

ANTHONY SKENE



MONSIEUR
ZENITH
THE ALBINO

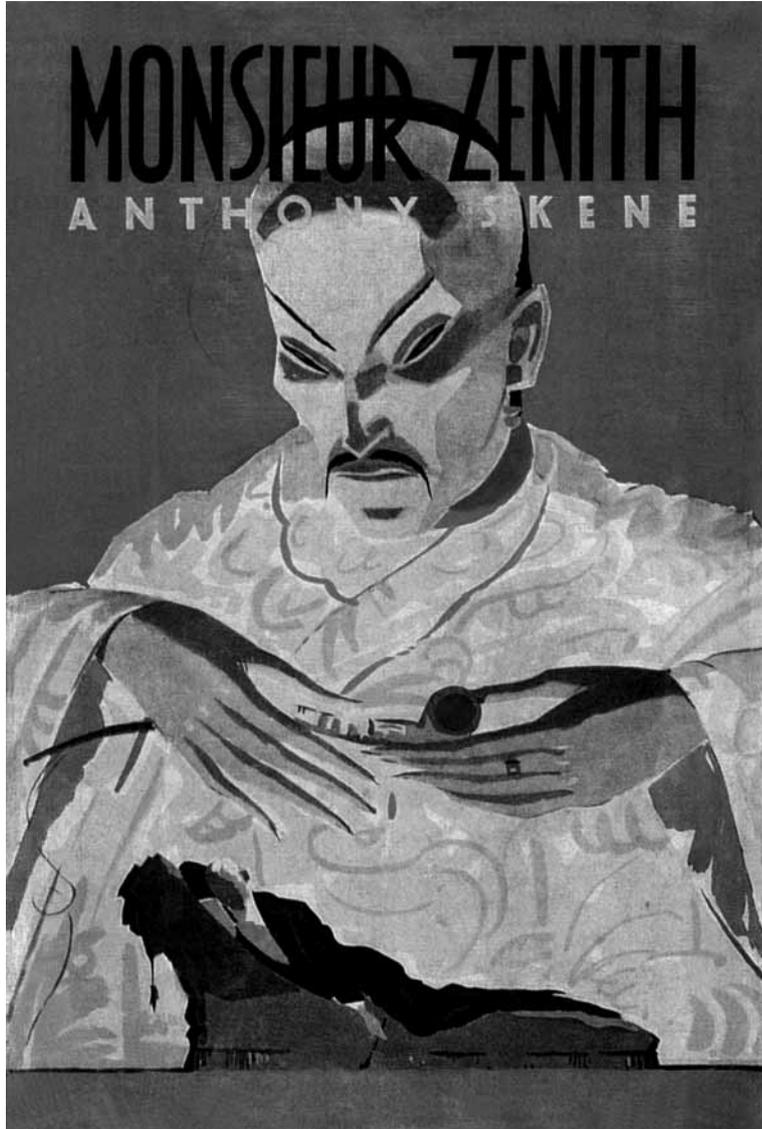


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SAMPLE CHAPTER—HOME USE ONLY

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Chapter 5



Chapter One



CROOKED JUSTICE

A ROOM garnished with curtains of black velvet, a low divan covered by an outflung drape of the same material, and, on the divan, in an abandon apparently deeper than that of sleep, the strange creature who calls himself Monsieur Zenith.

He is dressed in evening clothes with a velvet jacket. His sensitive yet powerful hands hang limp, one over the other. His head has rolled from the wooden horse, which, after the fashion of Chinese women, he has been using as a pillow, and lolls on the outward slope of the divan.

His skin, his lashes, the crisp curling hair of his head, are white as Cararra marble. Nowhere: neither in the room, nor in the sleeping figure, is there the least trace of any colour, until at length Monsieur Zenith stirs and opens his eyes. Beneath their fringe of stone-white lashes the irises glitter like rubies. The man is an albino!

