unimpressed. "You sound fishy, and you're the slickest looking cop I ever laid eyes on. But there are less unlikely things than that a second story man should try this route for his getaway. Well," she demanded ungenially, "what're you standing there for like a stone man?"

"My dear lady"—expostulated the dismayed P. Sybarite.

"If you're a cop go to it—cop somebody," she replied with a brusque laugh, "and then clear out. I can use the room and time you're occupying. Besides, you're slipping the said burglar a fine young chance to make the front door, unless he's under the bed."

Mechanically obedient to her suggestion, down P. Sybarite plumped on his knees, lifted the silken valance at the foot of the bed, and pretended to explore the darkness thereunder.

While thus occupied and badgering his added wits to invent some plausible way to elude this amazon, he was at once started and still further dismayed to hear the bed springs creak. A light double thump as two bare feet found the floor and again the woman's voice flavored with acid sarcasm.

"You seem to find it interesting down there. Is it the view? Or are you trying to hypnotize your burglar by the power of the human eye?"

"It's pure and simple reverence for the proprietress," P. Sybarite replied without stalling; "keeps me emulating the foolish ostrich. I believe me, madam, am a plain man, of modest tastes, unaccustomed to—"

"That," said the lady, smothering a giggle, "will be about all from you. Get up, or I'll call in a sure enough cop to search your title to that uniform."

Hastily P. Sybarite withdrew his head and rose. An embarrassed glance askance comforted him measurably; the lady had thrown an exquisite negligence over her night dress and had thrust her pretty feet into extravagantly pretty silken slippers.

"Now," said she tersely, "we'll comb the premises for this burglar of yours, and if we don't find him"—her lips tightened, her brows clouded ominously—"I promise you an interesting time of it. Where's your nightstick?"

With consternation P. Sybarite investigated the vacant loop at his side.

"Must've dropped out while I was shining over the back fence," he sur-



With a Jerk Up Went His Hands.

With whatever shrinkings and dire misgivings, P. Sybarite went on.

Without misadventure he gained the main wall of the house and there found open windows and upon further cautious investigation a doorway. Likewise wide, to the blind night air, but no sound significant of human tenacity. In spite of this it was without the least confidence that presently he plucked up courage to proceed.

Three steps on into darkness and his knee found a chair that might have poised itself on one leg in malicious ambush, so promptly did it go over—and with what a racket! Incontinently something rustled quite near at hand, followed a click—blinding light—a shrill, excited voice:

"Hands up!"

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misled vaguely. "However, I shall need it. This"—with a bright and confident smile displaying Penfield's revolver—"will do just as well—better, in fact."

"That?" she questioned. "That's no, a police department gun. Where'd you get it?"

"Oh, yes, it is. It's the new pattern—recently adopted. They've just begun to issue 'em. I only got mine today."

The lady's lips curled. "Very well," she concluded curtly. "I don't believe a word you say, but we'll see. I warn you, find me a burglar—or," she added with unmistakable significance, "I'll find one myself."

Interpreting the level challenge of her glance, P. Sybarite's heart quaked. But there was no use offering resistance to the demands of this masterful woman. She was one patently to be humored against a more suspicious turn of affairs.

He shrugged, gave in with a gesture. Her imperative arm, uplifted, indicated an inner door.

"Find that burglar. Lead the way now!"

Awed, P. Sybarite grasped his revolver and strode to the door with much dramatic manner, but paused with a hand on the knob to look over his shoulder. The woman was there, not a foot distant, her countenance a mask of suspicious determination.

He pulled the door open, flung out into the hallway, paused again at the mouth of the back well of the stairway.

Behind him the woman snapped on a switch. An electric bulb glared out of the darkness behind him. And P. Sybarite, peering down, started back, with a gasp of amazement that was instantly echoed at his ear.

On the stairs, halfway down, a man was crouching in a posture of frozen consternation, a small electric pocket lamp burning brilliantly in one hand, the other, lifted, grasping a weapon of some curious sort in the eyes of P. Sybarite more than anything else like a small black cannon, a hatless man in evening clothes, his face half blotted out by a black mask that left uncovered only his angular, muscular jaw and ugly, twisted mouth.

For a full minute, it seemed, not one of the three so much as drew breath. And then, as if from a heart of agony, the woman at his side breathed a broken and tortured cry:

"You dog! So it has come to murder, has it?"

