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DIME



MYSTERY

JAN

MAGAZINE

DETECTIVE NOVELETTES OF WEIRD MYSTERY

THE RAG-DOLL KILLER

by EDITH & EJLER JACOBSON

THE CASE OF THE FROZEN CORPSES

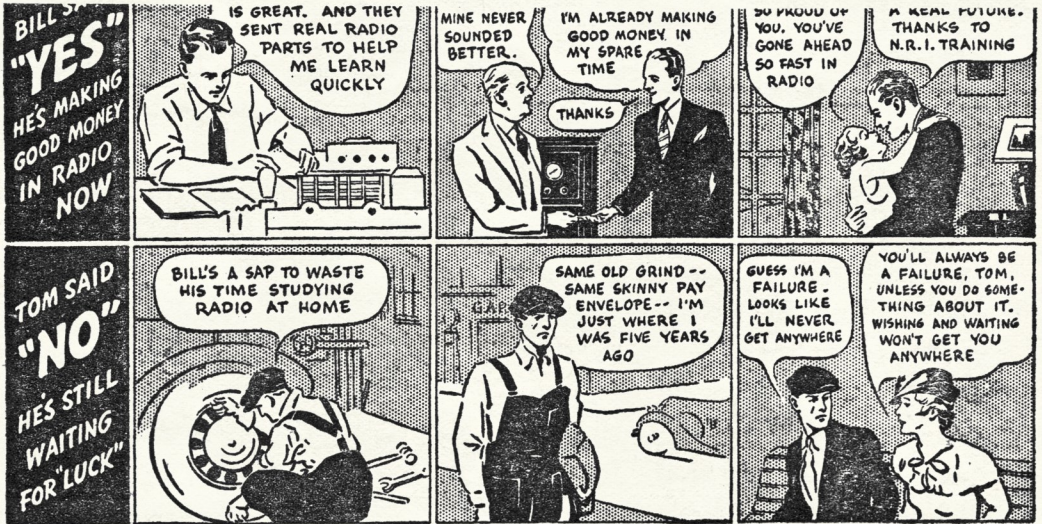
by RAY CUMMINGS



**THE
CHIMES
OF
DEATH**

by
**RUSSELL
GRAY**

Missing Page



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10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE



Volume Nineteen

January, 1939

Number Two

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All stories in magazines bearing this seal are written especially for this publisher and have never before been printed in any form!

FULL-LENGTH NOVEL OF BIZARRE MYSTERY

- Plague of Invisible Flame**.....G. T. Fleming-Roberts 7
 The eerie glare from the burning mines lit the sordid streets of Carbonville, while in their shacks the miners were dying inch by inch as the fantastic, unquenchable fire crept relentlessly through their veins! . . .

FOUR NOVELETTES OF WEIRD CRIME-ADVENTURE

- The Rag Doll Killer**.....Edith and Ejler Jacobson 26
 Nat Perry knew that he was facing almost certain death, but he knew also that only he could bring to an end the chain of fiendish murders that brought terror to the hearts of wealthy New Yorkers—and that reached out to fell the girl he was not allowed to love! . . .

- The Case of the Frozen Corpses**.....Ray Cummings 52
 Dot and I had tackled many puzzling and bizarre problems in our time, but nothing could equal the weird horror that began when Ralph Houghton suddenly became a blackened, frozen corpse before our very eyes! . . .

- Entertainment for the Dying**.....Harrison Storm 70
 One moment Calvin Kane heard the soft music from the radio in the apartment next door—then ghastly silence told Kane that the mad murderer had struck again; swiftly, soundlessly, without a trace! . . .

- The Chimes of Death**.....Russell Gray 90
 Every hour as the big chimes sounded, some respectable citizen of Mountain City turned on his loved ones like a ravenous beast, aflame with the lust to kill! . . .

TWO SHORT STORIES OF FANTASTIC MENACE

- The Spider's Parlor**.....Arthur Leo Zagat 43
 Fear ran like wildfire through the slums of the great city—for the gruesome corpse was a signal that the master of crime was again at work! . . .

- Murder at the Miracle Club**.....Donald G. Cormack 84
 Not even the sanctity of Manhattan's swank upper crust is safe, when a super-criminal brain decides to prey on debutantes! . . .

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- The March of Mystery**The Editors 4
The River Styx.....A Department 107

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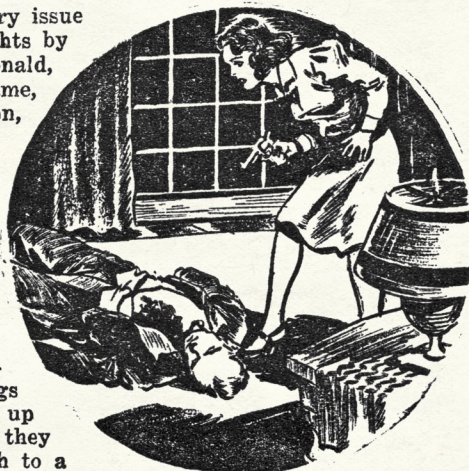
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DETECTIVE TALES

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The night that Geoffrey Lasiter, III, scion of a crumbled aristocracy, sat studying in his huge library, the last thing he expected to see was a dainty feminine hand unfastening his casement windows. But that is what he saw, and because he was as chivalrous as his buccaneering great-grandfather, he let that hand lead him through a trail of blood to save an old man from using half a million dollars to endow a *Murder Sanatorium!* A human, moving mystery novel by Edward S. Williams. . . . Paul Ernst tells us a vivid, thrilling story about a certain party who neatly lined up about \$20,000,000 of old Aunt Hepsiah's fabulous fortune—but *The Coffin Came Home!* . . . Fred MacIsaac scores again with that very human and very canny amateur investigator, Reggie Royce. This time Reggie fast-talks a gal into wearing Death's diamonds—so he can provide *A Corpse For Cinderella!*

The all-star program in the January issue also includes highlights and spotlights by such favorites as George A. McDonald, Ray Cummings, Wyatt Blassingame, Denslow M. Dade, R. W. Thompson, and others! . . .



ERLE STANLEY GARDNER returns with another smashing Paul Pry novelette—*It's the McCoy*. Pry, that suave fly in the ointment of the underworld and his one-armed camera-eye sidekick, Mugs Magoo, come as close to pushing up daisies in this thrilling yarn as they ever have. Watch Mugs play rajah to a harem of blond houris while Paul drums his way out of trouble and into the dough—and a gang of sadder but wiser crooks win nothing but weep stakes when they try to make off with a suitcase full of hot ice. And Johnny Dalmas, RAYMOND CHANDLER'S none-such of private dicks, solves the riddle of *The Lady in the Lake* in a complete, novel-length triple-homicide mystery. It all began when Violets M'Gee, homicide dick in the sheriff's office, foisted a cosmetic manufacturer with wife-trouble on Dalmas. At first it looked like just another one of those things, but the keyhole-peeping angle wasn't half of it. Too many corpses in the wrong places added up to headline proportions overnight and Dalmas was behind the eight-ball from the start, till he decided to engage in a little murder magic on his own hook. Then FREDERICK C. DAVIS brings back Keyhole Kerry, radio's ace crime reporter in another action-packed mystery. Plus *The Judas Touch* an Acme Insurance Dick Novelette by JAN DANA, and other stories and features.

The January issue will be on
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THE MARCH OF MYSTERY

SEVERAL months ago, in the September issue of *Dime Mystery* to be exact, we made the announcement that we were going to offer a new type of story to our readers—and immediately many of our friends and associates told us that we were making a grave mistake. We were inviting trouble, they said, poking our fingers into the old buzz-saw. For, *Dime Mystery* was already a trail-blazer in its field: Why should we attempt to improve something that was already well received?

Our answer to that was simple and direct. We informed our critics that we had no mind to sit around on our laurels. We did not plan to let well enough alone. For surely, no magazine ever reached a state of permanency without finding improvement—even in "the best!"

At last the October issue reached the reading public, and in it were four examples of our new type of crime-mystery story—and from all indications we were justified in what others termed a hazardous departure. After all, what we sought to do was not to scrap the style of reading which had made *Dime Mystery*, but, rather, to combine the principal elements of the old with the freshness and novelty of the new! When the November and December issue came out we were still more strongly convinced that we had not made a mistake; and with each issue, our responses told us that our authors were perfecting more and more, the new style of fiction we sought. And, in a nutshell, this is what we told our authors: "We want stories with all the eerie menace and terrifying atmosphere which *Dime Mystery* readers expect, but which have in addition, the speed, dramatic punch, plot complication and breathless tempo of the best detective mysteries ever written!" That was a big order.

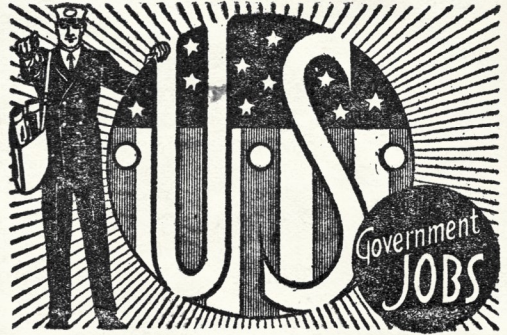
The March of Mystery

It is our contention that the stories in this issue back up our plan. G. T. Fleming-Roberts' novel, *Plague of Invisible Flame*, is about a young man untrained in crime fighting. He pits his strength, alone, against a strong, nameless menace which preys upon the innocent—and which seems traceable to the father of the very girls he seeks to save! This novel is packed with the old style fear and personalized menace

Edith and Ejler Jacobson give us *The Rag Doll Killer*, a novelette which encompasses all phases of detective fiction. There is a monster which would have been welcomed in the pages of *Dime Mystery* of 1935. Yet he is controlled—and caught—by men whose brains and resources are comparable to the most highly developed on both sides of the law today!

The Case of the Frozen Corpses exemplifies the new type novelette. Roberts & Co., a unique detective agency composed of a young investigator and his courageous sister, fight bizarre, highly scientific crime with methods always a little shrewder and more scientific than the criminals on whom they wage a constant and colorful warfare. At the same time, the tactics employed by the forces behind the string of inexplicable murders are so drastic, so cruel, that young Roberts and his sister know that they, too, are more than likely to end up as frozen corpses! . . . *Murder At the Miracle Club*, by Donald G. Cormack, is a short crime story combining the new, fantastic element, together with the eerie treatment of earlier issues. *Entertainment for the Dying*, a novelette by Harrison Storm, embodies the baffling element of super-criminal minds, pitted against a very human detective whose unfortunate affliction marks him as different from the ordinary man. Yet his courage and determination carry him through to the answer of an amazing series of crimes!

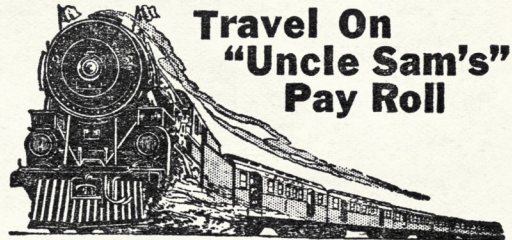
Do you see what we mean? *Dime Mystery*, like time itself, marches on!



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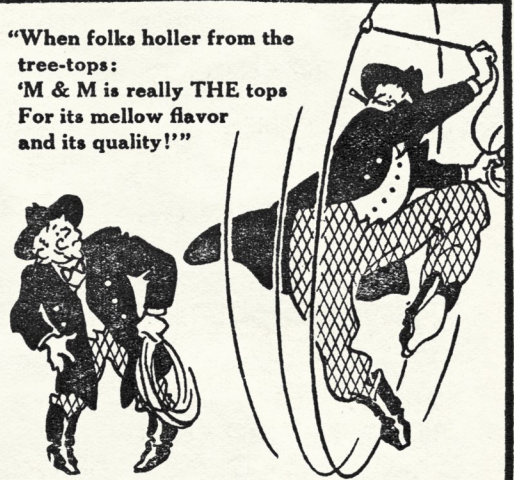
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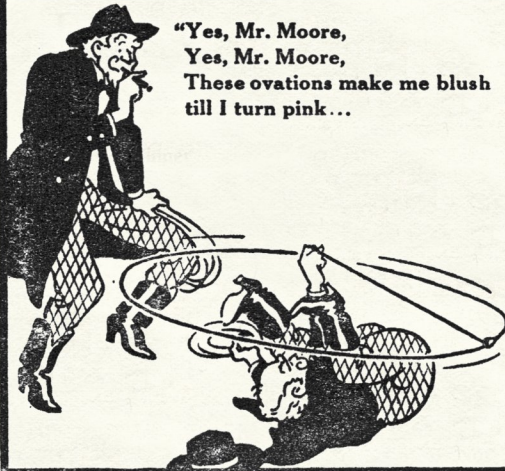
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PLAGUE OF INVISIBLE FLAME

By G. T. Fleming-Roberts

Joel Murdock came to Carbonville to take lovely Joan Leach for his bride. But he found there only murder and hate, for the townspeople blamed Joan's father for the horrible disease which burned in their veins and was slowly turning their flesh into ashes! . . .

It was the same murderous figure. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Dead Little Town

A Full-Length Novel of
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JUDGING by his size, you would guess the kid to be about nine years old, but there was an age of worry on his grimy face. He was sitting on the stone rail of a culvert, pulling a sickly pink-gray fish worm through his fingers. He looked up through matted yel-

low hair and gave big Joel Murdock an old man's glower.

"Whatcha want, mister?"

Joel Murdock's freckled hands released their grip on the steering wheel. His fingers were stiff because of the constant grip they had maintained for many a mile of tortuous, rutted road. It wasn't the sort of a reception Joel Murdock usually got from kids. His coarse-featured, freckled, sappy-mouthed face generally made kids smile.

"Where's Carbonville from here, sonny?" he asked.

The kid shot a glance over one skinny shoulder that showed through the rip in a faded blue shirt. The glance took in a tar-paper covered shack behind him and three or four other buildings staggered among little hills. It was a gloomy landscape from anybody's point of view. Black, ever-changing clouds boiled over the horizon as though there was the end of the earth and the beginning of hell. The sun was obscured, obliterated completely as though its fire was eternally quenched. The face of the earth was like the face of the kid—dirty.

"This here's it," said the kid. He tied the worm in a knot. It squirmed its feeble protest. He tossed it down on the gravel that speckled the wet clay on top of the culvert.

"Well, can you tell me how to get to the Leach house?" Joel Murdock asked.

It was oppressively hot in spite of the sunless sky. The steamy air was laden with the smell of coal smoke, yet there were no factories and no chimneys. There was nothing to be seen except the squalid black huts, the pitifully stunted hills, the miserable, old-faced kid, the turbulent blackness of the sky.

"Leach house?" the boy repeated. And then, unaccountably, he shuddered. "You goin' there, mister?"

"Sure," Joel Murdock said. "Why not?"

The boy didn't answer. He watched his bare toes curl. His lips pouted. Then he raised his eyes to meet Joel's. "I wouldn't tell a dog how to get to Leach house." He slid off the culvert, showed Joel the patches in the seat of his pants, ambled toward the tar-paper shack.

"Hey!" Murdock called. But the kid didn't turn around. Murdock got out of his car, rounded the culvert into the weed-infested piece of land that fronted the shanty. He got to the front door of the shanty at about the same time the kid did. The kid turned around, looked at Murdock, then looked back at the door. The kid looked scared.

"Whatcha want, mister?" he almost whimpered.

"I've got to find the way to the Leach house," Murdock insisted. "If you won't tell me, I'll have to ask somebody else. What's the matter in this village? Everybody acts half dead. Anybody home?"

"Pa," said the kid. "Pa's home. Ma's in there. Ma's dead." The kid swallowed hard. "Been dead since last night. We're waitin' for Doc Martin. Only you can't trust Doc Martin, because he's a friend of Leach."

The door of the shanty swung open and the kid cowered before the man who stood on the threshold. The man was tall. There had been power in his stooped shoulders and his broad, bowed back. Like the kid, his face had aged early and his wrinkles were harsh lines etched with coal dust. He squinted against the light, for the interior of the shanty was as dark as the drift mouth of the neighboring mine in which he worked. His gnarled left hand clenched on the end of a knotted staff which aided him as he hobbled toward the boy. The toe of one of his shoes was creased upward, empty looking.

"Pa," whimpered the boy. "Pa, I never ast him to come. I never ast him."

"Told you not to let strangers come

snoopin' around here, didn't I?" The man stuck out his foot and tripped the kid as the kid would have run beyond the reach of the gnarled staff. The man raised the staff clumsily in his left hand. He kept his right hand in his pocket. He would have struck the boy in blind, unreasoning rage had not Joel Murdock stepped in front of him seized the up-raised arm.

"If you're going to hit anybody," Murdock said softly, "better hit me. But," he added as rage dwindled in the coal miner's eyes, "I guess you're not going to hit anybody."

THE miner jerked his head toward the road. "You git!" he said between clenched teeth. "Got no respect for the dead? Can't you leave a man be with his wife dead and when he's—" he stopped. He eyes fidgeted. He wet his lips with his tongue. "You a friend of Alwin Leach?"

Joel Murdock nodded. He wasn't exactly a friend. He was going to marry Alwin Leach's daughter. From what he'd seen of Alwin Leach, he didn't think many people called him friend. Leach owned the three small mines that were the livelihood of all Carbonville, and Leach was tyrannical in the ownership of anything.

The miner flushed darkly under his grimy skin. His staff raised threateningly. "Then you git. Git outa here, damn you!" He stumped forward and Joel Murdock backed a little. Murdock didn't want to tangle with the man. Murdock had spent three years in professional boxing before Joan Leach had persuaded him to take up the more genteel business of law practice. So he didn't want to take a swing at the old man. He kept backing, adroitly ducking the blows of the stick until the miner tripped on a tangle of weed and lost his balance. Then, to prevent himself from falling, the miner pulled his right from his pocket, regained

his balance. And Murdock stopped backing.

Mouth wide open, Murdock's blue eyes stared at the man's hand. It was scarcely recognizable as such. It looked like the gnarled root of a tree. But it was black, charred as though by a blow torch.

"You git!" roared the man. "Git to hell!" He raised that burned, black fist, shook it at Murdock. And then his own eyes saw what he had keep hidden from them—his own blackened fist. Color fled from his face. The myriads of black wrinkles on his face looked like intricate tracery on old parchment. His knees sagged. He dropped to the ground. He stared in horror at his hand, beat it against the earth. His little finger, sticking out from the heat-withered knot of his fist, crumbled like charcoal. His snarling mouth widened, vented a cackling cry of anguish.

"Die, damn you, die!" he shouted. "I wanta die all at once. Not like this. Not burn to death inch by inch!" Then his lips shut in a determined line.

For a moment, Joel Murdock looked at the kneeling man half pitying and half reproaching him. The dirty-faced kid crouched on the cabin doorstep, dry-eyed, but looking as though he could have burst into tears without much provocation. These poor devils needed help, yet would they take it if he offered it to them? And after he had offered, what could he do? What the devil did the miner mean by burning inch by inch? Perhaps his mind was slightly disordered by some accident which had befallen him. Murdock remembered that one of the Leach mines had caught fire and that a score of miners had been entrapped within a burning tomb.

He was on the point of questioning the man further, when the slam of a car door caused him to turn around. A man had alighted from a small coupe and was staggering to the miner's shanty. He carried

what appeared to be a physician's satchel in one hand. His face had the petulant, puffy appearance of the face of a child who had slept too long. And there was not the slightest doubt but what he was as drunk as a man can be and still move under his own power.

"Pa," the kid shrilled, "here comes Doc Martin."

The miner looked up, saw the staggering man, scrambled to his feet where he stood with head downcast and his burned hand behind him.

The doctor took a bear-eyed look at Murdock and grinned. "Nice mornin'", he said. It was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon. Joel Murdock grunted disgustedly and started back for the road.

JOEL MURDOCK drove through the 'apparently deserted village of miners' shanties. Beyond the little hills that offered some shelter to the flimsy structures, was land that was flat and marshy, tented by the somber tarpaulin of the smoky sky. He knew, as darkness came, that it would not be real darkness; for the fire of the burning mine was yet unquenched, and through the clouds of smoke, lurid flames, like Chinese celestial dragons, mounted with swift, serpentine motion.

The fire that gutted the mine shafts beneath the earth must have warmed the cellars of the Leach house for the grimy-walled, unhomelike structure bulked not far from the skeleystal tippel of one of the main drifts. As he stared through the gloom at the house no architect would have been so heartless as to design, he thought of Joan—happy, blue-eyed. How could a bright soul like Joan Leach exist in such a place, even for a few months out of the year? Joan and Old Man Gloom just didn't get along. One would have had to yield to the mood of the other. And he had scarcely time to knock at the ponderous front door before he

knew that it was Joan who had yielded in the unequal struggle.

Joan didn't open the door. Joel Murdock opened it. He bucked it open with a capable shoulder and rushed into a hall dark enough to be the source of all the murk outside. He was usually a little more conventional about his entrances, but this, after all, was the first time his knocking had been answered by a woman's terrified scream.

He hesitated a moment in the hall, searching out light. He nearly knocked over a little table lamp that gave out a yellow glow grudgingly when he touched the switch. Then he saw across the room a small, beautifully made figure of a woman, standing in front of a door. The tips of her fingers were crammed against lips that would have been lovely had they not been blue. Cheeks that had been prettily rounded had shallow valleys in them, and the darkness of her hair emphasized the paleness of her brow.

"Joan!" came Joel Murdock's shocked whisper—a whisper that was muffled by the voice of a man on the other side of the door.

"Don't open the door, I tell you!" It was panic rather than rage that gave the voice its cutting edge. "You must not come in here, do you understand? You, above all people, must stay out. Don't come in! Great God, where's the key? I'll lock it. I'll keep you out!"

The girl took her hand away from her mouth. "Daddy!" she sobbed, then threw herself upon the door.

Her shaking fingers found the knob, twisted it. But the door had been locked from the inside.

The girl turned unsteadily. Her blue eyes were wide, blind-looking, until they saw Joel Murdock. Then eyelids drooped and Joan Leach stumbled forward to fall into Murdock's arms.

"Darling!" she sobbed. "Thank God you've come. Thank God. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Killer's Searing Fingers

DARKNESS—the darkness that was never totally dark because of flame from the gas vents of the burning mine—palled over Leach house. There was no sound within the hall nor in the rooms beyond save the soft sobbing of the girl beside Joel Murdock. Arms about her, he had led her to a small love seat pushed back against the stairway. Her head pillowed against his shoulder, he sat there, his eyes fixed and unblinking on the locked door.

So long had he stared at the door, that the dark grain of the wood had fashioned a face in his imagination—a demoniacal face, thin like Alwin Leach's face, with a wide, sardonic mouth and two burls for eyes. The face was surmounted by hair, which Alwin Leach's face was not, and the hair rose upward like a twisting flame.

He looked down at Joan, saw nothing but her dark hair. A tress of it brushed his lips like a dream of a kiss. "Darling," he whispered, "try and tell me. It can't be as bad as that. Nothing can."

She swallowed lumpily, straightened away from his shoulder long enough to ply a frivolous little handkerchief. Then she was back in the protecting nook of his arm, telling her story as disconnectedly as fear could make it.

"I haven't seen him for two days. It's been just like that—shutting himself in his room. It's not just me, it's everybody. Not as though he were angry. More as though he were afraid—afraid he'd do something to us. He won't let Mimi, that's my stepmother, come near, nor Uncle Charles, nor anybody. I don't know how he eats or anything."

"What about these miners?" Murdock asked. "Why do they hate your dad? What's the matter with them?"

"I don't know. Ever since that horri-

ble accident in the burning mine when so many of them were trapped and killed, they've refused to work. Dad's called on many of them personally, but it doesn't seem to help any. In fact, the last time he called at one of the miner's shanties, the whole family turned on him like a pack of mad dogs and drove him from the place. I hate them! I used to feel sorry for them, having to work underground. And Dad hasn't paid them any more than he has to. But I hate them for what they have done to Dad.

"And Dad's so good about it—better than you'd think. He's told Uncle Charles to go right ahead and furnish the miners with groceries. You see, Carbonville has a cooperative grocery and Uncle Charles runs it. Uncle Charles isn't—well, he isn't much help. He's not very intelligent. Now, if Uncle Boyde were alive—"

Murdock nodded. Boyde Leach had been the brain of the Leach family. A scientist and brilliant research chemist, Boyde Leach had kept to himself in the little brick walled laboratory at the rear of the Leach house, giving to the world new and amazing medicines, dyes, and flavorings derived from coal. Boyde had died eight months ago, and since that time disaster had dogged the footsteps of his brothers, Alwin and Charles. Charles had not been greatly affected. Nothing really bothered Charles, for his ignorance was bliss. He had frittered away his share of an inherited fortune, borrowed from Alwin until Alwin had obtained Charles' share of the little mining district.

"There's something else, Joel," she whispered. "I saved it until the last because it sounds so—well, so foolish. There's a man, Joel, a strange man. I've seen him twice, prowling about the grounds at night. He wears one of those old-fashioned cloaks and a wide-brimmed hat. And I've never seen his face. *I don't want to see his face.*"

"Joan!" He twisted around so that he could take hold of both of her shoulders, hold her at arms length and look steadily into her sweet face.

"I'm not mad," she said quietly. "Maybe it is the same man who robbed Uncle Boyde's laboratory right after he died. We never did find out what was stolen. Only I don't think this man is a thief. He looks like he ought to be riding on one of those old, old hearses that had the long, square oil lamps on the side. He looks like—"

"Joan!" he shook her gently. "This house is getting on your nerves."

She shook her head. "Not that so much as this strange sickness that has come to the miners. And that man in the cloak prowling around like an undertaker waiting for them to die. Some way, it's all connected and it means something unspeakably horrible."

QUICK, determined foot taps sounded on the bare flooring and Murdock looked up to see a tall, attractive woman approaching. She looked less than thirty years of age. Her dark hair was parted in the middle and sleeked back in a simple coiffure well suited to her classic features. She wore a useless looking little apron over her silk afternoon dress. Her smile, Joel thought, was just a little patronizing.

"This must be Mr. Murdock," she said in a deep, mellow voice as she extended her hand to Joel. "I'm Mimi. I must apologize for not appearing earlier, but you see we have had to let the servants go and I am preparing supper."

So this was Mimi, Alwin Leach's second wife and Joan's step-mother. There was nothing motherly about the woman. In spite of her effort at friendliness, she was surrounded with as frosty an aura as an iceberg.

"Joan, I wonder if you'll run out to the laboratory and see if you can drag Mr. Portos away from his chemicals?"

"My husband," she explained, evidently for Murdock's benefit, "insists upon feeding the man, and I think it is the least Mr. Portos can do to come to supper when he is called. I've tried to get him twice on the phone."

"Yes, Mimi," the girl said dully. Then her blue eyes thrust at the locked door of her father's room. "Mimi, see if you can't persuade Dad to join us. I don't know when he's eaten."

A slight frown clouded Mimi's forehead.

"I am certain he won't starve," she said. "However, I'll see what I can do." Her high heels tapped resolutely toward Alwin Leach's door. Then she paused, looked back at her step-daughter. "Please go at once, Joan," she said sternly.

Murdock left the house, walking at Joan's side into that unnatural darkness that was tinged with red and a sulphurous yellow from the mine fire. Columns of smoke rolled upwards to spread menacingly above like gargantuan ghouls above the grave of a Titan buried alive in the bowels of the earth. The roar of that earth-imprisoned giant echoed around the black walls of night.

They walked along flags greasy with soot. Grass grew thinly and its blades were as crisp as hay, what with the heat of the sun and the heat from the earth beneath. Everything seemed burned. Murdock thought of the miners who had been trapped in the burning mine. And he thought of that miner who hadn't been trapped but who looked as though he were burning anyway. He asked:

"What is the matter with the miners, dear? You said something about them being sick."

"I don't know," she said. "They're sick and they blame Dad for it. I haven't been down in the village. Dad said it wasn't safe to go. Uncle Charles is down there every day, of course, dispensing groceries. He says some of them are lame.

Others are sick in bed and complain about burning inside. Dr. Martin has his hands full. But he really isn't a very good doctor, I don't think."

"He isn't," Murdock said. "I saw him this evening. He was dead drunk."

"That's it." Her arm, clasped by his big fingers, transmitted a shudder. "I hate him. Such a filthy beast to be a doctor."

They were at the laboratory—a low, flat, brick building at the back of the house. A mercury-vapor lamp gave the windows a ghastly blue tint. Murdock asked:

"Who's this Portos?"

"He was Uncle Boyde's assistant in the lab," Joan explained. "He asked Dad if he couldn't stay here and work in the lab until his year was up. I don't know what he is up to—something about a discovery Uncle Boyde had made or had come near making, or lost. I don't know much about such things. We can ask him, only I don't think we'll get anything out of him. He's very quiet."

"Did Boyde Leach leave much of a fortune to his two brothers?" Murdock asked.

THE girl turned on the laboratory steps. The pale blue light heightened the pallor of her cheeks. "Nothing," she said. "I think Dad and Uncle Charles expected something. That's one reason why Dad shows his disappointment so keenly now that the mines aren't producing anything. Dad's broke, practically."

The girl pushed back the door and called sweetly, "Supper, Mr. Portos."

A gas flame hissed steadily from within the lab. There was no other answer.

Joan shrank back against Murdock. "I'm afraid," she whispered. "He—he doesn't answer. He isn't there. But the bunsen burner is still going."

Murdock moved her gently to one side and stepped into the tidy laboratory. At the farthest end of a bench which ex-

tended the entire length of the room, some one had been working with a hissing blue bunsen flame and a number of test tubes and beakers. Near the end of the bench was a door leading to a closet or some sort of an unlighted room. Just within the doorway, he saw the soles of a pair of man's shoes. The man he could not see until he had stepped to the door.

"Have you found him?" the girl called from the door.

"Yes," Murdock said without turning around. "Stay where you are." Murdock's voice wasn't steady. He couldn't have kept it steady, looking at what he was looking at. A face mooned up at him from the black floor. It was a small, weazened face, hideously distorted. Eyes bulged from sockets, crossed slightly, stared blindly. Blood suffused the cheeks. The lips were open and a black and swollen tongue bunged the mouth. But that wasn't all. If it had been Joel Murdock would have come to the conclusion that Mr. Portos had been strangled.

But the reason he could see that face so clearly in the darkness was that it was illuminated, apparently, by itself. It glowed like a moon, a phosphorescent light, but yet a flickering light. Then he noticed that the light did not come from the face at all, but from the neck—tiny serpents of white flame crawled lazily about the man's scrawny throat. Fingers of flame choking the life out of Mr. Portos.

"Joel—"

"Keep back, Joan!" Murdock's voice snagged. He turned, saw her entering the lab. He reached out and picked up the bunsen burner. The rubber tube which let the gas into the burner was of sufficient length so that he could bring the burner within a few inches of the corpse's face. He muttered a hoarse oath, nearly dropped the burner.

"Like the miner's hand," he whispered.

It was Mr. Portos' throat that was like

the miner's hand—black and charred as though by intense heat. Even the upper edge of the man's collar was blackened. And those fingers of white flame. . . .

"Joel—"

"Keep back," he warned. He raised the bunsen burner higher, looked about the closet. Shelves were laden with jars of chemicals. The dark, stagnant little pocket of air was filmy with grey smoke. In one corner, he saw a round metal trap where the curled and blackened remains of burned paper rustled slightly as his movements stirred the air.

"No, Joel—" the girl's voice pleaded. She was coming nearer, moving as though she walked on eggs.

"No what?" He started to back out of the closet.

"Joel," she whispered, "someone's watching. Joel—the door. I—I'm afraid to look around."

Murdock wheeled. His eyes thrust the length of the room to the open door, saw there a moving, shadowy form; saw against the shadow of a wide-brimmed hat, what might have been a face—a flickering, luminous something. Then the shadow, man or devil—whatever it was—was gone.

Murdock slapped the bunsen burner down on the bench and sprang to the door. Odd the tricks that incompleting darkness played, for the lurid light from the burning mine only increased the blackness in the opposite direction. He scanned the lawn with its heat-stunted shrubbery beds. Every bush seemed to be a man in broad-brimmed hat and cloak. Had there actually been someone watching them from the door of the lab?

The back door of the Leach house opened. Against the light, Mimi's slender, undeniably beautiful form was silhouetted. "Joan," the stepmother called almost irritably, "are you never coming?"

Murdock turned back into the room, put an arm around the girl's waist. "Let's

go," he said hoarsely. "They have to know Portos has been killed sometime or another."

"Killed?" Joan gasped.

"Yes. Strangled, but God only knows by what kind of killer's fingers."

CHAPTER THREE

The Frightened Man

THEY were grouped around the old crank-type wall phone in the Leach living room—Murdock, Joan, Mimi, and Charles Leach. It was Charles Leach who had the telephone receiver in his hand. He was years younger than his brother Alwin. Tall like Alwin, handsomer, not bald as Alwin was, nor did he have that determined chin that seemed to be a dominant characteristic of the Leach features. At the moment, he looked as helpless as a clothing store dummy animated by a clockwork of peculiarly delicate construction. He was no man to face a crisis. His brain simply couldn't keep up with violent and unexpected happenings. Three times he had failed to get in touch with the central operator.

"I—I wish Alwin would come out of that room!" Charles Leach whispered. "He could do this so much better than I. I—I'm not used to murders and deaths."

There was something approaching contempt in Mimi's beautiful eyes. "Charles," she said gravely, "will you call the sheriff or shall I? The way you're dilly-dallying over this, a person would think you had killed Mr. Portos."

"I—I killed Portos?" Charles Leach gurgled. "Why should I do that? Why should I kill Portos? Scarcely knew the man. What a thing to say, Mimi."

"We all scarcely knew the man," Mimi said calmly. "That's why it is so absurd to be so upset over his death. It's inconvenient, of course."

"It's a damn sight more than that," Murdock murmured. "It's incredible." They looked at him questioningly, but he did not elaborate. No possible use telling the women *how* Portos had died.

Charles Leach had cranked the phone again and this time had succeeded in getting the central operator. He stammered that he wanted to speak with the sheriff at the county seat. There was an interval of silence and then Murdock heard the click of a door latch. He looked swiftly from face to face, saw that he was the only one that heard the slight sound. He then slipped quietly from Joan's side, out into the hall. A shadow flitted across the silk curtains that covered the panes of the French doors opening into the dining room. There was no mistaking that tall, angular silhouette; that smooth, hairless cranium. Murdock seized the handle of the dining room door and the next moment stepped into the room to face Alwin Leach.

Leach was in the act of cramming bread from the dining table into his mouth. He was skull-faced, hollow-eyed from self starvation and worry. He gulped, choked, started backing toward the kitchen door. Murdock's powerful legs scissored the distance to the kitchen door, blocked the way. "Not until you come out with the truth, Mr. Leach," he said, quietly determined.

"Out of my way!" Leach gasped. "You

don't know what you're doing. I'm dangerous, I tell you!"

He looked somewhat less dangerous than a mounted skeleton in a physician's office. Poised some six feet in front of Murdock, his talonlike fingers clenching and unclenching, he whispered hoarsely: "This may mean your death, Murdock. Your death! I am poison, I tell you. My touch, my glance, my shadow—God, I don't know what about me—means death. You haven't seen the miners. You don't understand. And, so help me, neither do I!" His thin hands came up to grip his smooth forehead. His head bowed low.

"I've seen the miners," Murdock said. "At least one of them. His hand had been burned, charred. His wife was dead. And he hated you to hell."

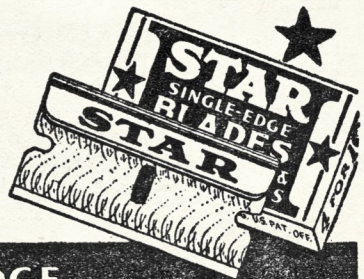
Alwin Leach gulped, nodded. "Ever since the tragedy, when those miners were trapped in the burning mine, the whole village has hated me. They refused to work. Because I cannot hope to avoid bankruptcy with the mines idle, I made personal visits to some of the houses of the miners."

