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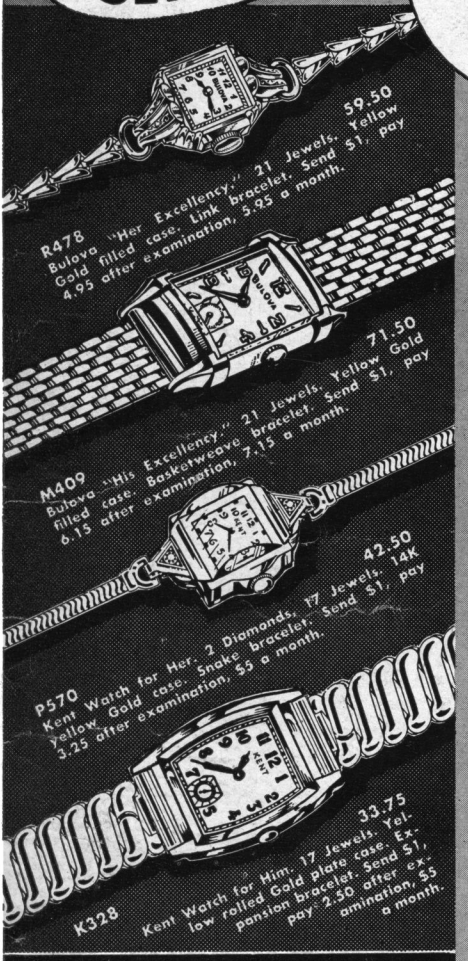

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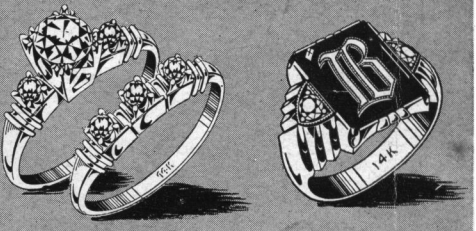

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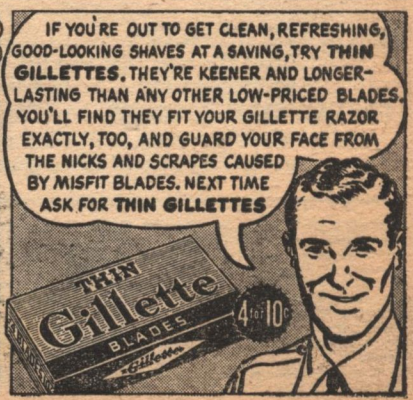

THE MAGAZINE OF WEIRD MYSTERY!

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NEXT ISSUE, DATED JUNE, OUT MAY 5th!

Volume 36 *April, 1948* Number 4

MACABRE MYSTERY NOVEL

THREE TERROR-PACKED MURDER NOVELETTES

THREE SPINE-TINGLING SHORT STORIES

—AND—

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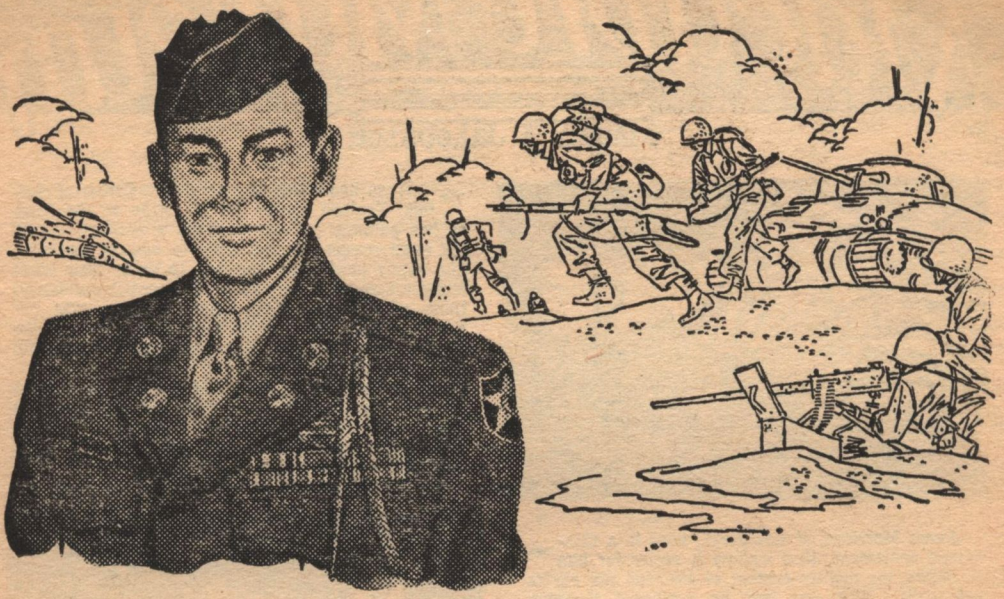

Are you man enough to wear this?

MEN of the Second Infantry Division—the famous "Indian Head" Division—can hold their heads high in any company of fighters. For this division is entitled to wear the famous Fourragere of the Croix de Guerre.

They won that honor in France in 1917 and 1918. For their combat record in World War II, they were awarded a dozen unit citations. Landing in Normandy June 7, 1944, the Second fought at St. Laurent sur Mer and liberated Trevieres. It captured Hill 192 in the vital struggle for St. Lo. It took Tinchebray, then swung south 300 miles to Brest, which surrendered in September. A month later the Second was biting into the Siegfried Line, and in January, 1945, it was in the thick of the Battle of the Bulge. Two key German towns, Monschau and Ahrweller, were taken in February and March, and by V-E Day the division had driven all the way to Czechoslovakia.

It takes real men to measure up to the standards of a great fighting outfit like this. They've got to be hard, alert, skilled in the use of many weapons. For the ground combat soldier is the most important man in America's defense. He is the keen cutting edge of the military machine.

If you like action—pride of achievement—the comradeship of a great group of men—there's a place for you now in the Second Infantry Division. YOU can wear the Indian Head insignia and the green cord of the Fourragere! Qualified men, 18 to 34, can enlist directly into this great outfit for 3 years or more. Get full details at your nearest U. S. Army and U. S. Air Force Recruiting Station.

CAREERS WITH A FUTURE

U. S. Army and U. S. Air Force

Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson

James Morrison, of Edinburgh, lived in a thin-walled apartment, thus making it easier for him ➡ to follow his nightly custom of pressing his ear to the walls. That was how he overheard Neighbor William Shaw arguing with his daughter, Kate. Later the girl screamed. Morrison collected assistance, rushed into the apartment, found the girl alone and dying of a knife in her side.

On the testimony of Morrison, William Shaw was convicted of murder and hanged. A little later a suicide note describing the method of her death was found among Kate's effects. The authorities backtracked, had a flag put on Shaw's grave in token of his innocence. They didn't hang Morrison from the flagpole, though.

Thomas De Quincey, the deathless essayist, ➡ wrote: "Once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing, and from robbing he comes next to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination. Once begun upon this downward path, you never know where you are to stop. Many a man dated his ruin from some murder or other that perhaps he thought little of at the time."

⬅ When handsome, young William Corder of Suffolk, England, called for his bride at the home of her parents, he was carrying a pickaxe, which, for some reason was not thought odd at the time. The happy newlyweds departed to make their home elsewhere and for a while, to all appearances, everything went well. Then, despite reports that her daughter was doing very well, Mrs. Marten, the bride's mother, began to dream that her daughter was buried somewhere in a red barn.

Mostly to ease her mind, her husband got a pickaxe and started to dig in the nearest red barn. He found his daughter, still in her wedding dress. William Corder, married to somebody else, was tried, convicted and hanged.

His occupation: He ran a young ladies' school!

Exactly 195 years ago, Elizabeth Canning vanished from her London home for four weeks, reappeared with a heart-rending story of being kept prisoner by the underworld. Within weeks she was more of a celebrity than the King of England. A Gypsy woman was sentenced to death on her testimony; pitched battles were fought on the streets between mobs who believed her and those who didn't—and the Lord Mayor of London was nearly lynched. Proved a phony, she served seven years for perjury, came to the U.S. and married. Some of our best families trace their descent from her.

Match up the people and the horns

(It may mean money to you!)

THE FIRST TWO, of course, are very easy.

The sea captain (1) goes with Cape Horn (2); and the musician (2) with the French horn (3).

That leaves the Average American (3) matched up with the Horn of Plenty (1).

As such an American, you'd like that to be true, wouldn't you?

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Let U. S. Savings Bonds fill up your personal Horn of Plenty . . . for the years to come!