As if electrified by that ejaculation, P. Sybarite whipped up Penfield's revolver and leveled it at the man on the stairs.

"Hands up!" he snapped. "Drop that gun!"

The answer was a singular sound—half a choking cough, half a smothered bark—accompanied by a jet of fire from the odd weapon and coincident with the tinkling of a splintered electric bulb.

Instantly the hall was again drenched in darkness, but little mitigated by the light from the bedroom.

In the excitement P. Sybarite pulled trigger. The hammer fell on an empty chamber, rose and fell half a dozen times without deducting any response other than the click of metal against metal, demonstrating beyond question that his revolver was unloADED.

From the hand of the marauder another tongue of flame licked out to the sound of the same dull, bronchial cough, and a bullet thumped heavily into the wall behind P. Sybarite.

Enraged beyond measure, he drew back his worthless weapon and threw it with all his might. And kismet winged the missile to the firing arm of the assassin. With a cry of pain and anger involuntarily he relaxed his grasp upon his own pistol, and, dropping it, he stumbled and half fell, half threw himself down to the next floor.

As he did this a white arm was leveled over the shoulder of P. Sybarite. The woman took deliberate aim, fired—and missed.

CHAPTER VII.

The Lady of the House.

AT once, like a demon of exceptional malignity, a breathless and overpowering rage possessed P. Sybarite. Without the least hesitation he stretched forth a hand, snatched the pistol from the grasp of the woman—who seemed to relinquish it more through surprise than willingly—threw himself halfway down the stairs and took a hasty pot shot at the marauder almost invisible in the darkness as he rounded the turn of the next flight.

Missing, the little man flung on recklessly. As he gained the next floor down the hall lights flashed up, switched on from the upper landing by the woman of the house. Thus aided, he caught another glimpse of his prey midway down the next flight, and checked to take a second shot at him. Again he missed. With but one thought he hurried on, swung round to the head of the stairs, saw his man at the bottom, pulled up to him and—

Beneath him a small rug slipped on polished parquet of the landing. P. Sybarite's heels went up and his head down with a sickening thump. He heard his pistol explode once more

Then, bounding up with uncommon resiliency he saw the street door of the house close behind the fugitive and heard the heavy slam of it.

Above him on the stairs the lady of the house appeared.

"Come back!" she called in a guarded tone. "He's made a clean getaway. Got to hand him that. No use trying to follow. You wouldn't catch up in a thousand years. Come back—d'you hear?—and give me my gun!"

A trifle dashed, P. Sybarite obeyed. "Now then"—she addressed the little man, with a brilliant smile—"now we can powwow. Come into the den," and led the way toward the rear of the house. He trotted submissively in her wake.

Turning into a dark doorway, the woman switched light into an electric dome, illuminating an interior apartment transformed by a wildly original taste in eccentric decoration into a lounging room of such distressful uniqueness that it would have bred unrest in the soul of a lotus eater.

Black, red and gold—lustreless black of coke, lurid crimson of fresh blood, bright, glaring yellow of gold, new mintal—were the predominant notes in a color scheme at once somber and violent.

"Cozy little hole," P. Sybarite couldn't forbear to comment with a shudder as he dropped into a chair in compliance to the woman's gesture.

Offering cigarettes in a golden casket, she selected and lighted one for herself. "My servants are all abed," she said, "I would offer you a drink."

"You have servants in the house, then?"

"Do I look like a woman who does her own housework?"

"You do not," he affirmed politely.

"But can you blame me for wondering where your servants've been through all this racket?"

"They sleep on the top floor behind sound proof doors," his hostess explained complacently, "and have orders to answer only when I ring, even if they should happen to hear anything."

"But there was a burglar," P. Sybarite contended brightly. "You saw him yourself."

"No."

"But—but you did see him—later on the stairs."

Smiling, the woman shook her head. "I saw no burglar, merely a dear friend. In short, if it interests you to know, I saw my husband."

"Madam!" P. Sybarite sat up, with a shocked expression.

"Oh," said the woman lightly, "we're good enough for one another—he and I! He deserved what he got when he married me. But that's not saying I'm content to see him duck what's coming to him for tonight's deviltry. In fact, I mean to get him before he gets me. Are you game to lend me a hand?"

