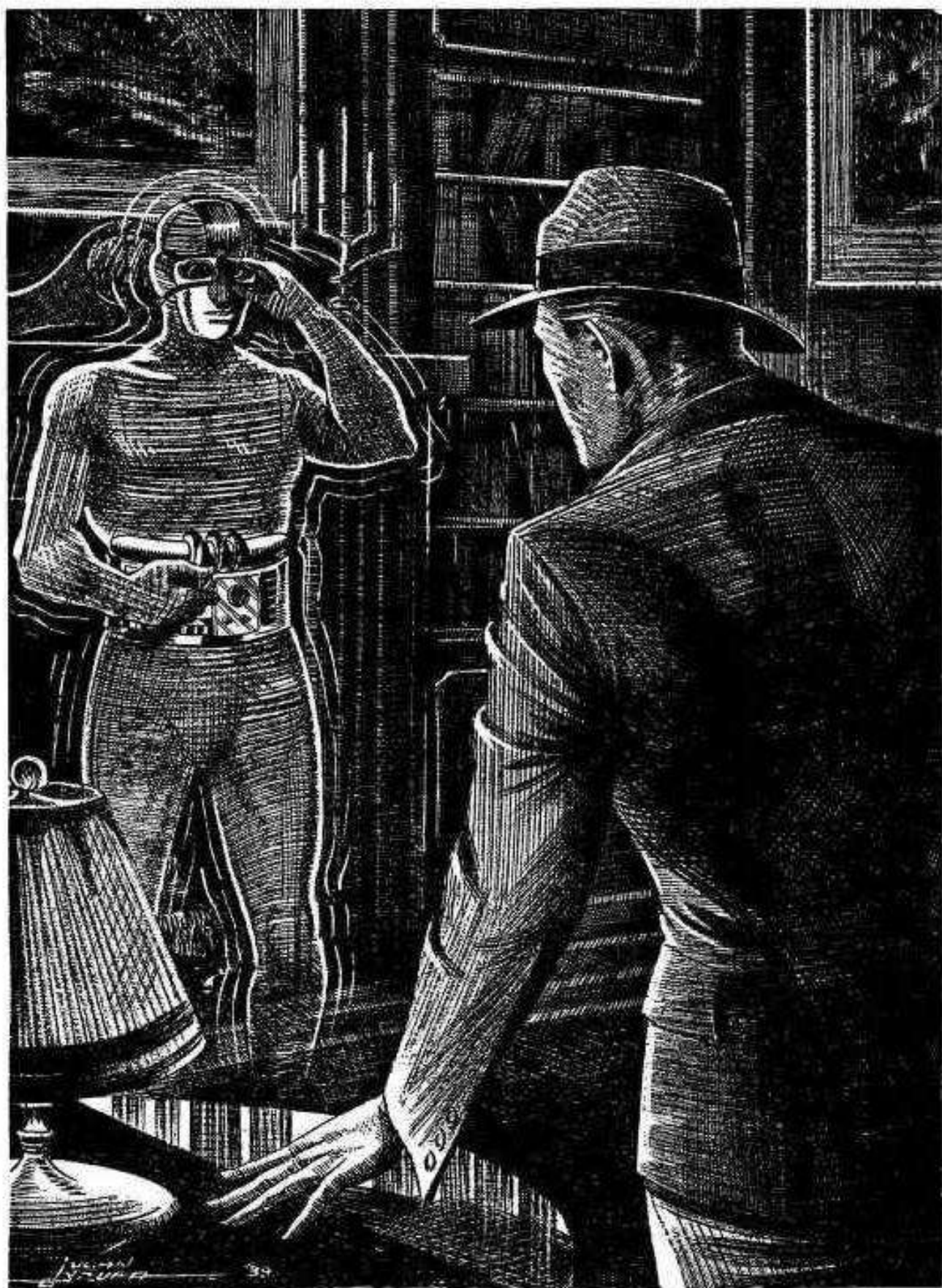






The Invisible Robinhood

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CHAPTER I - Out of Thin Air

THE young couple strolled down the deserted midnight street. The party had been fun and they were still laughing. They had decided to walk a ways, in the cool night air, before taking a subway. They were too absorbed in their conversation to think of danger as they passed the black patch of an unlighted gangway.

“Stick ’em up!” came the command.

Something hard jabbed in the young man’s back. The girl started to give a shriek, but was silenced by the harsh voice of the bandit who had loomed out of the shadows.

“Take it easy, sister. You don’t want your boyfriend shot, do ya? Hand over your stuff. No fuss, now—”

After a hopeless glance up and down the street, the young man gave up his wallet, watch and gold stick pin. The girl was forced to give her pocketbook, earrings and silver bracelets. She fumbled nervously. Impatiently, the gunman clutched at the locket around her neck.