LEACH passed a hand over his face. His skin looked dry and hot. "Every house I visited was marked for tragedy, it seemed. The miners and their families took sick. It was as though I was spreading a plague. It's a plague of flames. They burn. Sometimes their hands and



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feet turn black and crumble away. Sometimes, they burn deep inside. Several of the women have died. Many of the men are hideously maimed. I would have done something for them, if I knew what to do and if they would let me. But they won't have me near them. Dr. Martin is baffled."

"My impression of Dr. Martin is that he is in no state of mind to be anything but baffled. What else?"

"Good lord, isn't that enough?" Alwin Leach extended trembling hands in a pleading gesture. "Don't you see what they are saying—that I am some sort of a fiend out of hell? They say that I burned their brothers and husbands and sons in the mine which caught fire. And those who escaped—" Leach shrugged. "I am burning those who escaped, inches at a time like human candles"

"Bunk." Murdock said aloud, though he spoke to convince himself.

"Listen, Murdock, before morning you may feel the teeth of flame nibbling at your extremities. Don't say I didn't warn you. I'm driven to distraction with this—this intolerable suspicion. I'm driven to the point where I don't know that I'm *not* responsible. I wouldn't willingly or knowingly do anything—but how can I know what I do when I'm asleep?"

Leach's deep-set eyes met those of Murdock and Murdock's gaze was skeptical.

"You think I'm mad," Leach whispered.

"I think you're terrified. Constant worry about finances has frayed your nerves. You face bankruptcy and it comes as a double jolt because you were expecting that your brother Boyde would leave you pretty well fixed. And Boyde left nothing—"

"Who told you that, Murdock?" Leach stiffened.

Murdock looked at him out of the corners of his eyes. Leach wasn't quite out of his head. The mention of money still

made him take notice. Murdock answered: "Joan."

Leach nodded. "I'm glad you know. No fortune for you in marrying my daughter. Don't take offense. I meant only—"

The dining room window was shattered by a heavy object that arced through the air and crashed to the table, breaking a dish, spattering a plate full of salad over the cloth. For a moment, neither Murdock nor Alwin Leach said a word. Then Murdock wound his tongue and shoved an oath out with it. He dragged his eyes away from the thing on the table and sprang to the window.

"Don't go out!" came Leach's warning whisper. "It's happened before. It's the miners—poor burning devils! Last time it was a foot."

Murdock turned from the window. The object on the table captured attention and he fought back nausea. It was a half brick that had broken the window pane and attached to the brick was a gruesome severed hand, hardly recognizable as such because the flesh was blackened and cracking, the fingers twisted into knots as though by some withering flame. There was a tag tied to one charred, crumbling finger. On the tag was written:

"We'll get you for this, too, Leach."

Murdock's eyes narrowed. "I wonder if the miners could have had anything to do with Portos' death?"

"Portos!" Leach gasped. He lurched forward, seized the edge of the dining table for support. "He's dead? Portos dead? Tell me—tell me how he died. He was burned? He *was* burned, wasn't he? Don't shake your head. I see it in your eyes. He was burned. When did this happen? Speak up, man!"

"Within the last hour," Murdock said, "Portos was murdered."

Leach opened his mouth, gulped for air to feed the words that sobbed from his tense throat: "*And I was asleep!*"

With a low moan of anguish, Leach staggered past Murdock, through the kitchen door and from the room, hands outstretched like a blind man.

AT ALMOST the same time Joan burst through the French doors. Her blue eyes went to the door leading to the kitchen. It was still swinging. "Was that Dad? Daddy!" She ran toward the kitchen door but Murdock stopped her. He didn't know why. It was crazy, just believing that Alwin Leach had become a human firebrand luring his fellow men into deathly flame.

But still. . . .

"No dear," he said, holding her tightly. "I've seen your father. He's all right. Just nervous, possessed of the idea that he's responsible for whatever is happening to these miners. It wouldn't be well to cross him now."

"No, I suppose not. Not if he isn't well. But Uncle Charles is so helpless. There's a man out there to see Mr. Portos—"

"The sheriff?"

"No. We can't get hold of the sheriff. We can't hope to until morning, now. This man is Edmund H. Hennis. He wants to see Mr. Portos. And what can we tell him?"

Murdock started for the door. "I'll tell him. Simply tell him Portos is dead—Say, did you say E. H. Hennis?" He wheeled, stared somewhat dully at Joan. The girl nodded.

"The utilities king? What the devil is he doing here?" Murdock wrenched open the door and stepped into the hall. A square-jawed, flat-faced man squatted on the edge of the love seat. He bounded to his feet as Murdock entered. His smile was stock. "Mr. Portos?" he enquired.

"No," said Murdock sharply. "Mr. Portos was murdered less than an hour ago."

The man's smile melted. His flat face

became increasingly void of expression.

"Oh," he said. He started toward the front door, turned, said: "Look here, who murdered Mr. Portos?"

"I have no idea," Murdock said. "Have you any idea why any one should want to kill him? Just what did you want to see him about?"

"Under the peculiar circumstances, it would seem advisable not to answer that last question except to the proper authorities," said Hennis stiffly. "As to your first question, I do not mind telling you that Mr. Portos might—only, *might*, mind you—have been on the track of something that would make him an extremely wealthy man. Might I ask, am I the only person representing the electrical generating industries to arrive?"

"I suggest that you talk with some member of the family about that," Murdock said "And is this discovery in which you are interested the work of Mr Portos entirely?"

E. H. Hennis frowned. "Frankly, I would not have come in answer to Mr. Portos' message had it not been that he claimed his discovery was based upon notes of his superior, the late Boyde Leach. Until I have made an effort to locate these notes together with those of Mr. Portos, I intend to remain here."

"Just be seated," Murdock said. "I'll ask Mrs. Leach if she cares to speak with you." He went into the living room where Mimi and Charles Leach were still standing at the phone. "We're trying to get in touch with Dr. Martin, Mr. Murdock. He may be able to give us some advice."

"E. H. Hennis is out in the hall," Murdock informed her. "I think you should talk with him."

Mimi gasped: "Hennis, the millionaire?" Her deft fingers began tucking at her dark hair.

Charles Leach dropped the telephone receiver, turned around, said: "Huh? Who did you say was there?"

MURDOCK sank wearily into a chair. "Hennis. And he's got money. Lots of it." He watched Charles Leach follow Mimi from the room. He listened to the honey smoothness of Mimi as she greeted Edmund Hennis. Then he heard no more because Joan came into the living room looking worried and frightened.

"Joel," she sobbed, "why didn't you let me see Dad? What are you hiding from me—you and Mimi and all the rest? Now Dad's gone—"

"Gone?" It sounded queer, startling, as though something had happened to Alwin Leach. Murdock sprang to his feet, went to the girl, slipped his arm about her waist.

"Now, nothing's going to happen to your father. He's probably gone for a walk. It will do him good. Stop thinking about him for a while. Think about something else. Try and remember what your Uncle Boyde was working on in his lab before he died."

"Oh, I don't know! I never paid any attention to his experiments. I'm afraid of what the miners might do to Dad if—"

"Stop it, dear," he said gravely. He could feel the girl's body quiver. She was on the verge of hysteria. "Listen, didn't your uncle leave any sort of a will? Not anything?"

"There—there was an envelope for Dad—something which Uncle Boyde said would make us wealthy. But there was a string attached to it. I mean, Dad wasn't to use the contents of the envelope unless he couldn't make a living any other way. The envelope contained something dangerous. Then there was something else. There was a sealed jar in his laboratory."

"Yes?"

"And that's what the robber stole. Didn't I tell you about someone breaking into the laboratory? I must have. But everything is so mixed up—"

Charles Leach's face mooned through

the living room door. His lips simpered. "Mr. Hennis has done us the honor of accepting our invitation to dinner. Mimi says for you children to come to the table now."

Joan shuddered. "How Mimi can think of eating—"

Mimi, somewhere in the other side of the house, screamed. Murdock remembered thinking at the time that it was odd that anyone with so low and musical a voice could scream so stridently. And then he remembered that in the dining room was reason enough for anyone to scream.

Murdock stepped quickly ahead of Joan and Charles Leach, came to the door of the dining room. Mimi was shrinking back against the wall, her scream stifled with the back of her hand, her eyes fixed on the table. Beside the door, curiosity brightening his normally dull face, was Edmund Hennis. He was pointing at the charred human hand that centered the dining table. He was saying, "*What is that thing?*"

CHAPTER FOUR

Face of Flame

SO THERE was no dinner, only an effort on Mimi's part to get Edmund Hennis to swallow a little coffee in the living room. It was all a grisly joke, Mimi said, on the part of certain miners who blamed Alwin Leach for the tragic loss of life in the burning mine.

"And where is Alwin Leach?" demanded Hennis.

Mr. Alwin Leach, Mimi explained, was not well. He was in his room. He kept early hours because of his health. And wouldn't it be advisable for them all to go to bed?

But Alwin Leach was not in his room. Murdock knew that he wasn't, for he had tried the door of the room to find it unlocked and the room empty. And he knew

there was no point in further concealing this fact from Joan.

"Your father is possessed with the idea that he is responsible for the strange malady of the miners," he explained to Joan, when Mimi and Charles had gone to show Edmund Hennis the guest room. "He also has the mad idea that he is responsible for Portos' death. He's trying to run away—maybe from himself. And I'm going to find him. He can't be far, because there are no trains from Carbonville tonight and the car is still in the garage."

"You *must* find him!" Joan sobbed. "What if some of the miners were to find him? These threats—they must be in earnest. I'll go with you. . . ."

Murdock shook his head. "You won't. That's that, darling."

When the house was dark, except for the lurid light of the burning mine which was the moon of Carbonville, Joel Murdock got up from the davenport where he was supposed to sleep. He slipped out the front door and took the road for the village. He wanted to talk to Dr. Martin. Drunk or sober, he was going to pound truth out of the medico's head.

In the smoke-choked darkness that was never wholly dark, Murdock walked quietly along Carbonville's main street—a road of baked mud between two crooked strings of shanties, monotonously alike. In a few of these houses, lights emitted a feeble glow where terrified men and women nursed their sick in futile efforts to stop that burning death that blackened human flesh with invisible flame.

One of the buildings, longer than the others, bore a sign: "Carbonville Cooperative Store." It was here that Charles Leach's none-too-keen mind toiled with the business of distributing supplies to the miners. As he was about to pass the store, Murdock saw a flicker of light from one of the filmy windows. It was hardly more than the wink of a firefly, yet it

came unmistakably from the inside of the store.

Murdock hurried across the street, crept along the side of the building, stood on tiptoe to see through the window. Inside, a moving shadow blotted out the flickering beams of a flaming torch. Inside, a man was doing something with small, cloth sacks of flour which had been apportioned for the miners. The figure of the man was obscured by a voluminous cloak. Nor did the sinister figure turn around so that Murdock might glimpse its face. The head was perfectly concealed by a wide-brimmed, black hat.

It was the same—the same figure that Murdock had seen at the laboratory following the discovery of Portos' body!

One sack after another, the cloaked man piled on the center of the floor. He moved clumsily as though unused to the enveloping garments. When the sacks had been formed into a pyramid, the figure stooped, straightened with a red-painted can in its hand.

Murdock rounded the store to the front door, seized the knob, shouldered against the panel. He knew then, what the cloaked man was up to. The grocery, and especially those sacks of flour, were to be set on fire.

Something jabbed Murdock between the shoulder blades. A man's voice stammered: "Put—put your hands up. D-don't move. This—this is a gun! Loaded, too."

IN SPITE of the warning, Murdock turned to face Charles Leach. The youngest of the Leach brothers in bedroom slippers, trousers and a suit coat pulled over pajamas, confronted Murdock with nothing more formidable than a pointing finger.

"It—it's you!" Charles stammered. "I thought it was a thief. I heard someone prowling about the house, came down, followed you here. I—ha-ha—forgot you

were visiting us. I—" He looked down at his forefinger, laughed again, shoved his hand in his pocket. "I guess it's all right—"

"It is if you want your store to burn down!" Murdock cried. Already he could smell the odor of oil smoke creeping from the cracks in the building. The locked, but ill-fitting, front door was rimmed with red. "Quick! We may be able to trap him at the back!" He sprang down the steps and Charles Leach followed, crying: "Who? Who is it?"

As Murdock reached the end of the building, the back door of the grocery slammed shut. The cloaked creature, like some monstrous bat, sprang from the back steps. For an instant, it turned its head, faced Murdock. And Murdock stopped in his tracks. For beneath the black, broad-rimmed hat, was no face at all, nothing but a flickering, cold white flame. Hands that dangled out of the cloak were long fingers of dripping flame—fingers that had strangled Portos and left their brand seared in Portos' flesh!

Before Murdock could overcome his shock, the cloaked thing had gained yards on him. Once it stumbled and fell to the ground, but regained its feet at once. And then, when Murdock thought he was overhauling it rapidly, a shot rang out from somewhere on his right. Another shot. Long splinters of gun flame pointed through the darkness toward the fleeing figure. But the bullets were wild. One of them screamed by close to Murdock's head. He stopped.

Charles Leach crashed into him from behind, cried in a terrified voice: "The miners! They'll kill us!"

From the shadows of a neighboring house, the figure of a man carrying a gun appeared, raised the gun, sent one final shot at the fleeing, flame-faced monster. But the thing disappeared over the top of a hill.

The man with the gun turned toward

the grocery store, now an oven of flame soon to ignite its own flimsy walls. The man with the gun limped laboriously. Possibly the plague of flames had gnawed at his foot with its torturing teeth.

"Back!" Charles Leach tugged frantically at Murdock's arm. "He'll kill me, just because I'm Alwin Leach's brother. They hate Alwin and everybody connected with him."

Murdock hesitated only a moment, then turned to follow Charles Leach. As he did so, his toe touched something on the ground. He stooped, picked up a man's shoe. It was almost the exact spot where the flame creature had fallen. Evidently, it had lost one of its shoes in its mad effort to escape pursuit.

"Quickly!" Charles urged.

Murdock tucked the shoe under his arm, trotted with Charles Leach back to the road. Some of the miners and their families were already turning out to watch the burning grocery. Charles Leach followed a detour that kept them away from the rapidly growing crowd.

Beneath the last of three dim street lights which illuminated Carbonville, Murdock paused long enough to look at the shoe. It was fully laced and tied, but apparently without a tongue. He ran one hand down inside the shoe to discover that the tongue had been bunched into the toe. For an instant, he was close to a portion of the truth behind the weird happenings, but so incredible was that truth that he was a long time digesting it.

"Good Lord," mumbled Charles Leach as they hurried on, "what was that—that thing? That damned, flame-faced thing."

"I don't know, but I intend to find out," Murdock said grimly.

Then, for the first time, Charles noticed the shoe Murdock was carrying. "What's that?" he demanded, coming to a full stop just outside the Leach yard. "A shoe? Let me see it."

Murdock handed it to him. "Recog-

nize it?" Joel Murdock asked Charles.

"Yes—I mean no. Of course not. How would I recognize an old shoe? Might be anybody's, mightn't it?" He tossed the shoe into a ditch of stagnant water on the opposite side of the road.

"It wasn't, by any chance, your brother's shoe? Alwin's?"

"N-no. Of course not. Let's get inside. I'm dog-tired." He led the way into the house, limping slightly going up the steps, for the thin soles of his bath slippers had given his feet little protection.

MMURDOCK turned into the living room, stopped, stood open-mouthed, staring at a man who sprawled out on the cushions of the davenport, fully clad, his muddy shoes on the cushions. He had seen the puffy white face once before that day. The man was the disreputable Dr. Martin.

Martin waved a hand at him. "Hello, you. Where's the old man? Alwin, I mean. Where's he?"

Murdock strode to the davenport, grabbed hold of Martin's coat and shook the man. "Why do you want to know? What's this all about?"

Dr. Martin blinked. "No way to treat a friend," he reproached. "I came up here

to tip off old Alwin that the miners are coming up here to set his house on fire. The miners all got St. Anthony's fire. Most of 'em got it. What d'ya think of that?"

"St. Anthony's fire?" Murdock gasped. "Good Lord! That's why—"

"Sure," the doctor interrupted. "I looked it up. I been tryin' to remember to look it up for days. Somethin' even a medical man like me wouldn't suspect this day and age. You know what it is? You know how it burns their fingers and toes off? Look here, I'll explain." Dr. Martin leaned unsteadily on one elbow and would no doubt have launched into a drunken lecture had not Murdock checked him.

"We've got to find Alwin Leach!"

"Yeah," the doctor admitted. "They're goin' to smoke him out and then make him go into the burning mine. Going to make him walk right into the flame. He'll do it, too, lovin' Joan the way he does."

"Joan!" Murdock exploded.

"Yeah. His daughter. The miners got her. Two of them were carrying her out of the house when I came in. I tried to argue with them, but they knocked me down. That's why I'm lying down. Resting. Not usually this lazy. I—"

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Murdock sprang at the doctor, seized him up the throat, shook him. "Where are they taking her, you fool?"

"Don't!" Martin gurgled. "I don't know. Only if Alwin Leach don't surrender to them, they're going to kill her. Burn her up, like they claim he burned them."

"And you haven't seen Alwin? You've no idea where he is?"

Martin shook his head.

In desperation, Murdock flung himself into the hall, ran to the front door, opened it. On the threshold, he paused. Silhouetted against the curtain of smoke and flame that rose from the drift mouth of the burning mine, a long column of black figures moved. Men and women, backs bowed with hard work, faces etched with dirt, grimacing with hate, moved slowly to surround the Leach house. Moved slowly, because half of them were lame, their feet burned and blackened by the dread flame plague, their clenched fists charred knots. And in their midst, one figure walked upright, goaded onward by the kick of a miner's knee or the jab of some horribly shriveled hand. Joan, their hostage.

Somewhere in the house, seemingly in the hall directly behind him, sounded a low, anguished groan. Murdock turned, his eyes seeking the closed door of Alwin Leach's room at the end of the hall. The groan came again, unmistakably from this room. He crossed quickly to the door, took hold of the knob, found the door unlocked, stepped quickly into the room.

A man sat on the edge of a couch, his back toward Murdock, his head bowed and covered with—with what? His hands? They had the shape of hands, flaming hands—hands of cold, white flame!

No sooner had Murdock entered than the man sprang to his feet, dropped his hands. And his face—Murdock's fists

clenched. His heart jarred against his chest. The face was Alwin Leach's, the features scarcely discernible because of slowly crawling, ever changing flame that covered them; that must consume them until the face was nothing but a charred, black mask.

"Don't look at me!" Leach shrieked. "Don't, for the love of God!" And, his flaming hands out-thrust, he lurched toward the door, straight toward Joel Murdock.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mob of the Maimed

MMURDOCK seized Leach's arms. It was an instinctive move, for it kept him from being knocked over backwards. And as Leach's flaming hands touched his flesh, some measure of reason returned to Murdock. He gripped Leach hard. "Look!" he cried. "The flame does not burn. It's cold!"

"Let me go!" Leach shrilled. "I am poison. No leper was ever as dangerous."

Murdock shook Leach's slight form. "I don't believe it. Were you asleep? Answer me. Were you asleep?"

The flaming head bobbed. "I didn't want to sleep. But I was completely worn out. I've been afraid to sleep. But when you were all in the dining room, I sneaked into my room, shut the door. I must have dozed off. When I awoke a minute or so ago, I was burning like—like this. My face—"

Murdock reached out a finger to Leach's cheek, touched the flesh. As he drew his finger away, a tiny cold white flame tipped it. He wiped his finger on his trousers and the flame glowed against the cloth.

Outside the house, a hoarse shout arose: "Leach! Alwin Leach!"

"Listen," Murdock whispered. "It's the miners."

"Alwin Leach," the hoarse voice shouted, "if you don't come out in ten minutes, we'll kill your daughter!"

Leach sobbed in a breath. "Let me go!" he strove to break the hold Murdock had upon him. "They've got Joan. They'll kill her unless they get a chance to kill me. God help me, they shall have their way! I'm not fit to live!"

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Murdock glanced over his shoulder, saw Charles Leach, pale as death, shrinking up against the stair rail; saw Edmund Hennis, his face dulled by sleep, coming down the steps; saw Mimi, lovely in filmy negligee, stepping resolutely towards her husband's room. For a moment, the woman paused, open-mouthed as she saw Alwin Leach's flaming face. Then she gripped her lower lip between her teeth, entered the room.

"Alwin," she said, "someone has tricked you. The miners think you are responsible for the disease which has ravaged their homes. And it isn't true. You've proof that it isn't true. Proof, I tell you! You can save yourself and Joan, too, if you'll only use your head. Remember the envelope Boyde gave you before he died? It contains the truth—the formula for the poison which has been used on the miners. It will prove that you are not responsible. Give it to me. I will show the miners you are not guilty!"

"Mimi," Leach choked out, "is that true?" He fumbled with the combination of a small safe set in the wall. "Boyde said it was dangerous. Here—" he opened the safe and pulled out a long, plump envelope. "Take it, dearest—"

As Mimi reached out for the envelope there was triumph and eagerness in her eyes—and then surprise and hate. For Joel Murdock snatched the envelope from Leach's grasp, stepped back out of the woman's reach. He took one glance at the notation in pencil on the outside of

the envelope: "*Complete process for the commercial production of hydrazine—3-amino-phythol.*"

"Give that to me," Mimi snapped, her eyes blazing.

"I will like hell," Murdock said harshly. "It's what you've been after all along. I don't know what it is, but I know damned well it's what Edmund Hennis hoped to buy from Portos. Portos probably found fragmentary notes in the laboratory—notes that Boyde Leach had failed to destroy. Working on these as a base, Portos developed the same process as the one contained in this envelope. Boyde said it was dangerous. What he meant was that people would murder for it—as they have. But knowing its commercial value, Portos offered to sell it to Hennis."

"Let me see!" Hennis sprang down the steps, the coat of his pajamas flapping open. He took one glance at the envelope, gasped: "Cold light! No wonder Portos said it would upset the entire electrical industry. Hydrazine is cold light, and if it could be prepared commercially, it would be piped into houses and used for more efficient lighting than electricity. That's the stuff he's got smeared on his hands and face—" He pointed at Alwin Leach.

"**H**HE DIDN'T smear it on his face and hands," Murdock cut in. "Either Charles or Mimi did it to set the miners against him, just as they put ergot into the flour that was distributed to the miners so they would develop erysipelas, a plague recorded in history as St. Anthony's Fire. It's simply a mold that infests rye flour. It has medicinal uses and can be bought in drugstores. It causes the flesh to blacken as though burned, the fingers to drop off."

"That isn't true!" Mimi pleaded. "Alwin, you know I couldn't do that. It was Charles—"

"It was Charles who has been going around disguised in a cloak and wide hat," Murdock cut in. "He smeared that cold light stuff on his hands and face to further his terrible appearance. He killed Portos, because he suspected that Portos was coming close to the same formula that Boyde Leach worked out and he didn't want any competition when he and Mimi sold that formula to Hennis. And even above wealth, he wanted Mimi. So to get rid of Alwin, he poisoned the miners, knowing the miners, supposing that Alwin had some supernatural power to destroy them, would rise against him. To cinch that fear and hatred the miners had of Alwin, he smeared the cold light on his brother's face and hands tonight so there would be no doubt of his guilt when the miners saw him."

"That—that's not so," Charles Leach stammered. "I couldn't do such a thing. Where would I get this cold light? I am no scientist—"

"You'd get it out of Boyde's laboratory," Murdock snapped. "With the formula which Boyde left at the time of his death was a sealed jar which undoubtedly contained a sample of this hydrazine stuff. You stole it from the laboratory."

"That's not true!" Charles shrieked. "You were with me tonight when we saw that flame monster burn down the grocery store."

"That wasn't Alwin," Murdock said quietly. "That was Mimi. She burned the grocery so that when the sheriff arrived there would be no evidence of ergot poisoning in the flour in your store. Mimi put on the disguise you had worn. She even borrowed your shoes. That's why, when you followed me, you couldn't find your shoes. Mimi was wearing them. And when she escaped, she lost one of your shoes. That shoe was fully laced and the tongue thrust down into the toe. Only a very small foot, a woman's foot,

could have worn that shoe with the tongue balled up in the toe. Only a woman's foot could have been withdrawn from that laced and tied shoe. And if you want to know why she wore your shoes, Charles Leach, it's because she thought there might be footprints left behind after her little arson job.

"You, Charles, hadn't been too clever with Portos' murder. You tried to make it look as though it was the work of the same disease which killed the miners, but actually, you strangled Portos. Then, to make it look as though he had been burned, you actually burned the flesh of his throat with the bunsen burner and afterwards destroyed some of Portos' notes. Mimi feared that your joint plans might not go over. And if the 'flame demon' was caught, she wanted you, Charles, to be the one caught. That's why she borrowed your shoes—"

"**MIMI!**" Charles gasped. "You—you'd do that to me? After I was willing to kill for—"

Charles tried to gulp back words. And Mimi, pulled a small gun from the top of her stocking.

"No, Mimi! No!" Charles Leach flung himself upon the woman. She shot once, her gun muzzle under Charles' arm, got Murdock through the shoulder. The tearing impact of the slug against bone twisted Murdock around. Pain dulled his senses, upset his balance. He staggered, tripped over a chair and fell heavily against the door. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Charles Leach and Mimi reeling across the hall. Twice the gun spoke and Charles' grasp became a vise that death had made.

He saw the front door opening, the black mass of miners clamoring for Alwin Leach's blood. It was little wonder that the foremost among them mistook Charles Leach for his brother. A cudgel raised, fell, with bone shattering

force. Mimi's scream came, shrill and short, and then Mimi and Charles were blotted out by the mass of humanity.

Murdock was on his feet. In spite of pain and a helplessly dangling arm, he rushed to the door leading into the hall, slammed and bolted it. He turned, saw Edmund Hennis, white of face, cowering against the wall with Alwin Leach.

Murdock seized Alwin Leach by the small of the back and pushed him into the living room. He shouted to Hennis to follow. On his way toward the north window, he picked up a chair, used it to ram out the pane. He stood aside, motioned to Hennis to go first. As soon as Hennis was over the sill, Murdock thrust the trembling body of Alwin Leach into Hennis' hands. Then he sprang through the window into the open air.

"Get Leach to your car!" Murdock shouted to Hennis. And then he stood for a second until he had located Joan struggling with a single miner. The mob of vengeful villagers was besieging the front door of the house. If they moved fast, there was a chance of escape.

Murdock ran across in front of the house directly behind the group of miners who were breaking in the front door. The man who guarded Joan was keeping one eye on his companions, urging them on. He did not see Murdock until Murdock was within striking distance. Then he

shoved Joan at Murdock. Murdock's one arm went around the girl, and the miner closed in fast.

Murdock kicked the man in the belly, turned, half carried Joan to the car. Leach was wiping the hydrazine from his face with his handkerchief. Joan threw herself into his arms, crying, "Thank God you're safe! They were going to burn you—"

"Hush," Alwin Leach said tenderly. "In the car, quickly." He thrust his daughter into the rear seat, stood aside for Murdock to follow. Hennis had the motor running and the powerful car shot down the drive. A pater of shots followed from some inaccurate rifleman. Hennis drove coolly and rapidly beyond range, then he said, "Who's got that formula of Boyde Leach's? If that is put into use, it means the end of public utilities as they exist today. I'll pay a hundred thousand dollars for the privilege of destroying it."

Murdock pulled the envelope from his pocket and passed it to Alwin Leach. "Your business," he said. He looked down at Joan's sweet face. For the first time, she noticed the blood that was seeping through his coat. "Darling," she cried, "you're hurt!"

He smiled tiredly. "Just my luck, isn't it? When you are on my left side, my left arm would be useless!"

THE END

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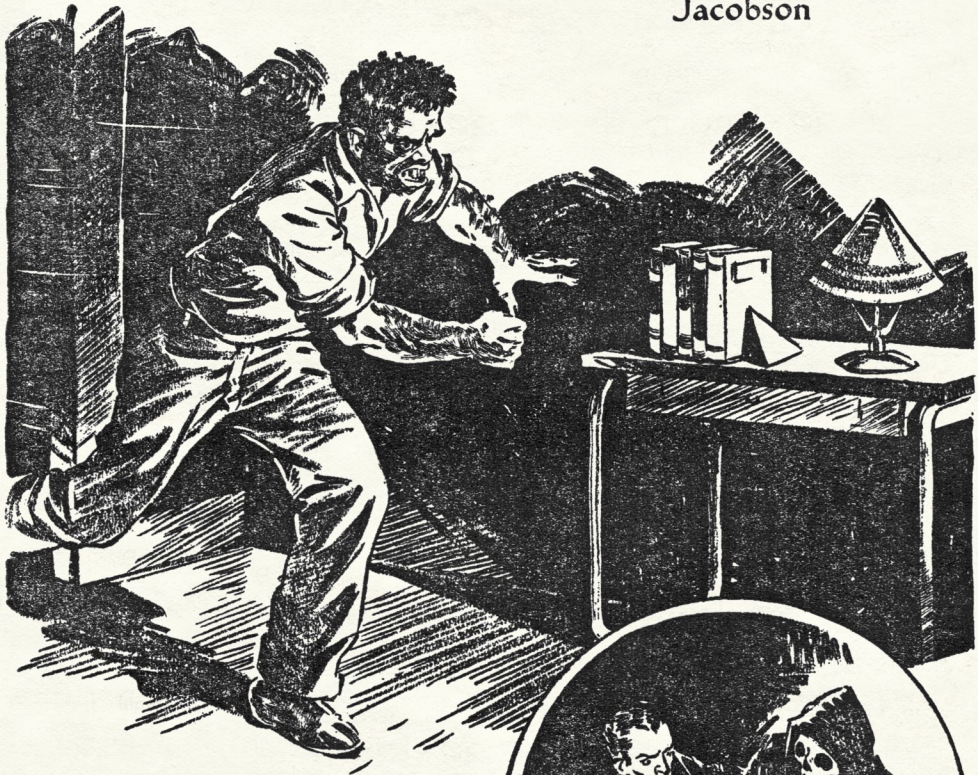
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THE RAG DOLL KILLER

A Bizarre Crime Novelette by Edith and Ejler
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They had a nightmare glimpse of the
Cretin's face. . . .

Nat Perry was a "bleeder," a haemophiliac, to whom the slightest cut or scratch meant almost certain death! Small wonder, then, that Inspector O'Connor despaired when his foster-son could not resist the pleading in a girl's eyes and offered to match wits with a sadistic killer who left but torn and shredded fragments of his victims! . . .

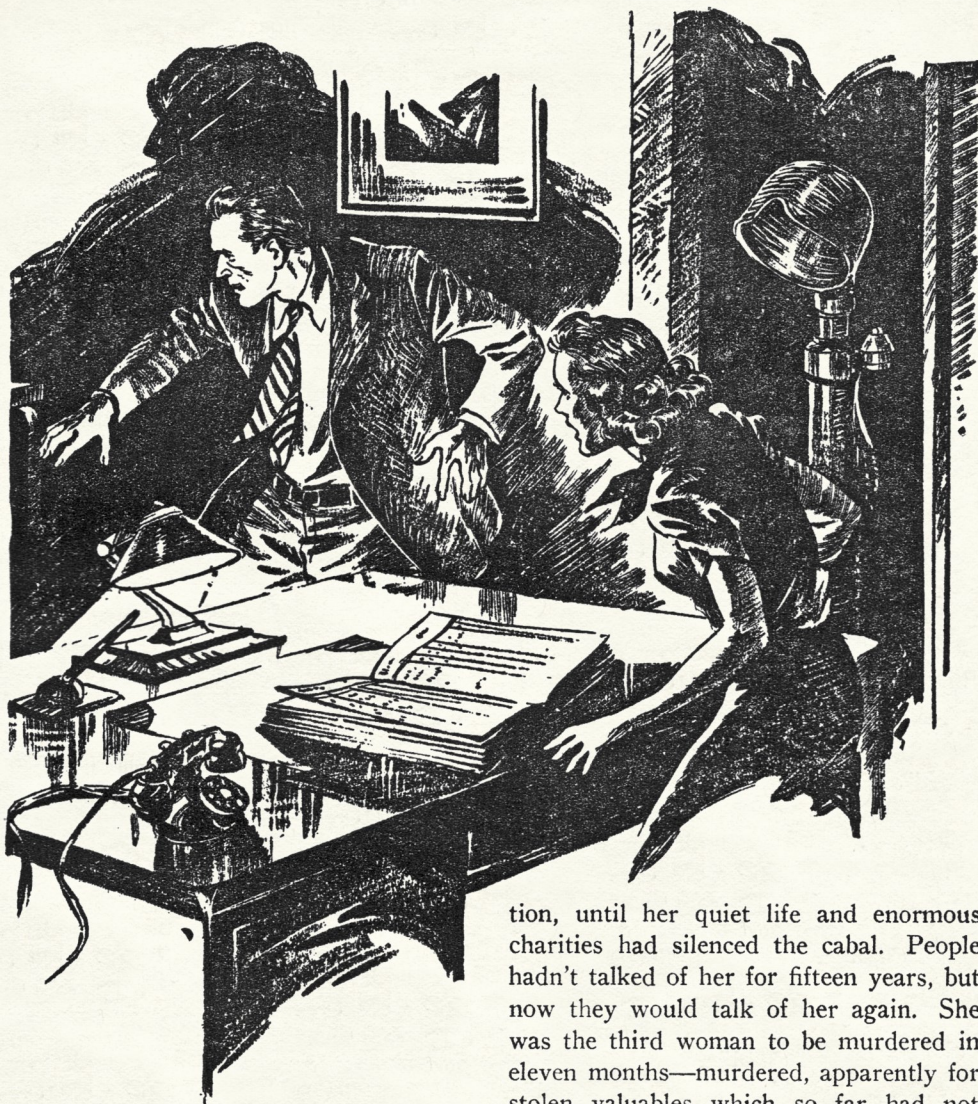


CHAPTER ONE

The "Bleeder" Takes a Hand

SUTTON PLACE looked like a listless wash-drawing against the backdrop of an East River fog. In front of one of the big apartment buildings, a disappointed group of thrill-seekers had ceased to ask questions of the harassed doorman. From time to time, grim hur-

The story of a very vulnerable detective—and a girl who was bigger than the deadly fear that oppressed her!



ried figures in blue uniforms passed into the building or out of it, speaking to each other, if they spoke at all, in terse official phrases. Otherwise, there was a hush about them, and about the place, for death had been an early visitor here.

The Rag Doll Killer, so-called from the condition in which he left his victims, had paid another call. Marilyn Ford was the latest. Once she had been an actress, had married well, and ever-present scandal-mongers had made her a front page sensa-

tion, until her quiet life and enormous charities had silenced the cabal. People hadn't talked of her for fifteen years, but now they would talk of her again. She was the third woman to be murdered in eleven months—murdered, apparently for stolen valuables which so far had not been traced.

A quiescent hysteria would arise again among women who had worldly reason to fear the maniac-robber. Husky private investigators would be re-hired, in the capacity of bodyguards.

Nathanial Perry would not be among their number, and he knew it. He was not husky, for one thing; at twenty-nine, he had a body slim and strong as tempered steel, but there was a leanness and pallor about him that arose from the incurable

condition of his blood. He was a bleeder, a haemophiliac. Even a pin-scratch would kill him.

Besides, as he walked past the silent onlookers at the Sutton Place entrance, his concern was not yet with the living. It was with the dead. . . .

The law was in the shambles of Marilyn Ford's bedroom when Nat Perry entered—the law, in the person of plainclothes inspector Harry O'Connor. He sat there, hunched, as though he were afraid to touch anything, looking hopelessly at the woman who lay in the wide bed, broken and twisted as a child's rag doll. Except that a rag doll is filled with cotton—and the woman wasn't. Perry wouldn't like to remember, even later, the indecent bareness of those pulped vitals.

O'Connor's face went stony when he saw the private detective, but his voice had no stoniness in it—it was harsh and alarmed.

"Get out," he said. His fading blue eyes were shadowed by perplexity and defeat, his shoulders were tired. Harry O'Connor was near sixty. He was getting old. Nat knew it had him.

"Pop," Nat pleaded. "Five minutes."

"No," said O'Connor, but he made no move. The perplexity in his eyes was succeeded by something more personal—tenderness with a kind of pain in it.