Automatic saving is sure saving . . .
U. S. Savings Bonds

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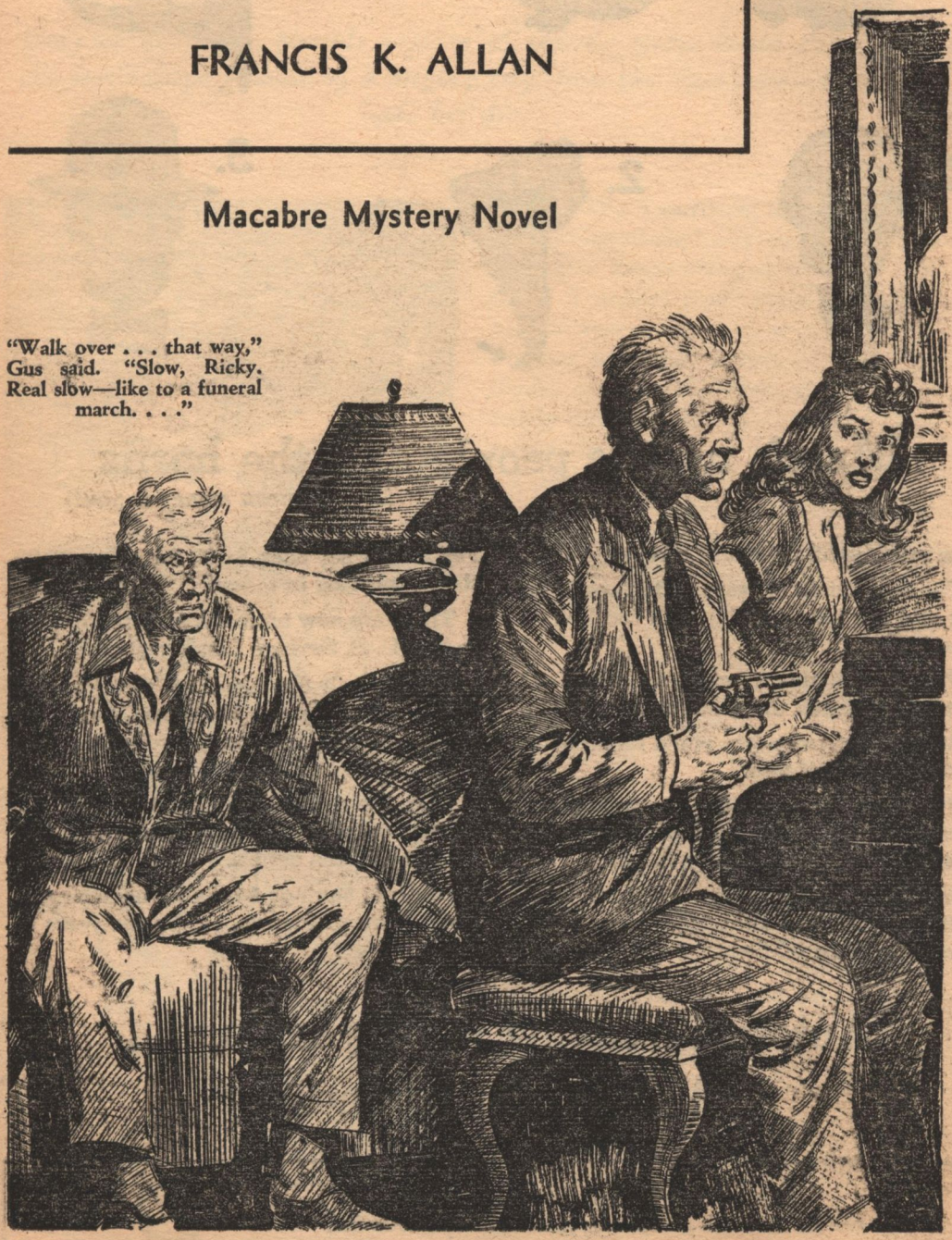
MELODY FOR MURDER

By

FRANCIS K. ALLAN

Macabre Mystery Novel



"Walk over . . . that way," Gus said. "Slow, Ricky. Real slow—like to a funeral march. . . ."

The big-money days were gone now . . . along with the tinsel, the gaudy lights and the gay times . . . and it was time to pick up the check. . . . Ricky thought of that as he walked—slowly, like to a funeral march, as Gus put it—toward the wall . . . listening to the swelling of Gus's mad threnody . . . waiting for the moment when the absence of sound would mean that Gus's hand had gone from the piano to his gun. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Escape

THAT foggy morning was the first time Ricky saw her. It was about ten o'clock—earlier than he'd been up in ten years—but he felt good. Proud

and maybe a little foolish—that was the way he felt, and he was taking a look at his layout. It wasn't bad for a West Side kid, he kept telling himself. But laughing inside. That was the gift that kept Ricky on the even. He could always laugh at himself.

So he was taking a look at this place he'd won in a game of craps from Al Costello two nights before. It was sweet. Fourteen acres that rolled and flowed down to the North Shore of Long Island. Trees and grass and the smell of water and land, and despite the fog he could look back up the coiling driveway and see the white pillars of the colonial house. He could see the tennis court off the end of the triple garage, and he kept thinking how crazy it was, him here with all this when he didn't know a flower from turnip, unless it was a rose. Then he remembered how his old lady had always talked about getting one of those garden-patch outfits in Queens before she died. It was too bad she couldn't have lasted a few more years. His face was still softened with the memory when he saw the girl across the hedge. There were a couple of spaniels with her and she was laughing—the kind of free and leaping laughter that does not know it is heard.

When she saw Ricky, she stopped and the laughter died. She pushed her fingers through her dark hair and said, "Oh, hello." Neither warmly nor coolly. And he said hello and walked over.

"Nice dogs," he said. "I'm Ricky Mandolin."

"That's an odd name," she said in a way that told him she'd never heard of him.

"It's a work-out on a jawbreaker my grandfather brought from Europe. And he liked playing a mandolin, anyway." He kept looking at her and thinking she wasn't like any girl he'd ever seen before. She wasn't golden and soft, like Kitty. Nor ivory and hard and crimson, like Dolores. There was a level look in her brown eyes and something about her lips that said they hadn't been kissed very often; they just hadn't found the time or the guy. She was slender and her curves were honest. Suddenly Ricky wished he could see her somewhere else—like the Paradise—in an evening dress and with candlelight in her eyes. He would like to kiss her, just to see what was there.

She smiled—half as if she knew what he was thinking and knew there wasn't a prayer—and turned away, leaving him standing at the hedge. That got him. It hadn't happened before to Ricky.

"What was the name again, darling?" he asked lazily.

"Barlow," she said, and added, "Mr. Mandolin."

RICKY cocked a brow and watched her until she and the dogs vanished in the trees. Then he walked back toward his house, frowning a little. He turned when he reached the porch and looked across the rolling lawn, across the hedge to the red-brick house where she must live. And then he laughed, a soft dancing laugh, and went in. The telephone was ringing. It was Georgie Caruso and his voice was low, restless:

"Ricky? I been calling thirty minutes. You haven't heard?"

"No. What is it?"

"It says on the radio he's out. Gus. Says he must of got out on the laundry truck. They found an unconscious guy in a car up near there, and his clothes gone. I don't know but what maybe—"

"Thanks, Georgie," Ricky cut in quietly. Without a sound he cradled the receiver and stood there, unmoving, almost in a listening attitude. His hard and handsome face had a sudden serenity about it and his clear black eyes were dreamy. You would have thought he was trying to remember the tune of a song. He

turned, then, and walked out, closing the heavy door behind him, and went around the house to the blue Packard coupe.

The sun was filtering through the fog and it shone in the waves of his black hair and glistened on the polished tips of his shoes. It was a funny thing about Ricky; maybe it came from the days when he didn't even have a pair of shoes, but he couldn't stand a speck of dirt anywhere on them. Ten times a day, in New York, he'd stop and get them shined. Always for fifty cents and always the same phrase when he flipped the money to the shine boy: "And maybe it won't rain. . . ."

A funny thing to say, but he wasn't talking about the rain, exactly. There was something about the words that gave them a sound of borrowed time. Some day the rain would come; luck would break and the shoes would be soiled. But maybe not today.

He drove fast, hardly moving his eyes from the unfolding ribbon of highway. The radio was on, playing a recorded program. Then, at eleven, the news came on. It was the second item.

"An alarm has gone out to the police of a dozen Eastern states to be on the lookout for Gus 'Rhythm' Dolphin, ex-protection racketeer and black-eyed genius of the keyboard who escaped from Sing Sing last night. Dolphin was in the second year of a fifteen-year term, incurred after the fatal beating of Dotty Haver, petite songstress of Dolphin's Paradise Club on East Fifty-fourth Street, on New Year's Eve, 1944."

The announcer went on with the international news and Ricky turned the radio off and lit a cigarette. From the Midtown Tunnel he turned north up Third Avenue and into a parking station in the Fifties, a station where he was not known. Two blocks farther, up Lexington, he paused to gaze at the brightly bound albums of records on display in a quiet small shop. Beyond the records were two sedate radio-phonographs.