“Oh, not that!” gasped the girl. “I’ve had it all my life—please—”

“Shut up!” growled the bandit. “I take what I want. I’ll have that locket, too—”

“I don’t think you will!” said another voice. The gunman whirled, tensely, ready to shoot. He saw nothing to shoot at. But something like a steel hand grasped his wrist and twisted it sharply. He dropped his gun with a cry of agony.

“Rat! Preying on people like a vulture—” said the ghostly voice again, from empty air.

Something like an iron fist cracked against the bandit’s jaw, snapping his head back. The gunman tried to run away, but an unseen fist struck him in whichever direction he tried. Again and again blows landed till the robber dropped unconscious, with blood streaming from his battered face.

The young couple, arms tightly entwined, had watched with paralyzed amazement. Now they saw an invisible something retrieve their stolen articles from the prone man's pockets. The articles formed themselves into a little heap on the sidewalk.

"There you are!" spoke the disembodied voice. Then they heard soft footfalls retreating down the street. But they saw only the bare sidewalk!

Up in a small office perched like an eyrie on the 44th floor of the office building, "Doc" Hdbson rubbed his hands gleefully. He opened the last envelope, took out the dollar bill enclosed, and tossed the coupon on the floor with hundreds of others.

The discarded coupon read—"Please send me the 56-page booklet on How To Grow New Luxuriant Hair, even though completely bald, with the scalpmassage method, by Dr. Fred Hobson, world-famous authority on this method. I enclose herewith a dollar bill. My name is—"

There were spaces then for name and address, with a heavy-print note at the bottom stating a moneyback-in-five-days guarantee, if not satisfactory.

"The laugh is, we don't even send 'em a booklet!" chortled Hobson, raising his hand to pat his own bald head. "I'd like to use the method myself—if I knew it! Now come on, Kirby, and help me pack these bills together in bundles of a hundred."

"A pleasure, doctor! " grunted Jack Kirby, his partner in their bold swindle. They laid dollar bills carefully on top of one another and pasted strips of paper around bundles of a hundred.

"Eleven hundred and fifty-eight today," declared Doc Hobson when they were done. He locked the door carefully and then opened their safe. They took out the other packets of dollar bills therein and heaped them on the desk.

"Ten grand in ten days!" summarized Hobson.

"We'll take these to the bank now, have them changed to big bills, and skip the city. The Federal agents will be on our trail any day now, for defraud through the mails. Ten grand—not a bad haul! "

Kirby laughed, tossing a pack in the air and catching it. "And all it cost us was two week's rent here, and a couple hundred in advertising. That's what I call profit!"

"What do you say we take a run down to Palm Beach and blow ourselves to a good time—on other people's hard-earned dough?" suggested Doc Hobson.

"Good idea!" exclaimed Kirby, tossing the packet in the air again.

But this time he did not catch it. The packet mysteriously stopped in mid-air and then seemed to float toward the window.

"What the hell!" gasped Kirby, passing a hand in front of his eyes.

Hobson stared, paralyzed at the phenomenon.

At the open window, the strip binding of the packet ripped open and the dollar bills flung themselves out into the wind. Fluttering and twisting, they fell toward the ground, like a shower of green rain.

"The wind is blowing just right," said a voice from in front of the two frozen men. "The money will drift into the tenement district a few blocks away. The people there can use the money more than you two— gentlemen!"

The disembodied voice went on calmly, as Hodson finally made a move.

"Put down that gun, Hobson—excuse me— Dr. Hobson! I have you covered. Besides, you don't know what to shoot at or where."

Another packet rose off the desk, floated to the window and was there dispersed out into the open air.

“Don’t try to stop me,” said the voice. “I’d just as soon shoot you as not. Jack, be a good boy and hand me the packets. Hobson, you help too. In fact you, Hobson—you scatter these bills, as I showed you how.”

The men had to obey, under threat of bullets that might snuff out their cowardly lives. Hobson stood at the window, and as Kirby handed him the packets, he broke the bands and flung the money out.

“Isn’t it fun?” said the unseen voice sweetly. “Look how pretty those bills twinkle as they drift down!”

But Hobson and his partner did not see anything pretty in the sight. They were sick. It wasn’t so much the loss of the ten thousand dollars they had so cleverly swindled. It was the thought of their utter helplessness against this invisible presence that struck cold terror in their dazed minds.

WOODROW JONES stepped forward before the loudspeaker microphone. Adopting the look of a patriarch about to address his flock, he raised his arms. The crowd fell silent, in the rally hall.