For five years, they had been meeting this way, the young blond detective, and the old policeman. Always, there was increasing perplexity in O'Connor's eyes, the bafflement of a man whose mind is losing its sharpness.

O'Connor hadn't been old before that. A stubborn, gritty, sawed-off little Irishman, he'd been. The only man in the world, Nat thought, who'd have taken on the welfare of an orphaned runaway, fifteen years ago.

A thin-skinned brat of a boy, undernourished, with the courage dead in him, not even normal—that was Nat Perry

at fourteen. O'Connor picked him up where a hit-and-run driver left him. Perry hadn't even bothered telling the cop—it was another boy who explained that he was a "bleeder", that any little cut would kill him, because his blood couldn't clot.

O'Connor took him to a hospital, and gave him three blood transfusions in the next four days. He didn't moan over the boy, didn't plead; he just said, "Well, you've got a cop's blood in you now—and cops never die!"

AND just like that, Nat thought quietly now, he made a cop out of me. It wasn't what he had wanted to do—O'Connor had been as instrumental as anyone in keeping Nat off the force when he tried to join. But fourteen-year-old Nat had really believed those words—believed the curse in his blood somehow lifted, that he could live forever. At twenty-nine, he knew better, but by that time, he'd built his life around the belief. He hadn't been able to turn back.

He had taken certain intelligent precautions. He was listed in the telephone directory only by phone number, with no address given. He kept his skin weathered and tough, developed callouses on his hands, and made a habit of gloves. He didn't hit with his fists, but he had another, more effective method of boxing . . . and there were people who knew it, and feared it. They also knew he was proficient with a pistol, and ready to use it. They called him the "Bleeder," but they had learned by experience that he didn't start bleeding easily.

He had never been able to convince Harry O'Connor of the value of those precautions—even in the past five years, when Harry needed all the help he could get, just to stay on the force. It was Nat Perry who kept O'Connor on the active list.

But the smell of blood was only beginning to clear from Marilyn Ford's bou-

doir, and Harry O'Connor was afraid for his foster-son.

She had been in her nightgown, but she had died at noon. That meant, that like the others, she had been unwell. After three such happenings, it struck Perry as more than coincidence.

It was in pre-war days that she'd been known as a famous beauty—but she'd been still beautiful, twenty years later. Again a coincidence—meaningless and puzzling as the first.

The work of a maniac—he looked again at that body on the bed—but a maniac who knew enough to go over an apartment pretty thoroughly.

Nothing clicked. He looked at Harry, saw the facts mirrored in those hurt old eyes. For eleven months, they had set Harry on the trail of a killer who left a pattern as crazy and distorted as he left the bodies of the women he killed.

And then it happened. The meaningless pattern linked in Perry's mind with a conceivable motive. Only a splintered fragment of bottle, with the trade label still on it, spelled that link, but to Perry it was like handwriting, still incomplete, but legible.

He picked it up—with gloves, *Gavreaux, Salon de Beaute*. A thousand women must own jars with such a label, but—there were millions of women who did not. Every one of the victims of the Rag Doll Killer had been a patron of the famous beauty establishment, each had been impressively youthful for her age. And each had been violently unbeautified in death . . . as though someone were deliberately trying to wreck the beautician's handiwork.

Police had checked on Gavreaux's connection with the murdered women, as they had checked on a hundred similar vague leads—but that was months ago. By now, the connection might be more apparent.

O'Connor took the piece of glass gingerly from Nat, replaced it on the dress-

ing table. "We've worked on that," he said. "You'll find nothing here, Nat. This isn't one of your type things. It isn't brains that's going to catch this killer—because he hasn't any brains himself. He wouldn't even have sense enough to be afraid of you."

Nat believed that. The body was proof of it. But somewhere, behind the sadistic souvenirs of blood-lust, was that persistent pattern. O'Connor must have believed it, too—but he wasn't going to discuss it. He took Perry's arm, and led him toward the door, firmly, but with the bitterness of ruin in his face . . . a bitterness Perry could hardly bear.

On the foggy street corner, he thought again of that piece of broken bottle, and it seemed to him that the jagged blue edges were beginning to reflect a certain light. Then he got into his car, and drove westward, to a more cheerful thoroughfare.

PERRY parked his car in front of Gavreaux's *Salon de Beaute* on Fifth Avenue. It was a conservative three-story establishment, and in the single front window there was a restrained plaster nude, holding Gavreaux products on her open palm. A mink-coated woman, dignified, austere and handsome, emerged from the doorway, and began a brisk walk up the avenue. She was a living corroboration to the fact Perry had just ascertained over the phone from the woman columnist of an afternoon daily—that Gavreaux's was the only place in town which furnished rejuvenation treatments worth the name.

There was a trace of perfume in the warm chromium gloom of the interior. A girl at the desk took Perry's card, and kept her eyes on it for seconds. When she looked up, her face held a minimum of surprise.

"Mr. Gavreaux's office is on the second floor," she said in a clear quiet voice.

"I'm quite sure he'll see you, Mr. Perry."

Perry had not expected so smooth a greeting. The man who nodded to him, from across a walnut desk in the severe upstairs office was hard-eyed, nervous, alert. A business man, from the core out—not one to grant interviews without reason.

Perry began directly. "I believe Marilyn Ford was one of your customers."

The hard eyes grew even harder, as though the man were bracing himself against some shock. "She *was*? What do you mean?"

"She's been murdered," Nat told him.

Garveaux uttered a short, shocked oath. "That's hell," he said. Then, "You're a detective. I suppose you're working on the case—for whom?"

Nat thought of Harry O'Connor, and replied that he had an undisclosed client. He felt, as he watched the man across the desk, that Gavreaux could not be surprised again. He was a man who already expected the worst.

"It was this maniac, I suppose?"

Perry nodded. "The Rag Doll Killer. He seems to make his selections purely among your customers, doesn't he?"

Gavreaux's smile was bitter. "He does. The police checked with me on that, last summer. They didn't seem to think much of it—I haven't wanted to, either. Any sane man would call it a coincidence. But obviously, you don't. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here."

Nat Perry agreed.

"I'll talk quite frankly, Perry—you're in business for money, and so am I. That's why I can trust you—I hope—to regard this as confidential. It's getting a little too close. If someone were trying to ruin me—whether out of envy, or any other reason—to ruin this business I've worked like a steel-moulder to build, I'd stop at nothing. If I were only sure these murders involved me . . ."

Gavreaux swore again, softly. Then he

looked at Nat, his sharp aquiline face appraising as a horse-trader's. A rueful twist finally softened his grim mouth. "You may be the man I want," he said. "I certainly want someone—it's beyond me. The police are no good . . . too much publicity. Besides, they've done nothing. If you get to the bottom of this, and keep my name out of it, I'll make it worth your while. It's shooting my nerves to hell."

Nat was beginning to understand the smoothness of his entry. There were tense lines around Gavreaux's hard eyes, lines that hadn't come there in a day.

But only half his mind was busied in appraisal of the man he had come to see, while the other half killed the question which was already on his lips—the question he had really come to ask. A split-second reaction whirled him to the door in soundless strides. He yanked it open.

"Won't you come in, Miss?"

It was the girl who had taken his card at the desk downstairs.

CHAPTER TWO

The Man With Half a Face

THE girl straightened, shook her hair defensively into order, and stepped across the doorsill. She was tall, staunch, straight as an arrow in the simple black dress, with clear pale features and dark, lively eyes. She was the last person on earth, even at second glance, who seemed capable of eavesdropping—yet apparently that was what she had been trying to do. Nat had heard her footsteps, hesitant and cautious in the hall, stopping just outside the door. She had neither come in nor gone on.

Gavreaux sized up the situation at once. "Jane!" His voice was waspish. "I don't quite understand, Mr. Perry. Miss Barnett's my most trusted employee. I didn't know she made a habit of spying on—"

"I wasn't spying," the girl answered, a little contemptuously. She disregarded Nat. "I came to tell you I'll be out most of the afternoon. I'm visiting at Aunt's. She's no better. Will that be all right?"

Gavreaux frowned, then seemed to think better of it, and nodded. The girl turned to go. As she passed Perry, she interested herself in him for the first time. He was startled by a queer ardent plea that suddenly came into her face—and as suddenly died. It was a look so personal that it made him instinctively want to answer her, though he had no way of knowing the question. Then she was gone.

"Who is she?" he asked Gavreaux.

Gavreaux had the air of a man who has come to a decision. "Jane Barnett—she's been working here for years. I don't exactly get it, Perry; she's almost a full partner. She brought a lot of money into the firm—she has an aunt who's practically subsidized the girl's career. That's Mrs. Thomson Donegan. Jane's also handled Mrs. Donegan's account with us. As you've just heard, Mrs. Donegan's ill. That's all I can tell you, Perry—make the most of it."

Perry thanked the manager, and reached for his hat and gloves. The information he had come to seek had been volunteered.

He was still wondering about the unvoiced plea in a girl's face when he got into the green touring-sedan.

His thoughts stopped as abruptly as the car. He pulled his hand from the gear-shift, and stepped on the brake in mid-traffic, disregarding the angry horns behind him.

There was a neat and minute slice in his right glove. In an almost imperceptible crack in the gear handle, glistened the hair-thin end of a sharp blade. His hand had barely been cut—there was only an edge peeled off the hard callous on his palm.

Slowly, his heart stepped down from the crazy staccato that came to it in danger. He wrapped his left glove around the gear handle, and started north again. It had been no accident. Flimsy enough evidence, and a strong hunch, had sent him to Gavreaux's. This wasn't flimsy—it was deliberately attempted murder. Someone wanted him out of the way, someone who knew his particular weakness.

Someone who wasn't through, not yet. Unless he'd been recognized as he entered, the first person at Gavreaux's to know his identity and presence was the girl.

A trail that began with disembowelled corpses—but the girl shouldn't belong anywhere near it! Somewhere, watching for his next victim, there was a maniac, sadistically perverted . . . but Nat wasn't dealing with a maniac alone, no matter what Harry O'Connor said to the contrary. No madman would have planted as subtle a death as that in his hand's way.

No, it was a mind clever as any he'd dealt with, a mind the more dangerous because it could couple a madman's methods with a clear intellect. A rotten mind, filthy and cruel, but sane.

A cold inner rage kept him from going to O'Connor with this final proof. Nat was young, with the love of life strong in every cell in his body. But something more than an instinct for survival made him want to be the first to meet whoever had left that blade where he found it.

THE big house hulked on the river's edge, alone and proud at the fringe of a crowded city. Near the southwest tip of the Bronx, timeless and magnificent it stood, surrounded by a sloping garden that reached from the modern highway to the Hudson. Things in New York grow shabby with age, but the Donegan house had grown venerable, like the Hudson itself.

Nat had heard of Mrs. Thomson Done-

gan—most people had. Fifty-odd. Enormously active in that vast, vague field called charity. Her name endorsed drives to raise funds for refugees, crippled children, lepers and wayward girls. She had her definite place in the traditions of New York.

An elderly butler scrutinized the detective primly, was pushed aside by a larger and younger man.

"What do you want?" A man of thirty, plump and verging on the bald, with a face uncharted as a child's, confronted Nat. His voice was thin and high-pitched. Nat looked at him without answering, and a stubborn petulance came into the plump face. "Mother isn't seeing anyone," he said.

Opposition was what Nat had waited for. The rage in him crystallized, grew purposeful. He started toward the hall staircase.

"Your mother will judge that herself," he said.

Clumsy, but full of gusto, the male child of thirty rushed at him. Nat caught his collar, and held on. Damn fool, he thought—and then he wondered if the young man could possibly know that the slightest of indiscriminate bruises might be fatal to Nathaniel Perry.

Suddenly the young man ceased his futile struggles. "You've got a gun!" he whimpered. "I see it—you've got a gun!"

"Of course he's got a gun." It was the girl from Gavreaux's. She stood behind them, wearing a small black hat, with a wind-flush just fading from her cheeks—she had apparently reached the house only a little before Perry did. The thirty-year-old quieted and Nat let go of him.

Of the pleading in her face, nothing was left. She was reserved, hostile. "This is my cousin Bob, Mr. Perry. You happen to be in his home. Do you usually begin your visits so forcibly?"

Bluntly, Nat said, "I felt I was wanted here. I came because you looked as

though you needed help—and you looked at me."

She stared at him, and swallowed hard. She stood stiffly, hands trembling a little at her sides, as though she were forcing herself to a decision. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet. "Go upstairs, Bob—see if Aunt's all right."

The young man obeyed unhesitatingly. For the first time, Nat found himself alone with the girl who seemed to carry in her heart a secret clue to the puzzle. "Had you another reason for coming?" she asked faintly.

"Yes."

The stiffness went from her, one white hand crossed her forehead. Her mouth quivered. Nat guessed she had maintained a rigid control for a long time, and now she could no longer maintain it, even in her own mind. "I'm sorry," she breathed. "I did try to let you know, when I came into Gavreaux's office—and then I didn't know if I wanted to. What did he tell you?"

"Only what you told me, or tried to tell me. That your aunt was ill."

She sighed, and the sound was akin to a sob. "Do you think it means anything? You don't think she'll . . . go the way of the others—who were murdered?"

AS FAR as he knew, Nat had been the only one to guess at the recurring pattern which would make Mrs. Donegan the next victim of the Rag Doll Killer. But the girl had guessed at the same thing—guessed or known! What were her premises? Where had she learned, and why was she afraid?

"You'll have to tell me more before I can answer that," he told her gently.

She tried to speak, seemed unable to begin. Finally, she said, "Mr. Perry, do you want to see my aunt? I think she'll tell you, better than I can."

Only a night-light glowed in the neat old-fashioned bedroom where Mrs. Done-

gan lay. Bob Donegan stood at the foot of his mother's bed, his childish features perplexed and miserable.

The woman on the bed opened her eyes and looked at the newcomers. She was pale, pain-wracked, not young—but she had been beautiful. Her eyes had a dull fever-lustre that seemed to act almost as a veil, and through which she peered intently.

"Jane?" Her voice was faint, thick. Jane walked quietly over to the bedside, taking Nat with her.

"This is Mr. Perry, Aunt Hazel. He's a friend—he's come to help me."

The old lady looked at Nat out of those dully glowing eyes, as though she were trying to fix his face in her memory forever. When she spoke, he had to bend close to catch the words. "Poor Jane . . . you'll need all your friends. Poor motherless child. . . ." Her next words were for Nat. "I've stood by my girl . . . always will. Won't back out . . . till this thing's cleared up. We backed her . . . several of us. The others died. I'm not dead yet . . . not all of us dead yet. I won't start a panic. There's always been a devil, but that's no reason . . . for running away from him!"

Perry's eyes were inches away from Mrs. Donegan's face. Her skin was clear, almost without lines, under the faint discolor of pain and illness—almost abnormally clear for a woman her age, like the skin of a girl.

Only at the corner of her mouth, was the faint beginning of a canker. The detective's eyes were fixed on it—he hardly heard Jane explaining in a whisper, "She means those three women who were murdered—they were all my business accounts. And we can't understand—"

Suddenly, the stolid figure of Bob Donegan came alive. He tiptoed toward Jane, touched her shoulder, and pointed excitedly out of the west window.

Outside, a night wind rustled distinctly

against a bare bush. At the river's edge, a shape seemed to blur in the darkness, a human shape.

Then, a monstrous shadow seemed to cross the garden, like a harbinger of doom . . . a shadow, or a living thing. In the dark, it was impossible to know.

Jane looked wide-eyed at Nat. "No one has any business there," she stated.

"Stay here," Nat warned her. He left the room quietly, went downstairs, out of the house.

A TIGHT sense of danger quickened in his skin as he picked his careful way on the garden's stone descent. It was that feeling he always had on the verge of unforeseeable encounter—that death was always at his elbow, a stern angel with velvet wings and sharp hidden sword.

Sere branches froned the damp stone walk—he felt their dry tips tugging at his arms and legs. He was sure of only one thing about the man he was about to interrupt in the dark; that those in the house had half-expected his coming. They did not want him; they were afraid of him, and they did not know who he was. Perhaps no one knew that—no one who was alive to tell.

The figure loosening the guy-rope of a motorboat loomed almost directly in front of him. Nat felt for his revolver, and in that instant, a time-worn flag in the stone crumbled under his tread.

Without warning, the loose-jointed figure turned and rushed him with incredible speed. No time to draw—he dodged, and the figure whirled for another try at him. There was a guttural growl of anger, a shadowy bludgeoning of big fists. Nat twisted aside again as the other's momentum carried him past. Nat caught at a flashing wrist with his right hand, twisted his anonymous attacker off balance, and struck him on the head with the calloused underside of his left hand.

In the very moment of impact, he felt a rottenness, a lack of resilience, in the skin that flinched under the blow. An outrageous certainty clicked in his brain. . . . The man went to his knees, dazedly, and stayed there. Nat Perry used the most ancient scientific method of fighting, and the deadliest. It was born in the Orient, in a civilization more accurately brutal than his own, less careful of human life—and it spared his knuckles from those fateful little bruises.

The man looked up, his face white in the deep twilight, and Nat Perry saw what he had already guessed. His opponent had only half a face. Below the pinched nose, there was only a leprous mess of sores, in which no feature was distinguishable.

"The Bleeder!" he gasped, out of his rotten orifice of a mouth. Then he spread out his hands, showing them empty. "I ain't carryin' a gun or a knife—not so much as a pin on me. I was jest—lookin' for my brother."

Kill or be killed—that had been Nat's challenge to the underworld; that was at the root of his reputation. But the half-faced man squatting on the ground wasn't taking up the challenge as the cold bore of Nat's revolver looked him in the eyes.

Nat had never seen him before, but the man apparently knew him by his synonym in the underworld. That meant a previous encounter—probably before the other's face had deviated so horribly from the norm.

He guessed grimly that this meeting had been planned, but not as it had happened. No, he had been meant to be taken by surprise, just as the slow scraping of his hand from a tampered-with gear-shift had been meant to take him by surprise.

The definite knowledge made him breathe more easily—his skin relaxed. He was about to ask the half-faced man to

talk—at the point of a gun—when the rotting features contorted into terror again.

Terror, not of Nat—but of something beyond, something that moved through the grounds with a slimy, plodding sound. The man struggled to an erect posture—the guttural voice, thick with fright, croaked, "Mister, lemme go! Before—"

A girl's scream broke in the open night. Nat saw Jane Barnett racing toward the house as though hell were yawning about her. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Devil's Abattoir

SHE was not alone—a little behind her, as though he were trying to cover her escape, was the girl's cousin. And closing in on both of them was a thing that bounded like an animal—except that no animal wears clothing and travels on two legs.

The thing reached them before Nat did. With rage and horror, he saw the young man smothered in a foul embrace, saw the girl turn and attempt a futile rescue.

Nat brushed her aside, came between her and the thing that had caught Bob Donegan. It was taller than he, even as it stooped over an oddly still prey. It had an egg-shaped head, like a cretin child's, and its mouth was wide in a blood-flecked grin. A shapeless, witless deformity, hulking over him in tattered shirt and faded blue denim trousers—a nightmarish version of the perverted soulless thing that had haunted New York for almost a year—the phantom Rag Doll Killer!

Nat's defense was automatic, a desperate gesture in the teeth of helplessness. He hardly expected it to work—barely thought the thing human. As the cretin rushed him, he slapped an accurate blow to the sloped fuzzy temple—and saw the

thing stagger backward, relinquishing its hideous burden of death. He whipped his automatic from its sheath. . . .

Simultaneously, a whistle shrilled at the water's edge, and the thing raced from him like a blooded horse. His bullet whined futilely into the foliage—he ran down the stone steps, sending lead ahead of him into the darkness.

The motorboat was bobbing idly on the black river—they weren't trying to get away. Somewhere in the shrubbery, they were waiting for a better chance—an almost immediate chance—for murder.

He raced back toward Jane, his heart knocking crazily against his ribs. "Your aunt . . . you didn't leave her alone!" he cried.

She was a shadow, kneeling beside Bob's body. "The butler's with her," she answered dazedly. "We came to see—if you needed help. You seemed in trouble. We didn't know there were two of them. That other thing cornered us in the garden."

Nat stared at the thing that had been Bob Donegan. Throat ripped to the nape, head twisted askew, fastened to the body by one knotted muscle—and soon the gory stream that jerked reflexively from the tattered neck would cease. Bob had died without time to utter even a cry of pain.

Swiftly, Nat got the girl back to the comparative safety of the house, rushed her to her aunt's room. The old lady lay in a half-sleep, mercifully unaware of what had transpired. Beside her bed stood the elderly man who had admitted Nat to the house.

"The shots," he stammered. "I heard shots. . . ." Bewilderedly, he looked at Jane and at Nat.

"Show me the phone," Nat commanded tersely. Before he did anything else, he had to notify the police that a murder had been committed.

The old man led him downstairs, to

the front hall. Nat started to dial headquarters, and then stopped abruptly. . . . The wires were dead!

Nat slammed the receiver down with an oath as the significance of the dead phone sank into his mind. Could his two recent adversaries of the garden have entered the house, found the telephone connections that quickly? And if not they, who had cut those wires? A third enemy—one who worked with his brains, using the other two as tools, must have entered the house earlier.

He snapped at the butler, "See if you can find the trouble, or get help somehow. I'll be right with you."

The girl stood at the threshold of her aunt's room. Without a word, he handed her his gun.

"She's still sleeping," Jane whispered tensely, taking the weapon. "But if it weren't for you—"

A chaotic crescendo of sound, echoing suddenly through the house, interrupted her. The heavy impact of bodies, excited voices, and through it all, one fading cry of agony. . . .

"Stay with your aunt!" Perry ordered. "And if anyone tries to get in . . . shoot!"

THE old butler had reached the source of the sound before Nat did. Perry found him in the basement, crouching over the remains of an elderly woman with blood streaming over her checkered apron. A sea of sick hatred rose in the young detective. He heard the old man snarl, "You killed my wife, you—"

And then the cretin leapt from the shadows, grinning at the old man's agony. Before he could intervene, Perry saw the old man's head circled in the crook of a monstrous elbow, heard the crunching of bone. Protest had been silenced by death—but in Nat's heart, there was another, more furious protest.

A report, an orange streak in the murk-

iness of the cellar, told him that he had been sighted by the monster's keeper. In the next moment, he leapt for the cretin, who wheeled to meet his rush. Perry's right foot flew forward, caught the cretin in the belly. He grasped the cretin's shoulders, somersaulted backward, and the cretin crashed behind him, on its head—but that head was as hard as the basement floor.

As he leapt to his feet, he felt the jar of another impact which brushed him aside. He reached for the wall to keep his balance, touched the broken ends of wiring on the wall. It was here the phone had been cut.

He dashed after the ghastly pair, terrified lest they reach the upstairs bedroom before he did. There was just a chance that he knew his way through the house better than they did—he made it back to the bedroom where a girl sat by the bedside of a woman who was barely aware of what was going on, and turned the key in the door behind him.

Downstairs, he heard the ominous tread of the strangers' feet.

It flashed through his mind again, that possibility of a yet unseen adversary . . . for if those two had known the house well enough to locate the telephone wires immediately, why had they not found the bedroom before he reached it? Who had cut those wires? One of the pitiful old pair who now lay united in death in the stone basement? He couldn't believe that. . . .

"You're bleeding!" the girl cried faintly, at the sight of him. She came toward him, anxious, forgetting her own danger for a moment in concern for her unsummoned champion . . . how grave his danger was, even she did not know.

The white, streaked face of a ghost looked at Perry. He was looking into a pier glass, at his own countenance. He was haggard, paler than usual—and swaths of red blood were drying to black

all over him. His own blood? He didn't know. He had been close, too close, to blood, for a long time now . . . he was tired, almost faint, but there was a desperation inside him that would not let him stop. If it were his own blood, he would drop in a little while, and not be able to get up. There was no remedy. In the meantime, he was all the more pressed to use what time he had. Help had to be summoned. . . .

He waved the girl aside, as she came toward him, his brain working hectically. They were isolated from the outside, as surely as though they had been stranded on a desert island, instead of in a bedroom in one of the most magnificent houses in New York. He had two women to care for—it was out of the question for him to chance worming his way down the outside wall, through the garden, to summon help. He had to stay, and he had to summon the police, with no means of communication. . . . While, in the house itself, death was coming closer every second.

Jane knew. She said, "You're a brave man, Mr. Perry, but this isn't your trouble. You could get away, if you went alone. These vines outside the window. . . ."

Outside in the hall a slimy footstep plop-plopped toward the door. A loud thud echoed through the semi-darkness as a heavy body hurled itself against the locked door.

FROM the east window, Nat could see the highway, glimmering with its thousand lights . . . less than a hundred yards away, and yet separated from them by a seeming infinity. He could barely distinguish the separate light stanchions, and the bulbous object on one of them—he had passed that way earlier, knew what the faint bulb signified.

A police call box. It was a thousand to one shot, but he could try. Shots had

already been fired on the Donegan estate, and no investigation had ensued . . . but this shot might bring investigation.

He aimed through the trees, fired twice, three times.

The insistent thud outside the door was repeated. A hinge creaked, the wood seemed to bulge inward. Toward the east, Perry saw a prowler car pull up beside the ruined call box. He fired all but one of his remaining bullets into the air, hoping against hope he would be noticed.

Could he cover the two women, if that door broke down too soon? His eyes met Jane's, found there something valiant and indomitable. . . .

Then, the night split wide open to the blatant sound of an approaching police siren!

At once, the attack ceased on the other side of the door. Footsteps retreated down the corridor. When Nat unlocked the door, there was only darkness. He fired his last bullet after the fading sound of running footsteps.

Jane caught his arm. "Please—don't go yet. Don't leave us alone."

"I won't." He felt a little unsteady as he stepped back into the room—there had been so much blood, all around him, and somehow, he had not been scratched. "You'll be safe now," he told the girl. "You and your aunt—for tonight, anyway. Jane, before the police come, tell me how you got into this. What reason you had for suspecting—what your aunt meant when she said she'd stand behind you."

"You know as much as I do," she insisted.

He nodded. They were alone no longer. Harry O'Connor had come into the room, and after taking one long look at Nat, he said, "I might have known it was you—there's only one man in this town who'd take it into his head to ruin police property."

Jane listened intently as Nat gave

Harry descriptions of the cretin and the half-faced man. A queer frightened light came into her eyes—she caught at Nat's sleeve, and cried, "Why I know him! There couldn't be two of them. . . ."

"Know who?" O'Connor demanded brusquely. "You're talking to me now, Miss."

Jane caught her breath, and then answered quietly, "A man who's been coming in for treatments. He lost half his face, I think it was years ago, in a railroad accident. He came to Gavreaux's, to see if they could fix him somehow."

"What's his name?" O'Connor demanded. The old policeman's eyes glinted fiercely, youthfully. "Where can we find him?"

"I don't know." Helplessly, the girl looked at Nat. "I just saw him—never had anything to do with him. Mr. Gavreaux could tell you all that."

O'Connor nodded. "I've sent a man down to fix the phone wires. I'll call Gavreaux when he comes back." Then he turned to Nat. "Isn't it about time for you to clear out?"

"Pretty soon, Pop," Nat agreed. "Here's your man now. I'm just curious. Suppose you try to reach Gavreaux."

The girl looked at him gratefully. Then, as they listened to O'Connor telephoning, he was surprised to see that eloquent, pleading look come into her face again.

O'CONNOR looked up from the phone. "Guess it'll have to wait till morning." He sighed heavily, then said, "We'll find him, though—the boys are watching for him. And when he answers one question, we'll have the case solved." He turned to Nat. "You've done all right. Thanks—and go home."

"I think I'll go, too," Jane volunteered. She looked at Nat again, and her eyes beseeched him to agree with her.

"You'll do what?" O'Connor asked her. "Please—this isn't my home. I have an

apartment downtown. I'll have to be here for a few days now, to take care of Aunt Hazel. I just want to get a few things. . . ."

O'Connor looked at her, eyes appraising. "I'll send a couple of men with you," he offered at last. "Keep you out of more trouble."

Nat suggested, "Suppose you let me take her. That's not asking much, Pop."

It wasn't, and Nat had done a lot for O'Connor that night . . . the old policeman looked at the young man and at the young girl, and a half-smile came into his face. "O.K.," he said. "Don't be long about it."

In the green sedan, Jane's uneasiness vanished. "Take me to Gavreaux'," she demanded. There was a fierceness about her—it was like hatred.

"Gavreaux?"

"Yes. I've got the keys to the office. Somehow, I don't feel Aunt's safe, no matter how many policemen stand guard in that house, with that man at large. We may find the half-faced man in the firm's books—without waiting for morning."

Nat asked, with sudden sharpness, "Why couldn't you tell the police that?"

"Because there are other things in those books. Things no one will understand—until the case is cleared up."

"What makes you think I'll understand?"

"I'll chance it," she said, almost grimly, but when she looked at him, there was an appreciative warmth in her face. . . .

The three-story building on Fifth Avenue was dark and empty. Yet somehow, among the covered counters, through the gloomy aisles, Nat sensed a malevolent presence. He kept his eyes on the girl, his hand near his holster, as he followed her into Gavreaux' office.

The pale beam of an arclight outside the window fell on her intent face as she bent over the firm's books. Minutes passed before she looked up. "There's

nothing that looks quite like it," she said disappointedly. "Maybe if I looked through his calendar—"

Nat swerved abruptly, as he sensed, this time undeniably, the presence of a third party. Before he could make a further gesture of defense, a heavy body hurled into him from behind—he had only time to make a hard resilient ball of his body as he crashed to the floor. He had a nightmare glimpse of the cretin's face, and a fleet impression of Jane's voice, trying to reach him, as he struck out wildly at the thing hovering over him. Something sweet and soporific stabbed into his lungs instead of air—and then he had only a dazed, confused impression of shapes blurring into darkness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood of a Cretin

WHEN he came to, he was strapped to a narrow cot, in a small windowless room. A small coal furnace in the corner emitted a fitful warmth and light.

He was alone, but he guessed he would not be alone for long. He wanted water; the humid warmth of the smoky little room was torture. Water, and the clean air again. . . .

What had happened to Jane? If he had only reached her in time. . . . He could not move. His wrists were tied behind him. He felt himself lapsing into a nightmarish half-coma, as he struggled timelessly toward freedom.

Suddenly a definite sound sharpened his senses, stiffened him into alertness. Plop-plop, down the stairs. . . . It was the cretin.

Light widened in the doorway. He recognized the cretin by its hulking shape, but there was no way of recognizing the man who stood beside him, whose face was turned to the dark interior where Nat lay. Only an outline, with something

in his arms that looked like a girl's shape. . . .

A terse command brought the cretin to a halt. The girl's shape slumped like a sack on the arm of the monster's companion. It was Jane Barnett. She was bound and gagged, helpless.

Again, the man in the doorway turned to the cretin. Nat interrupted, called him softly: "Gavreaux."

The figure tensed, approached him. In the light of the coal-stove, Nat saw that his guess had been correct.

Gavreaux smiled. "Bright of you to know me. I wonder why. You don't look half so dangerous now, Mr. Perry, nor half so able to take care of yourself. Not at all like the intelligent young man I took you for."

"It won't go, Gavreaux," Nat said, his tongue thick with thirst. "Someone else is going to reason the way I reasoned. Someone's going to find you out—you know it. You're scared. You had to have three people killed tonight whom you hadn't expected to kill. It's getting hot and close, Gavreaux."

The hard-eyed man looked interested. "You'd have a hard time proving it."

"No—it's been pretty clear. Whoever committed those murders only ransacked the apartments as a blind. The robberies were too thorough—you planted them to keep the police from noticing exactly what system you followed with the victims. The most important thing you wrecked were the bodies. Faces smashed, organs ripped apart—there was never any need for an autopsy.

"All those killed had been your customers—and they'd all been ill. Of what? No one could tell; there wasn't enough left to diagnose. You've been raking it in for those rejuvenation treatments—you're the miracle man of your field. Maybe it wasn't such a one-sided miracle, Gavreaux—you haven't been the first dealer in dangerous cosmetics. Maybe it was

something that killed after it cured—something that rotted those re-made faces. The way it's begun to rot Mrs. Donegan's—the way it messed up your man's face."

Gavreaux laughed shortly. "Is that all?"

Perry gritted his teeth over the thirst and the pain. Words were coming to him slowly. "No, that isn't all. You took in a partner, Jane Barnett, who had the confidence of the right people. From then on, your business was divided into two parts—one run by you, the other ostensibly by Jane. In some way, she brought money into the firm, kept bringing it in—money in excess of the regular fees for treatments. Otherwise, you wouldn't have needed her. And she was afraid to tell the police what she knew, since all signs pointed to her.

"All your victims were the kind of woman who'd share their luck—donate liberally for the purpose of popularizing your wonderful treatments. Perhaps, like Mrs. Donegan, they trusted Jane—put money in her hands for that purpose. Those women died of their own charity, Gavreaux. Once they contributed, they had to die before they found out the treatments were a fraud. Mrs. Donegan intimated that to me in her delirium—she's probably intimating the same thing now, to the police, which is why your time is practically up."

GAVREAUX was still smiling. "That's why my time isn't practically up. You've been remarkably correct in your surmises; but even you must see the fallacy in your conclusions. It's true Jane and her aunt convinced a number of women friends of the philanthropic need of popularizing my treatments—but that was their doing, not mine. The firm's books prove that any money to come in that way, came through Jane.

"I'll be extremely shocked to discover her duplicity, at about the same time the

world discovers it, if it ever does. In the meantime, I'm giving her one more chance to maintain her innocence before the world."

"You won't get away with it," Perry warned him. "You're ruined."

Gavreaux paused. "Fortunately, I'm not as afraid of you as my man seemed to be. I actually had to offer him a bonus to tackle you—after he found out he was fighting the Bleeder. I imagine he met you once, before I did—I've never asked about his past."

"What makes you think he won't talk?" Perry asked the beauty operator.

"He won't—and his brother can't. I met the boys right after a train wreck. One of them seemed to be dying. The other was all right from the neck down, but his face was absolutely smashed. I took them home with me, told the less injured one that I could probably make him look fairly human, if he let me use his brother's body for materials to work from. I had such an experiment in mind at the time, and it seemed all right—the man was dying, anyway.

"My patient was cured, but it didn't last. In a short time, the new face I'd made for him by gland injections—glands taken from his brother's body—began to rot. To make things worse, my human factory lived; but he had become a half-wit. A cretin. My patient wanted to kill me then—I persuaded him he'd do better with me alive. Killing me wasn't going to help his looks, and it would cut him off from the only person who could use his services, who knew what ailed him, and who was thereby able to keep him alive. I took them into partnership with me—the cretin, of course, doesn't want anything from life but food and drink. He also has a dependable instinct for trying to get back his own. It's from his body that all the injections ever used in my treatments were prepared.

"And his brother is doing very well,

Perry, very well. He has plenty of pocket-money, nothing to worry about—why should he ruin all that by telling what he knows? No one would ever feel anything but pity for the poor fellow."

He picked up an ancient alarm clock from a rickety table in the corner, wound it, set it at midnight. Then he turned to the cretin.

"I'm going out now," he said distinctly, slowly, as he might have spoken to a child, but without kindness. "See this clock? In exactly half an hour"—he indicated twelve-thirty on the clock face—"you can do exactly as you like with him."

Gavreaux stooped over the girl, picked her up in his arms again. She winced, feebly, and then was still. "I didn't mean to stop for a talk, Mr. Perry . . . just thought I'd drop my pet here to keep you company. In case you're wondering why you've been left alive and conscious, I might tell you that this poor half-wit hasn't any desire to attack those who already seem dead to him."

The cretin's teeth gleamed in a thirsty smile—Gavreaux went out with the girl, closing the door behind him. The coals began to die. There was no bright thing in the room save the face of the clock and the gleaming teeth of a thing that had once been human.

NAT pulled recklessly at the cords that held him, not caring any more whether or not he broke his skin. The cretin snuffled at him, but evidently it had learned obedience in a relentless school—it was giving him his half-hour of grace.

But why? It was not out of mercy that he had been spared for thirty minutes—something was happening, something that thirty minutes was needed for. He pulled frantically—his hands dripped with moisture, but whether it were blood or sweat, he couldn't tell.