He strikes his palms together, and instantly, from between the curtains which everywhere cover the walls, appears his Japanese servant.

“Excellency?”

“I wish to smoke.”

The voice is not the least astonishing attribute of this strange creature. It reveals nothing of the characteristic lassitude of those cursed by albinism, but is, on the contrary, unusually rich and powerful.

“Shi me up three pipes,” he adds, “big ones. I need to think,” and the servant, squatting on the floor over the peanut oil saturated wick of a brass lamp, and with a yenhok held to the smoky flame, manipulates a tiny bead of opium until it swells to the size of an enormous cherry. The acrid smell of the drug hangs with the smoke of the lamp in the middle air of the shuttered room. The crimson-irised eyes of Monsieur Zenith are reflective, brooding.

He speaks again when the ivory mouth-piece of the first pipe is between his teeth.

“There is a man named Adler, Oyani, who is, like myself, a thief; he is clumsy but not unsuccessful in his calling. So far, I have no quarrel with him. But deliberately, deliberately, I say, he has given to his thieving the appearance of being my own. I am ‘wanted’ for his crimes.”

Zenith’s sentences have been broken by long, grateful inhalations of smoke from his first pipe, and now indolently he extends his hand for another.

“For the guilt I care nothing, but for the clumsiness—well, that is different. I would not have supposed that I, Zenith the Albino, have so far lost my cunning as to be capable of bungling such as his. He must be punished, Oyani.”

Again the shapely white hand, reaching for a pipe, and then, “It has occurred to me”—the beautiful voice is now slurred in the heaviness of coming sleep—“that much of Adler’s loot is of a kind which he would find it difficult to negotiate. It may still be in his possession; in which case—”

The man’s words come slowly now, draggingly, reluctantly, as if each must be the last.

“As liability for his exploits is foisted upon me, it is only justice, less than justice, Oyani, that I should take the pro-

ceeds. While I sleep you will discover for me where this Adler lives. Go to Smith's Kitchen, go to the fence Chadwick, go to those who know me: what I am; tell them that I require his address. Then, tonight, if it pleases me, I will take what is mine. It promises to be amusing . . . amusing . . .”



Baxendale Mansions is in Fulham. At midnight Monsieur Zenith descended from his car outside the mansions and walked towards the entrance marked Nos 16-36.

He was, as always at this hour, in full evening dress. With tails and white waistcoat he wore a silk hat and patent shoes; around his wide shoulders was fastened a cape, silk-lined and voluminous. A trifle theatrical, perhaps, this cape; but in keeping with the terrific *elan* of the wearer. He was wanted for a dozen crimes; the description of his unmistakable personality was familiar to every policeman in London; he was known as a nightbird, and the elegance of his evening gear was distinctive; yet he did not even glance around him as he crossed the pavement. Seldom was there recklessness surpassing his.

Flat No 20 was at the top of the building. Zenith pressed the doorbell but there was no reply, no sound of movement behind the oaken door. He shrugged and looked around him. Above was a trapdoor in the ceiling. By standing upon the slippery handrail of the balustrade which edged the deep well of the staircase, he could reach the trap with his fingers, and succeeded, after a minute or two, in raising the wooden flap. It was on a balance weight and moved easily. Zenith swung once from the rim of the trap, then raised himself by a twist of his strong shoulders and got a foot beside his hands.

Out on the flat it was very cold. He closed the trap and crossed to the rear of the building. Then he bent down, grasped the edge of a gutter and lowered himself.

He was well aware that gutters are not constructed to

bear the weight of a man, and that, if this one came away under the strain which he was putting upon it, he would go down to almost certain death; but such considerations had no influence upon his conduct. What was life to him, he might have asked, that he should fear to lose it?

He worked sideways and got his feet upon a sill. It belonged to a closed and darkened window. Supporting himself by pressing his fingers against the reveals, Zenith drove his knee through the glass where he knew that the fastener would be, stabbed his hand through and opened the casement in one smooth movement.