“My worthy friends,” he began in his sonorous voice. “I am not here to make an empty speech full of double-edged promises. I’m going to get right down to brass tacks. Our platform guarantees five things. First is the matter of schools, for your children and mine. We’ll build new schools, modern, splendid, worthwhile—”

“But very expensive to the taxpayers!” interrupted a soft voice directly in Woodrow Jones’ right ear.

The politician had choked on his last word, startled. He looked around to see who had spoken, but there was no one nearer than those seated on the platform, twenty feet back of him. What was the matter with him, thinking he was hearing things?

He turned back to the crowd, excused himself for the pause and went on. “Secondly, I have fool-proof plans for reducing taxes, in six months, to two-thirds of their present rate. And—”

“Of course,” said the mocking voice in his ear, “after that the taxes will strangely rise higher—and higher—”

This time Woodrow Jones was definitely taken aback. He had heard the voice as plainly as if someone stood at his very side. Yet the limelighted stage was barren of a soul. Jones’ men in back of him looked at him blankly, wondering why he stared around so queerly. They had obviously heard nothing.

Jones’ amplified voice went on, but it was a little unsure now. He got through the taxation matter and launched into item three on his election platform.

“Extensive park improvement has long been needed in this district. We have a budget for that, which provides for the best of swimming pools, ball grounds, landscaping, and—”

“And which also, Woodrow Jones, provides for a large amount of graft for you and your group!” The voice in his ear again, unmistakable.

Woodrow Jones’ nerves pounded. His fat cheeks quivered. He didn’t want to go on. He almost felt sick. Yet he knew he must go on, or probably lose the election. He went on. His voice had a quaver to it and the audience stared at him closely. Already they sensed the exposed insincerity in his tone. His friends back of him looked worried.

“Item four on our platform—I am going to see to it that each and every destitute family in our district is taken care of properly. Since this matter is close to my heart, I’ve gone to the extent of compiling a list of such needy cases—”

“Could you produce this mythical list, Mr. Jones?” asked the unseen voice back of his head.

Though the evening was cool, Jones took out a handkerchief and mopped his perspiring brow. His speech, as he went on desperately, began to blossom out with “ers” and “ahs” and coughs and hesitations. No one knew how much he was suffering.

“And now the—er—last and perhaps most important part of our platform—reduction of racketeering. I’m going to stamp it out. I—”

“Is that so?” spoke the voice that was so much like his conscience. “Last night you and your colleagues in a secret meeting, promised the racketeering interests that they would not be unduly prosecuted— for a cut! What about that, Mr. Jones?”

Woodrow Jones swayed a little, speechless. To the audience, he seemed to be listening, but there was nothing to listen to! Yet he was listening, to something they couldn’t hear.

“You know you’re a bald-faced hypocrite!” said the plaguing voice at his elbow. “Tissues, lies, rotten deception is what you’ve just passed out. How can you stand there like a noble leader when you’re nothing but a cheap, chiseling grafter? Have you heard of Inferno, Jones? When you get there, you’ll make lying campaign speeches endlessly, with this voice in your ear!”

Woodrow Jones’ face turned putty-colored. His friends leaped forward as he tottered a little. But before they came up, the voice had said: “You won’t run for the election, Jones. Because if you do, this voice of your conscience will haunt you to the insane asylum!”

Jones went temporarily mad. In a screaming voice he renounced his candidacy. Fighting off his cohorts who tried to drag him away, he shrieked out the confession that all he had said was a pack of lies.

CHAPTER II - A Midnight Visitor

LEDA NORRIS awoke in the dead of the night with a queer, stifled feeling that some one had come into her bedroom. She had heard nothing, and could see nothing as she snapped on her bedside lamp, but the sensation did not leave her.

Something—some presence —was in her room!

She tried to convince herself that she was being silly, but terror rose in a swift tide as she seemed to hear footfalls going toward the open window. But not a thing was to be seen that might cause such a sound! She opened her mouth to scream—

“Leda! Leda, please don’t be frightened!” said a voice.

The curtains at the window moved. Something seemed to be going out to the fire escape.

The girl’s terror drained out with a rush. “Lyle!” she called eagerly. “Lyle Trent! Is it you? I can’t see you, but it was your voice—”

The curtains remained rigidly spread for a moment, then rustled back into place. Soft footfalls came toward the bed.

“Yes, Leda, it’s I,” returned the man’s voice, from a spot over her upturned face. “I’m invisible, by a scientific trick. But I’m here, in the flesh. I hadn’t meant you to awake, or talk to you. I just came to see your face, in the moonlight—” The voice faltered.

Leda Norris sat up wonderingly. “Oh, Lyle, it’s so good to hear your voice again! But why are you invisible?” She shuddered a bit. “It’s almost like talking to a ghost!”

“Turn off the light,” suggested the invisible man. “That way you won’t notice so much. I’ll have to remain—invisible.”