PRESENTLY a shadow emerged from the shadowy interior of the music shop and took the shape of a small, bald man with a wrinkled face and thick glasses. He stood there, his eyes flattened and magnified by the thick lenses, and finally he nodded. Ricky turned and looked at the hazy sky. He looked north, then south, then slowly turned again and entered the shop.

"Downstairs," the little man said without taking his eyes from the street. Ricky parted the grey drapes at the back of the little shop, passed the narrow stairs that led upward, and went down the unlighted steps that ran beneath the upper stairway. He opened a door and closed it behind him.

"Hello, Gus," he said quietly.

The man gazed at him with sad, dove-gentle eyes that sat in his bony face like brown jewels resting upon wrinkled leather. The low-watt globe mellowed the coppery red of his thinning hair and drew shadows into the leathery lines of the long face. He was sitting in a plain kitchen-type chair, his shoulders sloped forward, his elbows on his knees, and his long fingers drooping in total relaxation. He was a man of spare, gaunt frame, between forty and fifty, with a look of hunger and melancholy etched in his features.

"How is everything?" he murmured. His voice was low, with a rhythm beneath it, like the rhythm of tom-toms nagging at a tropic night.

"It's all right. Quiet."

"Have you got a place for me?"

"I've been thinking about it. I made Little Joe on Al Costello for his private games place on L. I. It would do for a while, I think."

"A little while is all I'll need." He rose silently. Ricky started to ask a question, then decided against it.

"I'll bring the car around. It'll take ten minutes."

"That's a long time," Gus said softly. Ricky glanced at him again as he opened the door, and he frowned as he climbed the stairs. It wasn't that Gus was different, he realized. Only that he was more of what he had always been. In his heart, Ricky knew he feared Gus as he would never fear another man in his life. He had known Gus too long and too well.

After he picked Gus up in the Packard, Gus spoke only once: "Get a little music, Ricky," he whispered. And when Ricky tuned in the swing, Gus's eyes drooped until the brown in them became just a slit beyond the sensual lids, and his hands, resting on his knees again, began to sway. The fingers rippled over imaginary piano keys. It was the most terribly graceful pantomime that Ricky had ever seen. It reminded him of a mad priest stroking his idols.

The sun was lost behind the fog when Ricky turned the coupe up the curving driveway and brought it to a halt in front of the garage. Gus kept staring straight ahead. "You think it will be quiet out here?"

"I don't see why not. Costello kept the place under wraps. Didn't even have it under his name. It's all respectable. There's not a soul here."

Gus gazed at a sparrow that was hopping across the lawn. "You're not very happy, Ricky. You're sorry I'm around. Things have changed."

Ricky turned and started to answer. Gus laughed dreamily, got out of the car, and walked slowly toward the house. Even upon the gravel his feet made scarcely a sound, and his shoulders seemed to be swinging to a lazy dance.

RICKY wet his lips and rubbed his moist palms against his pants as he followed Gus, and his eyes were focused steadily on Gus' spine.

"You won it all?" Gus asked, looking into the long L-shaped living room.

"Everything. Costello is broke."

"You were always lucky, Ricky." He wandered past the books that Costello had bought by the yard. Past the paintings that some interior decorator had selected. He rubbed the tip of his shoe down into the Oriental rug, pulled the butler's cord and listened with a smile. Then he sat down at the piano. His shoulders caved forward and his fingers began to dance. The music swirled up and out of the room, mounting in fury, then ebbing into melancholy, drifting like a lonely cry. It was music made on the brink of madness —brilliant and black and tormented. "Tell me the way things are," he said without opening his eyes.

"Everything has been handled through Georgie Caruso," Ricky said, standing at Gus's shoulder. "He sold all the jewelry. It brought ninety-six grand. It's in cash in my bank box. He sold the Paradise to Tashman for a hundred and ten. That's in cash. The cooperative kitty gave a hundred and sixty after Jacoby took it over. That's three hundred and sixty-six grand in my box, minus my twenty grand a year for handling."

"What have you been doing?"

"I defended Arch Bacon on income tax evasion. I had Mary Adrian's settlement suit against Sonny Walcott. That lasted all summer."

"I heard. You got a fancy play, Ricky." The rhythm shifted to tango tempo. "You were born to be lucky," he mused. "I knew it the day I picked you off the street. Lucky and smart and just hard enough. Not *too* hard." He gazed up and smiled slightly. "How does it feel, Ricky? . . . Looking in a mirror, seeing a good face, having the chips behind you, getting a golden-boy reputation, easing yourself over onto the respectable side. And how does that fit with remembering?"

Ricky returned the dreamy gaze with

hard eyes. "I came after you, didn't I? You're sitting here."

"I'm wondering why you did," Gus murmured.

"I've got a rule, Gus. It says that debts must be paid. What you did for me, I can't pay with money."

"No, Ricky. That's only part of it. The big part is, you were afraid not to come. Fear is a beautiful thing, Ricky." He closed his eyes and the music floated on. "It's like music. Fear is like music. But I don't think you understand."

Ricky stood there for almost a minute, silently, his fingers opening and closing. "No, Gus," he said, and turned away. The notes followed him through the front doorway and out across the porch. They drifted behind him across the rolling lawn and seemed to hang on the branches of the trees.

It was true and he knew it. Through the fifteen years he had known Gus, since he'd been a kid of eighteen, the strange fear had grown in the damp hollows of his brain, taken on the shape of inevitability. It was a vital part of him, he had sometimes thought. At other times, in a peculiar fantasy, it seemed that he was a creation of Gus's. As if, upon that first day long ago, Gus had seen him and thought to himself: I want a figure of flesh to be my toy. My strangely frightened toy.

That was the way things worked in Gus's mind.

As he stood there, he saw the girl with the black hair coming out of the brick house. For a moment sunlight sprayed through the clouds and shone in her hair. There was a careless grace to her slender body as she walked through the sunlight and out of sight beyond trees. And when she disappeared, a sudden loneliness swept over Ricky. He felt hollow and brittle. Here he stood, he thought. On the grass he had won in a dice game. Up the hill behind him, a murderer was playing the piano with fingers that had once beaten life from a pretty and foolish girl—and for such a useless reason: because she had drunk too much whiskey and kept tangling the words of a song. And here he, Ricky Mandolin, stood—waiting for what?

"My God," he said softly, "I hate myself."

The music had stopped. He turned his head and listened, feeling tension grow in the muscles of his arms. He breathed softly, silently.

"Something is going to happen," he whispered to himself. As if drawn by some force beyond his control, he walked slowly back toward the house and into the living room. Gus was sitting in a chair, hunched forward with his hands dangling, his eyes fixed on the rug.

"Go get the money, Ricky," he murmured.

"Now? The whole thing?"

"Go get it." He raised his eyes. "You never used to ask me questions."

CHAPTER TWO

The Happy Sadness Ends

IT WAS too much money to be riding around with, and Ricky kept perspiring and glancing into the cars that pulled up beside him at traffic lights. It was after five and an early spring dusk was floating in from the water when he turned the coupe up the driveway and breathed a sigh of relief.

As he stepped out of the car, Gus walked out of the twilight toward him. He was wearing a grey flannel suit of Ricky's, a soft grey sport shirt without a tie, and he was whistling a Spanish serenade. Without a word he took the tan suitcase with the money, entered the car, spun it in a wide, grinding circle, and leveled off in a hail of gravel down the drive.

Ricky watched until the twin tail-lights vanished, then turned angrily and strode

into the house. As soon as he turned on the light in the living room, he sensed that something was wrong. He did not move. Slowly his eyes began a journey around the walls, missing nothing. They came to the dark mantel over the fireplace and stopped.

One candlestick. Only one, where before there had been a pair. Even yet he did not move. His senses kept reaching out, gathering in the particles of alarm. Yes, a cigar had been in this room. Gus did not smoke. Perhaps that had told him, first.

At last he walked slowly across the rug to the mantle, turned and faced back across the room toward the door. Then, very deliberately, he knelt down and peered across the rug. He reached out with careful fingers and touched one spot. Damp. He looked closer. There was no doubt about it. It was blood.

It was as simple as that, and he rose with a haggard shadow in his eyes. Someone who smoked cigars had walked in here. And that someone would not go walking any more.

He looked at the ceiling and ran his tongue across his lips. There were rooms in this house he had never seen, parts he had never begun to explore. He started with the second floor. As he searched, he tried to think who would have come here. None of his friends, for none knew. Perhaps one of Al Costello's.

He found nothing on the second floor, nothing on the first. The basement steps, he discovered, descended from a hallway behind the kitchen. And here Ricky's search ended, beyond a heavy door that opened into a cool, musk-scented wine cellar. The body of a man lay stretched on the moist stone floor.

His skull was crushed. He had been a tall man, large in bone, brown of skin. His dark blue suit was expensive and conservative. His shoes were French, his tie English. He had been about forty-five, Ricky imagined. A bold face, yet discolored and beginning to sag with overindulgence. Grey-blue eyes and greying black hair. Small ears very close against his head. A man who might have done anything, but had done it with intensity, and with a drink waiting.