It was twelve-fifteen . . . and his hands

were free. The cretin sprang as Nat bolted upright, and the detective hurtled toward the door, ducking under the cretin's onrush. Mumbling furiously, the thing wheeled toward him.

Nat was on his feet, waiting for it. As it came at him again, he slashed at it savagely with the hard underside of his palm. The thing staggered, momentarily, brute anger twisting its already hideous features. Nat struck at it again, aiming his blow where it would do the most good.

It was a blow he reserved as a last resort—something that would have snapped a normal man's neck. The cretin seemed not quite dead, but it sprawled on the hard floor, insensible and harmless at last.

Nat found his way up the staircase—discovered he had been confined in a cellar, in an obscure stone house he had never seen before. The alley into which he stumbled was of a type to be found nowhere in Manhattan but Greenwich Village, the oldest part of the city. He had been brought in here unconscious.

Somewhere a clock tolled the half hour . . . and then there was the louder sound of a police siren. Suddenly Nat understood that half hour of grace.

The police had been *sent*—Gavreaux had meant his murder-tool to be found, to draw attention from his own activities. Half an hour, he'd allowed himself—half an hour's wait for the undependable maniac, who would then have been taken into custody for the time being as sole perpetrator of the Rag Doll murders, to which Nat's body would have been mute testimony.

There would have been on one to tie Gavreaux to the crimes—no one but a sick old lady.

Harry O'Connor was walking into the narrow little alley when Perry met him, Harry O'Connor with his old eyes half-frantic from worry. There were men in blue behind him.

"Nat! You damned fool, I thought you'd . . ."

"I did, Pop. Tell the boys to go in there, and clean up. You're coming back uptown with me. I haven't time to explain now. I'll tell you about it on the way. I found Gavreaux."

THE Donegan house loomed ahead in the moonlight like a big shadow, silent and dark. Harry O'Connor cut in for the first time since he'd heard Nat's story. "Seems empty enough. You were right. Those dumb cops left here as soon as they got the tip-off on that missing link downtown. He could have killed you—and nobody the wiser."

They entered the grounds without challenge—the place was unguarded. No voice sounded from road or river—on all sides, the place was deserted.

But in the driveway, in front of the house, stood an empty black sedan.

"You go inside, Pop," Nat said quietly. "It's on the second floor—she'll probably have a night-light burning. You'll see it from the inside hall. I'll stick around outside."

O'Connor started to protest, but Nat had already vanished into the black shrubbery. Wind touched the leaves, making a small music of them. No sound, not a voice or a footstep . . . he paused a few feet from the spot directly under Mrs. Donegan's window. A dark figure was inching up a century-old vine, and was now almost within grasping reach of the window-sill. He recognized Gavreaux in the moonlight. Still afraid of meeting some opposition in the house, the beautician had adopted second-story tactics. Nat trained his gun on the ascending figure and waited.

Then it happened. The barrel of O'Connor's pistol glinted bluely from the window-sill, and the old policeman snapped, "Freeze, down there—and drop what you're carrying, or I'll drop you."

Gavreaux gave a short cry, paused for a moment on the swaying vine. A dark heavy object fell from his grasp. . . . Nat snaked toward it, gun still trained on Gavreaux.

But O'Connor evidently had the situation in hand—at a word from him, Gavreaux began to clamber slowly upward. A sudden rustle in the shrubbery beside him made Nat turn his glance.

Then he understood the beautician's easy surrender—for the half-faced man was lurking in the darkness, covering his master with a weapon aimed at O'Connor. A weapon that was never fired—for Nat Perry fired first. The half-faced man rolled over onto the black lawn.

A gasp—it was no more than that—directed Nat's attention to another figure concealed in the shrubbery. Jane . . . she was still trussed, helpless. Swiftly, he released her. "You can go in now," he whispered. "You'll never be troubled again.

She did not move.

"Nat!" O'Connor's face glared out of the window. His eyes were hard, his voice angry. "Nat, you fool—come on up here! We've got him!"

"You mean *you've* got him, Pop."

The apoplectic purple in the veins of Harry O'Connor's forehead were invisible in the darkness—but there was a hint of that quality in his voice as he called to his foster-son, "Nat, damn you

—you can't hand it to me like this!"

"You'd better stay put, Pop." The young man's voice was an echo out of the shadows. "If you come after me now, he'll get away. I'll send you help."

A soft hand fell detainingly on Nat's elbow as he started for the highway.

"I owe you so immeasurably much, Mr. Perry—I'd be dead now, if you hadn't come. You've made my life right again."

"It wasn't I," he said. "You had it all, to begin with. Courage . . . and loyalty. I'm just a dick. This was a job."

"I told my aunt you were a friend," she insisted. "I'll always feel that way. You've been one of the best friends I ever had, just in a few hours. I don't want to lose you. I won't, will I?"

"Perhaps not," said Nat Perry. She had no way of knowing, this dark vibrant girl with her heritage of health and integrity, what curse there was in his blood, what strange companionship he had to offer. Something like a homesickness for the normalcy he had never known made him falter for a second—and then he knew. She belonged in the Donegan house, with its sturdy ancient tradition, and he in the obscure safety of his own corner of nowhere.

"Good-bye," he said quietly. He could still see her, a small straight line in the shadows, as he rounded the first curve of the highway.

THE END



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THE SPIDER'S PARLOR

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

Grotesque, horrible, that inhuman apparition hung there—its staring eyes and bulging body mute testimony of how strangely it had died. But Dr. Bain, who was himself a specialist in horror, knew that this was not the end. Somewhere in the shadows was the grisly master of crime—lying in wait for his next victim!



"My God!" screamed the small, piping voice.
"It's Jim—it's Jim!"

IN THE stained and grimy fronts of the tenements on Wayne Avenue, the windows are more often than not glassless and ragstuffed against the cold and rain. The people who shuffle dully

along the broken sidewalks outside are ill-clothed, unwashed, unshaved, and in their eyes is never hope but always fear—fear of hunger and homelessness and a pauper's grave.

Fear broods always in this dreary slum street, but on a certain fall evening it was almost as tangible as the musty reek of rotted food and rotting bodies. And this fear was different. It was terror, icy and omnipresent, of strange, pallid creatures who soon would prowl the black and greasy shadows; of these and of that which they would do.

This sense of threat was everywhere in the slum. It was a cloud of dread in the bare, uncarpeted room within the street-level basement of the brownstone house at Two-forty. It held to silence those who sat on the stools that were the chamber's only furnishing, so that the only sounds were the cough racking a scrawny chest, the wail of a fever-seared babe in its shawled mother's arms, the low moan of an old woman in whose breast a hard lump of pain gnawed eternally . . .

There was the creak, from the high stoop's newel post outside, of a narrow, hanging sign whose tarnished legend, when it swung into a street lamp's pale glow, read: *John Bain, M. D.*

A door in the wall opposite the room's deeply embrasured windows opened. A man came out through it. He was stalwart, powerfully built, but his face was a still grey mask, his lips white and tight-pressed to hold back a torrent of profane protest against the sentence that had just been passed upon him.

He stumbled unseeingly across the floor and out. In the doorway, through which he had come, another figure stood; short, bowed-legs aspraddle; the loose-hung arms at his sides so long that their back-curved hands were even with his knees; his head, capped by hair completely colorless, thrust forward and canted to one side with a queer ungainliness.

His palely pink and lashless eyes passed utterly without expression over the countenances of those in John Bain's waiting-room. The cough, the old woman's moan, even the baby's wail, hushed. For an endless minute there was absolute silence save for the creak, creak of the physician's shingle.

That sound, shrilly rasping, seemed the very voice of the fear that throttled Wayne Avenue, the fear all knew terribly but of which none dared to speak.

In the doughlike blob that was the face of Henry—(Bain's factotum is known by no other name)—a thin slit of a mouth opened. His right hand lifted, jabbed a thumb one of the sitters. "You," he said without intonation. "You're next."

There was vibrant eagerness in the way he whom Henry indicated darted toward the door. His short stature, his ragged blouse and tattered knickers showed him to be a lad of about twelve, but his sharp-featured visage was pinched and bleached as an old man's and in his deep-sunk eyes there was the glitter of a small animal's keen cunning—an ageless shrewdness.

Something feral there was, too, in the pad, pad of his shoeless feet as he reached the doorway and scuttled past Henry into John Bain's office. The door closed behind him, and suddenly the boy was motionless, his half-defiant grin vanishing, his small body quivering, his glance flicking about the shadowed room like that of a trapped woods creature.

"Come on," a stern voice commanded. "Come on."

The gamin shuddered and was moving again, almost reluctantly now, toward the aura of yellow light out of which the voice had come.

THE glow came from a shaded lamp on a battered desk that was cluttered with instruments. Behind the desk was an immense, brooding bulk of a man;

gaunt frame, massive head, knobbed and beardless face alike grey and hard as granite and as devoid of human emotion, to all outward appearance, as if he were actually hewn from rock. Beyond Dr. John Bain's motionless figure there was the vague paleness of a screen, the glitter of shelved bottles, the dark oblong of an unshaded window that looked out upon the brownstone house's debris-strewn backyard.

Nearing a decrepit chair placed before the desk, the boy's grimy fingers fished in his trouser pocket and came out clenched. The hand opened on the desktop.

Where it had rested briefly there was a small heap of coins; pennies, nickles, one or two dimes. "What's that?" Bain demanded harshly. "What's that mess?"

"Your dollar," the lad gasped, still standing. "They say you won't talk to nobody without he pays you first; so there it is!"

Henry was at the corner of the desk, noiseless as if he had magically materialized there. He counted the coins, deftly and without sound, nodded. Bain's hand, long and slim and tapering in odd contrast to his body's hugeness, reached for the tidy pile the albino had made, dropped it into a drawer his other hand had opened.

"What's your name?" he queried then.

"Bob. Bob Dipton."

"And what's the matter with you?"

"Nothin'."

Under the grizzled eaves of the physician's brows, his eyes narrowed. "What did you come here for?" There was a low growl in his tone, and the almost invisible knotting of a small muscle at the corner of his rocky jaw might have been anger . . . or something else. "Why are you wasting my time?"

Bob struggled with a lump in his throat, swallowed it. "I—I mean there ain't nothin' the matter with me health," he gulped. "But—but I'm scared."

Abruptly, he was whispering, for all his self-sufficiency a small and very frightened child. "I'm awful scared—for Jim."

"Jim?"

"My big brother. He didn't show up at the paper-stand he tends—one of Big Dick Tolan's. He ain't nowhere's aroun'. I'm scared they've got him."

"They?"

"The Goofers." In the way he uttered that name there was chilling terror. "This mornin' he said he had a hunch who they was, an' that he'd know for certain today. I tol' him he'd better lay off them, an' he said maybe he would, but now I can't find him." The lad's voice was rising now, becoming shrill-edged with hysteria. "They've got him! I know they've got him, an' they'll . . . you got to save him, Doc. You *got* to."

"I?" The physician grated. "Why come to me? I'm a doctor, not a detective. Why don't you go to the police?"

The shrewdness was back in Bob's color-drained face. "Listen," he said, "I know you're a doc. But I know you're a hell of a lot more. I know 'bout what you done for Mary Madden when Frank was in trouble. An' I know 'bout lots of the other things you done. You're a better dick than all the cops in the city put together, an' it's for us poor slobs that the cops don't give a hoot in hell for that you do your stuff . . . Geez, Doc, have a heart."

The words may have been impertinent, but the plea in the lad's blue eyes was not, nor the way his wan lips trembled.

"A heart?" There was bitterness in Bain's somber tone. His surgeon's fingers curled into the palm of his hand, and it was a sledge-hammer fist that lay on the desk.

Unobserved in the shadows, Henry stiffened, his ape's head jerking to the gloom-veiled window, his knees bending so that his legs were springs ready for instant action.

"Jim's all I got in the world, Doc," Bob sobbed. "There's just us . . ."

"All right," the physician shrugged. "I'll do what I can. I . . ."

Henry leaped to the window, his hands snatching its sash, flinging it up. Bain was out of his seat, whirling toward him . . .

"What . . . ?"

The albino was rigid, peering out into the fetid darkness, his hackles almost visibly bristling.

"I dunno," he responded, low toned. "Maybe nothing. But I swear I saw a face pressed . . ."

Sound cut him off, a gurgling well of sound out of the blackness, a scream of infinite agony. And then it stopped. . . .

Henry's form, vaulting the low sill, was blotted from Bob's sight by the doctor's bulk. Then Bain, too, was through the window and out in the black and terrible mystery beyond. The boy, shuddering within the sheath of ice to which his skin had turned, was staring after them.

CITY glow was a vague radiance in the sky, but below it was thick, heavy darkness. Somewhere within that dense and dreadful sightlessness was the pound of ponderous footfalls.

A sharp exclamation . . . Bain's mass was abruptly silhouetted against a beam which jabbed the darkness from a flashlight Henry held. The beam's end was a white disk drifting across shattered, refuse-slimed flagstones. It folded against some vertical surface, lifted . . . then pinned horror to the paintless and broken boards of a backyard fence!

The thing was huge and grotesquely man-shaped. It was the grey of a nightmare ghoul. Faceless and bloated, it was fastened erect to the fence by tendrils of the fleecy stuff of which it was composed. It might have been a more than life-sized mannikin, crudely fashioned from unwashed wool—save that it heaved, sluggishly, with a macaber sort of life. The

great soft lump, that was its head, muffled a moan audible only because of the stunned silence stifling the three who stared at it.

In almost that same instant, the apparition became still and soundless.

Words broke through the clamp on Bob's throat. "The Goofers. Another. . . ." Another! This was not the first such grisly monstrosity Wayne Avenue had seen. This was the terror that stalked the slum, that one by one was emptying its tenements. "They've done it again!"

"Again!" John Bain's hand lashed out, dug powerful fingers into the woolly mass enveloping the thing's head, ripped it open. He ripped the fleece from a blue, contorted face, from bulging, blood-shot eyes, from a gaping mouth crammed full of the dingy mass. . . .

A scream shrilled through the night once more. It was Bob Dipton's scream. "Jim!" A small figure leaped through the window, flung headlong across the yard. "Jim!" Frenzied small fingers tore insanely at the grey mass of filaments that encased a naked man, while the piping voice yammered, "It's Jim. My God; It's Jim!"

The matted threads clung to the gamins' hands, queerly sticky. They clung to John Bain's fingers as they probed that gaping mouth and extracted wisp after wisp of the stuff. They danced in the light Henry held.

"It's all the way back in his throat," the physician grunted. "It's in his lungs. He's. . . ."

"Dead? No!" Bob was whimpering now, tears streaking the dirt on his weazened face. "No Doc. He can't be. Not Jim. Not my Jim. Save him. You're a doctor. Save him."

Bain's huge arm dropped across the lad's shoulder. Oddly light, oddly tender, it stilled somewhat the shudders that shook the small frame. "I am a doctor, son, not God." The voice, too, was

strangely gentle. "Your brother is beyond my help." In the flashlight's eerie illumination, his craggy countenance was graven flint. "But I promise you that. . . ."

A STONE arced into the light beam. Not a stone, it thudded on the flagstone too softly for that. Henry bent, snatched it up. It was a wad of the wool that had enveloped Jim Dipton's cadaver—naked now and fallen to the ground on a bed of the stuff that had choked the life from it.

"There's something in it," the albino exclaimed, thumbing that which he had picked up.

He tore it open. "A paper, and it's got writing on it." A crisp rustle. "Geez, listen to this! 'You've found your Jim. Lay off us, Doctor Bain, or you'll get worse than him. The Goofers.'"

He twisted, his light flashing along the crumpled top of the fence, darting over it to impinge on fluttering clotheslines of tattered garments, on a tenement wall down which a rusted fire-escape crawled. "They're somewheres around."

"They were," Bain grated. "But we can't find them. There are a dozen cellars around to hide them." And then, as Henry groaned with helplessness, he turned back to Bob. "I promise you," he took up his sentence as though there had been no interruption, "that those who did this will be punished if it's the last thing I accomplish in this world."

His only answer was a sob from Bob. The lad was on his knees, his pipe-stem arms about the maltreated body.

"Come, son," the physician stooped to lay a tender hand on the boy's shaking shoulder. "That will do neither Jim nor you any good. I want you to tell me. . . ." He stiffened, bent closer, peering at the dead man's flaccid arm, at a blue-tinged fist clenched in its final agony. He reached to that hand, forced it open. . . .

"Don't touch him," Bob shrieked, batting at the physician, vicious as a hurt pup snapping at the one who would aid it. "It's your fault. You did it! *You did it!*"

A rush of sound drowned that scream, a surge of pounding feet, of hardly human yowls. Bain straightened, whirling to it.

"What . . . ?" Henry grunted, his flash beam slashing the darkness, finding the source of the tumult.

Men, the bedraggled men of the slum, gushed out of the black maw of an alley between the brownstone house and the garage next door. It was from these that the shouts came, from mouths gaping in pallid countenances wherein terror and rage were curiously commingled.

They surged out of the alley, ravening, gaunt arms upraised fists clenched on sticks, clubs. Their shadows, huge, black, ominous, danced on the whitewashed garage wall. They caught sight of the little group and milled, abruptly timorous, frozen by terror.

"There they are!" a shout came from somewhere among them. "The Goofers. Let's get them. There's nothing to be scared of. *Get them!*"

The mob started forward, was halted again by the blast of John Bain's voice.

"Stop, you fools!" Massive he was in the dimness, his arm upflung, his eyes blazing. "What madness is this?"

"You know damn well what it is," the same shout responded, raucous through the growling, bestial murmur of the throng and the whimpers of an almost animal fear. "You can't fool us no more." The owner of the voice thrust through the milling mass, flinging aside those who formed it as if they had no weight nor strength. "We got you red-handed."

He was shorter than any, but in girth he would have made three of them, and there was not an ounce of fat on his pillared legs, columnar arms, squat, barreled torso.

He was monstrous in the light Henry held upon him, his huge head completely bald, his eyes masked by round, dark goggles.

"Tolan," the albino breathed. "Big Dick Tolan."

"Yeah," the man snarled. "Big Dick Tolan. You picked the wrong guy to tangle with this time. I had an idea all along it was you was working this thing but it wasn't none of my affairs till you picked one of my boys. We was watching your place, thinking you wouldn't do nothing till your office hours was over, but we heard the hollering in back here and knew you wasn't waiting. Jim's the last guy you're going to bump, and we ain't leaving you to the cops for some smart mouth-piece to get off. Come on, fellows, we ain't taking any more of his guff. Come on."

With that, Tolan was lunging across the space between, enormous hands clawed to rend and tear and after him, emboldened by their leader's example, poured the rabid, ravening pack. With the insensate venom of the oppressed, they had always hated Bain, because they had to go to him in their illness, because he took their last dollars from them, and this was their chance to relieve that hatred.

There was no escape, no chance of escape from the terror-maddened, lynch-lusting mob.

In another second

"No," a high, boyish treble shrilled. "No!" and from Bain's very feet a tiny, wizened form launched itself straight at that ravening rush. "Doc ain't . . ." The boy's outstretched arms circled Tolan's knees, clamped them. The big man's fist flailed down, smashed at the youngster, but the onrush behind shoved him off balance so that the suddenly flaccid form tripped him.

He went down, the crowd piled on him. The light went out and pitchy blackness blotted out the tossing, heaving, cursing mass.

IT WAS moments before that jumble of humanity disentangled itself, moments before the flame of a scratched match flowered in the stygian murk. Bob Dipton lay, a still pathetic figure on the ground, stunned by Tolan's blow but otherwise unhurt. On its lethal mattress was crumpled his brother's corpse. But John Bain and his faithful acolyte were nowhere to be seen. . . .

"Never mind," Big Dick Tolan grunted. "They got to show somewheres, sometime, and we'll get them then."

He might have been certain of that, but his followers were not. There had been something magical about the vanishment of the two they hated, something almost supernatural. And there, horrible on the grey, woolen mass against the fence, was an example of the vengeance that surely now would overtake them.

They slunk furtively away, not daring to look at one another, or speak, each hoping that in the darkness and confusion he had not been seen or recognized. And now, along the sleazy slum street, there was a vast stirring, and a running about as of disturbed ants.

The news of the Goofers' latest exploit ran like wildfire through the slum, and because of the spine-chilling mystery of its perpetrators' escape it broke at last Wayne Avenue's dumb acceptance of whatever fate might be in store for it. Soon, all along the sleazy thoroughfare carts rumbled, piled high with the paltry furnishings of the very poor. Not vans, but pushcarts, shoved by bent, gaunt men, by shawled women, by sleepy children. Wayne Avenue was fleeing from terror—and terror went with them, painting their faces with the grey quiver of fear, bluing their lips, dilating their pupils.

The exodus went eastward toward where, along the riverfront, row upon row of decrepit wooden shacks had mouldered for years; untenanted, vermin-infested

hovels too foul till now for even the poorest to seek shelter.

The reason for this curious unanimity in the direction of that flight was unguessable, except that from mouth to mouth spread whispers of that refuge, started no one knew where or by whom.

Meantime, through the stench filled gloom of Wayne Avenue's backyards, a shapeless shadow flitted under the brooding skyglow. Curiously enough, though it also was in flight, and from a threat more imminent than that which overhung the others, there seemed to be a definite purpose in its furtive progress, a final goal at which it aimed.

AT THE corner of Wayne Avenue and Foster Street a brick block of a building stands. Its windows are tiny, and crusted with dirt, but across its front a great door opens through which trucks may pass in and out. There is no sign on this stark structure, but everyone knows that it is the headquarters of Big Dick Tolan, the center of his far-flung net of newstands and open-fronted, fly-filled little stationery stores.

There is no business so small, or whose gains are so paltry that with its units assembled in numbers it cannot yield wealth to the enterprising—and ruthless.

Only between the hours of ten and two is Tolan's building unoccupied, between the time when the last evening newspaper has been distributed and the first morning edition appears. Now, somewhere near twelve of Wayne Avenue's night of terror and flight, it was cloaked in darkness and silence. Within its thick walls there was the crisp smell of paper, the pungently-sweet aroma of fresh ink. . .

And also there was a tenuous, acrid odor that was neither paper nor ink.

Toward the front of the high-ceilinged, lightless vault there was empty space where shortly Tolan's trucks would maneuver. At the rear great piles of re-

turned newspapers, of magazines waiting their set date of release, loomed to make the darkness more dense, and oddly forboding. There was nothing living here. . . .

There should have been nothing living. But there was movement somewhere among those towering piles, a faint disturbance of the thick air, the hiss of a leather sole on the concrete flooring, a whisper of carefully guarded breath . . . and a shadow drifting, blacker than black itself, along the close aisles.

A slender pencil of light was suddenly apparent. It touched a heap of magazines. A hand appeared in the luminous spot, its fingers long and slim and tapering. Those fingers thrust into the pile, lifted the periodicals apart to reveal a multi-colored corner of one of the covers, vanished. There was a soft sigh, and movement again, and again the stealthy inspection of a magazine pile.

At the fifth heap the light paused. This was smaller than the others, and more jagged, as though the pile had been tumbled and had been hastily set up again. The almost inaudible breathing quivered, and the probing fingers went to the top of the heap, meticulously raised one after another of the magazines, inspecting each one.

Halfway down the pile they stopped, pulled out a magazine. The cover of this one was torn, a jagged piece jerked from it, and the rest crumpled. Once more the sigh sounded, but there was satisfaction in it now.

Now the light dropped to the floor between the aisles, and against its vague radiance a massive black bulk might have been visible had there been any one to see, crouched and huge as some primeval monster. The beam flitted back and forth across the floor's grey and dusty concrete, back and forth in an advancing track that covered it inch by inch.

Abruptly the scanning pencil held still,

fingering a crack in the flooring, a hair-breadth break in its surface that was too ruler-straight to be accidental. The prowler's dim mass crouched lower. The hand appeared again, stroking the concrete, searching. . . .

A click, abruptly, rewarded that search. Oddly, the crack was widening, was a nubian slit across the floor, became an oblong, then a square black pit quite large enough to admit a man. And out of it there came the acid reek, pungent, now, nose-prickling.

"Got it," Doctor Bain muttered. "It's down there, all right."

He manipulated the shutter of his flashlight, widened the beam it emitted. The light, thrusting downward, was jagged by the iron rungs of a vertical, descending ladder.

An instant more of tense waiting, and Bain was going down into the pit he had discovered. He dropped from the lowermost rung. His flashlight darted about the cavity.

VAULTED stone arches supported the floor above, green-slimed and fetid with moisture. Shelving encircled one of the pillars, serrated with gallon bottles. Centering the chamber was a huge vat, filled, as Bain's light revealed, by a grey, and bubbling liquid so dense as to appear on the verge of solidifying.

It was from this vat that the acid stench rose. On the floor beside it were a number of small brass tanks from each of which hung short lengths of red rubber tubing, brass-nozzled—fire-extinguishers of a very common type.

There was something else on the floor. A heap of clothing, trousers, a torn shirt. A cap. The physician's lips twisted with what might have been a smile save that there was no humor in his brooding eyes. He crossed to this, bent and picked up the trousers. His hand went into one of the pockets, came out with a tattered wallet.

A grimed card was visible under a bit of scratched isinglass let into one side of the wallet—an identification card—the name crudely hand-printed on that card was—*James Dipton!*

John Bain shoved the wallet into his pocket, turned to the vat. . . . Something grated, pulled his startled look, his flash beam, overhead, to the sliding trapdoor by which he had entered. It was closing! Bain whirled, leaped for the ladder. . . .

Something tripped him. He hit the ground hard. The flash bounced from his hand, crashed, smashed darkness down on him. He rolled—into something wet, thick, clinging. It clogged his legs, his arms, for all his great strength he could not get free of it. The molasses-like mass was stiffening, was a fleecy warm envelope soft as wool and as impossible to fight free of as chains of the finest steel. Bain could move no longer. He could only lie, panting, shaken on the floor. . . .

A HOLLOW laugh sounded, and light flashed on, blindingly. Out of the dazle appeared a round huge face, goggle-eyed, completely bald. Big Dick Tolan's face. Big Dick Tolan was bending over him. One of the extinguishers was in his hands, a grey fluff dripping from the nozzle of its tube, and he was laughing at Bain.

"A wisie," he spluttered, at length. "Came straight to the right place. But not wisie enough to figure I'd be waiting for you."

"No," the physician responded. "Not wisie enough." By lifting his head he could see his body, his legs—where his body and limbs ought to be. They were bloated now, with the same grey wool that had enveloped Jim Dipton. They were imprisoned by the same soft and fleecy covering of death. "You've outsmarted me."

"Sure," the other's grin was a dreadful grimace. "I've outsmarted better men

than you in my time. But what gets me is how you found the trapdoor so quick."

"Very simply. Dipton's dead hand clutched a corner of a certain magazine cover that isn't on the stands yet—it won't be for a week now. It was evident that he'd torn it off in his struggle when he was captured, and there was only one place where that could have happened. Here. Coupled with Bob's assertion that Jim suspected the identity of the Goofers that gave me the whole story. You lured him here, jumped on him. The place where he had been hidden must be near the pile of these magazines stored until the delivery date."

"I said you were a wisie." By exalting the cleverness of the opponent, Tolan was extolling by so much more his own cleverness. "Maybe you can tell me what this stuff is, since you're so smart."

Bain shrugged, as best he could. "Of course. It's a cellulose-acetate compound, like the stuff artificial silk is spun from. You probably make it in that vat from discarded magazines and old newspapers, and glacial acetic acid. You put it in those extinguishers and squirt it over your victims, into their lungs." He shuddered. "The air hardens it . . ."

"Right," Tolan grinned, licking his lips.

"But I'm puzzled as to why you are doing it. Of course it might be for the sheer sadistic pleasure of inflicting pain, but you don't look abnormal, insane . . ."

"Insane!" Tolan rocked with mirthless laughter. "Sure I'm crazy—like a fox. Listen . . ."

He cut off, and for a moment there was a silence into which, very faintly, came the rumble of many carts, the shuffle of many frightened feet.

"That's why I done it," the squat, huge man spoke once more. "They're moving tonight, all of them, moving down to the shacks along the river I been picking up for a song. They smell, and they ain't

hardly got cold water let alone hot, and the toilets are in the yards, but I'll be getting rent from them from now on, plenty of rent. Nor will anybody be moving back to Wayne Avenue, 'cause if they do the Goofers are going to start it again.

"Hell! That's enough of this jabber. You know what you want to now, but it ain't going to do no good. 'Cause, Doctor Wisenheimer, I'm going to finish the job on you now, and then I'm getting out—through that tunnel I got in here from." He jerked a hand to the black maw of an aperture behind the vat where his satanic brew stewed. "In an hour, I'll be upstairs counting the morning papers, but you'll be out somewheres on Wayne Avenue, just to show that the Goofers are still busy."

He bent to Bain's recumbent figure, jabbed the nozzle of the tank he held between the helpless physician's teeth. He started to open the brass cylinder . . .

Something burst from the mouth of the tunnel, a cyclone of flailing legs, of jolting arms. It crashed into Tolan, dashed the death tank from his grip, swarmed all over the startled killer.

WARNED, he might have made a fight of it, but taken unawares he went down under that fierce onslaught. There was an instant's maelstrom of snarling, bestial combat, the thump of brass knuckles against a hairless scalp . . . and astride him, grinning triumphantly, sat the bleached, simian figure of . . . Henry.

"Gee Doc," the albino grunted. "It sure was a good hunch of yours for me to tail this guy, but it was tough on me having to squat quiet in the stinking tunnel while you pumped him dry. Damn if you didn't have him diagnosed right."

"Yes," John Bain said quietly. "Yes, my diagnoses are usually correct. Pour some of that stuff over him to keep him quiet, and then cut me loose."

The Case ^{OF THE} Frozen Corpses

A Novelette by
RAY CUMMINGS

A dank wave of cold swept through the room, and Ralph Houghton, only a moment before in the best of health and spirits, fell to the floor, his flesh suddenly blackened by the gruesome freezing plague! And from that moment, the amazing detective firm of Roberts & Co. found themselves on the trail of a desperate killer—a trail that was marked by fantastic, incredible murder! . . .



The whole cellar was a glare of lurid flame and blurring smoke. . . .

Grim Death Stalked the City and None Knew Where It Would Strike Next!

CHAPTER ONE

Hell's Refrigerator

MY NAME is George Roberts. I'm senior partner—senior by four years in age and about eight inches of height—of the firm of Roberts & Co., Investigators. My sister Dorothy is the "Co." That's the legal side of it, anyway. But of actuality this dynamic sister of mine is anything but a second fiddle. No man—in this or any other line



of business—ever had a better partner. I am twenty-six. A big blond fellow. Slow-witted, Dot says. Maybe so; but it seems to me I use a man's method of thinking logically. Dot doesn't exactly think—she just acts by feminine intuition or something. She's a small girl; slim, black-

haired, clever, quick-witted. And I'm telling you, she can be a mighty hard customer when anyone angles her into a tough spot. She's about as gentle as an angry lion when she really gets mad.

Well, that's us. Now for the weird and gruesome case of the Frozen Corpses. It began, actually, about a week before Dot and I got into it. A man named Bob Allen—chief chemist of the Houghton Chemical Company, here in New York City—had been murdered. Stabbed in the back; found, one night, in the laboratory of the company's plant, where he had been doing some experimenting.

The police went to work on it, but they got nowhere. Then one afternoon, Dot and I got a telephone call from Ralph J. Houghton, owner of the Houghton Chemical Company. "I understand Allen met your sister socially, a few months ago," Houghton told me over the phone. "He

remembered her very well. He told me about her—well, under rather peculiar circumstances, just before he was murdered. Will you come up? I want to talk to you about it."

That decided us. We grabbed our little roadster and drove from our downtown office, up the West Side ramp to Houghton's home on lower Riverside Drive. It was about six o'clock—a late summer afternoon, sultry, oppressively hot. The butler admitted us into the somber, luxurious library. We found Ralph Houghton pacing the room nervously. He had summoned his company lawyer, John Tremaine—a large, handsome man of forty-odd—there to meet us. Houghton was a middle-aged, very distinguished looking man. Fifty perhaps, with iron-grey hair and a neat black mustache, solid black, suggesting that he dyed it to make him look younger. All his appearance gave one that impression. He was clad in an immaculate white linen suit; his neat bow tie was youthfully red and blue and above his sport shoes you could see red and blue clocks on his socks.

"Thanks for your promptness," Houghton greeted. He introduced us to Tremaine, his lawyer. Then we all sat down.

"It's quite possible that Mr. Roberts and his sister are not familiar with the case," Tremaine said. "Are you, Mr. Roberts?"

I shook my head. "No. Not particularly. We've been pretty busy—"

Then Tremaine began sketching, with a most admirable legal succinctness, just what the police were known to be doing. Which was just about nothing—no need anyway, for me to go into details. Bob Allen's murder, as it turned out, was only a sideline.

"What was it Bob Allen so mysteriously said about me?" Dot put in suddenly.

"I was coming to that," Tremaine said. "You tell them, Mr. Houghton. You have the first-hand knowledge."

THE portly, white-clad manufacturing chemist was still pacing the room. "At eleven o'clock the night that Allen was found murdered at the plant," Houghton told us, "he telephoned me. He seemed tense, excited. 'I've found something,' he said. Or words to that effect."

"He was phoning from the company laboratory?" Dot asked.

"Yes," Houghton agreed. "And then he said: 'I've just worked it out—on a small scale, of course. And only in theory. It could be dastardly—in practice—murderous. As the start of a double chemical reaction—there are two salts—' The telephone clicked, with an interrupted connection. That, I think now, was just a normal coincidence. A few seconds later, I heard him again. During the brief interruption, he had evidently changed his mind. 'No need telling you now,' he said hurriedly. 'I'll be right up.' And then he mentioned having met a girl detective. That's you, Miss Roberts. He said we might need you and your brother." Houghton smiled faintly. "Now that I've met you," he added, "I think maybe he was right. But, with the tragedy—so many police interviews—I forgot you until today. Then I told Tremaine, and we agreed . . ."

"That reference to you, Miss Roberts," the lawyer interrupted, "could well have been Allen's last words. He didn't arrive here that night. Mr. Houghton phoned him at midnight. The laboratory phone didn't answer—then later in the night we went there and found him."

It made the murder of Allen at least seem understandable. He had discovered—in theory at least—some mysterious chemical process. Something with two salts that had murderous potentialities. And he had been killed, doubtless, to prevent his telling what he had found.

Was it some impending plot against Houghton? The chemical manufacturer quite evidently feared so. I had a pre-

monition then that he was right—though Heaven knows none of us could imagine that the damnable thing would strike so quickly.

A woman's voice interrupted us: "Oh—excuse me, gentlemen. Ralph, I thought we were going to the Country Club for dinner."

Houghton's young wife, Gloria, stood in the library doorway. And the reason for Houghton's obvious desire to look young, was instantly apparent. Gloria Houghton—as we found out later—had been an actress. Her name had been Gloria Zorn—and she had married Houghton about a year ago. We saw her now as a tall blonde woman of about thirty. Expensively dressed; lavishly jeweled, a flawless, baby-doll face that didn't seem particularly characterful; a figure full, rounded, voluptuous—beauty of a purely physical quality that one could well imagine would enthrall the rich, middle-aged Houghton.

As I regarded her now while she advanced, graciously acknowledging her husband's introduction of us, a figure appeared behind her. Involuntarily I gasped. Here, behind the youthful, beautiful Gloria Houghton was a man so weirdly gruesome in aspect that it made me suck in my breath. It was Leo Zorn, Gloria's brother. He was a squat, thick-set barrel-chested hunchback—a man of perhaps thirty. He had been employed as a chemist in Houghton's plant, as we later learned. And through his contact with some obscure, malevolent chemicals, disease had attacked him. What had perhaps been a rugged, handsome face, now was dead-white, with pinched bluish lips and puffed, diseased-looking flesh, in which moist blackish sores lay like little pits of horror.

At the doorway, as though he seemed surprised at so many of us there, without waiting for introduction, he retreated; to stand like a massive, diseased ape,

out in the foyer, peering in at us, grimly.