The girl obeyed, puzzled. The side of her bed creaked as the unseen man sat down on it.

As Trent remained silent, she spoke again. “Lyle, why haven’t I heard from you for two years? Two long, eternal years! I meant what I said before you left to study in Europe—that I’d wait. I’d wait forever for you, Lyle. I still—”

“No, Leda,” interrupted Trent. “We—we mustn’t talk of those things. I’d hoped you had forgotten.”

“I see.” Leda’s voice broke. “You don’t care for me any more. There’s another woman, Lyle? Don’t be afraid to tell me. After all, two years is a long time—”

“No,” said Trent. “There’s no other woman.” He paused. “I still love you, Leda—and always will.”

“Then why—”

“Let me explain. You remember the accident I had while at Leyden—an explosion in the physics laboratory?”

“Yes, that was the last I heard from you.” Leda caught her breath. “I was so worried for you, Lyle! You didn’t write me much about it. Did you get hurt?”

“Oh, slightly. But that explosion was really the key to my researches. It was caused by the transfer of light-energy through a shield of solid metal. I won’t go into detail, Leda, but when a light photon hits an atom, an electron in the atom jumps to a new orbit. When the electron jumps back, the photon is released. The photon, if given enough stimulus, will jump from atom to atom, and will eventually work its way through solid matter. And almost at its original speed of light.”

“I have a modification of that first crude shield completely surrounding my body. It’s really a flexible, ventilated metal mesh, not very heavy, with interstices so fine that the human eye cannot see them. I can breathe comfortably, perspire normally and move freely. But you can’t see either me or my suit of mesh. The mesh carries a certain fine electric current, from special batteries at my waist, which kicks the light photons along as they arrive. For instance, a light photon striking my back is kicked right through my body to my front, and there radiated— as though I hadn’t been in its way in the first place.

“And that’s the reason I’m invisible, because light goes through me, even more perfectly than light penetrates glass. There was just one other detail. I had to devise a way to see, for the light photons are kicked past the retinas of my eyes too. I wear a pair of intricately designed goggles whose lenses intercept and change ultra-violet rays to visible radiations for my eyes. Things look a bit queer to me, but I see almost as well by that means as normally. But that’s enough explanation of the scientific end of it.”

LEDA had listened attentively. “Lyle, you’re a wonderful scientist,” she breathed. “I always knew you would be. I’m proud of your ability—”

Trent interrupted almost harshly.

“But after I’d perfected this means of invisibility, Leda, it occurred to me what it would mean, if I let it out. I thought of invisible spies! Invisible armies! Invisible deeds of crime!”

He let out his breath sharply.

“I decided my discovery must remain a secret with myself. I didn’t publish my results. I almost came to the point of destroying all my notes and apparatus. Then I thought of another thing. In the right hands, the power of invisibility could be a beneficent thing. And because I couldn’t trust anyone else, with any certainty, I decided to apply its benefits myself.”

Something gripped Leda’s hand suddenly, an invisible hand covered with what felt like smooth, flexible steel.

“Leda, I’m devoting my life to this venture. I’m going out in the world and do what I can for its betterment. I’m going to track down dangerous criminals, break up crime-rings. With my invisibility I’m going to ferret out all that’s rotten and wrong and bring it to light. The dark things can’t stand light.”

He gave a short, earnest laugh. “I’m going to start a one-man reform. I may not get as far as I hope, but I’m going to try my best!”

The girl squeezed the metal hand impulsively, unmindful of the sharp tingle of electricity from the contact.

“Is it any wonder that I loved you from the start, Lyle? I could see into your soul—”

“Leda—” Trent’s voice became solemn and heavy. “Leda, you see now, don’t you? That I must devote all my time and energy, all my life, to this thing. I want you, but it would be unfair to marry you—under these circumstances. My activities will take me all over the country, perhaps over the world. I might not see you for months at a time. It wouldn’t work — it can’t be. You must forget me—”

The girl was sobbing. “I understand,” she choked. “But, Lyle, can’t I see you—just once—it’s been two years—”

“No!” Trent said firmly. “If you did, it would make it harder—for both of us. It’s bad enough that I can see you, look at your eyes, and think of—what might have been.”

A floorboard creaked as he arose.

“I came back today because this is the anniversary of our first meeting. Remember?—the prom—moonlight ride—. I’ll come back once a year, on this day, to talk to you for a while. Goodbye, Leda—darling!”

Footfalls went toward the window, the curtains bent aside, and the unseen man was gone as though he had been no more than the breeze that blew in from the river.

CHAPTER III - Trent Begins His Mission

“COME in, Steve.”

Politician Steve, chewing an unlighted cigar, waited till the secretary had gone out. Then he turned to the fat, thick-lipped man behind the desk.