Ricky went through his pockets. Save for sixty-five cents in coins, they were empty. The initial *L* glistened on his belt buckle. Then Ricky noticed the wrist watch; it was very plain and very expensive. He unstrapped it and looked at the back, then pried off the back of the case and struck a match for better light. There was a serial number and the custom maker's name: Perroni. And engraved in a circle was the curious, almost meaningless phrase:

Alas, Thank God, The Happy Sadness Ends

That was all. Ricky read it again and again, then slowly straightened and dropped the watch in his pocket. He stared morosely at the body and chewed his lip. Then he began to curse in low fury. He closed the door, walked upstairs, poured a straight bourbon, and began to walk relentlessly up and down the long living room. The level of whiskey sank. It was eleven o'clock. Twelve. Sometimes the petulant whine of speeding cars drifted up from the turnpike. Sometimes birds chirped drowsily. The wind sounded restless in the trees, and the more Ricky drank, the more his fury focused itself on Gus's return. He found himself stopping, ceasing to breathe as the sound of passing cars floated up. The silence of the house began to gnaw at his nerves. He walked out on the porch, swaying slightly. He sat down in one of the metal chairs from which he could see the driveway. The wind felt cold, but the sound of it was soothing in the trees, and Ricky closed his eyes for a moment. . . .

THE BRIGHT glare of sunlight brought him awake. At first he sat there, his muscles aching, his mind fumbling with stupor. His eyes hurt and his head ached and he felt tired. Then he remembered. The dogs were barking joyously across the hedge. He sat there, remembering, and feeling a sensation of complete unreality. The dogs kept barking.

He stood up and shook his head. The house felt cold and clammy inside and there was a path of ashes on the rug where he had walked the night before.

From the kitchen window he looked out across the empty driveway. Gus had not returned with the car. He paused in the rear hall at the basement stairs. He did not want to look at the body again, and yet it seemed the final step in the re-creation of the night's deformity. So he went down the stairs and opened the heavy door into the wine cellar.

The stone floor was bare save for one part that was freshly scrubbed and clean. The body was gone. Maybe it had been just a dream, Ricky told himself. Then he remembered the watch. . . . He thrust his hand in his pocket quickly. The watch was there. *Alas, Thank God, The Happy Sadness Ends.*

Suddenly he turned and hurried up the stairs. There was not even coffee in the house. No car. He would have to walk the two miles to the station, but at least he'd be out of here, away from the silent house and the fragile peeping of the birds.

He cut across the lawn and hedge and started along the turnpike. Cars sped past him, pouring their exhaust fumes back in his face, and the brilliant sunlight seemed to stick needles into his eyes. Then brakes groaned and a worn yellow convertible shuddered to a stop.

"You should keep your chin up, chest out, Mr. Mandolin," said an amused voice. He turned and glared at the girl with black hair.

"You can keep your mouth shut," he said furiously. She laughed lightly. She was wearing a cool grey dress. Her head was bare and her eyes were bright. She looked as if she'd had a good breakfast and had never felt better in her life. Ricky hated her. He turned and stalked on. After a few moments she drew up beside him again.

"I'm sorry, if you feel that bad," she said contritely. "Get in. I won't say another word."

"I wouldn't bet on it." But he got in and slammed the door. "Just slow down and I'll jump when we pass the station."

"New York?" The car gathered speed. "How lucky! We can ride all the way together." Ricky did not answer. He lit a cigarette and tried to swallow the cotton taste from his mouth. "That was a good piano I heard from your place yesterday," she said after a while. "I almost broke down and came over. It wasn't you?"

"No," he said bleakly.

"I didn't think so. You don't have the fingers. Nor the look."

"What kind of look?"

"Oh, black fire. Motionless fury. It's hard to say, but it's there to get music like that. I used to go down to Billy's in the Village and listen to Ebony Carlisle before he killed himself. He was the best and he had it. You knew, when you watched him playing, that some day he'd either kill himself or someone else." She hesitated. "If the guy comes back, I'd like to meet him. He's good."

"I don't think you want to meet him," Ricky said deliberately. And I hope he never comes back."

She glanced at him curiously. "You made that sound odd."

"Odd is the way I felt it, darling," he retorted.

"Barlow," she corrected coolly, and then more softly. "Or Roberta."

"That's a pretty name." And then, softly, "Darling."

He got out at the Empress Hotel where

a doorman took over her car, and he said he'd be seeing her. She said maybe.

IT TURNED out that Perroni was a watchmaker in Italy but, the man at Dulaney's said, Perroni's watches were sold exclusively in New York by Garrison's of Fifth.

At Garrison's, a tiny man with a parchment-colored face peered into the watch and nodded. "A curious sentiment, isn't it? It brings to my mind a curious memory. Pardon." He went away to consult his records. "Miss Letty Drexel purchased this watch and ordered the inscription. Two years ago. It appears that she paid cash. We have no further record."

"What's the curious memory you have?" Ricky asked idly.

"I remember when it was bought. By a lady. Alone. Lovely. Very lovely." He sighed and took off his glasses to polish them. "Then the inscription. It was the strangest thing I ever heard. She insisted that a part of the mechanism he removed so the watch would not run. She had me set the hands at five-fifty. Strange, isn't it? Even after two years, I remember—five-fifty."

"What else do you remember?" Ricky asked.

"I made a little joke out of it," the man said. "I asked her, 'Does it mean afternoon or morning?' And she said, 'A February twilight in the Castile Bar and two martinis, one with onion, one with olive.'"

There was no Letty Drexel listed in any of the telephone directories.

Ricky got a shave and bought a new tie at Maurice's. He felt better after the first Scotch and water at the Castile Bar. It was a quiet room, off the lobby of the Castile Hotel, a small unhurried establishment in the fading section of Murray Hill. There was a painting of a frigate over the bar mirror, and the lights mellowed themselves in the dark panels of the walls. It was not crowded. It was the type of place that would never be crowded, where no one would ever get loudly drunk.

After a while the grey-haired bartender came back to refill Ricky's drink, and Ricky asked him.

"No, sir," he said after thinking about it carefully. "I don't recall the name at all."

"Two years ago. I imagine she sat at a table. I have a feeling she always drank martinis."

He shook his head again. "It might be Peter would know. He's the waiter. He'll be on at five, if you want to come back."

Ricky said he would. It was three hours until five. He could go to his apartment, but he felt too restless. It was more than that. It was a feeling of melancholy which, he knew, would make the silence of empty rooms unendurable.

He tried to take the feeling apart and understand. For a while it eluded him, and then in utter simplicity it came to him. It was the dank of contempt that had caught him the day before, when he had seen Roberta in the sunshine and Gus had been playing the piano. It was the depression that came from feeling he had lost himself long ago.

Now it was as though he were looking through a window where puppets cavorted foolishly on strings. And one puppet—more foolish than any other—was himself. And Ricky finally understood: He had never been anything but a man on a string.

He called Georgie Caruso. Georgie had not heard from Gus. Had Ricky?

"I saw him for a while," Ricky said.

"What's he got on his mind, you think?"

Ricky said he didn't know. He walked around to the music shop on Lexington. Londos, the little man with the thick glasses, shook his head. Ricky had no way of knowing how much or how little the man knew, or how he was connected with

Gus. Gus had never explained him, never involved him beyond the one statement to Rickey: "If there's ever anything you don't know, and should know, Londos will tell you."

"If you hear from Gus," Ricky said now, "tell him I need to see him."

Londos merely blinked and his eyes were like fish rising toward the surface of a limpid pool.

RICKY walked slowly across Forty-seventh to Vick's Parlay Bar and Grill near Times Square. There would be a lot of talk, he knew, but he didn't want the idea to get around that he was ducking. Dolores was sitting in a booth with Paul West, the producer, and the instant Ricky saw them he perceived the wary curiosity that came into their faces. Benny Wilcox turned and smiled at him avidly. Ricky felt it so very clearly; it was the same with all of them. Each was furiously wondering: Has he seen Gus? Maybe he's just left Gus. Maybe he knows, right now, where Gus is. What did Gus say to him? What went on?

He didn't want to parry with them. He nodded and went up to the bar where Vick was standing, his ham hands spread and his face innocent of any emotion. "Scotch and plain water, Vick," Ricky said.

"Okay." It was noncommittal. "Jannessen's been waiting for you, Ricky. He's over there now." He nodded.

Ricky turned around. Detective Jannessen was looking at him from a booth. Ricky took his drink and went over. "Hello, Jan," he said.

"Hello. Sit down, Ricky." They shook hands. Jannessen was a big, shabby man, broad-shouldered, grey-eyed, and with a worn patient face. "You can guess who I'm looking for. Have you seen him, Ricky?"

"No." He lit a cigarette with steady hands.

"Do you know where he is?" Jannessen asked. "Maybe you heard a whisper somewheres, huh, Ricky?"