The portly Houghton was closing off our conversation; assuring his wife that he would start for the Country Club in a moment. Dot was saying something to Tremaine, the lawyer. And then the horror burst upon us.

An exclamation from Houghton made us all stare at him. It was a startled gasp; and in the middle of a sentence he checked himself. For a second or two he stood as though numbed by surprise. Then terror swept his face. And suddenly I saw that he was livid, blue-lipped. His teeth were chattering. From head to foot he was shaking, as though with a chill.

Heaven knows I find it difficult to describe the weird thing. Certainly no more than thirty seconds were involved. The stricken Houghton had a moment before been red-faced, perspiring in the oppressive heat of the room. But he was blue-white, shaking with chill now.

And we all felt it—a wave of coldness, as though a huge refrigerator door had been opened, and its cold interior air blasted at us. Coldness, like a explosive blast, coming from Houghton!

There were a few more seconds while he tottered on his feet, his hands wildly fumbling. Then he fell; twitched feebly; seemed to stiffen. . . .

On the floor before our horrified gaze the blue-white body of the dead Ralph Houghton lay frozen as though it had been packed in ice! And from it a wisp of vapor momentarily rose—a white vapor-like steam that briefly streamed up, condensed in the warm air of the room and was gone!

CHAPTER TWO

Bridge of Death

IT was nearly seven-thirty that evening when Dot and I had grabbed a bit of supper and gotten back to our office. I

needn't describe the scene of turmoil—the arrival of the police—up there at Houghton's home. We stayed for a while, and then we got away—came back to the office to get our automatics which we hadn't taken with us.

Dot's theory is always to keep away from the police; not even for her and I to talk much—but always to act quickly. She remembered now that the murdered Bob Allen had mentioned that he had a girl cousin who was a bookkeeper in a laundry. A girl named Anne Johnson.

"I think we ought to go see her," Dot declared. "Allen wasn't a fellow who cared much for girls—I doped that out pretty quick the one time I met him. He discovered something—probably after a lot of secret research—found it at last, that night in the laboratory. When a man has anything that really worries him on his mind, he's just got to tell it to some woman. Allen didn't have any girl, except this cousin—"

There's feminine logic for you!

"And you think his cousin Anne Johnson will of course know all about it?" I retorted. "She wouldn't have told the police by now, would she? Just waiting for you—"

Dot grinned. "Well, I think we ought to go to that laundry anyhow. You were looking at the laundry mark on Houghton's linen coat, up there a while ago? Well, so was I. This girl Anne Johnson works in a laundry—"

She had something there. I had been interested to know what laundry Houghton's white linen suit and other clothes might have come from. But you couldn't tell that from a laundry mark. It tells the laundry to which customer the garment belongs, but that's all. And most certainly I didn't want to ask such questions from the Houghton household—not with that Gloria and her diseased brother to find out that I was probing such an angle.

And then, as often, my little sister

astonished me. She was rummaging in the pocket of her sport jacket. "Take a look at this, George. Didn't want to show you before—just in case we were being followed." Even now in the seclusion of our office, she cast a furtive look around and instinctively lowered her voice. "I ducked up to Houghton's bedroom," she added, "while the police had everybody downstairs. Nobody saw me—and look what I found in the waste basket."

She displayed a torn bit of wrapping paper on which was a pasted label: *From the Bridge Hand Laundry*. Followed by the laundry's address.

"And that," Dot said, "is where the Johnson girl works."

A clear connection! What it meant I could only imagine. But I knew a bit more about it than Dot did, at that, because I was present when the frozen corpse of Houghton was disrobed by the police—I saw his linen suit, stiffened by cold; his underwear, limp now and moist, with strange little flakes of melting ice just vanishing in the heat of the room. . . .

We drove down to the Bridge Hand Laundry, parked our car a few blocks away, and went forward on foot. It was now nearly eight-thirty. The laundry seemed to occupy the whole of a big wooden structure, in what is certainly a disheveled, dilapidated part of the city—that tangle of low-lying streets of slums, with the streams of traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge roaring close over the rooftops.

The darkness of a hot, sullen night was just gathering. The shabby streets were heavy with smells; crowded and noisy with children, pushcarts and pedestrians. This was Saturday night. The laundry evidently had been working late; girls were pouring out now as Dot and I approached. Then we had a bit of luck. A man passed us and accosted a group of the laundry girls—a young fellow, sort of weak-chinned.

"Has Anne come out yet?" we heard him ask.

"Anne who?" one of the girls retorted.

"Anne Johnson—the bookkeeper."

She hadn't; and all we had to do was keep the young fellow in sight to locate her. It was easy. He met her at the door, put his arm briefly around her, and they started off together. Whether we would have accosted them or not, I don't know. We didn't; because as they passed us, we heard him say:

". . . something I've just got to tell you, Anne."

HE certainly looked worried, apprehensive. More than that—furtive. I can tell a crook when I see him. This fellow might be on the level with this girl—but he wasn't apt to be on the level with anything else. That's about the way I doped it out. He began telling her something as they walked along. It was damnably tantalizing because we didn't dare get close enough to try and hear it. But whatever it was, it frightened Anne Johnson.

We followed them back toward City Hall, and up on the pedestrian walk of the bridge. It's easy to follow anyone when you've got a girl with you. Nobody figures a detective will take his girl along. We sauntered fairly close behind them. On this hot summer night there were quite a few pedestrians walking between New York and Brooklyn. Anne Johnson and the young man were walking swiftly. I recall now that the girl looked hot.

We had about reached the middle of the central span, high over the dark, sullen river where, far down, the lights of passing boats showed, when suddenly we saw the girl's companion seize her and force her to a bench. Dot and I, at the moment were a good two hundred feet behind them. And abruptly we realized that they were struggling with each other. That was what it looked like at first; then the girl jumped to her feet, with the man

plucking at her clothes, tearing at her filmy summer dress! A fiend suddenly crazed, so that he would attack a girl here in this public place? It looked so. She screamed. Then we saw that he had thrown her down; and he crouched over her, with pawing hands stripping her garments from her so that in a moment she lay nude beside him.

It was dim, there on the pedestrian walk close under the bridge parapet. Dot and I were dashing forward. Other pedestrians were coming. By chance a group of young girls were nearest. They rushed forward; then scattered in terror, screaming.

In a second it was a scene of turmoil. The nude girl was lying on the bridge. We had a vague glimpse of the man as he suddenly gathered up her clothes and cast them over the parapet. They fluttered; went down into the darkness of the river. . . .

In the dim chaos of milling people, Anne Johnson lay naked. She was only half conscious; her face livid, blue-lipped; her teeth chattering with a suddering chill that shook all her virginal little body as though by a convulsion!

"Where's a policeman?" someone shouted. "Don't they have policemen on this damn bridge?"

They didn't. There was no one here in the confused, excited group to exercise authority, save Dot and I. We shoved the people back; got to the naked girl; bent over her.

"Your coat," Dot gasped. "Good Lord, look at her—she's freezing!"

Her flesh, from shoulder to knee, was moist. Pallid flesh, with all the blood gone from its surface.

"Coat wouldn't do any good," I murmured. I knelt; began rubbing her flesh, and Dot helped me, while the crowd, increasing every moment, stood gasping with awed silence. Moist flesh, icy to the touch—numbed by cold. She didn't seem

quite unconscious. In a moment her eyelids fluttered up; her blue, quivering lips seemed gratefully trying to smile at our efforts. Then she drifted off again—numbed into a daze of semi-consciousness.

"If we only had some whiskey," I murmured. And Dot jumped to her feet. "Whiskey," she called at the crowd. "She needs a drink—who's got a drink?"

A man produced a flask. We forced some of the whiskey down the girl's throat. She gulped at it gratefully, and it seemed to revive her a little. And then from the crowd somebody shouted:

"Where the hell is the damned fiend who attacked her? Where is he?"

Hindsight is very easy! It's simple enough to look back and see what you might have done, that would have been better than what you did!

VEHEMENTLY Dot and I would have liked to have our hands on that young fellow. But in the excitement—our horror, because we knew so much more about this thing than did the crowd—we had thought only of emergency first aid to the girl who might be dying. The crowd considered the man a fiend who had attacked her. But we knew why he had stripped the girl.

He was gone now. In the turmoil, the excitement, the dimness, I can realize how easily he got away. The passing streams of automobiles had stopped and tangled the traffic. People rushed to them, shouting that the police were needed. And an ambulance must be summoned. . . . Almost everyone was trying to get closer to the naked girl who was lying in the crowd. But there were others, on foot and in vehicles, who were going shoreward; and nobody paid much attention to them.

Anne Johnson did not die. Within half an hour she had revived. Obviously there was no need of an ambulance—nothing the matter with her save terror and a deadly chill from which now, this hot sum-

mer night, she was recovering. The police came. An ambulance came and went away. There was complete confusion. . . .

"I'll beat it," I murmured to Dot presently. "You're going to stay with her?"

"Yes. She's agreed to let me take her home in a taxi, when we get through answering police questions." Dot lowered her voice still further. "I can drag a lot of things out of her when I get her alone."

Anne was huddled now in a sheet and blanket which the ambulance had left. A taxi had been sent for.

"We'll contact at home," I told Dot. "Some time around midnight?"

"Okay," Dot murmured. As always when we part, I tweaked her nose. There's an affection between me and my little sister which, Heaven knows, in our line of business, doesn't get much chance for expression. I'm always a bit apprehensive over Dot when we're working separately on a case. It may have been premonition this time. A little sinking sensation plucked at my middle when I left her there in the turmoil of the bridge.

Clues get cold very quickly. That's an axiom that Dot and I always follow. We had already had plenty of clues from the stricken Anne Johnson. The police would be after those clues later in the night; but I went after them now, heading back for the Bridge Hand Laundry. It wasn't much of a walk; but enough so that I had time to sort in my mind what we had learned. . . .

The young fellow who had just escaped us was named Peter Duffy. He was Anne Johnson's fiance. Whatever this Duffy might know of the gruesome affair, certainly it seemed that Anne knew very little. She had met Duffy tonight. He had told her he was going away. Where, or why, so far under Dot's questions, she had maintained that she did not know. Walking on the bridge tonight, the girl had been hot. Perspiring from the exercise. Then suddenly she had felt unac-

countably cold. Her undergarments, dank against her, abruptly were so cold that they had seemed sticking to her numbed flesh. That was about all she remembered, except that Duffy had torn off her clothes.

Why had he done it? The answer to that was easy: to save her from death. And to have done that so promptly, so effectively, I figured he must have had guilty knowledge of the real deadliness of whatever it was which was attacking this girl he loved. And then he had thrown her garments into the river. Why? To keep them from remaining as evidence of what had occurred!

As I pondered the weird circumstances, I was walking swiftly shoreward. In the sodden heat of the oppressive night, I found myself freely perspiring—my underwear dank and cold against my flesh. Against all reason, the damnable thought set my heart pounding. And then another thought stabbed at me. I recalled that a week ago, Dot had been annoyed at our uptown laundry for overcharging us. She had said that Norah, our maid, recommended that the big downtown laundries were cheaper. Where had Norah sent our laundry, this last time? I did not know. And probably, Dot did not know either. And then I pondered—what did we know of Norah, this maid we had so recently hired?

The thoughts were vaguely terrifying. The heat of my perspiring body suddenly was horrible. And I thought of Dot, there on the bridge, with her filmy chemise wet from perspiration. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Fire That Freezes

THE big wooden building which housed the Bridge Hand Laundry was dark when I got there now, with only a small light burning in one of its lower rooms at the side and back. Far more than when

Dot and I came here before, I was interested in this laundry now. The thing was beginning to hook together. Peter Duffy—so Anne Johnson had told us—was a solicitor for the laundry. His job was to get new accounts. And he had gotten the family of Ralph J. Houghton for customers only a few days ago. The first bundle of the finished work had been delivered to the Houghton residence just this afternoon!

For a moment I stood across the street, gazing at the big wooden structure which housed the laundry. Then I crossed; tried the small lower front door. It was locked. There was a bell, and I rang. After an interval, I rang again. It happened, as I was standing there, that my gaze went toward the back of the dark side yard. There seemed a blob back there in the shadows of the building. A man watching me? It seemed so, for suddenly as I turned to move toward him, the figure ducked and ran. Had he decamped, or gone into a back door from which he had emerged to see who was ringing?

I rang again. Then presently I heard footsteps. The door opened, disclosing a small, palish thin man; the proprietor, as he told me, who was working alone here tonight on his accounts. I'm a pretty good judge of character. I was convinced within a minute or two that this fellow—his name was Franklin—was on the level. He went into a panic when I told him bluntly that I was a detective working on a murder case. But that was nothing compared to the horror that shook him when he realized from my questions that it was the gruesome "Frozen Corpse"—as the radio was already calling it—death of Ralph J. Houghton; and that his laundry was involved.

We were in his small back office, dim with just a spot of hooded light over his desk. The door here into the dark backyard was open for air, this hot summer night. Another door opened to the main

ironing room. It was dark in there, with the white ironing rolls, the steam tables and the white padded ironing boards eerie blobs, like ghosts in the darkness.

To me the damn place was weird, and I wasn't at all sure but what there was a danger here. That figure lurking in the yard—someone watching me? I believed so now. It hadn't been Franklin, but a much thicker-set figure. I don't get the jitters very easily, but I kept my hand in the general proximity of my underarm holster, just the same.

I can't say either that my automatic gave me much comfort. The close air here was moist and heavy with the smell of laundered garments. And as I stared at the pale little proprietor who was sweating with nervousness under my questions, I couldn't help feeling that the thing might strike again . . . a wave of frigid coldness, with Franklin turning into a frozen corpse before my eyes . . . and again I was conscious of my own perspiration, with my undershirt sticking dankly to my chest and back.

"Peter Duffy?" Franklin was saying. "Well, I only hired him a week ago. But he seems like a nice young fellow. Got me several new accounts—a real hustler. I'm a humanitarian, Mr. Roberts. Just because a lad's in trouble—"

"In trouble?" I prompted.

The complete answer to that was startling. Peter Duffy had been brought here by Anne Johnson, trying to get him a job.

"They told me the truth," Franklin was saying. "I liked that. Duffy said right away—when I questioned him—that he'd been fired from the Houghton Chemical Company. He certainly changed his line of business. He's a chemist, Anne says."

NO argument but what that was startling! Then presently Franklin showed me Duffy's clothes locker, in a corner of the big ironing room. The lock-

er was open, with one of Duffy's jackets hanging there. I searched it.

"What—what's that?" Franklin tremblingly demanded as I brought out a crumpled slip of paper. The laundry proprietor was getting the drift of things now. "My God, you don't mean murder has been planned, here in my place by one of my employees?"

In the litter of Duffy's pockets I had found the crumpled paper. It was partly torn—a fragment of pencilled memorandum:

NH₄Cl plus KNO₃ Then at minus 28° F. CO₂ by—

The diagonal tear down the middle had amputated the rest of it. But lower down, where the diagonal widened, there was another fragment:

. . . thus without usual needed pressure, minus 28° F. freezes the CO₂ with resultant at least minus 200° F. for a brief—

That was all. "What's it mean?" Franklin murmured in terrified awe.

"Is this in Duffy's handwriting?" I countered.

He inspected it. "Why yes—looks so. What—"

To him it was a cryptogram, but it wasn't exactly so to me. I'm far from a professional chemist; but I had a lot of chemistry in college. NH₄Cl—that's ammonium chloride; mixed, in this case, with KNO₃ which is potassium nitrate, commonly called saltpeter. When mixed in the presence of moisture—you get a reaction so suddenly absorbing heat that the mixture will freeze! Your receptacle will freeze to the table on which it stands!

Two salts! Young Bob Allen, just before he was murdered, had mentioned two salts that could be dastardly—murderous!

But that was only a reaction to produce a sub-freezing temperature. And then Duffy's memorandum said: CO₂ freezing without pressure, giving minus 200°! Here was the murderous process

which Duffy so evidently had perfected. CO₂—that's carbon dioxide. When it freezes under pressure it produces what now as a trade term is called "dry ice", a mysterious substance of such a deadly cold that one may not touch it without danger of freezing the flesh!

Dimly I could envisage now the diabolic process, not to produce dry ice, but something chemically akin to it. . . . Undergarments impregnated with those two salts and with CO₂ and God knows what other ingredients. The moisture of perspiration . . . a sudden chemical reaction to produce a sub-freezing temperature. And this freezing, instantly to progress to the second reaction with the CO₂. A drop to minus 200°! A momentary drop—but enough to freeze human flesh and organs into gruesome, sudden death, with the heart stopping from the shock, even before the blood stream was fully chilled. . . .

"But what is it?" Franklin demanded again. "Is that a formula?"

"A formula for murder," I said.

Where had Duffy worked upon his diabolical lethal scheme? Not here in the laundry; that would hardly be practical.

"Queer thing," Franklin said suddenly, "we were late delivering that bundle of laundry to Houghton's home today. It was finished and ready to go out last evening, but it got mislaid . . . I'm trying to help you, Mr. Roberts. My God, I—to think that my laundry—"

"You are helping me very much," I assured him . . . Duffy, I could imagine now, had taken the bundle of clothes out of here last night, and returned it today, with Houghton's undergarments prepared for his death. . . . Duffy, who had been fired from the chemical company, and had a grudge against Houghton? Maybe that. But it didn't seem enough. For money then—money from the real fiend planning and executing this damnable thing? But what of Anne Johnson, who had so nar-

rowly escaped being another victim? Why did they try to murder her?

Then I found what seemed still another clue. On the floor of Duffy's locker there was a bit of paper ash—a tiny bit of paper which he had evidently burned and dropped here. The writing on it still was dimly visible—a few words of an address in upper New York City—not obliterated because the graphite used in pencil leads is a mineral and will not burn. Duffy should have remembered that and crumpled the ashes!

I THINK that perhaps in another moment or two I would have left the laundry. I was eager to investigate this address. And even more eager to contact Dot. She was on the main trail—through Anne Johnson we might be able to nab Duffy.

I was just saying goodbye to Franklin, when in a momentary silence between us, distinctly we heard a sound. A thumping, bumping scrape, as though some heavy object had fallen. It was in the cellar underneath us. The cellar door was beside us, standing partly open. Automatic in hand, with a gestured warning to the petrified Franklin, I went down the stairs on a run—down into the dimness of a big littered cellar. It was an empty barrel which had fallen and rolled—fallen from a big pile of barrels, boxes and rubbish.

And what the fallen barrel had disclosed struck me numb so that I stood gasping. Another frozen corpse! Within the pile of rubbish the nude body of a woman was buried! The ghastly grey-black face stared up at me. A woman I had never seen before—a beautiful face, framed by flowing dark hair. Her torso was visible, but the legs were hidden by the rubbish. Voluptuous breasts, shoulders, abdomen—flesh blackened by the horrible sub-zero cold!

I had no more than a second or two to gaze at the ghastly thing. Then, from

down in the litter of rubbish that still partly concealed the nude corpse, there was a flash. A sizzling, hissing, burning, sustained flash, as of a train and a pile of gunpowder suddenly ignited. And now I was aware of the smell of gasoline. . . .

That gasoline-soaked pile of rubbish went up into a sheet of flame. I staggered back, jumped for the stairs. The whole cellar was a glare of blinding lurid flame and blurring smoke. But through it I had a glimpse of a moving figure. A man who had been hiding here—a man who like myself was almost trapped, and who was climbing to the safety of a window near him. I had no chance to shoot at him. I was staggering backward at the stairs. And I turned and stumbled wildly up them, with a roaring inferno of flame and smoke following me.

But with that fleeting glimpse I had recognized the other figure. Not Peter Duffy! It was a squat, massive misshapen form. Humped shoulders. A face of bloated, diseased flesh!

Gloria Houghton's brother! The diseased Leo Zorn!

I had come staggering from the cellar. Franklin was standing confused in the center of the room. From the opened cellar door, smoke and flame were pouring. I jumped for the door; tried to close it, but the smoke and fire drove me back.

"My—my records," Franklin gasped. "My cash—I've got money in the drawer there."

He stumbled for it; but I seized him. "Come on, you fool—no time now—"

I was pulling him toward the door; and for a moment, in his confused panic, he resisted me. And suddenly, while we were still near the center of the room, the sprinkling system went off! Pipes holding water under pressure were threaded along the low ceiling. The heat from the cellar doorway had melted the soft metal fuses of their vents.

It was impotent protection in this in-

flammable wooden structure, against such a fire as this! But it did its best. From a dozen vents overhead, sprays of water descended upon us—a drenching torrent through which in the heat and smoke and licking flames, we staggered for the door.

Heat? In those weird seconds as I gripped the drenched terrified Franklin, suddenly a wave of cold from him struck at me. In horror I cast him loose, and for another second or two, I stood staring as he tottered and fell, with ghastly white face and blue chattering lips. Then his twitching body stiffened. At my feet he lay, another of the ghastly frozen corpses, with the water from the overhead sprinklers freezing upon him!

Choking in the smoke, with licking hissing flames from the cellar driving me back, I staggered from the room.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dot Stalks Terror

AT about eleven o'clock that same evening, Dot stood on a street of the lower West Side—the west Twenties over by the Hudson River. There was little traffic; hardly a passing vehicle and only a few pedestrians. The street was dim; overhead the sky was grey-black with threatening clouds, and the hot summer night was more oppressive than ever.

Dot was watching the house in which Anne Johnson lived—a big dilapidated structure, in a solid row which stood well back from the street. It was a boarding house. Anne was in there now; but Dot had every reason to think that she might come out.

It was not quite as easy for a girl, as for a man, to stand loitering in a public place without attracting attention. But Dot, Heaven knows, was experienced. My sister is a trig little figure. She generally wears very unobtrusive sports clothes. She's a small, dark girl, not in

the slightest sense beautiful. But she's pretty, with an alert personality which makes her immensely attractive.

Dot was tense now; she had been waiting here in the block more than half an hour. Would Anne come out. . . ? Dot, as planned, had taken the stricken girl home, had sat with her awhile until she fully recovered. But Dot's persuasive, careful questions had only yielded disappointment. Whatever this girl bookkeeper might really know of the grisly affair, Dot could not guess. Resolutely Anne had parried every question.

But she had seen that Anne was tense; frightened, with an apprehension which was akin to terror. And as the evening grew later, it had become evident that Anne wanted to get rid of her solicitous visitor. My little sister, as I have indicated, is a good guesser rather than a logician. Her guess was that just before the weird affair on the bridge, Duffy had arranged something with Anne—something with which Dot's presence was interfering. So Dot had left. . . .

Her guess was right. At about quarter past eleven, Anne came out. From quite a distance down the block, Dot followed her as she headed east. Modern disguise for a detective hardly includes the traditional big mustache and chin whiskers. It is, instead, more often a question of minor details. In that line, a woman has a big advantage—especially in dealing with another woman. Dot's cloth sport hat was designed to permit instant and radical alteration of shape. That, in itself, worked wonders in her aspect. Her jacket was reversible, from a quiet grey on one side, to a somewhat sporty plaid on the other. She was sure that from a little distance, Anne would not recognize her.

At Seventh Avenue, Anne went into an uptown subway kiosk. That sort of thing requires a quick cleverness when you're tailing. Dot boarded the Van Cortlandt Express just a bit after the other girl—

and into an adjacent car. It was a long but quick ride. At Dykeman Street Anne disembarked; and Dot followed her west, down into that queerly wild and lonely wooded region where the Spuyten Duyvil Creek flows into the Hudson River and terminates Manhattan Island. There are patches of woods here on the side, with the railroad trestle winding high over the ancient Dutch-named creek. It is still New York City, but one would hardly guess it.

Anne walked swiftly, though sometimes seeming uncertain as to her direction. The house which Dot finally realized Anne sought stood on a small but rugged hillside, facing the shabby creek and the Hudson River. The encroaching city was close; but here on the descending slope, the shadowed grounds of the huge old house were solidly dark. Dot had a vague idea of the place—one of those old Dutch mansions which still are standing. A place of ornate gabled roofs—a very typical old haunted house, somber and black, apparently deserted now, with great black trees clustered around it.

At the gate, Anne hesitated for a moment, as though in fear. Then she moved forward through the dark garden. Dot was outside on the winding driveway. On the verandah a brief flashlight beam showed. A man had come out to meet the girl; and at once they went into the front door which closed after them.

Was it Peter Duffy she had met? Dot could not be sure. . . . My sister can break into anything but a bank vault without much difficulty. After a minute or two of prowling she found a window not too securely fastened. And like a cat, she went in.

The room in which she found herself was furnished—a sort of old-fashioned parlor. The padded furniture looked ghostly with its white summer slip covers. The place was heavy with brooding silence. Then Dot heard a murmur of

voices. More than ever like a cat, with her automatic in hand, she moved into a dim hall. Another room showed a vague spot of light—the flickering light of a candle.

THROUGH an opened doorway, Dot peered presently into what seemed a big old fashioned den. Trophies were on the wall; the place was crowded with mounted specimens of fish and animals. An ornate onyx-top table held an array of Oriental curiosities. To one side, in a shadowed recess, there was a suit of armor—trappings of a knight of the Middle Ages, while on a taboret beside it—curious anacronism—stood a modern telephone. The big, littered room had only this hall door, and a single window, shrouded by drawn shade and portier.

All this Dot saw at her first swift glance. The lighted candle was on the taboret by the telephone. It's flickering beams showed Peter Duffy and Anne Johnson on a small couch nearby. The girl's arms were around him as she sat pleading, her face white and her eyes wide with terror.

"Oh Pete—what have you done?"

"Stop it!" he growled. "Good God, don't snivel. Are you going to stand by me or aren't you? I'm not as bad as he is, anyway. And I've got the money—we'll be rich. What the hell more do you want?"

He was reaching into his pocket. "Here, take this." He shoved a roll of bills at her. "That'll hold you—I'm going to beat it. We'll get together—it won't be long, Anne. You got to get out of here now—an' when I get the rest of the money from him, I'll scam."

He kissed her as she clung to him. So many otherwise good girls have clung like this to a murderer! Dot's heart went out to her.

"Oh Pete—dear God—they'll catch you. This—"

"Quit it!" he growled again. "What's done is done. That damn Houghton deserved it anyhow—"

"We'll talk more about that later," Dot said suddenly from the doorway. "Put your hands up. You're going out of here without any fuss."

She advanced through the doorway, with her automatic leveled at them. There's nothing about Dot, when she holds a gun on you, that would give the impression you can trifle with her. Anne gave a startled scream and jumped to her feet, clutching at Duffy. He also leaped up. His jaw dropped, terror swept him, but obediently his arms went over his head.

"Thanks," Dot said as she slowly advanced. "Break away there—turn him loose, Anne. I want to see if he's got any weapon on him. Is that telephone working?"

"I—I don't know," Duffy gasped.

Still eyeing him, Dot started for the 'phone—to summon me, if possible—or to call the police. She didn't reach that telephone.

Across the room, something struck the candle. The light went out, plunging the place into blackness.

Even now, Dot is not a bit sure just what happened. The ghastly thing was so utterly beyond what anyone could have expected that it struck her into a horrified chaos. That's not like my sister, but Heaven knows, in this grisly case you couldn't blame her. The candle fell to the floor. The plate on which it had been standing, crashed. Mingled with Duffy's terrified oath and Anne's hysterical scream, Dot was aware of a queer hissing sound—like air or steam escaping under pressure. It was mingled with the tinkling of breaking glass. Something had been thrown. It had struck Duffy. Dot heard his cry. And a second later there was more breaking glass and a scream from Anne. . . .

Dot had whirled; jumped backward. She was alert to a new antagonist, but in the blackness she could see nothing. And then she recoiled as though struck by a physical blow. Like a wall, a great wave of frigidly surged over the black room. Before its advance, Dot staggered back into the hall. From the room there was the thud of a body falling . . . then another. . . .

In the silence there was nothing to see; nothing now to hear. For a moment the cold air poured out into the hot hall—a low, heavy current that numbed Dot's legs and feet. But it eased presently, and she darted into the chilled room, with a wave of warm air, high up, following her. God knows she should not have been so incautious, but horror for what she knew she would find, impelled her. She snapped on her flashlight. On the floor Peter Duffy and Anne Johnson lay dead—two more of the ghastly frozen corpses, with stiffened clothing moist with melting ice-flakes. Frozen heads and faces this time . . . ghastly faces, with flesh dark-grey.

Dot in that second was shivering with cold, shuddering with horror. And behind her there was a sudden sound. She had no time to whirl. Her automatic was struck from her hand. She tried to turn and hurl her flashlight; but a man's arms went around her. Big powerful arms jerking her slight figure backward with an encircling arm pressing her breasts, and a hand clapped upon her mouth!

CHAPTER FIVE

"The Fiend's Got Me!"

THAT big ramshackle frame building which housed the Bridge Hand Laundry went up in flames like a tinder box. Neither Franklin's body, nor the body of the nude woman in the cellar were recovered. And a short while later, from the midst of police, firemen and all the chaos

of that East Side neighborhood, I summarily decamped.

Dot and I live in an apartment up near Columbia University. I grabbed our parked car which was near the laundry, and went home. Dot would be there, I hoped. But she wasn't. We have a little phonograph-recording gadget rigged on our private telephone. But there was no message on it.

Apprehensive, I sat down to wait, wondering how Dot was making out with Anne Johnson. Vehemently I wanted to connect with Dot, before I started off on a new trail. And there seemed plenty of new trails. The weird case appeared to have clarified a bit. Duffy's diabolic chemistry was plain now. But Duffy, I reasoned, was just a tool of the sinister, diseased Leo Zorn. I could begin to see the motive. A mentality warped—a brooding, depressive mind. Lord knows, I had seen that in the aspect of Leo Zorn, up there in Houghton's library, just before Houghton so gruesomely turned into the first of the frozen corpses. The brooding Zorn, doubtlessly with an incurable disease eating into him, had come to hate Houghton, his erstwhile employer. He had been stricken through working with chemicals in Houghton's plant, and felt that Houghton personally was to blame.

All this was pretty clear. And there could be still other motives in Zorn's unbalanced mind. Houghton's young wife was Zorn's sister. Houghton was rich. With his sister inheriting wealth, Zorn of course could profit by it. Was Gloria Houghton in the plot? On that point I could not be sure. I recalled that she had seemed an imperious, headstrong young woman. Not very brainy—the exact type who so often uses her physical beauty for her own selfish advancement. A woman perhaps of loose morals. But a murderess? I doubted it. I thought rather that she was the unwitting cause of a portion of Zorn's motive.

All that was very simple. But why had Anne Johnson been an intended victim? The fear that Duffy had told her too much? On the other hand, I had a sneaking suspicion that maybe Anne's near-death on the bridge had been an accident. Through some mistake—the details of which, for a fact we never have learned—Anne put on those garments, that evening in the laundry to go out with Duffy. She thought they were hers. But they weren't. They had been prepared with chemicals by Duffy—prepared perhaps for the murder of that other woman whose corpse now was burned to ashes in the inferno of the laundry cellar. And Anne got them by mistake.

I think I was right in that reasoning concerning Anne Johnson. But who was the gruesome nude woman in the cellar? I could not guess. So far, quite obviously, she had not previously come into the case. But I could imagine what Zorn was doing there: laying a powder train for an incendiary fire to burn the laundry, that nude corpse—and any chemical evidence that Duffy had left around. . . . And why had Franklin been killed? That of course was obvious—to prevent him from telling me the very things about Duffy which he had told!

Midnight came as I sat there at home alone, pondering, waiting for Dot. Still no word from her. That address which Duffy had burned and I had read on the ashes in his locker, was the old Stuyvesant Mansion, up in the Dykeman section. I had heard that the rich young Charlie Stuyvesant, sportsman and world traveler, was in the Orient; and his three maiden aunts, all that was left of the famous old Dutch-New York family, were in England for a month of the summer. . . . Why was the Stuyvesant place of interest to Duffy? . . . Life is sometimes very ironical. I was worried about Dot; and I was sitting inactive, wondering if I ought to go up and investigate that old Dykeman

house, and in reality, at this moment Dot was in deadly danger, in that house!

Then suddenly my telephone rang. I hadn't realized quite how apprehensive I was over Dot; my hand was shaking as I reached for the receiver.

"George? Listen—don't talk—" I stiffened at the swift intensity of Dot's low, furtive voice. "The fiend's got me! Stuyvesant Mansion—Dykeman Parkway. Got me locked in a room—ground floor, west. He's gone downstairs—to destroy chemical apparatus. Oh George—come alone! Don't tell anyone—no police! If he's warned of attack, he'll kill me! You'll have a better chance getting in here alone—Here he comes now. Oh George, George!"

THE 'phone clicked as the connection broke. Numbly I hung up. Maybe you can imagine how I felt. Anyway, when in a minute or two I came out of my numbed fog, I grabbed my cap, went down to my car, I guess I broke about every rule against reckless driving in that dash up to Dykeman Street. . . .

The weird, haunted-looking old house was solid black when I crept upon it. Not a glimpse of light; and nothing but a somber brooding silence. Ground floor west—back. Dot's furtive words whirled in my head. I don't know how to describe the combination within me of quivering confused terror, mingled with the realization that I had to put this job over now. . . . *The fiend's got me!* In all our years together, my little sister had never had occasion before to say such words. They pounded in my head like a horrible knell. . . . Was I too late? Would I find her, like those others, a ghastly frozen corpse?

I located a dark window only a few feet above ground, which seemed as though it were the west, back room Dot had meant. It was locked; but the old lock yielded when I pried it, with only a little rasp of sound. Slowly, cautiously inch by inch, I

raised the sash. There was no sound from within the room. With the utmost care I raised the blind. Still there was only blackness, and my groping hand found a dark portier inside, close against the window. I shoved it slowly aside.

The air of the room was chill and dank. I saw a faint flickering glow of light that drifted in through an opened opposite doorway—light from a candle in an outside hall. The faint reflected radiance showed me a room crowded with trophies. And on a small couch, Dot was lying! My racing heart thumped with triumph and relief. I saw that she was bound and gagged—but not a frozen corpse. Thank God for that. She was alive; apparently unharmed. She had heard the light noise I made at the window—her eyes were turned my way as she mutely stared.

Weapon in hand, I climbed through the window. "Dot—thank God—" I whispered. Her body twitched as she strained at her bonds to answer me. As I bent over her, reaching for the cloth gag that was tied into her mouth, she tried to mumble. And her eyes were imploring me.

Imploring me. God knows—since that telephone call from her that so struck me with terror—I was anything but normal. And now the rush of my thankfulness so swept me that I did not interpret her imploring eyes. And her words in my memory, as I had heard them over the phone—"Come alone, George—don't bring the police—" Surely I should have realized. . . .

I was reaching for her gag, when from the dimly candlelit hall a groan sounded. A choked gurgling groan—and then a sudden oncoming tread! It snapped me into alertness. I jumped sidewise from Dot, whirled up my automatic as the candlelit doorway was blotted by a squat hunchbacked figure!

Leo Zorn!

My finger was pressing the trigger of my gun. But I didn't fire. Zorn was a silhouette for a second. Then he took a staggering step, not forward, but backward from the doorway. And the light fell on the front of him. His ghastly, bloated, diseased face was blood-smearred! In his barrel chest a horrible wound was

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oozing crimson upon his shirt! In that second as I withheld my shot, he tottered on buckling legs, half twisted around and crumpled to the hall floor.

"Dot! Good God—" I gasped as I jumped for Zorn. There was a choked mumble from Dot. And another sound, behind me! All I saw as I whirled was a crouching dark blob of figure, partly behind the voluminous black portiers near the window. A crouching man, with his arm going up and back, his hand clutching a white ball on which the faint light glistened as he was in the act of throwing it.