“Okay. Spill it, Pete,” he said. He glanced once more around the room to make sure they were alone. No one else was in the room besides the two men. He could see that.

Lawyer Pete licked his fat lips and began. “The tenement district in Ward Six has been condemned by the mayor. My client—you know who—doesn’t want those buildings torn down. They have standing value. Suppose we remodeled them instead?”

He smirked knowingly.

“You know, they can be fixed up pretty nice for about a hundred grand. My client can then raise the rent and clear fifty grand in a year. If you can square it with the City Hall, your—er—share would be iofo. What do you say, Steve?”

Jake’s mangled cigar traveled from one corner of his grin to another. “You taking me for a sucker, Pete? Make it 20% and I’ll play ball. I’m risking a lot; finagling the court records and all.”

“All right,” growled the fat lawyer. “It’s a deal. We’ll start remodeling in a month. And of course, we’ll use the very best of materials!” He smirked again.

Steve laughed. “Yeah, sure. I can imagine that gouger, Paulson, giving out any more than—”

“Ssh, damn you!” warned the lawyer. “I’ve told you my client’s name must never be mentioned.”

“So what? There’s nobody in this room except us.”

“No there’s nobody else here,” admitted the lawyer. “But don’t talk in your sleep. If this ever got out, you and me and my client would be sitting on top of a volcano and—”

Steve’s cigar stopped gyrating suddenly and his head came up sharply. His eyes began to pop out as he looked at the secretary’s empty desk across the office.

“Look!” he gasped. “What’s that pencil doing jumping around? It looks like it’s writing—Pete— for God’s sake—”

HORRIFIED, the two men watched the animated pencil. Suddenly it laid itself down. The paper on which it had been writing rose off the desk top. Catlike footfalls approached the

two men across the thick rug. The paper floated along about five feet off the floor. It approached till it dangled before the two men's eyes. They saw neat shorthand script on it.

A voice came out of blank air.

“Gentlemen, how does it feel to be sitting on a volcano? Or how would you like to live in slums, as thousands of poor souls have to, because men like you and your boss Paulson won't tear them down?”

Lawyer Pete was gasping like a fish. Politician Steve was crossing himself superstitiously. Both of them were speechless.

“No, I'm not a ghost,” continued the voice without a visible source. “I'm an invisible man. I'm out to get men like you. I have a complete shorthand record of every word you two connivers spoke.”

The paper flaunted before their blood-drained faces. Then it began to fold neatly across the middle. Unseen fingers tucked it into empty air where a man's pocket might be.

“The mayor will be interested to see this. Pleasant dreams, gentlemen!”

The depressions of footprints in the rug moved toward the door. The door opened and then closed.

IN a rollicking good humor, Ted Marne ambled out of the beer parlor and headed uptown. He might find a few cronies up at the Topsy Tavern. Cross here. No—red light. What the hell, what's a red light? He could dodge the cars. Here we go!

Ted Marne got half way across the busy thoroughfare and then had a sickly feeling that he was trapped. One car passing another was bearing down on him. Damn, if he could only see a little clearer . . . squealing brakes, but too late. The car was going to hit him squarely, probably kill him at that speed—

A firm hand grasped his arm and yanked him back, just in time. Then the same firm grip propelled him forward at a run. Ted Marne stumbled up the curb. But he stumbled now from nervousness. He was cold sober from fright and the narrow escape.

“Thanks, pal,” he said, turning to his rescuer.

But there was no one there. Yet he still felt an iron grip on his arm, steadying him. Marne blinked and experimentally wiggled his arm. The grip remained.

“Are you all right?” whispered a voice in his ear.

Ted Marne was not the scary type. Nor was his mind slow.

“Okay, Houdini,” he said. He spoke out of the corner, of his mouth softly, so that passing people wouldn’t think he was talking to himself. “You do it with mirrors. Now who or what in hell are you?”

“I’m an invisible man.”

“I don’t drink that kind of stuff,” returned Marne. “I’m the best damned reporter in this town and I’ve seen some funny things, but Hannah help me—an invisible man!”

“A reporter? You work for a newspaper? Will you come with me to my rooms, where we can talk privately?”

A HALF hour later Ted Marne sat down and watched the cushion of a stuffed chair across from him sink under an unseen weight. He lit a cigarette and listened while the disembodied voice introduced its owner and briefly explained the method of invisibility.

“So I’m as human as you are, if you had any doubts,” concluded the voice, “but invisible through those scientific means. Do you see?”

“No, I don’t. I can’t see you at all!” Marne grinned impishly. Then he became serious. “Say, that’s quite a thing, Trent. But why are you going to all the trouble of explaining about yourself to me?”