Ricky shook his head slowly. "I don't know anything about him."

Jannessen rubbed his big hands together. "I thought you might hear, being his lawyer. Thought he might want money or something like that. We have got to have him in a hurry." He leaned forward, folding his arms on the table. "If it will help you, I'll tell you what we're not telling everybody," he said gravely. "Gus is over the line up here, Ricky." Jannessen touched his temple. "He was always close. The way he blew up in Dotty Haver's face, for no reason much. He always had that psychopathic streak. Maybe being in prison shoved him across. Whatever it was, they've had trouble with him. He'll go along, quiet and soft-eyed and saying nothing. Then something will start working inside him. He sometimes thinks he's a concert pianist or a symphony orchestra leader and he's got a date for a concert. He blows his top. They have to wrap him up." He gazed solemnly at Ricky. "That's how he is. That's why we need him in a hurry—before something happens. He's too cranked-up."

Ricky sat there turning his glass, making moisture rings on the table top. "I don't know where he is, Jan," he said heavily. "I don't have a date to meet him. I'm sorry."

"So am I. I'd hoped you could do better than that." He sighed and stood up. "You can always phone me." Then he turned back. "I almost forgot. The boys hauled your car off Seventh Avenue this morning. There's a parking fine hanging on it."

Ricky felt a flush crawling up his cheeks. Moments wore away. Jannessen sighed again. "I guess you'd forgotten," he said heavily. Then he was gone. Ricky discovered how hard it was to swallow the taste of shame.

CHAPTER THREE

Strange Music

PETER, the waiter at the Castile Bar, shook his head. He didn't remember the name. And so many people drank martinis. It meant nothing. But when Ricky mentioned the watch, a look of warm recollection came into Peter's eyes. "That's something else," he said. "The watch—I remember *that*. She doesn't come any more, but I see her passing sometimes. Maybe she works somewhere nearby. If you wish—"

"I wish," Ricky said immediately, and a five-dollar bill changed hands. He ordered a drink he didn't want and listened to the muted drone of conversation. He had almost finished the drink when Peter hurried toward him.

"With the red hat. Going uptown. The one with the gold hair."

Ricky bumped down his glass and rushed out. He caught her in the crowd at the intersection. "I beg your pardon." He touched her elbow. "Are you Letty Drexel?"

She turned and looked at him coolly. Her eyes were blue. Her hair was golden, with a polished glow. Her mouth had a hint of bitterness about it. "Yes," she said. "Why?"

"And once you gave a man this watch." He held it out, and he watched her eyes widen and grow darker. Slowly they rose to meet his.

"Where did you get that?"

"I found it. My name is Ricky Mandolin. Will you tell me whose watch this is?"

"Mandolin." She frowned momentarily. "I've read about you." Then she looked at the watch again. "Where did you find it?"

"In a cab. I read the inscription and went to Garrison's, then to the Castile—"

She laughed softly, without humor. "That's very funny. Five-fifty. I've often wondered . . ." she mused, and broke off at his impatient gesture.

"Will you or won't you tell me whose watch this is?" he demanded.

When she looked at him again, there was a gleam of amused curiosity in her blue eyes. "You sound so impatient, Mr. Mandolin," she said archly. "The morning paper said you probably knew where Gus Dolphin was."

He cursed to himself. "Which only proves how wrong the morning paper can be," he said. His brows went up. "Do you know Gus?"

"I was around a couple of times when he played the piano somewhere. I remember *that* all right. Once Niles and I went—" She stopped momentarily and her eyes faltered. Ricky grinned.

"Okay. The guy's name was Niles. Tell me what else."

"I don't see why it's so important," she said half angrily. "The name is Niles Loring. I haven't seen him to talk to since I gave him the watch over two years ago, and I don't like to talk about it, either."

"But with a martini, maybe you would, if I hinted it was important," Ricky said. She gave him a long, level look, then the deep blue curiosity shadowed her eyes again and she moved her shoulders.

"Something about this is starting to get me." They turned back toward the Castile.

"Now," Ricky said when they were seated, "read to me from your diary. All about Niles Loring."

"You better listen fast, because I'm not going to say it twice. The guy is a spook. He won't give out. He hates people. Silence and a big empty house and a phonograph screaming its head off—that's for him. He was a rich kid but he had stuff. He was a child prodigy on the piano. By the time he was thirty, he'd played concerts where people fought to get in. Then he found out all about whiskey and gin and whatever. He tried to drink it all, and he came close. He

knocked himself out of the running. His father died and left him an income plus a great big hunk of a place, like a chateau, perched on one of those mountains up the Hudson. Gifford's the name of the whistle-stop. Nobody sees him any more. He used to give musical parties, and he kept an apartment in town. That's all over. Now he just wanders around that big tomb with a drink in his hand and the gates locked. He had the place fixed with a terrific phonograph system and he wallows around in music. Sometimes he gets a musician up there and pays him to sit there and play for him. That's it. Once I got an idea I could change all that, but it was no soap." She paused and for many moments her eyes were darkened with remembrance.

"What really nailed me was how close I came. At five-fifty he phoned, and me in a misty dress at the church. He said, 'Let's make it a drink instead.' So. . ." She shrugged. "The watch idea was corny. Time stopping, and all, but I felt pretty dewy, I guess. Funny he held on to it, isn't it?"

"Yes," Ricky said distantly. He ordered two more drinks.

"Now," she said abruptly, perching her chin in her palms and looking at him curiously. "You tell yours. You got excited about a watch. You're a lawyer for Gus Dolphin. Dolphin is no longer with Sing Sing. A working girl like me needs something to keep her interest up."

"That shouldn't be hard, with a working girl like you," Ricky said gently. "Wait till I make a call." He went back toward the phone booth and waited until Peter came by. "Tell the lady I'm sorry. Tell her I'll be coming in at martini time tomorrow, maybe." Another bill traded pockets, and he went out the rear door, across the lobby, and out into the twilight.

It was nine-twenty when he got off the train at Gifford, a place that looked as if it had been forgotten forty years before.

THE CAB DRIVER was an ancient man whose skill had not improved with the years. Ricky clung to the seat and shut his eyes as the high-topped sedan wavered and seemed to gather itself for a suicidal plunge over each curve of the steep mountain road.

"Nope!" the driver shouted over the laboring motor. "Folks in the town don't see Loring nowadays. The Skelley kid delivers a bunch of groceries and fire water up to the gate every week and leaves it there. Loring fetches it hisself. Don't take much to company since he got shot at."

"Shot at?" Ricky yelled.

"Shot at. Bird he used to have working for him. Gardener, I think. Came back one night, more'n a year ago. Trying to steal something, looked like. Loring surprised him and the bird shot at him. Just nicked him. Bird went to prison. Loring locked hisself up."

The cab slammed to a sudden halt and the man waved his arm. "That's the gate where the kid leaves the groceries. All over behind that stone wall is Loring's place. Close to a hundred acres. House on top of the mountain. Mighty lonely up there, friend."

"We'll see." Ricky watched the tail lights flutter out in the darkness, then he walked to the iron gate. It was locked. The stone wall was about six feet high and rough enough to afford a top-hold. He pulled himself up and dropped into the thorny bushes on the other side. He followed the unkept driveway in its rambling journey up to the peak of the mountain where, finally, the dim amber glow of two lamps fell somberly against the moat-like main entrance of the chateau. No other lights were visible. There was no sound save the restless calling of the wind in the trees. Far across the Hudson flickered the headlamps of cars speeding along a parkway. They seemed part of another world.

Gus would like a place like this, Ricky was thinking. From the way Letty had told it, Gus and Loring had been much alike. Secretive, drawn away from people. But had Gus wanted this enough to kill to get it? And if so, why?

While he was thinking, and in an interval when the wind seemed to tire and fall silent, he heard the measured crunching of gravel as someone climbed the driveway behind him. He heard a car departing on the road. Silently he stepped aside into the bushes.

The footsteps passed him. He could see nothing in the blackness, but at last the figure appeared in the dim glow of the amber lamps and knocked at the door. Ricky exhaled a long soft breath.

It was Londos, his thick glasses glistening in the light, his scrawny body buried inside a long coat that was rusted with age. The door opened. No light was burning within, but he heard the brief exchange of voices before the door closed. He couldn't tell if the other voice had been Gus's, but he knew he had come to the right place.

He waited five minutes, then approached the front door. It was locked. He worked his way through the thick, unkept hedges that surrounded the house until he found a small slanting door that seemed to go down to a basement. He felt his way down steep steps to a stone floor and stood there listening.

Faintly but with fragile clarity the notes of a piano reached his ears, and the music was music that came from Gus's fingers and from the strange black pit that was Gus's brain.

He struck a match and found the stairs that led up into the house. They opened into an unlighted corridor at the end of which was the kitchen—a foul-smelling kitchen filled with bottles, most of them empty, and with discarded tin cans in carton boxes. Beyond the kitchen Ricky found a set of service stairs that wound upward, down which the music seemed to pour into the kitchen.