"Really—I'd rather be excused."

"Really," she mocked pleasantly, "you won't be. I'm a gentle creature, but determined. Perhaps you've heard of me—Mrs. Jefferson Inche?"

Decidedly he had, and so had hundreds of New York's newspaper reading population heard of the most dangerous woman in town.

"But—ah—Mr. Inche, I understand, died some years ago."

"So he did."

"Yet you speak of your husband?"

"Of my present husband, whose name I don't wear for reasons of real estate. I took the rotter on because he's rich and will be richer when his father dies. If our marriage comes out prematurely he'll be disinherited, so we've agreed to a sub rosa arrangement, which leaves him ostensibly a marketable bachelor."

"Now, I happen to know a marriage has recently been offered him, through which he would immediately come into control of a big pot of money, and naturally he's strong for it. But I refused his offer of a cool \$300,000 to play the Reno circuit, and so he concluded to sue for a divorce with a revolver, a Maxim silencer and a perfect alibi. Do you follow me?"

"As far as the alibi."

"Oh, that's quite simple! We don't live together, and he's in sure enough society, and I'm not. Tonight the annual Hadley-Owen post-Leuten masquerade's in full swing just around the corner, and Friend Husband's there with the rest of the haughty bunch. Can't you see how easy it would be for him to drop round here between dances, murder his lawful wedded wife and beat it back without his absence being noticed? But I recognized him. I saw his mouth—his mask wouldn't hide that—and knew him instantly."

P. Sybarite was silent. He, too, knew that mouth; its wearer had something to do with Molly Lessing.

"Now that you know the lay of the land, how about helping me out?"

Now, the trail of the man with the twisted mouth promised fair to lead to Molly Lessing. P. Sybarite didn't linger on his decision.

"Short of trying a 'prentice hand at assassination—"

"Don't be an ass! I only want to protect myself. Besides, you can't refuse. Consider how lenient I've been with you. If I wanted to be nasty you'd be on your way now to a cell in the East Fifty-first street station. But I was grateful."

"The saints be praised for that!" exclaimed the little man fervently. "What's it for?"

"For waking me up in time to prevent my murder in my sleep," she returned coolly, "and also for being the spunky little devil you are and chasing off that hound of a husband of mine if it wasn't for you he'd've got us sure, or else," she added, "I'd've got him, which would have been almost as unpleasant—what with being pinched and tried and having juries disagree and getting off at last only on the plea of insanity and all that. Who are you?"

"Michael Monahan, madam. This was the first alternative combination to pop into his optimistic mind."

"Can that," retorted the lady serenely. "Come, what's your real name?"

Taking thought, he saw no great danger in being truthful for once.

Then, bounding up with uncommon resiliency he saw the street door of the house close behind the fugitive and heard the heavy slam of it.

Above him on the stairs the lady of the house appeared.

"Come back!" she called in a guarded tone. "He's made a clean getaway. Got to hand him that. No use trying to follow. You wouldn't catch up in a thousand years. Come back—d'you hear?—and give me my gun!"

A trifle dashed, P. Sybarite obeyed. "Now then"—she addressed the little man, with a brilliant smile—"now we can powwow. Come into the den," and led the way toward the rear of the house. He trotted submissively in her wake.

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"Cozy little hole," P. Sybarite couldn't forbear to comment with a shudder as he dropped into a chair in compliance to the woman's gesture.

Offering cigarettes in a golden casket, she selected and lighted one for herself. "My servants are all abed," she said, "I would offer you a drink."

"You have servants in the house, then?"

"Do I look like a woman who does her own housework?"

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"Madam!" P. Sybarite sat up, with a shocked expression.

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"Really—I'd rather be excused."

"Really," she mocked pleasantly, "you won't be. I'm a gentle creature, but determined. Perhaps you've heard of me—Mrs. Jefferson Inche?"

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"Of my present husband, whose name I don't wear for reasons of real estate. I took the rotter on because he's rich and will be richer when his father dies. If our marriage comes out prematurely he'll be disinherited, so we've agreed to a sub rosa arrangement, which leaves him ostensibly a marketable bachelor."

"Now, I happen to know a marriage has recently been offered him, through which he would immediately come into control of a big pot of money, and naturally he's strong for it. But I refused his offer of a cool \$300,000 to play the Reno circuit, and so he concluded to sue for a divorce with a revolver, a Maxim silencer and a perfect alibi. Do you follow me?"