“You’re a reporter. I’m a story to you—”

“Oh no, you aren't!” contradict Marine. “I could a peach of a piece about you, but the editor wouldn't print it. If he did, the readers wouldn't believe it. You're just too damned unbelievable. But thanks anyway.”

The cushion expanded. Footfalls began to sound softly around the room, as though Trent were pacing thoughtfully.

“Marne,” he said finally, “I want you to write me up, as a favor, and get it printed.”

“Okay,” sighed Marne. “You saved my life, I can't say no. But what's your game?”

“I've been thinking of this step for some time. I need publicity to carry on my campaign effectively.”

Marne sat up. “Publicity—campaign? Let's have it. What campaign?”

“My campaign of getting human rats! At first I just prowled the night streets and stopped petty hold ups. Later I gave police the information that broke up a dope ring. And more recently I was behind the indictment of Paulson!”

Marne's mouth was open. “I begin to see now!” he murmured. Trent went on.

But that's just pecking at it. I want to go after bigger and bigger game. And I want all those who indulge in shady and criminal dealings to know that an invisible man can expose their every scheme. To know that I may be at their elbow at any moment—listening, watching! I want to put the fear of me into every guilty heart in the city and country! Can you write me up that way, Marne?”

“Can I?” The reporter let out a whoop. “Boy, let me tell you I can, and will! And I have just the name for you. Hereafter Trent, you'll be known as the Invisible Robinhood!”

CHAPTER IV - “Beware the Invisible Robinhood!”

BIG Fellow Marlin looked out over the midwestern city spread beyond the window of his high quarters in the building he owned. He frowned as a king might frown. He had the right to. He was virtual ruler of the city. He was the power behind the puppet mayor's throne.

"This invisible man stuff!" he grunted.

He went back to his breakfast table and picked up the paper. The headline stared him in the face, though he tried to ignore it.

"Invisible Robinhood Cleans Up Westavia!"

After the gory recital of smashed organization, the writer, one Ted Marne, went off in his usual vein.

"Do you know that the Invisible Robinhood may at this moment be at your side? He comes and goes like the wind, unseen, unheard. He roams the country, searching out crime and racketeering. He may strike anywhere, wherever his hand is needed to help the forces of law, order, decency and honesty. If you have any guilty secret he may know it. If you contemplate any shady undertaking, beware that the Invisible Robinhood does not know of it, to the last rotten detail. He carries on. And remember—he may be at your side at this moment!"

Big Fellow Marlin threw down the paper disgustedly. But he could not prevent his eyes from whisking around the room. Nor could he control the slight chill that ran up his spine at the thought that an invisible man might be watching his every move.

The telephone rang. Marlin picked up the receiver.

"Hello . . . Hello, 21! What's up? . . . What! . . . You mean you won't do it? Why not? . . . The Invisible Ro—nuts! You better do it! . . . Which do you fear most, 21, that publicity myth or me? . . . I'll ruin you! By God, I'll ruin you!"

He was still fuming a few minutes later when a cautious knock on the door heralded the entrance of Dapper Mike.

"Hello, Mike. What's on your mind?"

Mike swallowed. "I was just wondering, Big Fellow. Maybe we'd better sort of lay low with that new gambling joint. They say—" He stopped to swallow again.

"Yes, what?" urged Marlin.

"They say he's in town!"

"You mean that damned Invisible Robinhood?" roared the Big Fellow. "Who says he's in town?"

"I got it from Joe. Joe got it from Barney. Barney says they're talking about it down at headquarters. I'm not taking any chances, Big Fellow." Mike glanced around the room nervously. "No soap on our deal."

Marlin arose with studied calm, and sauntered to his wall-safe, behind a picture of cows in a field. "You know what I have in here, Mike," he said, twirling the combination. "Blackmail papers on you that—"

"Don't open that!" almost screamed the gambler. "He may be in this room now, waiting for that! Didn't you read the Westavia case?—how he let Walser open his private safe, then knocked him out and used the stuff in court? What's in your safe can ruin you and me and half the town. Don't open it!"

Marlin hesitated and then drew back, replacing the picture. His eyes sneaked around the room apprehensively. He flushed at Mike's sober nod.

"Oh, get out, you damned chicken!" Marlin roared. "Get out!"

Later in the day, Marlin was speaking to his two closest henchmen. "21's place gets a nice bomb, see? And Dapper Mike gets a slug in the back. They've both turned yellow. Got it straight, boys?"

"No, we ain't!" said one of the two gunmen flatly. "We're not doing any dirty work right now. At Westavia, he got the whole works, just tracing down a guy who bumped off another guy."

“You see, boss,” said the other gunman, “the Invisible Robinhood’s in town!”

BUT at that moment, Lyle Trent was far from that city, and had no idea of coming to it. He was in one of his several secret quarters, talking with Ted Marne, the only man who knew where those places were.