He climbed slowly until he came into another corridor which curved away at either end, and suddenly he was upon an open veranda: a rather Spanish arrangement which circled an immense room which was like a great well below Ricky. The room rose from the main floor to the beamed ceiling of the third floor, above Ricky. And down in the pit, small in the empty space, sat Gus at a magnificent grand piano. There was only the piano, an iron lamp, a small table, and the vast cascade of velvet curtains that cloaked the three-story windows. And behind Gus, like a timid dwarf in the shadows, stood Londos, still wearing his rusty coat and lumpy hat.

THE SCENE was so grotesque, in some way, that Ricky stood there, simply staring. Gus, the killer, lazily playing the piano in this great well-room where sounds grew up into richness and thunder, or muted into the gentlest of whispers in the ceiling. And Londos, the dwarfish little blank of a man, waiting humbly. For what. . . ?

Ricky stopping thinking. Gus had lifted his head to listen. His features were stilled in animal concentration. Some queer intuition seemed to lead his eyes slowly around the dark circle of the veranda. Ricky remained utterly motionless. He knew he was in darkness. Gus could not possibly see him. Yet a chill gripped him deeply as Gus's eyes halted in focus on that spot where Ricky stood and his fingers seemed to stroke the keys with a terrible insolence. At last Ricky breathed again as the search of eyes passed him, but perspiration ran down his cheeks. Gus could not have heard a sound, could not have seen. Yet something in him was restless now.

He got up from the piano and murmured something to Londos. He stopped

at the windows and parted the thick drapes. Again he seemed to listen. Again his eyes turned upward toward the veranda and searched into the darkness. His lips moved gently and his dreamy words wandered to Ricky's ears:

"It would be too bad if something went wrong, wouldn't it?"

Londos appeared to nod. At that moment a telephone began to ring. Gus turned with slow deliberation and gazed in the direction of the ringing. Again and again it rang. At last he moved his wrist slightly. "See who it is. If they ask, you are a guest."

"A violinist," Londos said softly. He padded across the room and disappeared from sight beneath the veranda. "It is a woman's voice. A girl's," Londos reported. "The name is Letty Drexel."

Ricky almost strangled. "What does she want?" Gus was asking.

"It is not good. I don't understand. She wants to know if Ricky Mandolin has talked to you about your watch, meaning Loring's."

The lines seemed to deepen and etch a melancholy pattern into Gus's face. "I thought I remembered a watch on that hand. I—I think I better talk." He crossed the room slowly.

Ricky was cursing himself, the watch and Letty Drexel as he tiptoed back toward the steps. He strained to pick up Gus's conversation. He could hear only thickened laughter, a few rolling words: ". . . if I want to get drunk, it's my business. . . .Where are you? . . .Maybe I've changed my mind Maybe I'd like to see you. . . ."

Ricky heard nothing more until the receiver clicked down. "I'm going to New York," Gus said. Ricky was in the kitchen now, but he could still hear Gus.

"You stay here. Ricky may come out. Funny, the way I had a feeling something was going wrong. This girl. . .that's funny, too. She said not to think she was making a pass; she was just worried for some reason, after talking to Mandolin and knowing Gus was out. She just kept thinking about it. Intuition plays funny tricks, you know."

He laughed then, a low liquid laugh that was hot and bright with a new ecstasy. Then the laughter was gone. Gus was gone. A car motor was roaring outside, then retreating down the winding driveway. Gus was on his way to New York. To put an end to Letty's intuition, Ricky knew. Curious, foolish Letty, who couldn't forget the guy she'd loved.

He tiptoed down the last curve of steps. Londos was standing there, gazing vacantly out the window, his lips twitching slightly as though he were repeating some half-forgotten phrase to himself. He was like a miniature cobra, Ricky thought—a shabby cobra with thick glasses and a brain that wouldn't talk.

Ricky took three silent steps and said, "Londos."

The man turned. Even now there was scarcely any surprise on his wrinkled face. His eyes came bulging upward. His fingers started their downward glide. Ricky hit him between the eyes. The glasses flew off. Ricky hit him on the exact point of his nose and heard it crack. The eyes retreated and rolled upward, and the little sack of a man collapsed.

Ricky rushed into the corridor, found the telephone and jerked up the receiver. "Operator? Operator, I want Miss Letty—" His words fell apart then, and the bottom of his stomach seemed to drop through his knees.

"Yes, sir?" the operator was saying. "The name again, please."

"She doesn't have a phone. I forgot. She doesn't have a phone and I don't know where to reach her," he heard himself saying in total bewilderment.

"Do you wish to cancel the call, sir?"

"Cancel? My God, *cancel!*" he exploded. The bewilderment had boiled into seething self-fury at his stupidity. "I—get me Larkin Jannessen." He spelled it. "Try his home. If he's not there, try the Fifty-eighth Street Police Station. Hurry!"

"Yes, sir," the operator said with infuriating mildness. Ricky fumbled for a cigarette. He could scarcely strike the match. Such magnificent stupidity! A moron would have done better, he swore at himself. And here he stood, dangling this foolish telephone in his hand, while Gus was on his way to Letty. And only Gus knew where to find her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pit of Darkness

"YOUR CALL is ready, sir."

"Jannessen!" Ricky nearly screamed. "Mandolin. I've played pure hell! I located Gus. I wasn't carrying a gun, just getting the picture. Then a girl stuck her nose in. Gus is after her because he doesn't like what worries her. I'm up the Hudson. Gifford. A big shack where a guy named Loring lived. Gus knocked him off and moved in. But the girl's name is Letty Drexel. Drexel. She doesn't have a phone. I know nothing about where she lives or who she knows. It must be in mid-Manhattan because she stops at the Castile Bar on her way home. But she may not *be* at home. Gus knows where she is, and he left here ten minutes ago in a car. Yeah . . . maybe the George Washington Bridge. Maybe Bear Mountain or as far down as one of the tunnels. I don't know. . . . No, I don't even know what kind of a car. Londos may know. I'll wake him up and find out as quickly as I can. But, Jannessen, spread the boys out. I don't know what you can do, but it's *got* to be something. I'll call you back when I shake Londos up. Yes. . . . Yes." He hung up and strode back to the kitchen.

He picked up the sack of man and shoved him upright into a straight chair. He took a .32 automatic from Londos' pocket and put it in his own. Then he filled a pan with water and threw it in the wrinkled face. He tilted a bourbon bottle and let it gurgle down behind the yellowed teeth.

Londos began to gargle and twitch and his fingers pinched at the empty air. Ricky backed away and waited for the bleary eyes to get his range. When they were clear, he picked up the thick glasses and thrust them down across the bleeding nose. "Now," he said.

Londos licked his thin lips and stared back at Ricky stubbornly.

"What kind of car was Gus driving?" Ricky demanded.

Londos licked his lips again. Ricky took a step forward and seized his vest. "What kind of car, damn you!" he raged.

The tongue faltered on the thin lips. Ricky put the heel of his palm against the broken nose and ground down. Londos screamed and struggled to break away.

"What kind?" Ricky shouted.

"Buick. Blue Buick sedan, 1942," Londos gasped. "But I don't know where—where he was going!"

"We're going to the telephone. Remember what a fine little gun your .32 is, even in somebody else's hand."

Londos was licking his lips again in silence. Ricky got Jannessen and relayed the information on the car. "Call me back the minute something happens," he urged. He hung up and walked Londos back to the kitchen.

Nothing to do but wait now. Wait and hope that somewhere in the labyrinth of Manhattan the police would spot Gus before he killed Letty. Wait and count the minutes and listen to the wind that spilled through the trees. Smoke a cigarette that tasted like sawdust. Stare at Londos' wrinkled, gnome-like face.

"How did you ever tie up with Gus?" he asked abruptly. "That's something I've always wondered."

The eyes softened slightly. "I taught him to play the piano many years ago. He understood what I meant. Only certain people can understand," Londos said gently.

"Understand what?"

He held out his wrinkled, bony hands. "See them, now? Once they were slender and strong. Now they are ruined. Arthritis. But why should I have been the one to have arthritis? Why did my hands waste and ruin? You know why?" He leaned forward, his eyes beginning to glisten. "It's because the world is wrong. The world steals happiness and twists hands and blinds eyes and withers bodies. You've got to learn to hate the world, because the world hates you. That's the answer."

Ricky frowned. "Your hands were ruined with arthritis, so you hate the world. It's that way? Then you taught Gus to hate the world. Is that right?"

"That is why he can play in the way he does. Because the music is hate. I taught him two things. To play and to hate. Now they can never hurt him. The world can't hurt him."

Ricky said, "Oh," very softly. He stared at the face that had suddenly caught a glow of inner rapture, and suddenly he was sensing something in Londos, something immensely larger than the sack-like body and wrinkled face.

"How old was Gus when you . . . taught him?" he asked slowly.