He has moved quickly because it is his habit to move quickly, and not because he foresees any necessity to do so. The fact, however, makes almost the difference between life and death; for, as he makes his way in at the window, the door opposite to him is thrown open, light is switched on, and a man in shirt sleeves moves with a growl of rage to meet him.

Zenith has swung in at the window and drops upon the balls of his feet. His cape has gathered itself behind his shoulders, leaving his arms free. Two rapid strides and he is within hitting distance of the other. The man in shirt sleeves begins a powerful right-handed blow. He begins it: no more than that. Zenith's quickness is the quickness of a coiled spring. In striking he expresses himself. In the vindictive forcefulness of his riposte is the abnormal reacting against the instinctive hatred of the herd. The big knuckles of his right fist crack against the point of the other's jaw. Click! Bone striking bone.

The man in shirt sleeves bunches, then turns over in the air, falls with his neck doubled limply beneath him. Zenith looks at his own hands with disgust, wipes them upon his handkerchief, and then, stepping over the outflung arm of the insensible man upon the floor, passes through the doorway into the passage beyond.

Several doors lead out of it. One is open and the room to which it belongs is lighted. In the middle of the floor, and vis-

ible from the open doorway, is a table bearing *two* glasses. The significance of the two glasses is appreciated instantly by Zenith, who has survived so incredibly long as a lone wolf only because of his ability to solve such problems with speed and accuracy. Two men. He has seen one of them: where is the other? The answer is easy. As he enters the room he gives the door the weight of his shoulder. Its woodwork collides with the head of the man who is standing behind it.

The man staggers clear. He is dazed by the impact, but he has not relinquished his grasp of a heavy automatic pistol. Still holding the weapon against his side, he flexes his wrist so as to raise the muzzle.

“Got you, you—” He checks in astonishment. “Hell, if it ain’t Zenith!”

The Albino is an almost legendary figure in the underworld, and this tribute may not be disagreeable to him. He frowns angrily, however, at the form of address which the other has used.

“*Monsieur* Zenith,” he insists.

This second man, like the first, is in shirt sleeves. He is a blond brute, with a face broader than it is long. He grins offensively at Zenith’s correction.

“You talk very big for a man who’s goin’ to get the works. They told me you talked big, but you can’t talk back to a bullet.”

“You are thinking of pulling the trigger?”

“You bet I am. And I can get away with it too. Self-defence. You force your way in here—”

Zenith has removed his hat and is inspecting the crown where it has been spotted by rain. He appears more interested in his hat than in the other’s pistol.

“No,” he murmurs, “no, it would not do. You’d have the police in here, and that would not suit you at all.”

“Why not? I’m not Adler. The cops have got nothing on me.”

“Your companion then is Adler. I had supposed—”

“Not him. Adler’s out on a job. And he’ll be as pleased—”

In the act of replacing his hat Zenith momentarily covered his face, concealing the deflection of his glance to the pistol-hand of the other. In that moment he threw himself backwards, kicking at the pistol and rolling so as to finish upon fingers and toes like a sprinter ready for the word. He was so little out of control that he arose to catch the weapon as it flew through the air and to swing it by the barrel when the blond man lurched forward.

Thud! The man fell to his knees. From the broken skin upon his brow descended a trickle of blood.

Zenith looked down in contempt.

"I came here," he said, thinking aloud, "to take the hot ice from Adler, but that's not amusing in his absence. Where is he?"

His voice penetrated to the blond man's bemused brain.

"I told you. He's on a job."

"What job? Where?"

"I don't know."

"I could get no thrill out of killing you."

"As God's my judge—"

The Albino's hand tightened: the pistol which he held came up to horizontal. "Very well," he murmured in resignation.