“Your publicity campaign for me has been a marvelous success, Marne,” said Trent.

“I’ll say it has!” boasted the reporter. “You’ve been Page One for eight months. My best line, the one I get in every time, is—‘Remember, he may be at your side this very minute!’ I’ll bet everyone shivers ten times a day, thinking of that.” He grimaced. “In fact, I’ve got to believing it myself. I shiver sometimes when I know you aren’t around! ”

Trent chuckled. “Guilty conscience, Marne? But I don’t know what I’d do without you. You’ve followed me around the country like a faithful dog, as my personal press agent. You’ve been in danger, too.”

“Don’t I know it!” responded the reporter. “I had to think fast when the boys at Westavia wanted to take me for a ride. It was easy, though. I just looked around a little and said, ‘Okay, Robinhood, give ’em the works!’ You should have seen them duck and run.”

He burst out suddenly.

“But say what do you mean I followed you around? Didn’t I plan the whole thing? Didn’t I insist on jumping from one corner to the other of the country, so as to give people the idea that you were everywhere? Let me tell you, Trent, it’s worked. You’re in every city in the country, at all times, in the minds of all those who have reason to fear your coming. You’ve started reforms in cities you’ve never been within a hundred miles of! ”

“You’re right, Marne,” agreed Trent. “Some little town down south sent me a check for a thousand dollars for driving out their worst local character, a cruel landlord, who claimed a voice in his ear kept haunting him till he fled. Yet I was never there.”

Marne puffed at an expensive cigar contentedly. “And don’t think you’re known just here in America. I’ve been releasing all my accounts to the International Service. Why, I’ll bet there isn’t a soul on God’s green earth that hasn’t heard of the Invisible Robinhood, even the big-wigs in Europe—”

Trent interrupted. “Say that again!”

“I said, ‘even the big-wigs in Europe’; why?”

“What’s doing in Europe at the present?”

“Everything rotten that you can think of,” retorted Marne. “For one thing, there’s a big war brewing. The undeclared war going on at present is just the preliminary for the big bout which may break any minute—”

“War!” ejaculated the bodiless voice of Trent. “The most senseless folly of mankind. Innocent people murdered and impoverished. Suffering, misery, famine—”

“Yeah. But what can you do about it?”

A steel-like hand gripped Marne’s shoulder, half dragging him to his feet. “Start packing, Marne. We’re going to Europe!”

“Aw, Trent, you can’t—”

“Make reservations on the Normandie,” commanded the incisive voice of the unseen man.

Marne shrugged and then grinned. “One or two staterooms, Trent?”

CHAPTER V - The Invisible Robinhood’s Secret

THE Leader condescended to read the newspaper account, suitably translated, that his Foreign Minister handed him with a grim look.

“European War Averted!” boldly stated the headline.

It went on. “The Facts, by Ted Marne. In the past four months, the European situation has changed from a powder-keg ready to blow sky-high to a farce of tangled intrigue. Five Big Powers, ready at any moment for attack or defense, are today ready for neither. Their best and most secret offense plans are the common knowledge of every country’s capital.

“What Power planned to cross what mountain pass to attack what little thorn in its side? Everybody knows! What gigantic army was ready to invade what open territory to get at what enemy for a killing blow, all in secret? Everybody knows! Every man in the street knows all the other great military coups laboriously plotted out by would-be Napoleons.

“And how is this all known? Because the Invisible Robinhood, humanity’s champion, stole all those guarded plans from under their respective noses and mailed printed copies everywhere except Timbuctoo. The Timbuctooans aren’t particularly interested.

“Unseen, silent as a ghost, quick as a tiger, the Invisible Robinhood sees all, hears all, knows all. All you ministers of murder you crack-pot war-lords, you dispensers of cannon fodder—are under his watchful, cunning eye. You can’t make a move he doesn’t know of. You can’t plan a single big drive or secret offensive. His mailed fist is mightier than yours. Remember—he may be at your elbow this very minuter’

“So!” grunted The Leader. “It is this Invisible Robinhood who gave our great triple attack plan, on which our staff worked for three years, to our enemies, and not the ten spies we shot. We must get him out of the way, or we will never be able to make war.”

“That will not be easy,” said the Foreign Minister. “He is as described—unseen, unheard.” He glanced around uneasily, and shivered. “He is everywhere—and nowhere!”

The Leader frowned. “Who is this Ted Marne? Where is he?”

“His only confidant. We have checked his movements.” The Foreign Minister leaned forward. “Perhaps we can strike at the Invisible Robinhood through him. He is in this city at present. We have papers—”

The Minister drew them from his portfolio. “These are facsimiles of our plans, sent to other capitals, signed by him. That makes him a spy! We can shoot Ted Marne! Then we can concentrate on tracking down the Invisible Robinhood.”