"Scarcely twenty-five. He was playing with a band in a dance hall, but he didn't understand the truth in music. There was no hate in his music, no truth. *I* taught him how to play."

"And he quit the band? When did he get into the rackets?"

"After he learned that the world would steal and cripple and cheat him. After he learned to play." Londos smiled.

"Just like that. He was playing in a dance band, then you taught him how things really were. You knew because you had arthritis." He took a slow breath. "Did you ever know Niles Loring?" he asked abruptly.

ANOTHER gentle smile crossed the thin lips. "I knew him very well. He was playing concerts. False, empty, hollow concert music when I met him. I taught him to play."

"And he never played concerts again," Ricky said softly, half to himself. "But you must have taught other pupils, too?"

"Oh, there were many. Many, many," he said softly, his eyes glowing. "The little Italian girl, Felice. I've often wondered. She seemed ill the last time I saw her; then she went away. There was Bruno Vorello. Niles Loring invited him

here where I could meet him. Poor Bruno. He died."

"Oh," Ricky said hollowly. "But teaching them. I don't understand how you do it."

"It is not here." He motioned with his fingers. "It is here and here." He touched his head and his chest. "The music follows hate. First it is the child, and then it becomes the master and the food. But you do not understand. Only certain people can understand. People whose life and curse is music, people who are damned. Those people listen, and we talk and we drink and we dream the dreams where everything moves so slowly, and colors wander by, and then we understand."

"Those kinds of dreams? With maybe a little cocaine to help?"

Londos shrugged his shoulders and smiled vaguely. "Perhaps this, perhaps that," he murmured. "The main thing is the power and the genius of the teacher. The genius to perceive which pupils are ready to learn."

"I see." Ricky wet his lips carefully. "It's too bad, isn't it, that you can't teach *all* the pianists? Some you never touch."

"Some, never." And his fingers closed into gnarled balls and a look of bitter hunger crossed his little face. "Some go on and on and I never touch them," he whispered. "Those are the ones I hate."

Ricky could only stare at him—this gnome with his twisted hands and his poisoned brain, hating and striving to wreck those whose talents had survived his.

Suddenly he had to laugh. It wasn't a pretty laugh. In a way it was a crazy laugh, because that was the way he felt. "You're a great little guy, aren't you, Londos?" he said sardonically.

A dreary blankness crossed Londos' face. "You don't understand. You aren't a musician, so you will never understand."

"Thank God." He paused. "What was the idea of getting rid of Niles Loring?"

"He could not play any more, and I need to hear the music of hate. Here, where it reaches so high and lasts so long in the shadows. And, anyway, he had learned too well, at last. He had learned to hate even me. He wanted to kill me. He followed me to your house. He was insane, you see? For days he had followed me. It was in his eyes, his yearning to kill me. Each day it came closer to the surface. I knew it was time. I led him to Gus and Gus killed him, and then Gus played for me."

"And you were never happier in your life, were you?" Ricky whispered.

"It was a beautiful ending," Londos said softly. "Death and music." He smiled. "You don't understand Gus. Each thing he does has beauty. His fingers when he plays. His eyes and the smile on his lips when he kills. Gus is the finest pupil of them all."

"I don't think you'll have him much longer," Ricky said softly.

"I will be sad when he is gone, then, but there will always be others. Always," he said.

"And you'll always be around to give them a hand, huh?"

"For many years." Then a glimmer of brightness wandered across the little man's eyes. "Even after you are gone, Ricky."

"You sound very certain of that," Ricky said slowly.

"Yes. Very certain," came the serene murmur.

Some overtone in the sound of Londos' answer brought a cool tingle to Ricky's throat. Something in the little gnome's eyes warned him. He looked carefully around the kitchen. There was no weapon, not even a whiskey bottle that Londos could reach quickly. And the gun was secure in his pocket.

He reached into his pocket suddenly. It was there. Then he saw the expression on Londos' face: intense as a man watch-

ing the unfolding of deathly fate, unbreathing, with every muscle poised, as if to leap. There crouched Londos in the chair—crouched, watching as if life itself depended upon the next moment.

COULD something be wrong with the gun? Ricky drew it slowly out. The raw intensity faded from Londos' face and his shallow chest heaved with a hungry breath. No, Ricky realized, whatever it was, it was *not* the gun. But what?

What could be in his pocket that had such a gripping effect?

Now Ricky felt himself drawn into the deadly spell. He tried to think, to imagine, as he watched the wrinkled face. His own breath faded and his muscles tightened across his shoulders. Slowly he slid the gun back toward his pocket. Again Londos ceased breathing. Again his little body froze.

Ricky's fingers searched over the contents of his pockets. Keys. But keys meant nothing. Or could they, in some way?

He drew them out, dangling them before Londos, and again the little man breathed. His lips were dry, his face was bloodless. Ricky slipped the keys back to his pocket. For a moment his eyes locked with Londos', and a strangest sensation assailed him.

It was as if he were seated with this litle gnome, locked in a game where the loser would die. Londos understood the game, and he likewise understood that Ricky was seeking the game. And Ricky could not speak. The rigid tension of the pantomime had rendered words empty. This was hypnosis of a strangest sort.

Cigarettes in his pocket. They were as meaningless as keys, but he drew them out. A cool finger of excitement went down his spine. The tension that knotted Londos' body did not fade. His fingers twitched. Ricky shook a cigarette loose and put it slowly to his lips. He tried to taste the tobacco. Impossible that a cigarette could mean anything.

But Londos was not watching the cigarette. He was watching Ricky's fingers again, but he did not breathe. There was one more step, wasn't there? One more step in the game, Ricky was thinking. What? Cigarette. Matches. The match, of course. But what. . . .?

Slowly he drew out the folder of matches, and instantly he was sure. The grey of Londos' face was silken; his eyes were brilliant. His muscles seemed on the verge of explosion. A bead of perspiration broke out on his forehead. Ricky tore a match from the book. Londos' lips parted with a whistle of breath.

This is what he has been waiting for, Ricky realized. This match. Why should a match. . . .?

Slowly he closed the flap. Deliberately he poised the match.

He wants me to strike the match. . . . The answer is in this match. . . .

Ricky jerked the match toward the book as if to strike it. And with that motion, Londos leaped. It was a wild sprawling leap, down across the floor and out the swinging door with a scrambling of feet, of arms, then a desperate pounding down the long corridor.

Ricky dropped the match book and jerked out the gun. He plunged into the corridor down which Londos was racing.

"Stop! Stop, or I'll shoot, Londos!" he shouted. The little man plunged on, his arms flapping and waving, his fantastic coat billowing out behind him.

Ricky leveled the gun. In the moment before he fired, a quiet but brutal satisfaction wandered across his brain. That grotesque little sadist had made Gus what he was, and through the years Gus had passed the poison on to Ricky. It was ending now with the twitch of a finger. He fired.

Ricky did not see Londos die.

As the gun rocked in his hand, the

walls around him seemed to hiss and fold over, and a great rushing roar lifted him on fiery wings, hurling him bodily down the hall in pursuit of his bullet. He heard himself screaming and he had a glimpse of speeding past the wall. The wall stopped abruptly and he was flung into it and dropped into the pit of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Rendezvous

AT FIRST, it was like a nightmare in which he was trying to crawl over burning coals. Then the nightmare faded into distorted consciousness and Ricky realized that he *was* crawling, dragging himself blindly down the burning corridor. The taste of blood was in his mouth and his skin felt seared. Here was Londos, crumpled in the corridor, his head face down in a pool of blood, his glasses shattered. Little Londos with his music of hate, Ricky thought, as he crawled across him. He struggled to his feet, swayed against the wall, then stumbled on away from the mounting inferno that roared behind him. He found a window, shattered the glass, crawled out and fell into a tangle of bushes. For what seemed like hours, he could not move. Sleep was all that mattered. At last he dragged himself up again and tottered down the hill until he fell again.

There, stretched on the rocky hillside, he watched while the flames ate their way to windows and broke through the roof and came spilling down the walls. Finally it was a complete mass of fire, accompanied by the constant roaring, the heavier crashing of falling stones and timbers. No more music here, he thought.

He began to understand how it had been. Londos had opened the gas jets on the stove, wriggling against them with his shoulders. The odors of spoiling food in the kitchen had blanketed the odor of the gas. The match would have been the end of the deadly game, just as the firing gun had been so nearly the end, for both.

Cars were gathering on the road now. People were spilling over the stone wall, moving closer to watch the end of the fire. And gradually Ricky's stupor and shock was leaving him. The pattern of memory swelled back into his brain.

He pulled himself up and walked slowly toward the road.

"Always was a queer place," a man was saying. "Strange doings."

"Yeah. Nothing lost, I'd say," another answered.

Ricky got a ride with two boys in their teens. They said he looked like he'd had it.

"Yes," he said. "Tried to go in, thinking somebody might be in there. You can let me off at the station."