My shot rang out. Then another, and another, as fast as I could fire. Heaven knows, I was taking no chances this time. There was a tinkling crash of glass—the white ball shattered above his head by my first bullet. Then there was a thud as he fell forward. I was running at him; but through the acid smoke of my shots, a wave of cold struck at me—a blast from the fiend's crumpled body so that I staggered back, rushed to Dot and with her in my arms, dashed from the room. As I untied her, with cold air blasting out at us, I saw that Zorn—lying here in the hall—was not dead. He was lying with his gaze on us; and I caught his faint, blood-choked words:

"You got him? I tried—but he—got me instead—"

WE were back in the room in a moment—staring at the crumpled body of John Tremaine, Houghton's lawyer, where he lay with one of my bullets in his shoulder! It hadn't been my bullet that killed him, but the shattered glass ball which he had been about to throw at me! Wisps of white vapor were rising from him now—vapor like liquid air volatilizing into the infinitely warmer air of the room. The handsome, stalwart Tremaine, with the frozen flesh of his face ghastly grey-white; and his frozen eye-

balls congealed with the look of terror still in them. The last of the frozen corpses.

Zorn did not die. From him—and from Gloria Houghton's full confession on which the D.A. agreed not to prosecute her—we were able to piece together the main points of John Tremaine's grisly murder plot. His motive, queerly enough, I had doped out fairly well, though I had thought Zorn was the fiend. Gloria Zorn had had an affair with the handsome, unscrupulous Tremaine before she married the rich, middle-aged Houghton. And after her marriage, Tremaine came at her again—with love-making, and threats of telling her husband of their former relations. She had again yielded; and his hold over her was complete. Tremaine, it seems, was always in money trouble—a spendthrift; and a gambler, always losing. From Gloria he had forced considerable sums of money. And then he conceived a bigger stake: the murder of her husband. He knew that as a rich widow, she would gladly marry him, and it would be no trouble to get the Houghton fortune away from her. But Tremaine was also entangled with another woman—the woman whose corpse I had seen in the cellar of the laundry. He included her in his gruesome killings, to get rid of her and clear the way for Gloria. It was Tremaine who had set that time-fuse and caused the fire—for just the reasons I had thought.

The horrible method of murder was, to Tremaine, undoubtedly a brilliant stroke of cleverness, which would divert all possible suspicion from him. Weird frozen corpses—that chain of murders could so easily be imagined the work of the diseased, brooding Zorn! Tremaine had lured Zorn to that old Stuyvesant house; stabbed him. And was planning to leave him with the bodies of no less than four frozen corpses—Anne and Duffy, Dot and myself. Zorn would be considered a mad

fiend, wholly crazed at last so that he had committed suicide among his victims. It had all worked out just as Tremaine planned. Almost. But Zorn had been a sudden obstacle. Tremaine hated Gloria's deformed brother, and the hatred was mutual. Zorn knew of his sister's helpless infatuation. And when Bob Allen was murdered, and then Houghton, Zorn suspected Tremaine. But he wanted to settle it himself. He was afraid to tell the police, afraid that his sister would be involved as an accomplice. Zorn had seen Tremaine and Duffy go to the laundry the previous night. Tonight Zorn had prowled in the cellar, just before the fire, and had discovered the nude corpse. And he was just as surprised as I was when the blast went off and almost got us both.

That fellow Allen—you've got to admit he had all the makings of a genius. They tell me now that police chemists have worked out Allen's full process, as completed by Duffy. The basic chemistry of it is, in broad principle, just about what I conceived, from Duffy's formula. Not the manufacture of dry ice—not exactly liquid air. Something, I gather, midway, chemically, between them. The chemists say that they have impregnated fabrics,

and gotten a brief temperature of more than minus two hundred degrees, when moisture was added. And they've constructed some of the diabolic little glass balls—bombs of coldness, as you might luridly call them. The exact same chemical reactions—the dry chemicals held separate from the moisture within the glass ball—mixing when the glass is shattered. It's a neat chemical formula, they say. But it's a formula for murder—I don't want any more of it. Not as long as I live.

Tremaine, we have learned, knew the Stuyvesant family, and thus he and Duffy had access to the old mansion. When he caught Dot there, instead of killing her at once, he used her to trap me. He was standing at her side, with a knife pressed against her breast, when she 'phoned that decoy message to me.

I think that's about all I need recount of the case of the frozen corpses. It was a weird, ghastly affair. The damned thing sets me shuddering, even now. And most particularly, God knows, I don't ever want my little sister to telephone me again and have to say, "The fiend's got me!" Those terrible words give me the creeps, every time I think of them.

THE END



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CHAPTER ONE

Death Leaves No Mark

THE accident occurred on Main Street during the evening rush hour. The sedan couldn't have been doing more than twenty. Yet it swerved suddenly, mounted the sidewalk, and headed for one of the show windows of Bee's Department Store. There was a short, agonized scream—then the crash of shattered plate-glass and crumpling metal.

The scream had ripped from the throat

of a twelve-year-old girl who had been directly in the path of the car. From the two occupants of the sedan there had come no sound.

Calvin Kane drove by the scene of the accident some ten minutes later. The crowd in front of the store completely blocked traffic. Policemen were trying to open a lane, but it was a difficult job. Kane's coupe crawled along in first. When he was abreast of the store, he saw the sedan, its front end sticking into the window.

A patrolman jumped on the running-board of Calvin Kane's car. "Come on,



The Payne family looked like a tableau wax museum.

snap it up. This is no time for sightseeing." Then he said: "Oh, it's you, Mr. Kane. Nasty accident."

"How in the world could it have happened on a crowded street?" Calvin Kane asked. "Driver drunk?"

"Damned if we know yet," the cop said. "Witnesses say it looked almost de-

liberate, the way the car swung up on the sidewalk. The car smacked a little girl up against the window and—well, she's all over the radiator. There's a man and woman in the car—stone dead both of 'em, but there's hardly a scratch on 'em. Funny thing. Maybe their backs are broken, or their necks. The name on the guy's license is Somers. Ever heard of him?"

"Somers? It's not an uncommon name."

"Would you like to take a look at 'em?" the cop suggested. "Maybe you could identify 'em."

Calvin Kane glanced at the crowd. He didn't like to appear among people. Once a man had touched his hump for luck and Kane had almost killed him. He said: "No, thanks. Accidents aren't in my line."

They were beyond the crowd. The cop hopped off the running-board and Kane threaded through the traffic.

Several minutes later he eased his car up to the curb in front of a modest apartment house. Several people in the street turned to look at him as he sidled toward the entrance with that peculiar crab-like motion of his. He had spent numberless hours in the privacy of his home trying to walk like ordinary human beings, but it wasn't any use. His right leg was a withered stem, too weak to carry his weight. He had a special contraption on his car so that he needed only one foot for driving.

Diana Fowler came to the door in a bathrobe.

"What a pleasant surprise!" she exclaimed. "Come in."

He moved to an armchair and dropped into it. "You were dressing," he said. "Going out?"

"Jimmy Cornell is taking me to a dance."

"Don't mind me," he told her. "I just dropped in to see how you are getting on. I promised your brother to look in on you now and then."

Diana Fowler smiled. "Is that the only

reason you came to see me? A duty call?"

"No," he said. He looked at her, at her slender young beauty, her dancing blue eyes, the perfect mold of her features. His heart was cold within him. A cat could look at a king . . . and Calvin Kane could look at beauty. But beauty was not for him; would never be. Love was for handsome normal young men like Jimmy Cornell.

"Calvin," she said, "I knew you were a private detective, but—well, Jimmy told me all about you the other day. He told me of your reputation for fearlessness, of how you take only the most dangerous cases. Frankly, I'm worried about you."

"My dear girl, when you came here two months ago to take post-graduate courses at State University, your brother, who was my best friend in college, wrote me to look after you. I'm the one who's supposed to do the worrying about you."

"I'm not even in danger of catching a cold," she said. "But you—why must you choose such a hazardous profession?"

CALVIN KANE studied his long, strong fingers. "What other way is there for a man like me to make a decent living than to receive pay for running the risk of being killed and sometimes killing? And what other justification have I for living than to do my share of ridding the world of the human rats that infest it? Look at me."

Diana Fowler's eyes tried not to see his right shoulder which was a good six inches higher than his left, or his right leg which hung useless against the chair. She gazed at his strong, sensitive face, his thick black hair which swept back from a high forehead, his intelligent black eyes which were always sad.

She stepped up to him and brushed his cheek with a cool hand. She opened her mouth to say something, but didn't. She turned, muttering, "Pardon me while I dress," and went into her bedroom.

There had been pity in her face, Calvin Kane thought bitterly. Pity was the most he could ever expect from her or any other woman.

As if in mockery of his mood, a man next door laughed. The walls between apartments were thin. He could hear the radio in the next apartment emitting loud music; he could hear the man laugh again, a small boy shouting something and a woman answering him. An evening at home for an average family—such an evening as he was destined to never know.

As he sat brooding in the chair, he became suddenly aware of the silence. He found himself listening for sounds in the house, for Diana Fowler moving in the bedroom, for the voices and the radio next door. And then he realized why the quietness had attracted his notice. It had come so abruptly. The radio next door had stopped, which was nothing strange because radios always stop abruptly. But the voices had also stopped, suddenly, as if like the radio they had been switched off.

Strange. But why? Why this feeling of uneasiness because the family next door was no longer noisy?

He rose from his chair, moved nervously about the room. He stopped at a window and looked down at the street below. A woman giggled merrily as she hung onto a man's arm. A white laundry truck, which had been parked across the street, moved off with a clash of gears.

The bedroom door opened and Diana Fowler came out dressed in a black evening gown which contrasted vividly with the ivory whiteness of her skin. Calvin Kane caught his breath. "You're lovely," he muttered.

She showed her even white teeth. "I promised to let Mrs. Payne who lives next door see how I look in my new gown. It was through the Paynes that I met Jimmy Cornell."

He reached for his hat and she said

quickly: "Don't go yet. Keep me company until Jimmy calls for me. I'll be right back."

SHE went out and he heard the bell in the apartment next door ringing. He listened, heard no movement in the apartment. Diana kept her finger on the bell. Evidently there was no answer.

There was the slight creaking of the door as if Diana, having found it unlocked, had pushed it open. Then he heard Diana cry out, a single hoarse gasp of horror—and, after that, dead silence.

When necessary Calvin Kane could move rapidly. He slammed out of the apartment, scurried down the hall. The door to the Payne apartment was open, and just over the threshold Diana Fowler lay in a crumpled heap. He dropped down to her side, saw at a glance that she had only fainted. Then he looked up and his blood ran cold.

All four members of the Payne family were in the living room. They looked like a tableau in a wax museum.

Seated on a chair with a folded newspaper on his lap was a thin man with a white mustache. His head drooped on his shoulder; he might have been sleeping save for his staring sightless eyes. In the middle of the room a buxom rather pretty woman lay outstretched on her side. Against the wall a boy of ten sat with his chin between his knees. On the couch, curled up as if for a nap, lay a little girl of six or seven.

Kane rose and went to each of the four in turn. All were dead. They were unmarked, bore no signs of how death had come save perhaps for the fact that their faces were purple. They looked as if they had been drowned.

Diana Fowler stirred on the floor, moaning. Kane picked her up in his powerful arms and, shutting the door of the apartment behind him, he carried her into her own apartment and placed her gently on

a couch. Then he went to a phone and said: "Give me the police."

CHAPTER TWO

Radio Murder

LIEUTENANT MAGUIRE said: "And you're sure you heard all four of them alive five minutes before Miss Fowler discovered their bodies?"

Calvin Kane nodded. "They must have been killed so suddenly that they hadn't even a chance to cry out, or move from the spot where each of them happened to be at the moment. First I thought of gas, but the windows were wide open and there was no smell in the apartment. I'm no doctor, but they look as if they've been asphyxiated."

Dr. Hall, the medical examiner, was bending over the little girl on the couch. He straightened up and looked at Lieutenant Maguire and Calvin Kane with a puzzled frown.

"That's right, Mr. Kane," he said slowly, "a form of asphyxiation. They have been electrocuted."

Lieutenant Maguire exclaimed: "I'll be damned! How?"

"That's what I can't understand," the medical examiner said. "Obviously live wires weren't used. They were sitting here, an ordinary family spending a usual evening at home, and then suddenly—like that—a powerful bolt of electricity."

"But from where?" Maguire demanded incredulously. "That's what I want to know—from where?"

There was no answer. Calvin Kane had been sidling slowly about the apartment. Desperately he was trying to recall the exact moment when silence had descended on this apartment. Something more had happened than a cessation of the voices.

Then he had it. The radio!

Quickly he went to the radio, snapped the switch. Nothing happened. He lifted the top, looked in. Removing one of the

bulbs, he held it up to the light. Burned out.

"Say," he said. "Look at this, Lieutenant. The radio wasn't turned off. It burned out. Must have been burned out at the exact instant when the four died."

"So what?" Lieutenant Maguire commented. "The electric bolt burned out the tubes."

"Why? The regular electric lights in the apartment are still on." Kane ran his fingers over his chin. "It sounds silly, I guess, but I have a hunch the electric bolt came from the radio."

"Damn silly," Lieutenant Maguire scowled. "Why, I bet there were hundreds of radios on in this neighborhood at that minute. Dozens in this apartment house. Why wasn't anybody else killed?"

"I don't know," Calvin Kane muttered.

Maguire said: "That's the kind of brain-storm a shamus gets when he tries to make believe he's a real detective."

Dr. Hall's lips puckered into a smile. A plainclothes man who stood near the door grinned.

"All right, it's your case," Calvin Kane said. "Let's see you do something with it."

HE WENT out and rang the bell to Diana Fowler's apartment next door. Diana was wearing a coat as she opened the door. Jimmy Cornell was behind her, one of his hands lightly touching her elbow. A pang of jealousy shot through Calvin Kane as he looked at Cornell's tall, well-knit body.

"We were just leaving," Diana said. She was still very pale. "Of course I can't go to the dance now after—after what happened; but Jimmy suggested that I go for a ride with him."

"Good idea for her to get away from here for a while," Cornell said. "Poor girl, it was a terrible shock for her walking in there. It was quite a blow to me just hearing about it."

Calvin Kane asked: "You were rather intimate with Payne?"

"Sure. His lab assistant. He was not only a swell man, but a great scientist."

"A scientist!" Calvin Kane ran the brim of his hat through his fingers. "You must know all about his work. Did he have anything to do with radio?"

The effect of that last sentence on Jimmy Cornell was startling. His jaw sagged. His face blanched. He looked like a man who had suddenly seen a ghost.

"Why—I—well, he dabbled in a lot of things . . . Let's get started, Diana."

They brushed past Calvin Kane and moved toward the elevator. The private detective grabbed Cornell's arm.

"Hey, wait a minute. You know what killed Sterling Payne and his family."

Cornell attempted a laugh, but it came through his lips as a weak simper. "Don't be silly. How should I know?" His eyes flicked to Diana and his voice suddenly rose. "For God's sake, let go of my arm."

He jerked his arm up and down, breaking Calvin Kane's grip. Then he hurried Diana over to the elevator. Calvin Kane watched them get into the cage, watched the door slide shut.

And then it struck him that he shouldn't have let Diana out of his sight. Cornell was obviously scared stiff. Was he afraid that for some reason best known to himself he would meet the same fate as his boss? And was that frightened glance he had given Diana a sign that she also might be in danger?

There was only one elevator in the house. Kane took the four flights of stairs down. Steps weren't easy for him to negotiate, and by the time he reached the street Cornell and Diana were out of sight. He got into his coupe.

He hadn't any idea where he was going. He had, of course, no way of knowing where Diana and Cornell had gone. Chances were he was only imagining she was in danger.

As he cruised through city streets, his right hand automatically reached toward the dashboard to turn on the car radio. His fingers brushed the knob, then dropped away. Blood drained from his outstretched hand.

Had Jimmy Cornell a radio in his car? A radio, Kane was convinced, was the key to the horrible tragedy of the Payne family. He visualized Diana and Jimmy driving along, listening to soft music while her head rested on his broad shoulder. And suddenly. . . .

"Good Lord!" he cried aloud.

He wasn't thinking of Diana and Jimmy Cornell now but of another couple riding along Main Street an hour ago. Somers and his wife. The radio was on. Abruptly the radio burned out . . . Somers and his wife were dead . . . their car ran wild . . . plunged into a department store window, killing a girl who was in its path. . . .

Impossible! And yet why should a man, driving his car slowly through a busy street, suddenly lose control of his car and let it run wild? He might have died of heart-failure and in falling forward over his wheel his foot might have pressed down on the gas. But in that case the woman beside him would have snatched at the wheel—would at the very least have screamed. And it was too great a coincidence for the crash to have killed both instantly.

No. Both must have been dead before the crash.

HE DROVE to the precinct police station. Police Sergeant Schneider was in the squad room getting into his coat.

"Hello, Kane," Schneider greeted. "You were the one who phoned in the Payne murder, weren't you? Is it true the whole family was wiped out?"

"He and his wife and two kids."

"Tough," Schneider grunted. "Say, one of Sterling Payne's assistants was killed

in an auto accident about an hour ago. Funny kind of coincidence."

Kane's heart started to beat furiously, but he kept his voice quiet. "You mean Somers? Was he Payne's assistant?"

"Yeah. Walters Somers and his wife Regina were riding along Main near Willow when—"

"I know about that," Kane broke in. "Was an autopsy performed on them?"

Sergeant Schneider stared at Kane. "What do you know about it?"

"Payne and his family were electrocuted," Kane said. "Nobody knows who did it or how it was done. You said it was a funny coincidence that Somers and his wife were killed in an accident an hour before Somers' boss and his family were wiped out. You meant it was a coincidence both were murdered."

"Maybe," Schneider said slowly. "We're not sure yet. There hasn't been time for an autopsy, but you don't have to be an M. E. to know they didn't die as a result of the smack-up. So we had Morrow, the assistant M. E.—Doc Hall was already away on the Payne case when the bodies came in—look at them. He said they were dead before the crash; that death was probably caused by a powerful electric shock. Jeesh, this is getting goofier by the minute."

"Do you know if Somers had a radio in his car?" Kane inquired.

"No idea. They're taking the car apart now. Think maybe there were wires in it, though I can't see how it could be worked."

The pattern was beginning to take form. Payne and his family wiped out; one of his assistants and his wife killed; his other assistant at this moment with Diana Fowler. Whatever the motive behind the murders of Payne and Somers, the killer was apparently not satisfied with their deaths alone. He wiped out their entire families, killed those whom they loved most.

So that if Jimmy Cornell, as Payne's associate, was doomed to die, then the menace also hung over Diana Fowler because Cornell loved Diana. Cornell had understood the danger; that's why he had been so terrified.

CALVIN KANE said: "I suppose there was a check-up on Somers. Do you know any of the dope?"

"Homicide is taking the case over," Schneider stated. "But I got something. Walter Somers was thirty-two. Married three years. No children. He was an assistant to Sterling Payne like I told you. Payne had only one other man working for him—James Cornell. All three had been employed up to a couple of months ago by the Averill Electrical Appliance Company. Payne and Somers and Cornell quit at the same time and set up their own laboratory. Seems they had a fight with Harvey Averill, president of the company. Homicide is checking up on Averill."

Kane said, "Thanks, Sergeant," and started for the door.

"Say, where do you fit into this?" Schneider called after him. "Who's your client?"

Kane turned slowly. "A girl whose brother was the only real friend I ever had. He asked me to take care of her."

Then he left. Sergeant Schneider looked after him and scratched his head.

Calvin Kane had slid behind the wheel of his car before he realized that the radio was on. He hadn't left it on. He hadn't had it on all evening.

Instinct told him that death was seconds away. He leaned forward to snap off the radio. His hand was arrested by a voice which broke through the symphony orchestra which was playing.

The voice said: "*Calvin Kane, are you listening to me?*"

Kane's finger closed over the knob, but he did not snap off the power.

"Calvin Kane, you are clever. I have no idea how much you know or suspect. But it is too much."

A tight band formed about Kane's scalp. The orchestra was still playing as a sort of accompaniment to that voice. And the voice—it was low, husky, self-confident. It could not possibly come from any studio and it was obviously heard only by him although thousands of sets must be tuned to the same wave-length.

He changed the wave-length. A news commentator was now speaking, but the voice of the killer still came through the loud speaker.

It drowned out the commentator's voice; was saying: *"Therefore, Calvin Kane, you must be eliminated. Death comes like—"*

A quick twist of the wrist and the voice was snapped off. Kane leaned back, breathing heavily. Nothing happened.

It was clear now that the owner of the voice could kill only through a radio which was turned on. Another moment and death would have flashed into the car. It was the killer's confidence of his power which had saved Kane's life. He could have killed Kane the moment he had entered the coupe. But the killer had the egoism of a madman which had caused him to taunt Kane, to make him squirm, before he sent death.

Kane got out of the car and looked about. Save for a uniformed patrolman coming down the steps of the police station there was nobody on the street. A sedan was coming from one direction. At the other end of the block a white truck was turning the corner.

CHAPTER THREE

Menace in the Dark

CALVIN KANE drove several blocks until he came to a drug store. He entered a telephone booth and called Diana

Fowler's apartment. As he had expected, there was no answer.

For a minute or two Kane stood staring at the telephone box. A feeling of helplessness overwhelmed him. There was no way of finding Diana; nothing to do but wait until she returned home—if she ever did.

Asking the police to help him find her would be a waste of time. They wouldn't take his fears for her safety seriously; he would be laughed at.

There was one sure way to save her, if he were not already too late: to get at the source of the thing that killed so suddenly and so mysteriously.

He thumbed through the telephone directory which hung outside the booth, then called a number. A gruff voice said: "Yes?"

"Mr. Harvey Averill, please."

"Speaking. Who's this?"

Kane hesitated. Then he said: "The police."

"What, again?" Averill barked with annoyance. "Not more than twenty minutes ago two of you were up here and I answered a hundred questions. Of course I deeply regret that Somers and his wife were killed, but why all this fuss about a motor accident? And I'll be damned if I can understand what my quarrel with Somers has to do with it? Even if it conceivably did, I told you that two weeks ago I dropped my suit against Somers and Payne and Cornell for breach of contract when they left my employ. Recently we've been on the most amicable terms."

Evidently Averill did not know that Somers and his wife had been murdered. The police hadn't told him, thinking they could get more out of him if he believed Somers had died simply as the result of an accident. And obviously Averill didn't yet know about Payne. The second killing had happened too recently.

"What we want to know, Mr. Averill,"

Kane inquired, "is why you dropped the suit against your three former employees?"

"You cops have a nerve prying into my business affairs without justification."

Averill hung up. Kane waited a minute, then called the number again. As soon as he heard Averill's voice he said: "Murder, Mr. Averill, is a serious matter."

"Murder?" Averill snapped impatiently. "What are you talking about now?"

"Somers and his wife weren't killed in an accident. They were murdered."

Averill sucked in his breath sharply. A single word quavered over the wire: "How?"

"He and his wife were electrocuted while driving in their car. We're not quite sure how it happened, but perhaps you can tell us."

"Good God!"

Kane went on relentlessly: "And half an hour later Sterling Payne and his entire family were killed in the same way while listening to the radio in their apartment. Others are in danger of a similar fate. If we knew how they died, many lives may be saved."

He could hear Averill panting. "The fools!" Averill said. "I told them. And now—"

"What did you tell them, Mr. Averill?"

Averill cried: "The radio! I forgot!"

Kane heard a thud as of a phone falling on a table. And then he heard the radio. The music came thinly, as from far away; the radio was evidently in the other end of the room. Averill's voice and the fact that he hadn't been listening for it had kept Kane from hearing the radio before.

Suddenly the music stopped. Kane impatiently tapped the side of the phone box as he waited for Averill to return to the phone. One minute passed. Two minutes. Was Averill simply ignoring him? Or had he rushed out of the house after turning off the radio and forgotten all about him?

If Averill had had a chance to turn off the radio. . . .

KANE hung up. He looked up Averill's number again in the directory, noted the address, then went to his car as quickly as his deformity would permit him. Averill lived at the other end of the city. Ordinarily the drive would have taken fifteen minutes. Kane made it in eight.

The door of the Averill home was opened by a butler. Kane sidled past him. "Where's Mr. Averill?"

The butler went after him with mincing steps. "I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Averill gave explicit orders not to be disturbed."

"All right." Kane flashed his private investigator's badge. The butler, as Kane intended, assumed that it was the badge of the city police. He looked at Kane's deformed body and clucked his tongue. He was plainly puzzled.

"There were two detectives here a short time ago," the butler said. "Whatever can be the trouble?"

"Have you seen Mr. Averill since they left?"

"No, sir, he's been in his den all evening. As you are from the police, I imagine it would be proper for me to disturb him."

"Is he alone?" Kane asked. "Where's his family?"

"Mrs. Averill is in Florida with the children. I'll call him, sir."

"Never mind," Kane said. "I think I'd better go up."

He followed the butler up a flight of stairs. The butler tapped lightly on the door on the second floor. There was no answer.

"I'm afraid he has fallen asleep," the butler said.

Kane brushed the butler aside and pushed the door open. It was a man's room; the chairs were red leather and hunting and fishing trophies hung on the walls. The only light was a reading lamp

next to a chair, and on the arm of the chair lay an open book face down. Averill must have been reading when he had been interrupted by Kane's phone call. He would never read again.

Harvey Averill lay on the floor, like a runner who had tripped and fallen on his face. His right hand was stretched out beyond his head, as if even in death it was trying to reach the radio which stood some ten feet away.

The butler emitted a thin shriek and rushed to his master.

"Don't touch him," Kane ordered. "He's been murdered."

The butler stared blankly at Kane. "No. I was in the house. I should have heard something."

Kane went to the radio. The switch was on, but the radio was dead. He looked inside. Burned out. The radio killer had claimed another victim. A couple of seconds delay and Averill would have been able to save himself. He had known how death would come, but he had not been in time to shut off the radio.

Kane dropped the lid of the radio cabinet. The butler was no longer in the room. He had probably run down to call the police, in his haste forgetting that there was a phone in this room.

Then the lights went out.

CALVIN KANE stood in utter darkness. There was no sound but the thumping of his heart. Had the fuse blown? Or had somebody deliberately cut the wires? What had happened to the butler?

Kane moved toward the door. He stood there listening. No sound below. He sidled along the hall. No light downstairs either. The entire house appeared to be dark. He fumbled in his pocket for matches, but he let the matches go and instead slid his gun out of its shoulder clip. It might be dangerous to make a light.

When he thought he had reached the stairs leading downstairs, he crossed the hall. His hand touched a banister. He followed it until it turned, and then he stopped, again listening, trying to pierce the darkness below with the intensity of his stare. Nothing but blackness.

Below a shoe creaked, once. Then again that silence in which Kane's breathing sounded like the exhaust from a motor. Somebody was down there waiting for him to show a light. Where was the butler? Or was it the butler whose shoe had creaked?

He thumbed back the safety catch of his automatic. He could out-wait whoever was below. His ears would catch any movement up the stairs.

A pencil of light shot out of the blackness below, shone fully upon him. He threw himself backward an instant before the shot cracked out. He heard the thud of the slug bury itself in the wall behind him.

The flash snapped out.

It had happened too quickly for him to get a chance to shoot back. But he threw a shot anyway at where the flashlight beam had come from. An answering shot came, going very wild. Whoever was below wasn't very good with a gun. Otherwise Kane would have been dead as soon as the flash had found him.

After a minute or two Kane rose and groped his way back into Averill's den. He lit a match in order to find the telephone and called the police in a low whisper. Lieutenant Maguire spoke to him. Keeping his voice as low as possible, he told Maguire that Averill had been murdered and that he was being held on the second floor of the house by the killer.

"I'm going out one of the back windows," Kane said. "It's not too great a drop to the ground. Then I'll keep the killer in the house until you come."

He hung up and turned to where a slight diffusion of the darkness indicated

a window. The creak of a shoe almost in his ears spun him around. The beam flashed out from the doorway—and Kane dove under the beam. It was the only thing he could do.

The killer hurried his shot and the slug whistled over Kane's head. And then Kane felt cloth under his fingers. His gun fell from his hand as he wound both arms about the assailant's legs. The killer went down heavily. Kane landed on top, groped for the wrist which held the gun, found it and held on.

LIKE many men with hunched backs, Calvin Kane had arms of steel. His powerful fingers tightened about the wrist. The body beneath him jerked; he heard a cry of pain; the gun hand opened and the gun slid out. Triumph flared in Kane. Now, unarmed, the killer was through. Kane worked his hands up to the killer's throat.

A hand flailed up at him, clawing like a woman. Kane didn't care. His own fingers were closing on the throat. The body beneath him heaved up. It was a strong body, stronger perhaps than Kane's, but few men had the power that was in Kane's arms. Kane laughed deeply in his throat and bore down.

And the next instant that laugh turned into a cry of pain as fire seared into the muscles of his left arm. The killer had a knife! In the darkness Kane couldn't see from where the next knife-thrust was coming. He threw himself backward, free of his assailant, and rolled on the floor.

Then for what seemed an eternity there was no movement, no sound but his own agonized breathing and that of the killer. The killer was afraid of the strength of Kane's hands, and Kane was afraid of the killer's knife. Somewhere on the floor were two guns. Every sense alert as he waited for the killer's charge, Kane started to run his hands over the floor.

A car pulled up in front of the house.

Running feet pounded on the pavement outside. The police had come!

The positions of Kane and the killer had changed during the fight, and the killer was now nearest the windows. Kane heard the abrupt movement of a body, sensed rather than saw the darker mass momentarily gathered at what was probably one of the windows. He leaped toward it. He heard the thud of a body landing on the ground below.

The night was almost as dark as the interior of the house, and as Kane leaned out of the window he saw only a blackness tinged with gray. He could not even make out the ground. The killer might be waiting for him to follow or had already started running. To jump down after him would either be suicide, or, at best, utterly futile.

The door downstairs slammed open. Kane rose unsteadily, groped his way into the hall to the head of the stairs. His left sleeve was soaked with blood. As he descended the stairs, he saw flashlights in the broad foyer below.

A voice exclaimed: "Hey, Mike, look!"

By the light of the two flashlights he saw two uniformed cops bending over a body on the floor. Lieutenant Maguire had sent out a radio alarm and these two cops in a prowl car had answered.

Calvin Kane said wearily: "That's the Averill butler. The killer got away."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Fiend at Large

A FLOODLAMP illuminated Harvey Averill's den with a harsh white light while an electrician downstairs tried to locate the severed wires. A police photographer snapped pictures. Lieutenant Maguire stared at Averill's body, then looked at the corner of the room where Dr. Hall was bandaging Calvin Kane's wound, and he gnawed his lips.

"You'll be all right in a couple of days," the Medical Examiner told Kane. "My God, I thought I've seen every way in which one person can kill another. The way that butler downstairs was killed is understandable and human and natural. A knife in the back—instant death." He swung a hand toward the corpse on the carpet. "But this!"

Grimly Lieutenant Maguire demanded: "What I want to know, Kane, is what in hell you were doing here?"

"Walter and Regina Somers were apparently murdered in the same way as Payne and his family and Averill," Kane said. "Somers and Payne used to work for Averill's company. They quarreled and quit, or quit and then quarreled. I suspected a tie-up then. Now I'm sure of it."

Maguire nodded. "I found out about Somers when I returned to headquarters. A couple of boys from my department checked on Averill less than an hour ago and didn't learn much."

"Neither did I," Kane said. "Except that Averill could have told us how the others had died. He might have told your dicks if they hadn't let him think that Mr. and Mrs. Somers were killed in an accident and if you had taken my hunch seriously that the murders were accomplished through radio. I spoke to him by phone to save time. The moment I mentioned Payne and Somers had been electrocuted he became terrified. He made a dive for the radio to shut it off. He was too late."

Maguire ran his tongue over his lips. "Good God, if there's anything in what you say—why, man, the killer could wipe out hundreds and thousands of people at a time if he wanted to!"

"Now you're beginning to see it," Calvin Kane commented quietly.

There was a brief silence. The lights in the house went on suddenly, but nobody in that room realized it.

"You fought with him," Lieutenant Maguire said. "Haven't you any idea who he is?"

Calvin Kane hesitated a moment before he said: "No." The idea was too vague, too far buried in the recesses of his mind, to mean anything yet. "The killer was being very careful. That's why he cut the electric wires. He didn't know how many people there might be in the house; probably didn't know that Averill's family was away and that only one servant remained. He saw me go into the house. He wasn't sure, I think, that he had succeeded in killing Averill, and if he hadn't he was afraid I might find out enough to give him away. He couldn't wait until I came out to try to kill me, because he knew I would probably use the phone. So he had to come in after me.

"He couldn't kill everybody in the house and naturally he didn't want to be seen, so he plunged the house into darkness. He met the butler immediately before or after he cut the wires and stabbed him. He figured I'd come down to investigate, and like fool I did. If he'd been a better shot with a gun he would have gotten me when his flashlight picked me out. Then he had to come up after me. I was a menace to him; I had to be killed. Fortunately he didn't succeed."

MAGUIRE nodded. "All right. But I still don't see where you fit in. You're a business man, Kane. Every private dick is. Who's your client and why?"

"Diana Fowler, who is the sister of my best friend, is James Cornell's girl friend," Kane stated. "Cornell worked as Sterling Payne's assistant. Payne and his other assistant, Somers, were killed by some diabolical electrical device. Averill, head of an electrical concern for whom the three had once worked, was also killed. Of the four only Cornell is still alive, and he and Diana Fowler are out driving somewhere in or near the city."

"You think—"

Kane said: "I pray to God that they have no radio in their car. After what you've seen and heard, even you, Lieutenant, ought to be convinced of their danger. If they're warned in time, they might have a chance."

Lieutenant Maguire looked at Kane's strained face, then strode to the phone. Kane gave descriptions of Diana Fowler and James Cornell, and Maguire barked them into the mouthpiece.

Kane was out of the house before Maguire had finished phoning in the alarm. He drove directly to the apartment house where Diana lived. From the street he saw the darkened windows of her apartment. Slowly he drove about the city, peering into every sedan he passed. The police were out looking for them now, had an infinitely better chance of finding them; but Kane had to do something to keep himself from going mad with anxiety.

Twice more he drove past Diana's apartment. And the third time he saw a light in one of the windows.

Diana was still dressed in her black evening gown when she opened the door in response to his ring. She seemed surprised to see him. He said, "Thank God you're safe!" and slid past her into the living room.

The strains of an orchestra came over the radio. Kane went to the radio, snapped it off quickly.

"Don't turn it off," Diana protested. "There's a new swing band I want to hear. It's coming on in a few minutes."

He turned to her with his back against the radio. "Where's Jimmy Cornell?"

"He brought me home a few minutes ago and left almost at once." Two parallel lines creased her forehead in a puzzled frown. "Why are you acting so strangely? Why did you turn off the radio? I want it on."

"Did Jimmy Cornell suggest that you listen to the band?"

"Yes. He even tuned in the station for me. We had been talking about swing, you see, and he told me about this new band."

Kane asked quietly: "If he was so interested, why didn't he stay to listen?"

"He said he was expecting an important phone call and had to be home." Her frown deepened. "He's been acting queerly all evening. What's come over you men—you coming in here at this hour and turning off my radio and Jimmy taking me to a movie and then leaving me alone most of the time?"

His fingers closed about her wrist. "He did *what*?"

"Why, it wasn't important except that I think it was rather inconsiderate of him to leave me for so long a time. He had suggested going to the movies instead of driving; and we'd hardly sat down when he said he had to make an important phone call and he didn't return for almost an hour."

Kane leaned against the radio, looking at her.

The pattern was complete, but it didn't make sense.

He said: "Jimmy Cornell loves you, doesn't he?"

"Yes. But I'm afraid that I don't love him. That's why we quarreled after we got out of the movies. He asked me to marry him. I told him that I didn't feel that way about him, that I was sure that I never would. He became very insistent, wanted me to promise that I would marry him as soon as possible. I told him not to be ridiculous. And then a change came over him. He laughed in a queer way that sent chills down my back and said I was missing an opportunity to be the wife of the most powerful man in the world. I thought he was joking, but he didn't seem to be. His manner was beginning to frighten me, when suddenly he became his own self again and started to talk about swing music."

"Jimmy Cornell!" Kane said hoarsely, and he started for the phone.

The door flew open and a voice ordered: "I wouldn't touch that phone, Kane."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Last Murder

A BLACK automatic was gripped in Jimmy Cornell's fist. Diana gasped, "Jimmy!" and stared with open mouth at his gun.

Calvin Kane said: "I see you own two guns. You were in such a hurry to leave Averill's house that you left one behind."