“Good!” exclaimed The Leader. “Have Marne arrested and brought here for a quick trial and sentence.”

An hour later, Ted Marne was ushered into The Leader’s presence, between two rows of armed guards. The Leader’s eyes were cold. Marne glared back defiantly.

“You can’t do anything to me!” he said confidently. “I’m an American citizen.”

“You’re a spy!” shot back The Leader. “I have proof here. These papers—”

He reached to the side of his desk, but there was nothing there. The Leader looked puzzled, then dumbfounded, for no one had been in the room, outside of his trusted personal guard, since the Foreign Minister had left.

At that moment loud voices sounded from the corridor and a man burst in. He was the American consul. “I’ve been informed,” he snapped, “that one Ted Marne is unlawfully held here, under suspicion as a spy. Have you any proof? If not, free him immediately.”

“Where can those papers be?” appealed The Leader to his minister. “Who could have taken them?”

“The Invisible Robinhood, of course!” grinned Ted Marne. “Didn’t I tell you he might be at your elbow?”

“Guards, lock the doors!” roared The Leader. “We’ll get him!”

“You won’t lock the doors on us!” stormed the American consul. “Who do you think you are?”

Helplessly, The Leader watched as the consul and Ted Marne stalked out. They walked strangely apart, as though a third, unseen, man were between them.

IT was the day, and all day Leda Norris was in a fever of impatience. Would he keep his promise to come back once a year, on the anniversary of their first meeting?

The hours passed. Night came. Eleven o'clock. Leda was now alone in her room. One minute to twelve. . . .

The curtains rustled at the window. Soft footfalls came toward her.

"Lyle!"

"Leda!"

The voice came from just before her, but when she stretched out her arms, involuntarily, she felt nothing. She heard him step to the side.

"No, Leda. We mustn't. Sit down and I'll talk to you for a while."

The girl obediently sat down, then looked at the opposite chair. "I'm glad you remembered, Lyle. Just to hear your voice—" She broke off and began again. "The Invisible Robinhood! I've read all about you. Every word, over and over. I'm proud of you, Lyle. You're doing more good in this world than any one man before in history!"

"Only because of my power of invisibility," returned Trent. "Any other decent man could do the same. But when I'm gone, my secret goes with me. It's too dangerous, in the wrong hands. The process may never be discovered again. I found it only because of that accident, which gave me the clue—one chance out of a million. So it was a lucky accident—but a cursed one too!"

His voice was surprisingly vehement on the last phrase.

"Why do you say that, Lyle?"

"Because it's kept me from you, Leda!"

"Oh, I see."

Silence fell between them. The silence of two souls who are meant for each other, but are kept apart by the strange workings of destiny.

Leda felt like crying bitterly, as she so often had since that last time, but conquered her emotion bravely, knowing he would want her to.

She stared fixedly at the empty chair in which he sat. "I can almost picture you there, Lyle," she murmured. "Your tall, straight body—grave, boyish face —curly hair— Lyle! I'm never to see you again, in all my life?"

"Never!" said Trent, almost in a croak.

ATER, when Trent returned to his rooms, Marne was waiting for him.

"Say, Trent, I've got a great idea!" the reporter chortled. "I'm going to run your picture! What's publicity without pix? I'm going to run a full rotogravure pic of you, in color—" He laughed ringingly. "Yeah, Trent, all in grey! Can't you just picture people looking at a ten-by-twelve blank space labeled 'The Invisible Robinhood' and—"

Marne choked on his laugh. Somehow he sensed the air of gloom surrounding the other. He had been with him long enough to know his moods by a subtle aura he radiated.

"Sorry, Trent," mumbled Marne. "Seen Leda, eh? You know, that girl really loves you. She's written me a million letters, asking about you, Jelling me to take good care of you. Trent, aren't you making a mistake? Why not marry her? You could take her with you. She'd follow you anywhere—to Mars, even, if you started a reform there. And you'd be happier, too. I know it's none of my business, but—"

"Marne" said the unseen man in a low, harsh voice, "you've never seen me, and you've often wondered why, I know. You know the story of the accident at Leyden that gave me the secret of invisibility. Look!—"

A switch snapped. With startling abruptness, Marne saw a figure before him. It was completely sheathed in what looked like fine chain-mail. The gauntleted hands reached up to unfasten the helmetlike hood. Marne gasped.

The face revealed was hideous. Great burn-scars obliterated what had once been a strong, handsome face. There was little nose or hair. Only purple folds of lumpy scar-tissue.

“Leda does not know,” said Lyle Trent, replacing the hood.

Ted Marne bowed his head in his hands. He felt like crying, but went out and got drunk instead.