"He's at Fourth Avenue, off Baker Street," said the blond man, quickly. "Sally Mynor's place." His blood-shot eyes goggled at the aperture in the end of the barrel. "You don't have to believe me. Look on the table. Important paper he left behind him. It's all doped out there. I wouldn't lie to you. As God's my—"

Zenith picked up a folded sheet of foolscap from the table, gave it a brief glance, then turned towards the door.

"H'm. I'll see that he gets it."

He hardly looked at the blond man as he went out.



Monsieur Zenith left his car at a point in Fourth Avenue only a short distance from the house where Sally Mynor

lived. Then, without hesitation, he walked to her gate and entered.

He knew better than to move stealthily. The opium was still in his brain, but it had the curious effect of making him normal. And it was normal to him to be utterly reckless. He had come there to see Adler: the fact that Adler was engaged upon a task requiring solitude and dispatch gave the intention piquancy. Such crack-brained behaviour was characteristic of the Albino. He had always behaved thus, would always so behave.

Sally Mynor's house was important, although not of great size. It stood in a wide garden in a place where land was expensive.

On the way thither Zenith had scrutinised Adler's notes, and, by crossing to the side of the house, was able to look upward to the window by which the burglar had planned to enter. It was at the second floor level and slightly open. Probably Adler was still there. "Excellent," he told himself.

At the same time his respect for Adler increased. The high stone wall, with its recessed joints, was not unclimbable, but it was difficult. Presumably Adler had scaled it, however, and he prepared to follow. The wall belonged to a projecting wing of the building and was in sight of a frequented road. To climb it would occupy some time, fifteen minutes or more, and meanwhile people would pass. It was, however, black with dirt, and a climber in dark clothes would be almost invisible against it. Zenith approached and made the discovery that Adler's daring had been less than he supposed. A rope hung from the window.

He grasped the rope and went up hand over hand, rolling in at the partially opened window and finding himself behind curtains. Beyond the curtains was a staircase.

The house was silent and the staircase only dimly lighted from the hall below. Sally Mynor was notoriously a night bird. She would hardly yet be home after the theatre. Nevertheless the Albino moved rapidly. At any moment somebody might notice the cold from the open window and approach to close

it. When that happened he wanted to be elsewhere.

Adler's plan had been detailed, and Zenith knew exactly where to find him. He passed swiftly but silently across the landing and into a passage; opened a bedroom door.

There had been a light in the room but it was extinguished the moment that he entered. He said, "Put on the torch again, Adler. Let us see each other."

A beam of white light focussed upon his face. It accentuated the blanched pallor of his skin, flashed in his crimson eyes.

From the darkness behind the light came astonished recognition: "Zenith!"

Seconds passed.

"You are wondering," said Zenith, "whether, if you aimed a blow at me with the jemmy which you have in your hand, my fall would be heard. It would not. *Your* fall would be heard."

"What do you want?" breathed Adler.

"I want tribute from you. You are giving to your clumsy depredations the appearance of being my own. For that you must pay."

"Speak more quietly, you fool."

"*You call me* a fool!"

"I am sorry. I apologise." Adler was very humble. Anything to get rid of this lunatic who was risking discovery with every word. "You go," he went on, "and I'll see you later, anywhere. I'm your friend, I—"

"My friend!" Zenith did not appear able to believe his ears. "Did you call yourself my friend? I do not have friends!"

He had spoken in his natural voice, deep and resonant; and, in an effort to secure his silence, the panic-stricken Adler aimed a blow at his head.

"Ah, that is better." Zenith had stepped backwards. "That is a language which I understand."

Adler struck again, and Zenith steadied him with a flush left on the mouth. "I use it myself." He brought his right across, crack! against the side of Adler's jaw. Adler's torch

— Crooked Justice —

and jemmy clattered to the floor; he brought a chair over as he fell.

There was no time to escape from the room. The pelmet curtains, just visible in the faint light from the windows, were of heavy velvet. Zenith slid into hiding behind them.