Cornell showed two rows of even white teeth. The smile was deadly. "This time I won't miss. Make a move for your shoulder and I'll let you have it. And the second shot will be for the lovely Diana. You mightn't care much for your own life, but I have an idea you're rather fond of Diana."

Kane shrugged and kept his hands at his side. His shoulder holster was empty anyway. In his haste to search for Diana he had left his gun on the floor of Averill's den. Otherwise he would have risked shooting ability. Bitterly now he cursed reason to have little respect for Cornell's shooting ability. Bitterly now he cursed his carelessness in leaving his gun behind.

"You love Diana," Kane said. "I don't care what you do to me, but you can't harm her."

"Can't I?" Cornell laughed. It was a nervous, chilling laugh—the laugh of a madman. "I can do anything I please. I control the life and death not only of you two but of the whole world. And I begged her to marry me. Begged her! I who will have the most desirable women in the world at my feet in a short time!"

The sense of limitless power had broken down his mind, had given him the ruthless egoism of the mad.

"No!" Diana muttered. "Jimmy, you're

not like that. I've never loved you, but I've always thought a great deal of you. I thought you were fine, decent. Jimmy, you're playing a joke on us."

"Joke!" His face grew purple with rage that anybody should doubt his power or his ruthlessness. "Was the death of Payne and his family and of Somers and his wife and of Averill a joke? They thought they'd doublecross me. But I got the jump on them. I was smarter. Now there is nobody to stop me. Nobody knows; nobody suspects me. Until I'll be ready to come out in the open, and then it'll be too late."

Yes, the man was undeniably mad and there was no use trying to reason with him, but if his plan to kill them could be delayed, help might come from somewhere.

"You're not so good," Kane said contemptuously. "You're using a device invented by other men which you stole from them."

"Damn you!" Cornell cursed. "I had as much to do with it as Payne and Somers. For two years we've been working in Averill's laboratory on a radio directional sender. Do you know what that is? Radio impulses can be sent to a specific radio set. People will be able to communicate to each other over radio the way they do over the telephone and no third party will be able to listen in to their conversation. It hasn't been perfected yet; the directional sender at present must be within five hundred feet of the radio to which the impulses are sent. But given time I'll perfect it."

"Nonsense," Kane scoffed. "Why would Averill have kicked you out of his laboratory if you'd invented something?"

"We left, you hunchbacked fool. According to our contracts, in return for our salaries, whatever we invented belonged outright to Averill. That was unfair, so we quit and Averill sued us for breach of contract even though he had no

(Continued on page 108)

Murder at the Miracle Club

by DONALD G. CORMACK



A gun-blast splintered the panel in my face, and I shoved Dudley and Helen aside. . . .

For relaxation, I put on my dress suit and stepped out. But the maelstrom of murder I was swept into was far more baffling and deadly than the tough case whose close I was about to celebrate!



I GUESS every private detective has his own way of relaxing after an especially tough case, but my way is to get dressed in my evening clothes and go out for a darned good frolic. Not at all

original, but quite satisfactory. And that is just what I was about to do that night after unwinding the Clemens tangle you may have read about; in fact I had just finished fussing with my white tie when the telephone rang. For a second I thought of ducking out the door; then, feeling like a truant schoolboy caught by the teacher, I went and answered the thing.

It was Red Snavelly, a newspaper photographer for one of the tabloids, and an old friend of mine.

"Barry," he yelled in an excited voice, "I'm at Eightieth street and Fifth covering a call that came into the office. It's murder—a young girl found in Central Park strangled with a silk cord and her face all slashed to ribbons—it's a horrible thing."

"Who is it—do they know?" I asked him, half interested.

"Betty Forrest! That's what Sergeant Kinsella says."

I whistled when I heard that. Betty Forrest was the leading debutante of the season and an heiress in her own right.

"But that's just it!" Red said almost plaintively. "I know the murdered girl isn't Betty! The evening bag she was carrying is Betty's, all right, but I've photographed Betty so many times I know she has a birth mark on her neck—I try to keep it out of my shots to avoid extra retouching—and there's no mark on this girl. Her face, of course, is unrecognizable. I tried to tell Kinsella, but he told me to go roll my hoop. You know what Kinsella's like."

Yeah, I knew Kinsella. He was the surliest, meanest guy on the force, and once he'd tried to have my license revoked on trumped-up charges of concealing evidence, just for spite. I'd do anything to put Kinsella in his place. Furthermore, with Betty in this tangle it was going to be front-page news all over the country.

"Tell me what else you know, Red," I snapped.

"The girl is young," he said. "About twenty. She's dressed in expensive evening clothes and she's been garroted by a silk cord, Chinese fashion. The doc says her face was slashed after death—not much bleeding. So that gave me the hunch maybe it was done to prevent identification and that the evening bag was put there purposely. In one hand we found a silk button with Oriental characters embroidered on it, and stuck in an inside pocket was one of those wooden mallets they give out in night clubs—it was from the Miracle Club. But Kinsella wouldn't let me say a word, so I thought I'd call you in case you're interested."

"Thanks, mister," I told him. "I am interested—a lot."

"Well, there it is," he said. "Now I gotta go to work. 'Bye."

After he hung up I sat down and smoked a butt, thinking the thing over, but I didn't get very far. A society girl found in the park, strangled by Chinese and with a Chinese button in her hand; she had probably just been to the Miracle Club, a popular society place, as indicated by the mallet; and she had been mutilated to prevent identification. It didn't add up, but I figured one thing—the Miracle Club knew some of the answers. I put on my topper and grabbed a cab at the corner.

I'D NEVER been in the Miracle Club, but I thought it was well named—two dollars for a steak and a dollar extra for mushrooms. When I got there I was snooted by the doorman because I hadn't come in a car of my own. When I got to the checkroom a man in full dress walked up to me and I recognized him from pictures as Giovanni Paselli, the owner of the place. His oily, dark-skinned face was covered with a blue beard that no amount of shaving could erase, and his lips were quirked in a mechanical smile that contrasted with his cold Latin stare.

"You have a reservation?" he asked, and when I shook my head he shrugged his shoulders eloquently. "The tables, they are all taken."

Inside I could see a dozen empty tables. "I had an engagement to meet Miss Forrest and a party here," I said. "Aren't they inside?"

His lips tightened on his set smile, but he showed no surprise. "They have gone," he said, "and we have no room for you. So sorry."

Behind him I noticed two men dressed as waiters who were elaborately unconcerned with our conversation. It was their presence that told me I was close to something—and something not very pretty.

"Suppose I wait," I suggested. "They'll return, I'm sure."

"They won't be back," Paselli said. "I know. So sorry."

He had been edging me toward the ornate doorway, and now the doorman swung the chromium grilled portal wide open. With nothing to go on but a hunch, I couldn't do anything more. I walked into the dark street, took a cab that came to the door, went around the corner with him and dismissed the cab. On the side street were parked the big cars of the patrons inside, their chauffeurs talking in idle groups. I walked up to one of them who was reading a paper under his dim cowl light.

"Which is Miss Forrest's car?" I asked him.

"Second up the line," he said absently. Then his eyes left the paper and looked at me. "What you wanta know for, mister?" he asked.

But I was walking away by then, his answer all the information I needed. If her car was outside, she hadn't left the club. I walked toward the entrance again, my eyes on a delivery entranceway just this side of the lighted canopy. When I got to it I ducked into the dark passage,

hoping the doorman hadn't spotted me. Then I stripped off my Chesterfield and topper, dropped them in the passage, and stepped into the lighted kitchen of the club. A swarthy Italian chef looked up in surprise and two waiters scowled in puzzlement, but I told them to take it easy—that I was just playing a joke on some friends inside. Before they could say anything I pushed through the swinging doors, but instead of going through into the dining room I ducked up a short stairway and through a door that led to the office of the management.

I knew I'd have to work fast now and my gun jumped into my hand as I went down a short corridor on the double. I shoved open the first door I came to, but the ornate office inside was empty and I was about to go on when a faint scream came to my ears—from a door leading off the empty room. I jumped over to it and threw the door open—inside was a girl I recognized immediately as Betty Forrest and she was roped hand and foot, her evening gown ripped and smeared with dirt. Her eyes were wide with terror, but when she saw that I had come to help she calmed down quickly. I had the ropes off her in a hurry.

"Thank God you came!" she whispered, shivering with dread.

"Quickly!" I snapped. "Tell me what happened."

THE girl took only a minute to get her nerves under control. "We came here for dinner," she told me in broken gasps. "Five of us—Helen Field, Marjory Franklin and I, escorted by Frank Mann and Dudley Field. When we had finished, Paselli suggested that we visit a private club of his downtown somewhere. We agreed, thinking it would be fun. He told us to meet him back in his private offices—these rooms—and when we came back here a gang of thugs attacked us. I don't know—"

"Where are the others?" I interrupted her, feeling a chill of dreadful premonition run through me—Dudley and Helen Field were the son and daughter of the police commissioner, and the other names sounded like a roster of Who's Who on Wall Street. "And what's behind this?"

But she shook her head. The attack was sudden, unexplained, and she had been separated from the rest. I didn't tell her about the murder; she was too upset already.

"Look, Betty," I said, "I'll search for the rest, release them. You duck out through the kitchen, find your chauffeur and run for the police. And hurry!"

I watched her go through the door at the end of the short hall, then turned back to search the other rooms when I heard voices coming toward me and I had barely time enough to duck back into the room we had just left, hiding behind some long drapes at the far end.

Two men came in, and by standing back in the deep shadows I could peer out and see the figures in the room. One was Paselli, the other was a giant Chinese who must have stood six foot six, easily. Gone now was Paselli's truculent manner and he did everything but scrape and bow before the expressionless Oriental who sang his words.

"The captives?" he intoned to Paselli.

"All here, Ah Kai Ling," Paselli said, fawning. "Marjory Franklin's body was thrown into the park by your men as you ordered. The dead boy will be tossed on his father's porch." He walked to a closet and threw open the door. I gasped when a body rolled out—it was young Frank Mann, his evening clothes ripped and blood-stained, but it was his face that made me shudder—it was literally slashed to ribbons.

"The letter?" the Chinese went on emotionlessly after a glance.

"It is already mailed—the commissioner will get it tomorrow."

The Chinese grunted. "Where are the others?" he asked.

"The two Field kids are down the hall, the other girl you wanted for yourself is in the next room. They're waiting to be shipped."

I saw the Oriental's eyes sparkle horribly for an instant when Betty Forrest was mentioned. He nodded his head slowly, then moved around behind Paselli, seemingly without motive.

"Ah Kai Ling is pleased!" he commended. "Your task is done." But the sneering tone had hardly been heard before he whipped a silk cord from his coat sleeve and snapped it around Paselli's throat, wrenching it tight and knotting it in one movement. Paselli's scream was strangled and his palsied hands pawed futilely at the embedded cord as his face began to turn from crimson to black. In a short moment he was on his knees, then he was twitching on the floor as the Oriental looked impassively on. "Your task is done," he sneered again.

Ling clapped his hands and two Oriental servants bounded noiselessly into the room, and at the same time Ling padded over to the door of Betty's room, threw it open—but a glance told him that she had escaped. For the first time he momentarily lost his calm as a string of meaningless words burst from him. The others jabbered excitedly back at him—I knew that the time for action had come, and I was ready. I leaped from behind the portiers, my gun blazing as I came, and I saw both servants go down as though pole-axed. But the giant figure of Ling plunged into the next room, the door slamming behind him. I was at it in a bound, trying to wrench it open—and then I heard shouts outside and a rush of slithering footsteps. I wheeled around just in time to see a whole pack of yellow faces closing in on me, had only one chance to cut loose with my gun before I went down under the hurtling fig-

ures . . . went down to blazing pain and unconsciousness.

WHEN I came to I found myself in the dark interior of a jolting delivery truck, bound and gagged. Next to me I could feel the figure of a girl, and up by my head were someone's feet. I knew almost certainly that the other captives were the commissioner's son and daughter—and I knew too that hope of our rescue was pretty dim because we had been removed from the club before Betty Forrest could bring the cops.

After what seemed a long time we jolted to a stop, and when the rear doors were swung open I could see narrow twisting streets with dim lights, and quickly moving figures in strange clothes—Chinatown! The truck was backed up to a dark, gloomy loft building that was deserted and falling in disrepair, and in a moment three yellow henchmen jumped into the truck and cut away our bonds and gags, forced us out of the car and into a dark alley that ran beside the building.

A moment later we were being driven down a short passage and through an iron door. As the door opened we were almost knocked off our feet by the noises and smells that swept over us.

We were in what was supposed to be a night club, but such an evil, noisome place as had never existed before. The creatures who rioted in the place seemed to be the mindless devils of another world, some lying in a drugged stupor in the midst of the wild revels, others dancing and singing in crazy abandon, and the whole revolting pandemonium was made more chaotic by a Negro jazz outfit that shrieked with barbaric, impassioned frenzy. But it wasn't the music that loosed the depraved natures of the revellers—it was drugs. And this hidden night club must be Ah Kai Ling's outlet for dope peddling at fancy prices!

But we weren't given much chance to observe the antics in the large room. The three of us were hustled into a small room at one side, and a second later the door had been banged shut and locked. We were waiting for execution, I realized dimly.

The girl was in her brother's arms, sobbing with near-hysteria now that we were alone, and I knew I'd have to do something right away.

"Listen!" I snapped at Dudley Field. "My name's Kingston; I'm an investigator and I've been in tough spots before. And the dumbest thing we can do is to stand around and wait for the yellow rats to return."

The kid Dudley snapped right out of it, waiting for me to give some orders. Over in one corner I saw a pile of packing cases, empty now and in long disuse. The sight of them and a shuttered window gave me an idea. "Grab some of those boxes and rip them apart," I yelled. "Give me all the nails and heavy planks you can get."

I knew the noise outside would cover the sound of hammering as I used the heel of my shoe to nail a board across the floor in front of the door. Then I jammed some heavy planks under the paneling of the door and braced the heels of the planks against the board, using it as an anchor.

"Now, Dudley," I yelled, "you smash open those shutters and the two of you start throwing the rest of the packing cases out into the street. Throw everything you can lay your hands on—we'll get the cops in here even if we have to rip up the floor and heave it out too!"

The action seemed to drive away the kids' fear, and as I held my shoulder against the door, they busted open the shutters with a beam and started to toss things out. As soon as the first crashes were heard in the street, a high-pitched voice from below screamed something in

Chinese, and other shouts came in answer. Then there were running footsteps outside the door and a heavy weight smashed against it, making it creak on its hinges.

I YELLED to Dudley and Helen to keep on heaving, and they went at it with a will, but I knew we were done for with the next rush. But no more rushes came—a gun suddenly blasted splinters in my face and I felt a searing pain in my arm. I shoved Dudley and Helen beyond range.

The door groaned and shattered under the next attack, and I knew that one more push would smash it flat. But that next push never came! The hallway outside was filled with the chattering roar of a machine gun, was answered by a chorus of shrieks. It couldn't be the cops already! But it was, and we could see the police rushing past in pursuit of the fleeing yellow horde when we tore away the last supports and the door sagged open.

The first one in the room was a granite-faced man with white hair, and I knew at a glance it was the commissioner as Helen went into his arms with a little sob. Behind him came a swarm of blue-coated men, and in their midst I saw Betty Forrest and her chauffeur. Next thing I knew the commissioner was fixing me with his piercing glance. "Kingston!" he roared, and I must have jumped a foot. "I won't forget your work tonight. Nice going, detective!"

I grinned kind of foolishly. "Thanks Commissioner," I said. "But would you mind telling what was behind Paselli and Ling?"

"Sure," he said. "That's easy. This Chink, Ling, was running dope joints in other cities and he was establishing one here. His scheme was to work through Paselli as a 'front'. The wealthy mob

who liked that sort of thing was steered down here by Paselli from his club.

"But the police department suspected what was going on—though we didn't know about the Paselli front. Ling heard we were going to close in on him, so he figured Paselli had gotten scared and squealed. That's why he killed Paselli. But he had already started to put through his crazy scheme: kidnapping my kids in order to force me to let him operate long enough to make drug addicts of several socialite kids. He could clean up, close shop and then blackmail the kids' families. Anyway, he had Paselli pick up the young crowd at the club—"

I interrupted: "Why did they kill young Mann and Marjory Franklin and plant Betty Forrest's bag on Marjory?"

"I can answer that," Helen Field said. "Frank Mann put up a fight and those awful Chinese started shooting. Marjory and Frank were both hit; their faces must have been mutilated to delay any investigation. And Betty's bag being chucked in the park with poor Marjory's body was merely an accident."

The commissioner said, "That sounds logical." Then he went on, to me: "After you freed Miss Forest, she left her chauffeur on guard at the club and went for the riot squad. The chauffeur trailed them to this section, but lost the trail before they got to the hideout—this loft. But your barrage of packing cases pointed that out pretty plainly."

Betty whispered something to the commissioner and he grinned.

"That's right, I forgot. Kingston!" he roared again. "How about you and Miss Forrest coming for dinner next Saturday? Something I want to talk over with you."

Usually my voice is pretty positive, too. But it was sort of quiet now. "Thanks, Commissioner. I'll be there." It must have been the look in Betty's eyes that made me feel a bit weak.

THE CHIMES OF DEATH

Bitsy Ward, diminutive ace-detective, was happiest in roaring battle. But it was different when the girl he loved was a target for the monster who drove sane folks to hideous murder—and when Bitsy was convinced the killer was a corpse!

Even if I hit her—she'd be better
off dead! . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Murder Strikes Twelve

THEY weren't impressed by me. Nobody is—at first. Neither the guys who face me at the other end of a ping-pong table, nor the gunmen who pull rods on me. But they learn. I'm not smaller than Napoleon was.

Chief of Police Hemmer snorted with



Tense, baffling mystery novelette, by RUSSELL GRAY

contempt as I walked into Mayor Bigelow's office. "Bitsy Ward, the ping-pong champ!" he sneered. "I thought, Mr. Mayor, you were going to call in a man."

I don't exactly blame Hemmer for being sore. The police of even a one-horse town like Mountain City don't like to admit that things are in such a mess

they have to call in a private dick.

Mayor William Bigelow stuck out a hand and said: "We've been waiting for you, Mr. Ward. We're pretty desperate because of this inexplicable horror which has descended on our city. Although I must confess that it was only at my daughter's insistence that I wired you."



The Chimes of Death struck fear into the townspeople—even as they will cause your pulse to tingle!

We shook hands. A voice behind the mayor said: "Hello, Glenn." Jean Bigelow rose from a deep leather chair and came toward me.

One of the reasons I fell for Jean Bigelow when we met during the national table-tennis tournaments in Chicago a couple of months before was that she called me by the name my parents gave me. There were other things about Jean, of course, more important: her black eyes

and perfect features and trim little figure. And you should have seen what she could do to a ping-pong ball!

While we held each other's hands and looked at each other, Mayor Bigelow mumbled an introduction to the fourth person in the office. Nelson Lange was his name, and later I found out that he was the big-shot lawyer in town. He towered nearly a foot over me, and he was a handsome devil. Like Chief Hemmer he looked down at me with contempt, but for a different reason. Instinctively I knew how he felt about Jean; and I knew, too, that he didn't consider me much of a rival.

Then the clock started to bang out the hour.

The other four in the room stiffened. Shadows of fear crawled over their faces. And there was not a sound but the booming of that clock.

Three . . . four, I counted. It would go up to twelve.

I had hit Mountain City a few minutes before midnight. The mayor's telegram had stated that he would be waiting for me in his office whenever I arrived. And on the way I had read the newspapers carefully so that I would get some idea of what was up. There hadn't been much—only that on each of the last three nights, precisely on the stroke of midnight, a respectable citizen of Mountain City had committed brutal murder. This was the fourth night.

Six . . . seven, boomed the clock.

There had been something in the papers about the clock, too. It was the pride of Mountain City, set in a specially constructed tower in the city hall which stood on the highest point in the neighborhood. The striking of the clock could be heard for miles around by the townspeople and neighboring farmers.

They had been very proud of that clock. Now they were afraid of it.

Nine . . . ten.

I swung to a window and looked out. At that hour the square in front of the city hall was deserted save for a man and woman who were slowly strolling along. The three murders had occurred in different sections of the town. The small police force of the city was trying to cover the entire town, but what good did that do? They couldn't tell who the next murderer would be or where the murder would take place.

Eleven . . . twelve.

There was a sharp intake of breath behind me. And then the woman in the square was screaming.

THE mayor's office was on the ground floor. I went feet first through the window into some shrubs which almost tore my eyes out. Stumbling up to my feet, I raced toward the couple.

The man had the woman on the ground. At first I thought he was choking her. When I got closer, I saw that what he was doing was a lot more horrible. He was trying to tear her apart! He was digging nails into her flesh and gouging out bloody chunks with superhuman strength!

I hurled myself at him, knocking him off the woman. He turned on me with the furious strength of a madman. A stiff right to the jaw sent me back on my heels, but he didn't follow up the blow. Instead he turned back to the woman, a sort of animal mewling pouring from his throat. He plunged nails into her cheek, ripping—and then I was on him again.

I think that in the end I would have had to use my gun if a patrolman hadn't come charging up. Together we managed to hold him, but it wasn't by any means an easy job. He kept lunging at the woman, and hellish hatred of the woman blazed in his eyes.

Mayor Bigelow, Chief Hemmer, Nelson Lange and Jean were racing toward us. With the help of the three men, the

madman was finally subdued. The patrolman clamped handcuffs on him and even then the madman kept squirming and whimpering and trying to get at the woman.

"Good God!" Mayor Bigelow gasped. "That's Howard Blaine; and the woman is Cecil, his wife!"

I stood up, brushing myself. Cecil Blaine wasn't a pretty sight. It had been less than a minute between the time I had seen Blaine attack his wife and the time I had pulled him off her, but in the period he had almost completely torn the clothes from her, and her cheeks and abdomen were ribboned strips of flesh. If I had reached him half a minute later she would have been dead.

I stared down at her as she writhed in agony. She was young and pretty. I looked at her husband. A well-dressed man who normally must have been handsome. Now he had the face of a monster.

Jean was swaying as if she were about to faint. "They loved each other," she babbled. "I've known Howard since we went to high school together. He wouldn't hurt a fly. He would have given his life for Cecil."

I moved to Jean's side to steady her. She leaned against me, trembling, as I placed an arm about her. I glimpsed Nelson Lange glowering at me.

"The fourth in four nights!" Chief of Police Hemmer was gasping incredulously. "Tomorrow there'll be another unless—unless . . ."

"Unless we stop whatever is in back of this," Mayor Bigelow completed the sentence. "But how? How can we know who'll kill next and where at the stroke of midnight tomorrow? And—" his voice dropped to a hoarse mutter—"how'll we know that one of us won't be the next victim or the next killer?"

Suddenly the cop who had been holding down Blaine called out: "He's quiet now."

We went over to the man on the ground. He lay on his back, panting, and the madness was gone from his eyes. He looked up at us in horror.

"What happened?" he asked. "I did something. I recall . . . as in a nightmare . . . but I'm not sure what it was."

His eyes shifted to his wife whom Chief Hemmer was lifting in his arms.

"Good God!" Blaine cried, twisting up to his feet. "Cecil! Who did that to you? I'll kill him! I'll—"

He stopped. He looked at our grim, strained faces, and suddenly he collapsed inwardly. He brought his hands up to his face, then tore them away instantly as he saw his blood-stained fingers.

"I did it!" he shrieked. "Oh, God, I'm a beast like those others! As we walked, I knew that I was waiting for twelve o'clock. But I didn't know I was waiting to—to kill Cecil! Oh, Cecil, forgive me!"

"She'll be all right," Chief Hemmer said gently. "Fortunately we came in time."

BLAINÉ walked as in a daze after Hemmer. The patrolman had to support him. I followed, walking between Jean and her father.

"They all act like that," the mayor said. "They killed at midnight and then it was as if they had awakened from a nightmare. They didn't want to kill, but they did. Good Lord, what can the answer be?"

Icy rivulets crawled through my veins. Under my left armpit I felt my heavy automatic. The great equalizer, I used to say. What difference does size make when you have a .45 in your hand? But now the gun wasn't any use. Shooting the killers—even if you knew who they would be—wouldn't do any good. They weren't responsible.

"The other three died," Mayor Bigelow was saying. "All were killed on three successive midnights!"

I said: "This fourth act was staged in front of City Hall for my benefit. You hired me to stop these horrors. Whoever is behind them knew I was coming. So the fourth horror was staged right under my nose to show how little they feared me."

"They?" Jean whispered. "You think some human beings are responsible for this?"

"Don't you?"

Jean shuddered. "I don't know. I've begun to think that it's something about that clock; something about the gongs which turn men into beasts. I've tried to persuade my father to stop the clock."

"That's ridiculous," the mayor said. "First, stopping the clock will be an admission of terror, a sign of complete demoralization. Second, it's the hour of twelve, not the striking of the clock, which made the people kill. Else why has only one person become homicidal at each midnight instead of all who heard the clock?"

"That's right," I agreed. "There's method behind all this. What we have to find out is what these people had in common."

"Nothing," the mayor declared. "We checked that angle. The first murderer was a poor farmer who killed his wife; the second a girl working in a mill who killed her boy friend; the third a grocery clerk who killed his mistress; and Howard Blaine is an architect. No, it's just sheer, unreasonable horror."

By that time we had reached the mayor's office; Chief Hemmer had placed the mutilated woman on a couch. I went into another room where the patrolman had taken Howard Blaine. The man was in a pretty bad state. He was begging the cop to give him a gun so that he could shoot himself.

I tried to question him, but it didn't do any good. Through his half-mad ravings I gathered that he had been married three

years, that he had never quarrelled with his wife, that he had had no hint that he would attack her until the clock struck twelve. But for several hours before midnight he had been waiting for the stroke of twelve. "It was like a hungry man waiting for food," he said. That was all he could tell me.

AN AMBULANCE had arrived when I returned to the mayor's office. I noticed at once that Jean Bigelow wasn't in the office.

"Where's Jean?" I asked her father.

"I sent her home with Nelson Lange. Poor child, she has gone through a great deal."

Casually I asked for his address and directions of getting there. I didn't like the idea of Jean being with Nelson Lange. Jealous? Maybe. But more than that, after what I had seen and heard in the last half-hour, I didn't trust her with anybody but myself.

And then, as I walked across City Hall Square, a numbing thought struck me. Could I trust her even with myself? Couldn't the same thing which had temporarily made decent citizens into beasts overcome me? How could I know that at the next stroke of midnight I wouldn't turn on Jean and attempt to rip her apart with my bare hands?

With a weak laugh I tried to banish the thought as ridiculous. But it persisted, gnawing like a fearful cancer in my brain.

A cold sweat broke out over my body.

The attack came a couple of blocks from the city hall. They came out of a dark doorway in a deserted street, those two huge shapes. Brawny arms gripped me; an iron fist smashed into my face. I let myself fall with the blow, twisting as I went down, and a moment later was on my feet ten feet away from my attackers. What I lack in size I make up in agility.

As they came plunging after me, I flicked out my gun and let the foremost have it. He came on a couple of feet, stopped abruptly in midstride, then sank to the sidewalk. The second turned and ran. I poured lead after him, but the light was too bad for any decent shooting.

I noticed movement in the hallway from which the two had come. I made for it, gun ready. Suddenly a shape detached itself from the hallway and lunged against me, sending me into a half-spin. Then the figure was plunging past me.

I could have gotten him easily. I was just about to squeeze the trigger into the fleeing back when the man cast a glance behind him. He was only a couple of feet from a street lamp and I could make out every line of his face.

Paralysis gripped me. To save my life I couldn't have pulled the trigger.

Because how could I kill a man whom I'd already killed five years ago?

CHAPTER TWO

The Dead Walk!

BY THE yellow light of the street lamp we stood looking at each other. It was Augie Kaup all right; and he should have been moldering in his grave. No two men could have that same angular build with the right shoulder inches higher than the left, and that jagged scar running down his right cheek and ending in a ragged red splotch on his throat.

Only now he hadn't any left cheek. That's where a .45 slug fired from my gun at close range had shot away flesh and bone. The slug which had killed him.

The one eye in his head glared at me. No mistaking that eye either. Two of them had glared at me like that five years ago as I had been about to send a bullet into him—eyes deep-set, red-rimmed, blood-shot. The single eye focused on me,

unwaveringly, and I found that I was held as in a vise.

Was I held by horror? Or through some method which only the dead can use? I don't know. But the fact is that I tried to raise my gun and couldn't.

Abruptly he turned and ran around the corner. I moved then; ran after him. When I reached a corner, I saw only a deserted street. I was soaked with cold sweat.

Feet pounded behind me. A blue uniform came up and there was a drawn revolver in the cop's hand. My shots must have brought him.

"I got you covered!" he panted. "Drop that gun!"

I dropped it—into my pocket, not on the ground. Then I showed him my badge.

"Private law, eh?" the cop said. "Anyway, you shot a man. Come along."

I explained that I was working for the city, but the cop wasn't taking any chances. Shrugging, I went with him. The guy I'd shot lay where he had fallen, an ugly brute twice my size. Lights leaped on in houses. A man in pajamas appeared in a doorway and the cop called to him to phone headquarters. Several minutes later a flock of police arrived, and with them came Mayor Bigelow and Police Chief Hemmer.

I told them what had happened. When I explained about Augie Kaup they looked at me as if I had lost my mind.

"And you're sure you had killed this Augie Kaup?" the chief inquired.

"I saw his funeral," I replied. "About five years ago a girl of twelve in a little town in Illinois was brutally attacked and killed and her body was thrown into the woods. The local cops got nowhere. Her father hired me to conduct a private investigation. I tracked down the killer, cornered him in the house where he lived. He was Augie Kaup, a notorious booze runner. We shot it out and I tore his face

away. He was as dead as any man I've seen, and I've seen plenty."

"It might be somebody who looks like him," the mayor suggested.

I shook my head. "No two men can look like that. And it wasn't a disguise. One can't do anything to an eye to make it look like that or tear away a whole side of a face."

I could see that they still thought I was crazy. Maybe they were right. Augie Kaup was a decaying mess six feet under the ground. Yet I'd seen him!

I said: "Somehow Augie Kaup is tied up with the midnight horrors. I don't know how or why, but there has to be a connection. When a vicious degenerate like Augie Kaup returns from the dead, what follows is sure to be pretty nasty."

Chief Hemmer laughed, then. He said: "My God, Mayor, is this what you hired to protect us? A combination ping-pong player and jittery old woman who sees ghosts on every street!"

I flushed. "All right, laugh. But three people have been killed in a way that makes a guy believe in ghosts and you haven't been able to do a thing about it. But whoever or whatever is behind it doesn't want me around. Dead or alive, Augie Kaup has reason to remember me."

WITH that I spun on my heels and walked away. I'd been thinking of Jean Bigelow all the time. Seeing her again after the Chicago tournaments, I realized how much I cared for her. And it was up to me to protect her. I didn't want to tell even her father that I was worried about her. There wasn't anybody in this hellish town that I trusted.

The mayor's house wasn't far from City Hall. It was a two-story, colonial affair; pretty swanky.

I was walking up the broad steps when I heard Jean's voice come from one end of the long open porch.

"Please, Nelson!"

I stopped dead. Nelson Lange's voice said bitterly: "I suppose you're in love with that half-pint detective?"

"What if I am?" Jean retorted defiantly. "It's none of your business."

Suddenly I felt fine. People killing their loved ones at the stroke of a clock, a man I'd killed five years ago walking the streets—that was brushed to the back of my mind by the admission of the grandest girl in the world that she loved me.

I didn't know then how all that was part of a single horrible pattern. I couldn't know.

Then I was bounding up the steps. Jean was gasping: "Don't, Nelson! Please!"

I saw two shapes struggling at the end of the porch. With all my strength I drove a right up at Lange. He went against the porch railing. There was a sickly smile on his face as he wiped blood off his lower lip.

"All right, half-pint," he said. "You asked for it."

He came at me. I'm pretty good with my fists, but I knew I wasn't good enough to take a man that big. Jean screamed. I dove under his first couple of blows, sent one to his breadbasket which made him grunt.

Jean yelled: "Stop them, Hubert!"

Behind me a quiet voice asked: "I want to see Tess."

We stopped fighting as if a wall had come between us. Ordinarily, I'm sure, it would have taken several husky men to pry us apart; but there was something about that presence behind us and in the quality of that voice which made both Lange and me turn to look at him.

There wasn't anything unusual about him. A pleasant-faced young man with sad eyes. Yet those eyes weren't really seeing us. They seemed to be gazing at something very far away.

"Where is Tess?" he demanded.

Jean took advantage of the interruption. She said: "Glenn, I want you to meet my sister's fiancé, Hubert Healy. Hubert, this is Glenn Ward."

I had met Tess Bigelow at the Chicago tournaments the same time I did Jean. She was a couple of years younger than Jean and almost as good to look at. I stretched out my hand to Healy. He didn't take it; didn't even seem to know I was there.

"Tess," he said.

"You can't see her now," Jean told him. "She went to bed several hours ago."

"I have to see her," he said.

Little chills ran suddenly up and down my back. "Why?" I asked.

He looked dumbly at me. "I don't know. But I have to."

Before we knew it, Hubert Healy had moved to the front door and was through it. Jean cried: "Don't go up to Tess's room!" I'm not sure Jean knew what was going to happen. I didn't either—quite. But I knew that there was something terribly wrong.

Lange and Jean and I went after him. He was standing inside the broad, well-lighted foyer, staring up at the stairs. At the head of the stairs stood Tess Bigelow in a blue negligée.

"I heard somebody scream and then I heard your voice," Tess was saying. "Is anything the matter, Hubert, darling?"

The city hall clock struck one.

A STARTLING change took place in Hubert Healy before the last resonant sound of the gong died away. His shoulders hunched up; his mouth opened, baring snarling teeth; his eyes blazed with sudden fiendish hatred. And he started up the stairs.

I was after him, and just before he reached out for Tess Bigelow I got my hands on his ankles and pulled him down. Tess didn't move, didn't scream; just

stood looking in horror at the man she loved and who was striving to attack her. Healy kicked out at me, thrashed out with clawed hands in an attempt to get them on Tess. Behind me I heard Jean moan hysterically, and then Lange was at my side helping me to subdue Healy.

For ten minutes he struggled like a wild thing, then slowly his resistance slackened and an expression of incredulity came into his face. Exactly an hour ago I had seen Howard Blaine slowly return to normal in the same way after having tried to kill the woman he loved.

Nelson Lange gasped: "Good God, it's happening every hour now!"

I nodded. Fear was a gnawing monster inside of me. I've faced blazing guns without a quiver. But this! And the speed of the horrors was being accelerated! At the stroke of each hour now somebody within hearing of the city hall clock would turn with murderous intent upon somebody else.

We got Healy down into the living room. He was white, feverish as he lay panting on a couch. Jean and Tess stood clinging to each other, whimpering.

"What did I try to do?" Healy wailed. "I was looking up at Tess there at the head of the stairs. I knew I had to see her, but when I did I didn't know why. It was as if I were waiting for something. Then when the clock struck it seemed as if a great sheet swept down over me. I don't remember what happened; it's like awakening from a nightmare, knowing you had a horrible dream, but not being able to recall what it was. God, did I try to kill Tess like those others killed?"

He saw the answer in our faces. He sat up, dipped his hand into a pocket and brought out a sheet of paper. Without a word he handed it to me. Lange and the two girls crowded around me to read. It was an ordinary sheet of typewriting paper on which was typed in capitals:

YOU HAVE UNTIL NOON TOMORROW TO RAISE FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS IN CASH. A MAN WEARING A WHITE CARNATION IN HIS BUTTONHOLE WILL BE OUTSIDE YOUR OFFICE AT THAT TIME TO RECEIVE THE MONEY. CONSIDER YOURSELF FORTUNATE: THREE OTHERS WERE NOT GIVEN THIS CHANCE. REFUSE AND THE CITY HALL CLOCK WILL ANNOUNCE THE DOOM OF ONE YOU LOVE AT YOUR OWN HANDS.