"As far as the alibi."

"Oh, that's quite simple! We don't live together, and he's in sure enough society, and I'm not. Tonight the annual Hadley-Owen post-Leuten masquerade's in full swing just around the corner, and Friend Husband's there with the rest of the haughty bunch. Can't you see how easy it would be for him to drop round here between dances, murder his lawful wedded wife and beat it back without his absence being noticed? But I recognized him. I saw his mouth—his mask wouldn't hide that—and knew him instantly."

P. Sybarite was silent. He, too, knew that mouth; its wearer had something to do with Molly Lessing.

"Now that you know the lay of the land, how about helping me out?"

Now, the trail of the man with the twisted mouth promised fair to lead to Molly Lessing. P. Sybarite didn't linger on his decision.

"Short of trying a 'prentice hand at assassination—"

"Don't be an ass! I only want to protect myself. Besides, you can't refuse. Consider how lenient I've been with you. If I wanted to be nasty you'd be on your way now to a cell in the East Fifty-first street station. But I was grateful."

"The saints be praised for that!" exclaimed the little man fervently. "What's it for?"

"For waking me up in time to prevent my murder in my sleep," she returned coolly, "and also for being the spunky little devil you are and chasing off that hound of a husband of mine if it wasn't for you he'd've got us sure, or else," she added, "I'd've got him, which would have been almost as unpleasant—what with being pinched and tried and having juries disagree and getting off at last only on the plea of insanity and all that. Who are you?"

"Michael Monahan, madam. This was the first alternative combination to pop into his optimistic mind."

"Can that," retorted the lady serenely. "Come, what's your real name?"

Taking thought, he saw no great danger in being truthful for once.

Then, bounding up with uncommon resiliency he saw the street door of the house close behind the fugitive and heard the heavy slam of it.

Above him on the stairs the lady of the house appeared.

"Come back!" she called in a guarded tone. "He's made a clean getaway. Got to hand him that. No use trying to follow. You wouldn't catch up in a thousand years. Come back—d'you hear?—and give me my gun!"

A trifle dashed, P. Sybarite obeyed. "Now then"—she addressed the little man, with a brilliant smile—"now we can powwow. Come into the den," and led the way toward the rear of the house. He trotted submissively in her wake.

Turning into a dark doorway, the woman switched light into an electric dome, illuminating an interior apartment transformed by a wildly original taste in eccentric decoration into a lounging room of such distressful uniqueness that it would have bred unrest in the soul of a lotus eater.

Black, red and gold—lustreless black of coke, lurid crimson of fresh blood, bright, glaring yellow of gold, new mintal—were the predominant notes in a color scheme at once somber and violent.

"Cozy little hole," P. Sybarite couldn't forbear to comment with a shudder as he dropped into a chair in compliance to the woman's gesture.

Offering cigarettes in a golden casket, she selected and lighted one for herself. "My servants are all abed," she said, "I would offer you a drink."

"You have servants in the house, then?"

"Do I look like a woman who does her own housework?"

"You do not," he affirmed politely.

"But can you blame me for wondering where your servants've been through all this racket?"

"They sleep on the top floor behind sound proof doors," his hostess explained complacently, "and have orders to answer only when I ring, even if they should happen to hear anything."

"But there was a burglar," P. Sybarite contended brightly. "You saw him yourself."

"No."

"But—but you did see him—later on the stairs."

Smiling, the woman shook her head. "I saw no burglar, merely a dear friend. In short, if it interests you to know, I saw my husband."

"Madam!" P. Sybarite sat up, with a shocked expression.

"Oh," said the woman lightly, "we're good enough for one another—he and I! He deserved what he got when he married me. But that's not saying I'm content to see him duck what's coming to him for tonight's deviltry. In fact, I mean to get him before he gets me. Are you game to lend me a hand?"

"Really—I'd rather be excused."

"Really," she mocked pleasantly, "you won't be. I'm a gentle creature, but determined. Perhaps you've heard of me—Mrs. Jefferson Inche?"

Decidedly he had, and so had hundreds of New York's newspaper reading population heard of the most dangerous woman in town.

"But—ah—Mr. Inche, I understand, died some years ago."

"So he did."

"Yet you speak of your husband?"

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