"I paid no attention to it," Healy said. "I'm one of the richest men in Mountain City and now and then I receive extortion notes in the mail. I thought it was a crank trying to capitalize on the three who committed murder on successive midnights. I showed it to Chief Hemmer and he agreed with me." He buried his head in his hands.

Lange drew in his breath in a harsh laugh. "So that's it, merely an extortion scheme! And look—this is a carbon copy. I bet a number of them were sent out."

I kept looking at the typewritten sheet. Well, this supplied a motive all right. But it didn't explain the essential horror: how people turned into bestial murderers when the city hall clock struck. And how Augie Kaup could walk the earth.

Jean screamed. I swung toward her. Trembling, her lovely features contorted with terror, she stood pointing at a bay window. Every eye in the room followed the direction of her hand.

Outlined in the window was the half-face of Augie Kaup! His one eye blazed at us with an intensity which was like repulsive physical contact.

CHAPTER THREE

The Nightmare Eye

DEAD silence hung over the room like a stifling blanket. The whimpering of the girls had abruptly ceased; behind me

I heard only heavy breathing. Augie Kaup's single eye seemed to be on all of us at once, holding us in a vise.

I had started to go for my gun as soon as I had seen him. My arm felt a ton; it moved up slowly, sluggishly, as if something were holding it down. Sweat beaded my forehead as I forced numb fingers to close about the butt of my automatic. I was struggling against a hellish force which emanated from the eye of the dead man.

After what seemed a century I got the gun out. And fired. A nerve-chilling laugh came from the window. I plunged forward, saw nothing but broken glass. The face was gone.

Could I possibly have missed at that close range?

My hand had been unsteady; or perhaps it's impossible to kill the same man twice?

Through the window I saw a shadow weaving through the flower garden in front of the house. I snapped a second shot, but the figure didn't falter. Missed again—or again a bullet had been futile.

I pulled up a window, tumbled through it, and gave chase. From the house I heard Jean yelling: "Glenn, come back! Oh, my God, don't go, Glenn!"

The figure disappeared around a row of hedges. I ploughed through the flower beds. When I reached the street, I saw a sedan starting to roll.

Was Augie Kaup in it? Did a dead man ride in autos?

Then I heard that chilling laugh again. It came from the car, and I had my answer.

A voice shouted almost into my ear: "Come on, Ward, here's my car. We'll chase him."

It was Nelson Lange. He was climbing into a high-powered roadster parked at the curb a few feet away. He must have dashed out through the front door while I was going through the window.

I climbed in beside him. The motor

was already purring. He snapped the gears into first and the car leaped forward.

"This baby can do a hundred," Lange said. "We've got him now."

And sure enough we were behind the sedan in a couple of minutes. I thought it odd that Augie Kaup hadn't turned off on one of the side streets we had passed and try to lose us that way. Leaning over the side of the roadster, I threw a couple of bullets at the other car. The sedan shot forward, and now both cars were going like bats out of hell.

With his right hand Lange flipped open the door of the dashboard compartment and took out a stubby automatic. I dropped back in my seat and casually turned the muzzle of my .45 on Lange.

Lange grinned. "Don't trust me, eh? Listen, Ward, I don't like you. And some day I'd like to finish that little exercise we started on the porch. But now we're in the same boat. We both feel the same way about Jean, and if either of us should turn on her when the clock strikes . . ."

I said: "That's the idea." But I didn't risk another shot at the sedan. I wasn't giving Lange an opportunity to shoot me in the side. I didn't know where he fitted into this, but I wasn't taking any chances.

We were on an open road now. The speedometer of the roadster said eighty-five and was climbing. We were steadily gaining on the sedan.

Suddenly Lange exclaimed: "We're being followed! All I see are lights in the mirror, but they're keeping up with us. Maybe they're police."

I TOOK a quick glance back. Lange was right.

"Not police," I said. "Now I see why Augie Kaup didn't turn off. They pulled us into a trap. We're sandwiched between the two cars. For God's sake, turn off!"

Lange bit his lower lip. "It's straight road for another five miles. We're sunk."

Had Lange led me into this trap deliberately? Was that why he had been out of the house so quickly and offered to pursue Augie Kaup in his roadster? It didn't matter now. I stuck a fresh clip into my automatic.

"Pull up," I ordered. "We'll use the roadster as a barricade. How are you with a gun?"

"Pretty good," he said tightly, and his foot came off the gas.

But not quickly enough. Brakes screamed ahead of us and the sedan skidded so that it turned broadside to us and stopped. It was a two-lane road; there wasn't enough room for the roadster to pass.

Lange swore and clamped down on the brakes. Too late. The sedan leaped up in front of our windshield. Lange twisted the wheel and the roadster jumped off the road. The wheels smacked the shoulder of the road, the car caromed crazily over rutted ground, and then the radiator flattened out against a tree.

I had tried to brace myself against the shock, but it wasn't good enough. My head cracked sickeningly against something; bright lights flared in my brain. A couple of seconds passed, and then I found myself leaning over the door and feeling as if my insides had been ripped out. I glimpsed Lange streaking into the woods. I glimpsed shapes running toward the roadster.

My gun was still in my hand. I lifted it, but the world would not stay straight. The ground, the oncoming shapes, wavered. Behind me I heard a sound. I tried to twist, but never got around. A terrific blow descended on my skull, and this time I was really out. . . .

Grey mist shimmered all about me when I opened my eyes. My head felt twice its usual size. I was lying down; with an effort I got my hands under me and pushed up. Searing pain shot through my head. Groaning, I sank down again.

"Here, drink this," a voice which seemed to come from very far away said.

I was lying on the floor in a room. The mist was in my fogged brain. A face shimmered above me, the features of which looked blurred. A glass was thrust against my teeth. I drank deeply. The liquid went down pleasantly enough, but it didn't clear my head. Instead, it sent me to sleep.

But just before my eyes closed I saw an eye above me. Just an eye, red-rimmed, piercing—nothing more. A dead man's eye.

And then for a long time I kept seeing that eye. It was always there, boring into my very soul, until nothing in all the world existed but that eye. And later I heard words. The eye was speaking. Of course an eye can't speak—but there were words and they came from the eye. Soft words repeating something over and over. . . .

And, later still, I was walking in the street, staring about me in astonishment. How had I gotten there? My head pained hellishly. I rubbed it with sweaty palms, trying to remember. Useless. I had been knocked out, taken somewhere, and Augie Kaup had been there. Now I was here. That was all I knew.

The city hall clock boomed. I started to tremble violently, and every nerve was strained, listening.

One . . . two . . . three.

No more. Three o'clock.

The tension left me and I felt suddenly very weak.

I had been out for almost two hours. But that was not why I had been listening so intently. In heaven's name, what had I been listening for?

Standing there in the dark street, I felt stark naked terror possess me. I had been converted into an instrument of murder—and when the time came for me to kill there would be nothing I could do about it!

CHAPTER FOUR

Locked In With Murder

THE jail was a block from City Hall. As I was going up the steps, I met Chief Hemmer coming down.

"You, Ward!" he exclaimed. "My God, what happened to you? We've half the police force scouring the neighborhood where Lange's roadster was wrecked."

"So Lange got away," I said.

"He got out of the wreck and ran till he reached here and told us what had happened. He's back there helping to look for you. We were sure they'd killed you."

I said quietly: "They could have killed me twice and didn't. They wanted me alive. Augie Kaup hates me and he doesn't want me to die too easily."

"But you got away."

"They let me go," I told him. "They have their reasons. . . . Chief, what happened when the clock struck two?"

Hemmer looked at me with drawn face. "When the clock struck two, Mark Tenyson, one of our leading citizens, killed his seven-year-old daughter. Then he put a bullet in his head. You know that Hubert Healy tried to attack Tess Bigelow at one." He stopped and then said: "It's happening every hour now. Probably something happened in an outlying district at three, but we haven't a report yet."

And in forty-five minutes it would be four o'clock, I thought. Four o'clock would be my time.

The chief ran a huge handkerchief over his face. "And on top of it all, Jean Bigelow has disappeared."

My heart stopped beating. Words couldn't go past my constricted throat. I just stood looking at him.

"She ran out of the house after you and Lange," he said. "That's the last that was seen of her. We figure that the car that

followed you and Lange kidnapped her. You didn't see her while you were in their clutches?"

I shook my head. That they would also release her, I was sure. Release her to kill and be killed. Augie Kaup was having terrible revenge on me through the girl I loved. He had turned us both into beasts who would stalk each other.

I said: "Chief, do me a favor. Lock me up in one of your cells. No matter what I say or do, don't let me out until morning."

Chief Hemmer's lips curled into a sneer. "So the great Bitsy Ward is afraid!"

"Yes," I admitted. "Will you lock me up?"

"With pleasure," he said and led me into the building.

Mountain City hasn't much of a jail: a row of about half a dozen cells on the second floor. A uniformed cop locked me into one of the cells. As the cop and the chief left, I yelled after them: "And for God's sake, don't let me out under any circumstances."

Hemmer turned and grinned. He had plenty to worry about, but my terror gave him grim satisfaction.

I slumped down on the cot and burned cigarettes. My watch said three-thirty. At my right I heard a man snoring. At my left a cracked female voice was cursing drunkenly. For the rest—silence.

There were four burnt cigarettes at my feet when I went to the door. I thought of Jean, of her slim loveliness. I opened my mouth to yell to the cop who had locked me in to let me out, then I closed my mouth again. *No*, I said, *I won't give in!* But I kept seeing the vision of Jean and something inside of me drove to try to get to her. I fought it as a man fights the drug habit.

Returning to the cot, I loosened my necktie. I was panting. Jean! I had to go to Jean. But I knew what the others

hadn't known: that if I went to her, the result would be fatal for her. And so I fought. God, how I struggled inwardly to keep from pounding at the door and demanding to be let out!

And each minute I became weaker. Slowly the minute hand of my wristwatch crawled toward the twelve. Seven minutes to go—five . . . four. . . .

I jumped up, gripped the bars, started yelling: "Let me out of here! You can't keep me! I'm not a prisoner!"

Voices rose along the line telling me to shut up. The female on my left roared: "Aw, lay and egg!" and went into a gale of laughter.

Then the cop appeared and somebody was with him. Jean!

"Thank God you came here, Jean!" I gloated. "I had to see you."

Her lovely face smiled. "Glenn! I was looking for you. I had to find you."

The cop fumbled at the lock. "The chief said I shouldn't let you out, but I guess it's all right to let the mayor's daughter visit you."

The door swung open and then clanged shut. The cop shuffled away.

We were in each other's arms, clinging to each other. She was so lovely. I let my lips travel down from her mouth past her chin. My lips lingered hungrily on her smooth white throat, pressed against a vein which throbbled there.

At that moment the city hall clock struck.

We stood tense, motionless, as each deep-throated clang vibrated in the air, and nothing in the world existed but the sound of that clock.

One . . . two . . . three . . . *four!*

As the fourth hour struck, something snapped within me. Rage overwhelmed me—an unreasonable, unthinking hatred of the woman I held in my arms. My lips still hovered near her throat.

There was an answering snarl. A slim shoulder lunged at me. Dots of fire

jabbed into my cheek. Jean was tearing at me with hooked fingers.

Shrieking with rage and pain, I thrust her away. Then we were facing each other, panting, bestial sounds issuing from our throats. Jean's face was no longer lovely. Her teeth were bared, her facial muscles screwed up with hatred, her slight body crouching like that of a beast of prey about to spring.

We both leaped at each other at the same time, and then we were fighting, we two who loved each other, fighting like caged beasts in that prison cell, striving to tear each other apart!

But unlike the others, I was conscious of what I was doing. Because I had known what was coming, I had been able to maintain some measure of control. But not enough! Not enough to save Jean!

A key turned in the lock of the cell. The door swung open and a big body came between us. A powerful blow sent me crashing against the wall. I slumped, slid down heavily to the floor, and I found myself looking at the flushed, horror-filled face of Nelson Lange. With one arm he was holding the squirming figure of Jean. Her dress was in tatters and blood streaked her face. She kept lunging at me as Lange held her back.

Groggily I stumbled up to my feet and hurled myself forward. Not at Lange. At Jean! I didn't care about Lange. Jean was the one I had to kill, to destroy!

Lange met me with an uppercut which came up almost from the floor. I was out on my feet before I fell.

Then somebody was throwing cold water on my face and I looked up at the florid face of the desk sergeant whom I had seen when I had entered with the chief of police. The prisoners in the other cells were raising a racket; they must have been screaming throughout my fight with Jean. Standing behind the sergeant, looking haggard and worried, was a plain-clothes man.

"You all right now?" the sergeant asked.

I sat up weakly. I was myself again. "Jean?" I said. "Where's Jean? Oh, my God, I almost killed her!"

"She did plenty of damage to you, too," the plainclothes man remarked. "Mother in heaven, it's happening even in jails!"

"Jean!" I said again, and there was a sob in my voice. "What happened to her?"

The sergeant said: "Nelson Lange carried her out. It was damn' queer. Miss Bigelow came to the desk and asked to see you. A couple of minutes later Lange came in, and because he's a big shot in the city, I let him through too. Then I heard the screams. I started for the cells and I came across Higgins, the cop on duty, knocked out cold. I didn't know then that Lange had knocked him out and taken his keys; so when Lange came carrying the girl I didn't try to stop him. 'Ward attacked her!' he shouted and I made for your cell. I found you unconscious. Lange and Miss Bigelow are gone. My God, what the hell is going on?"

I stood up. I knew some of the answers, but not all. Where did Lange fit in? Was he removing Jean to safety or taking her to an even more horrible fate?

"Hey!" the sergeant cried. "Where do you think you're going?"

I was already at the door. I said: "To find Jean Bigelow."

"Like hell!" the sergeant said. "You get out of here only on the chief's say-so. He had you put in. And there's something screwy."

"Damned screwy!" I agreed. My hand dove under my right shoulder and came out with my .45. They hadn't taken my gun away from me; the fiends had left it, thinking I'd use it on Jean.

The sergeant's eyes popped. The plain-clothes man's hand started moving up.

"I'll shoot," I warned. "Neither you

nor the devil will keep me from finding Jean Bigelow."

I backed out of the cell and clanged the door shut. The cop who'd been knocked out was sitting up at the end of the hall and he was holding his head. He looked astonished when I waved the gun at him, but didn't make any move toward me.

The Mountain City police station, as I mentioned, wasn't big, and I figured that at four o'clock in the morning and with the entire force trying to protect the town from the horrors, there wouldn't be more than the sergeant, the plain-clothes man and the cop in the place. I figured correctly. I got out without any trouble. Then I ran like mad.

CHAPTER FIVE

Climax for the Corpse

ABOUT a block from the station house I was brought up abruptly by the sight of a figure lying on its face in the shadows of an office building. I dropped down next to the body. Blood gushed from between the broad shoulders; a large irregular circle in the back of his suit was already saturated with it.

"Lange," I choked, "what happened to Jean?"

A moan quivered up from the sidewalk. Gently I turned Lange over on his back. A tremor ran through his big body. His face and lips were the color of death and his eyes were closed.

"It's me—Ward," I said. "Where's Jean?"

His eyes opened. "Ward," he said. "Save her. I was carrying her away . . . to hide her till all this is over . . . They leaped out at me . . . the man with half a face . . . one or two others . . . I tried to drop Jean and fight . . . but the knife got me in the back . . . I'm dying."

He lay so still that I thought he was dead. Then I saw his eyelids flutter

slightly and I put my lips to his ear. "How much do you know, Lange? I might still save her."

Again the eyelids moved up. The eyeballs were glazed, unseeing. The voice was thin and very remote.

"After I ran away I helped look for you. Then I heard from the police that Jean . . . that Jean was gone. I hurried back to the city . . . I was crazy with worry. . . . I went to the police station. . . . The sergeant told me Jean had gone in to see you. . . . Then the screams . . . I rushed in . . . carried . . . Jean out. . . . And now . . . now . . ."

I said: "You knocked out the turnkey and took the keys away from him instead of asking him to unlock the cell. You didn't trust him. Why?"

"I think. . ." he whispered. Then he lay back motionless. His lips moved. I had to put my ear against his mouth to hear the words.

"Jean . . . save her . . . she loves you . . . I think. . ."

That was all. The voice melted away, and Lange was dead.

I stood up. My nails dug into my palms until they drew blood. Nobody was in the street. I could see the lights of the station house. I wasn't being pursued. I didn't know why; I didn't care.

As I looked blankly at the station house, trying to make my numbed brain work, I saw a car pull up in front of it from the other direction. A figure got out and went up the steps.

For a minute or two more I continued to stand there. Then I moved. I kept against the buildings until I reached the station house. My gun was in my pocket. The way I felt then I would have shot it out with the devil himself if he had tried to stop me.

The car in front of the station house was a big sedan. I stole around to the side which faced the opposite curb, slowly opened the back door and crawled in. I

curled up on the floor, the gun between my knees. I wasn't sure of what I was doing. This was a long shot, but the only chance I had of getting Jean back alive.

A minute or two after I'd gotten into the car the man came down the steps and slid behind the wheel and drove off. If he had glanced in back, he would have died on the instant.

We didn't drive far. I gave the man about a sixty second start after he cut the motor and got out. I left the car on my hands and knees. We were in a residential section. But the man wasn't going into any of the houses; he was walking rapidly down the street.

I followed him for three or four blocks. The houses thinned out, spaced far apart in the midst of fields and lots. He entered one of them—a small frame house which hadn't been painted in years and which stood at least a hundred feet back from the road. The house was utterly dark. The man went around the back way.

AFTER waiting a couple of minutes, I followed. As I passed one of the cellar windows, I saw a thin sliver of light. It trickled through heavy black canvas which covered the window. I crept closer and heard voices come from the cellar.

"Your liver's white," I heard Augie Kaup sneer. "Did you think this was gonna be a tea-party?"

"But is this much killing necessary?" the man I had followed protested. "Once a night was bad enough. The people are sufficiently terrorized. But why every hour now? You're a damned degenerate. You kill for the sake of killing."

"Maybe he wants to back out, String," Augie Kaup said.

"Sure, we'll let him back out," a voice I didn't know chuckled. "With a slug in his guts."

The man I had followed said quickly: "Don't get me wrong, boys. I'm in to stay. But must you kill the girl? That's all I ask—spare her."

Augie Kaup laughed unpleasantly. "She's Bitsy Ward's woman. I got something to even up with that shamus. . . . See this face, sister? I got your boy friend to thank for that. Maybe I'll let you live after all. What'll your boy friend think of you with a face like mine?"

There was a muffled shriek. Augie Kaup laughed again and said: "Hand me your knife, String."

That was when I moved toward the back door.

The hinges creaked as I pushed the door open, but I didn't stop to discover if they had heard me or not. There wasn't time. Wooden steps led down, and at the bottom of the steps there was light. I heard Augie Kaup chuckle, heard the beginning of a thin scream which was quickly stifled.

Then I was at the bottom of the stairs, barking: "Freeze, you rats! The game's over."

For moments nobody in that well-lit cellar moved. A very tall and very thin man—that would be String—had one hand clamped over Jean's mouth, while a big automatic dangled from his other hand. Jean slumped against him, the upper portions of her body gleaming white where I had ripped her dress. Her eyes popped with terror as they were glued on Augie Kaup who held a murderous knife inches from her right cheek.

And standing a little distance away from the three was Chief of Police Wallace Hemmer.

The man called String was the first to move. He jerked up his gun.

Jean was between myself and String. But she came only up to his shoulders, and anyway I had to shoot. Even if I hit her she'd be better off dead than what they'd do to her if they got me.

I squeezed the trigger of my gun. It was as good a shot as any I'd ever made. String went down with a .45 slug through his forehead. He fell heavily, pulling Jean down with him.

Instantly I was ready for another shot, but neither Kaup nor Hemmer went for their guns. I had the drop on them; they knew it would be suicide.

Jean scrambled up to her feet. "Glenn!" she choked. "Oh, thank God, Glenn!"

"You're all right now, sweetheart," I said. "Kaup and Hemmer have guns on them. Frisk them."

BARE flesh showed through a rent in her dress, but she ignored it as she ran her small hands over Augie Kaup and Hemmer. This was no time for modesty. She lifted a gun from each of them and took the knife from Augie, then turned to me.

I said: "Run to the nearest phone and get your father. Tell him to bring men he can trust. Tell him to be careful of the police he brings. I don't know if any cops are in this with Hemmer. The turnkey at the jail might have been; he had orders from the chief to lock you in the cell with me when you arrived. But tell your father not to take a chance. And take the guns with you."

As she went past me, her fingers tightened momentarily about my free arm. How I loved that girl!

The back door closed behind her. Hemmer stood against the wall, his face a yellowish white, his tongue running over his lips. Augie Kaup focused his single eye on me—that intense, piercing eye.

"It won't do you any good, Augie," I said. "You can't hypnotize a person who doesn't want to be. And those damned drugs you fed me have worn off." But all the same I made sure not to meet his eye. He had learned some diabolical power. . . .

For a while we three stood like a wax

tableau. Neither of the other two moved an inch; they knew I was itching for an excuse to blast them down.

To pass the time I said: "For a while, Augie Kaup, I almost believed you were a dead man returned to life. But dead men aren't afraid of guns. Maybe you were dead for a little while; maybe that's how you got that look in your eye. What happened after I shot you down in that Illinois town? Was the sheriff in your gang, and the coroner, too? Your technique was to get big shots in the police on your side through corruption. . . . And of course it was an empty coffin or one containing another corpse that was buried."

"You're smart, aren't you, shamus?" Augie Kaup sneered.

I nodded. "That's right. And after you'd recovered you hid out somewhere. You were a freak, too easily recognizable if the cops ever got on your trail. Where were you during those five years, Augie?"

"India," he spat out. "Damn you, I'm not through yet."

He kept boring into me with that eye of his. I laughed.

"That's where you learned hypnotism," I said. "Your one eye and your horrible face must have given you unusual powers. And you learned about those hellish drugs. I figured it was something like that when I was given that drink as I was recovering consciousness. You used post-hypnotic suggestion on your victims. Ordinarily a person can't be hypnotized into doing anything which he wouldn't do in his normal state. But the drugs undermined their brains. It deadened everything that was decent in them. While under your hypnotic influence you instructed them to kill a certain person at a certain hour, and when that hour struck the hypnotic suggestion completely dominated their drugged minds."

Chief Hemmer spoke at last. His voice was cracked with fear. "I didn't know it

would lead to murder. He said he'd hypnotize people into giving money. I swear I'm innocent of murder."

"YOU know the law," I told him. "Maybe what you say is true, but you're an accomplice and so just as guilty. The influence of the drugs didn't last long enough to make people turn over money. It takes time for even a wealthy man to raise cash. It was a gigantic extortion scheme to make a vast fortune through terror. The first few victims weren't rich. They were selected simply to strike fear into the hearts of the wealthy. You, Hemmer, dropped in to see the potential victims on some official pretext or other. You had drinks with them, fed them the drugs, when Augie Kaup came in and hypnotized them. While under the hypnotic spell, they were instructed to forget what had happened. I should have suspected you were in it when Hubert Healy told me he had taken the extortion note to you. Others no doubt did the same, walked right into your clutches. Then when Jean came into my jail cell, I suspected you. You could have gotten in touch with Augie Kaup and had him instruct Jean to go to see me. So I knew—"

At that moment the city hall clock struck the hour. Five o'clock. A shudder ran through Hemmer. Kaup was listening intently, a hideous smile of satisfaction on his half-face. He was an utter degenerate, killed not so much for the money as for the sake of killing. God, how my trigger finger itched!

Once again somebody in Mountain City had turned into a murderous beast. There was no help for it now. But he or she would be the last.

The hinges of the back door creaked.

I pivoted in a half-turn. A gun exploded above me. Fire tore into my right side.

Then my own gun was roaring.

There was a scream above me and a heavy body came rolling down the steps. I wheeled. Augie Kaup and Hemmer were throwing themselves on me. Gun-sound filled the cellar room until the clip of my automatic was empty.

Not many minutes later Mayor Bigelow and Jean and several men, among whom were two uniformed cops, burst into the cellar room. They found me sitting against the wall, trying to stench the blood which trickled out of my wound. A big man with a brutal face lay dead at the foot of the steps. A few feet away Augie Kaup lay motionless against the corpse of String and nearby Chief Hemmer was on his back coughing his life away.

"Glenn!" Jean cried and dropped down to the floor next to me. She was wearing a man's coat over her torn dress.

I smiled wryly. "This time, I'm sure, Augie Kaup will stay dead. I was a sap for not suspecting that there was one more in the gang. But maybe this way was better than a drawn-out trial."

Mayor Bigelow was getting a statement from Chief Hemmer. One of the cops looked about the room and then at me and said: "He might be little, but oh-my!"

Jean saw the bloody handkerchief pressed against my side and started to whimper. "Glenn, darling, you're wounded!"

Still smiling, I said: "A few weeks of your nursing will fix that." I put an arm about her. "As a matter of fact, I feel fine."

And that was no lie.

THE END

MONTHLY FICTION MAGAZINES HAVE THE LARGEST CIRCULATION. THERE'S A REASON!



IN NEXT month's issue of *Dime Mystery Magazine*, we present another story about Nat Perry, the strange young detective to whom the slightest cut or scratch means almost certain death. Nat receives a phone call from a frightened girl—Kathie Calvert, the lovely and much publicized new movie star—and he goes to her hotel to find that frightful death has visited before him. Renee, the maid, lay on the floor, her face a ghastly ruin of loveliness. But this is only the beginning of a reign of horror that centers about the slender person of Kathie, for later, at a night club her young debutante friend sinks to the dance floor, her flesh blistered by searing acid. Could it be that Dr. Potter knew more than he was telling? . . .

They were in front of the hotel again before Nat felt that he could trust his eyes—almost blinded from the fumes of the acid—and even then, the deadly scent seemed to linger in his clothing, and about the persons of those he was with. Strong, deadly stuff—probably hydrofluoric, one of the most caustic agents known, and especially treated. In the preparation of that acid, there was some clue to the identity of the man who packaged death in an atomizer, in a slide trombone. . . . Was that why the atomizer had disappeared?

Death in perfume, death in music. But most especially death striking in the neighborhood of Kathie Calvert, swiftly and without mercy.

That was in Kathie's head, too. She whispered, "That girl—that utterly lovely little girl—and her life's over because of me! I'd better give up. . . ."

"No," said Nat, his whole, tired body tense with determination. "You won't give up. I won't let you."

Lorimer, the publicity agent, seemed preoccupied. As they passed the desk, he told the clerk to send the first editions of the morning tabloids to Miss Calvert's suite.

"If they handle it right," he explained, "to-

night's mess may be the biggest boost we could get. It'll keep us in the papers four days instead of one." But he looked a little uncertain, and more than a little sick.

If he could only get Potter to talk, Nat thought. The case would have to break soon—or Kathie would break first. Even if she were not forcibly wrested from all protection, her nerves weren't going to take much more. Once she broke, only a miracle could save her.

He sat down in the sitting room of her suite with Kathie, half relaxed over a cigarette. Lorimer went down the hall, still with that tense, thoughtful look on his face. Nat rose and followed him. He pushed open the door of a room further down the hall, a dark room that smelled faintly of whiskey.

"Hope the damned doc didn't get himself too plastered," Lorimer said. "If people ever needed fixing up, we're the people."

Nat, too, hoped Potter hadn't gotten too plastered—his finger felt for the light switch.

Potter was sprawled on his own bed. If he had been drunk, he would never sober up now—and he would never have a hangover. He lay on his back without even the decency of skin to cover him—for the skin was blistered away.

Lorimer uttered a low groan. Potter did not hear him. Potter was dead. . . .

This is just a sample of Edith and Ejler Jacobson's new full-length novel appearing in the February issue of *DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE*.

(Continued from page 83)

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inking of what we had invented. Our lawyer told us we hadn't a chance of winning, so we hinted to Averill what we had and that we'd experiment no further unless he tore up our contracts and signed others making him an even partner with the rest of us. He agreed.

"And then, in our experiments, by accident, we hit upon a way to send electric impulses through our directional sender which were so powerful that they could kill on the spot. As yet those impulses are confined to only a small space surrounding the radio into which they are sent. But the possibilities are boundless. Additional experimentation will show how they can be sent through every radio within a huge area at once, killing every living thing within range.

"What power such knowledge will place in the hands of those who possess it! And I knew then that each of us was thinking of doublecrossing the others. I beat them to it because I was cleverest. Secretly I built the apparatus and tonight I put it into use for the first time."

CORNELL was breathing heavily. His eyes gleamed with insane triumph. His gun, which had been pointing unwaveringly at Kane, came up an inch or two and Kane tensed. This was the moment.

But Cornell didn't shoot. Instead he moved warily toward Kane, and Kane knew that he wouldn't shoot if he could help it. He preferred to kill his victims in his own way—through his directional sender.

Cornell lifted his gun above his head and muscles exploded in Kane's one good leg as he hurled himself forward. If Kane had had two good legs from which to propel himself forward, he might have been able to get his hands on Cornell before the gun descended. Kane glimpsed the blow coming in the middle of his drive,

Entertainment for the Dying

thrust one hand up to ward it off, then felt steel cut into his scalp. The room spun; he floundered in a grey world on the border of consciousness. The gun barrel again came down savagely on his head and Kane slumped. . . .

Hot music ran riotously in Kane's jumbled brain. Laboriously he opened heavy-lidded eyes, and the first thing he saw was the radio. It stood high above his head some ten feet away and the music was coming from there. Something was choking him. He tried to cough and couldn't. Then he realized that there was a gag in his mouth and that he lay on the floor with wrists and ankles tied.

Near him Diana Fowler lay gagged and tied in similar fashion. Her eyes were open, staring at the door. Twisting his head, Kane saw Jimmy Cornell with his hand on the doorknob.

"So you recovered at last," Cornell gloated. "I didn't want you to miss the sensation of waiting for death. And now, Diana, my sweet, and Kane, the so clever hunchback, I leave you."

The door opened and closed. The radio music grew louder, more feverish.

Diana's eyes were on him, filled not so much with fear as with the agony of waiting for death. Kane had promised her brother to look after her and had failed. And yet it wasn't his own death or even Diana's which was hardest to bear. It was the thought of that fiend at large with that terrible instrument of destruction in his hands. How many thousands, perhaps millions, would die to satisfy his mad lust for power!

Frantically Kane tore at his bonds. Given time he might free himself. But there was no time. Cornell must already have reached the street.

But there was a chance. With an effort Kane lifted himself to a sitting position and propelled himself in little jerks to the radio.

(Continued on page 110)

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(Continued from page 109)

Suddenly a voice was in the room, coming from the loud-speaker above the blare of the swing band.

"This is James Cornell speaking," the voice mocked. "Announcing the entrance into hell of Diana Fowler and Calvin Kane."

A MOAN trickled through Diana's gag. Sweat covered Kane's body. His wound opened and it started to bleed under his bandage, but he wasn't aware of it. If Cornell would only continue his taunts for another minute.

"So you considered yourself too good for me, Diana." Cornell's voice turned bitter. "Perhaps you prefer that cripple. Very well."

Kane's head struck the side of the radio cabinet. He strained every muscle to reach the switch with his teeth. Couldn't quite.

"So yours will be the fate of all who try to defy me," Cornell went on. "A slight movement of my hand and you and that detective—"

There was a crash and the voice stopped. The music stopped. Kane sobbed inwardly with relief. He had managed to thrust his head and shoulders against the side of the radio, knocking it over.

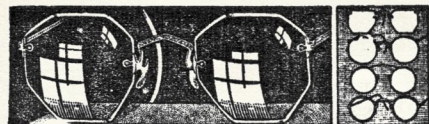
Kane paused less than a minute to recover his breath, then again fell to work on his bonds. His long powerful fingers managed to slip a loop over a hand, and then the rest was comparatively simple. In another minute he had released Diana.

She threw her arms about him, sobbing. His blood raced in his veins even though he knew that no woman like Diana could ever love a man like himself. Gently he broke away from her and went toward the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"There's a job to be done," he said grimly. "You phone the police. Tell them what happened."

He took the stairs down to the street.



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In front of the building he paused. Cornell had said that the directional sender had to be within five hundred feet of the radio through which the electrical impulses were sent. That meant that the apparatus had to be movable and was probably still in the neighborhood.

Across the street a white laundry truck was beginning to roll. *The* laundry truck! He had seen it when Payne was killed and later when Cornell's voice had come through his radio outside of the police station.

Kane sidled to his coupe, whirled it around and roared after the truck. Cornell had no way of knowing that Kane and Diana had escaped death. He wasn't fleeing; merely driving away. So it took only three blocks for Kane to catch up to the truck.

There was a spare automatic in the dashboard compartment of his car. He reached for it as he drove and placed it on the seat beside him.

He followed the truck for a couple of blocks further until they came to a block which ran through empty lots. Then Kane cut his wheel sharply and swung out beside the truck. Cornell glanced casually at the car which was trying to pass him—and his eyes went wide with sudden terror.

Kane snatched up his gun and poured slugs into Cornell.

(Continued on page 112)

ARTHRITIS

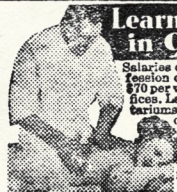
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Dime Mystery Magazine

(Continued from page 111)

KANE had killed men before, but never in cold blood. Always before it had been a gun fight or as the result of a killer going for his gun. But Cornell wasn't a man. He was a monster who sought to destroy or enslave mankind. This was an execution. Kane didn't stop shooting until the gun was empty.

The truck swung crazily off the road and went a little distance into the undergrowth of the vacant lot. Then it stopped. Stiffy Kane slid out from beneath the wheel and approached the truck. Cornell lay slumped over the seat. Two slugs had splintered the windshield. One had gone through Cornell's cheek, another through his temple.

Kane pulled open the back door of the truck. Inside there was what looked like a radio sending apparatus. Clubbing his gun, he did as much damage as he could. Then he returned to his coupe, got an extra clip of cartridges from the dashboard compartment, loaded his gun and carefully fired into the gas tank of the truck. The gas tank exploded and the truck started to burn.

The apparatus which sent death was destroyed—and all who knew the secret were dead.

Cars stopped. People came running. In a minute a small crowd had collected.

"There's been a bad accident," Kane said. "Somebody please go for the police."

Then he dropped wearily down on the running-board of his coupe and lit a cigarette. In a little while he would go back to Diana and tell her that everything was all right. There would be gratitude in her eyes, and then she would look at his deformity and there would be pity. Well, that was the most he could expect from any woman.

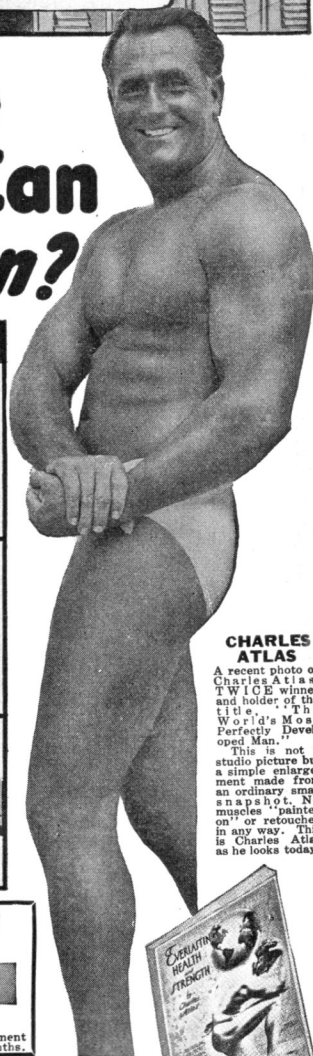
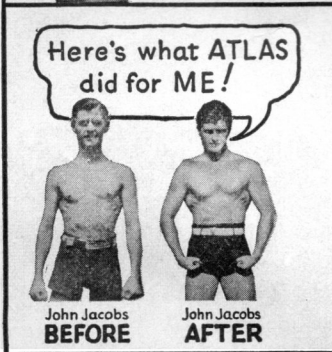
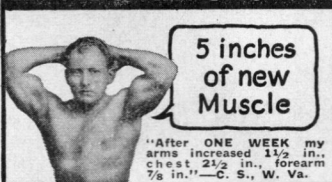
He watched the burning truck and told himself that he had done a good job.

THE END



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