At the empty station Ricky put through a call to Jannessen and waited, scarcely breathing.

"Jannessen? . . . Yes. What happened?"

"He tried to cross the George Washington Bridge. The Jersey boys spotted the car when it pulled up at the toll booth. They gave him the order, but he wouldn't have it. He broke through. They loaded the car with slugs. Gus got across the bridge before he crashed, trying to make the Parkway turn. He crawled out and got away completely. The devil is like a ghost, but he's hurt. Blood all over the seat covers and on the steering wheel."

"But the girl? What did—"

"She's all right. We've got her covered, if he's crazy enough to make a play. We spotted announcements on the radio stations and she caught one and called us. Lives up at the Larraby Hotel. But what the hell happened to you and that phone out there?"

"Something boiled over on the stove," Ricky said. "I'm taking the next train

home. I don't think there's a chance, but you might get the troopers to put a watch around what's left of Loring's house, in case Gus comes back. I'll be on the next train."

THE LIGHTS of Inspector Gerhardt's office shone nakedly on the plaster walls, and smoke from cigars and cigarettes made layers in the still air. From an outer room came the crackle and crack of a radio, mingled with drab voices and the frequent scream of the telephone.

Ricky had told them everything, and now he sat motionless in a chair, his head sinking against his chest until he woke again and brought it up wearily. He was more weary than he had ever been in his life, and within him a cheated feeling gnawed. Gus was still at liberty; and Ricky's guilt still clung to a deranged killer's whim and fury.

"Nothing, yet," Jannessen came in from the outer office to report.

Gerhardt chewed his lip and turned his swivel chair to stare bleakly out the window. "A typical criminal would simply crawl up somewhere and die, or get himself picked up. Gus . . ." He sighed.

Ricky stared at the layers of smoke and his brain began to stir slowly. "But not Gus," he thought aloud. "If Gus knew he was carrying his death wounds around inside him, he wouldn't be praying or crying or trying to get help. He would be hating someone as never before."

Gerhardt blinked at him curiously.

"And who would that person be?" Ricky continued slowly. He stared at them. "I think it would be me." He paused, then nodded. "Yes, if Gus felt that he was checking out, he'd want to take me with him. That's the way his brain works."

"It's too bad he doesn't walk in here and try," Gerhardt said ironically. "I don't mean, Ricky—" he began quickly. Ricky waved the apology aside.

"He wouldn't come here. But let's think about it. . . . He doesn't know I tipped his hand on the bridge. He doesn't know everything. So just suppose. . . . Suppose I returned to the place on Long Island. Suppose Gus came and it looked like he could make it—no cops. There's a chance he'd come in to take me with him. He wouldn't *know* I was waiting for him. He would only know he was on his way, and he'd be damned if I lived after him." He kept looking at them; then suddenly he laughed a hollow brittle laugh. "How do I look for bait?"

"I think you've had enough for tonight, Ricky," Gerhardt said. "You need a bed and sleep. Tomorrow we can talk about—"

"And tonight a hate-crazy killer is roaming around, maybe fatally shot and giving not the least damn what he does! No thanks, for the bed." He stood up. "Lend me a gun and give me a lift toward Long Island."

For the space of ten seconds nothing happened. Ricky's frayed nerves snapped.

"Can't you hear me! I *know* Gus, I tell you! Haven't I been his little shyster since I could crawl? I *know* how he works, because I've worked for him, and I'm part of him. I'm trying to get out, can't you understand that? I'm trying to pay up and get out! Now, damn you, take me home and give me a gun!"

Gerhardt looked at Jannessen and both of them looked at their shoes for a long minute. "All right, Ricky. We'll take you home," Gerhardt said very quietly.

THREE HUNDRED yards from the driveway, they got out and left him with the gun and the plain black coupe. The boys would be filtering in where there was cover in the bushes, they said.

"But not to the house," Ricky said. He shifted the gears and the car moved forward. He turned into the driveway and the headlamps shifted upward over

the rolling lawn, through the trees, finally across the front of the dark house. The tires crunched on the gravel, and then it stopped and the motor died.

Slowly he walked toward the dark house. His feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground. His eyes moved from black window to window, and he wondered and wondered. He closed the door behind him and stood in the black silence, listening. Finally he snapped on the light. It seemed the greatest effort he had ever made, that simple motion.

The light seemed to pour down on him, freezing him in focus. He did not move. He waited. Nothing happened. His eyes roamed up the stairs, into the living room, to the piano. Silence and the loneliness continued.

And then Ricky heard the faint, distant notes of a piano. A piano, playing at four-forty in the morning, and faltering upon a queer, twisted melody.

Ricky understood perfectly and terribly. Gus was waiting there, calling him with music, and knowing that Ricky would probably come, for he was waiting—not alone and in the darkness—but in the light, and with Roberta. It was crazy and suicidal, of course, but Gus was crazy and on his way to death, anyway. So it was very simple.

Ricky walked down the lawn and climbed through the hedge, and the dogs barked at him sleepily. He walked without haste but steadily toward the house. At the very door was a New York taxicab, empty. So Gus had commandeered it, Ricky thought. He wondered whether the driver was alive or dead. He looked; the house shades were drawn.

He found the knob of the door and took a long breath. And then, for no real reason, he said to himself, "I forgot to get a shine today." He entered a dark hall. To his left was a closed door with a margin of light showing at the bottom; from within came the music. Silently he turned the knob. The door was locked. He sighed and then he knocked.

The music stopped. There was a long pause, and then he recognized Roberta's voice, strained and very stiff. "Who is it?"

"It's Ricky," he said firmly.

Footsteps crossed the room. The lock turned. The door swung inward listlessly, revealing a large room lined with books and portraits. A comfortable room where this shouldn't have to happen. On a couch sat a tall elderly man in pajamas and bathrobe. That would be Roberta's father, Ricky guessed. Retreating from the door, his face frozen in terror, was a pathetic little man wearing a cabby's forlorn expression.

Slowly Ricky walked into the room and stopped. They were together on the piano bench, Gus and Roberta. Her face was clear ivory and utterly motionless. Her eyes, even in fear, were beautiful. And Gus—the pallor that would tomorrow be death was damp upon his melancholy face.

"Hello, Ricky," he whispered. "We understand each other . . . very . . . well." He was barely clinging to consciousness. "I knew you were on . . . that balcony. I just didn't . . . know well enough. Intuition is a funny thing . . . Ricky. Like right now. . . . You know not to shoot me, don't you. You know where my gun is."

"Yes." He looked into Roberta's eyes, then back to Gus. "Well?"

"Intuition . . . funny. Saw you watching her across the hedge that time. Knew what you were thinking. Knew you'd be here. Funny. . . ."

"I'm here," Ricky said quietly.

"Walk over . . . that way. Slow, Ricky. Real slow, like to a funeral march, Ricky."

"And the rest of them, if I do?"

"You're all that matters. Me and you."

"I hope so, Gus." Ricky started walking. Slow, like to a funeral march, he reminded himself.

"Ricky!" Roberta cried out desperately. "Don't, don't—"

He kept walking and the bullet hit him as he neared the bookcase. He was so near he could read the titles on the books, and it was funny. Even after the roar drifted away and the fire turned from cold to hot inside him, he kept staring at the titles, looking for one he had read. And Gus was saying something to him in a low fading voice:

"Drop, shyster. Tell 'em I'm coming, too."

Ricky wanted to answer. He couldn't. Without a sound he fell.

GUS DIED just before sunrise, but Ricky wasn't there to tell 'em he was coming. Ricky was on an operating table in the Lady of Mercy Hospital. He was back on the table that afternoon. It was three days before they were sure Gus's hand had trembled enough, and it was three weeks after that before he put on his clothes to walk out. Jannessen was there with the train reservation Ricky had asked him to buy, and he kept frowning and worrying a dead cigar.

"I still think you're doing it wrong, Ricky," he said stubbornly. "You could stay here and make a million, and all of it honest. Or you could talk to the D. A., like he wants. You've got talent, Ricky, but what the hell do you know about New Mexico? You know *anything* about it?"

"Nothing. It's just a place. A *new* place to me. I might come back some day, but that will be later."

"You're crazy," Jannessen said bluntly.

"I always was," Ricky said drily. He finished combing his hair. He was ready.

"You're not going to see the girl?"

"No." He put on his hat. "Let's go."

"Crazy." Jannessen shook his head and picked up Ricky's heavier grip. He drove him to Pennsylvania Station where they shook hands, and each told the other to take it easy, and be careful. The train was waiting and Ricky found his seat and settled his luggage and loosened his shoe laces. The train began to move, first heavily and slowly through the tunnel; then it sped out into the daylight, and buildings were rushing by. Ricky watched them—all the crowded tenements, the factories, the skyline of Manhattan. He thought of the streets tucked down in the city where he had spent so many years. Where he had lost so many years. He was thinking about it, quietly and without much rancor, when the porter came with luggage and stowed it under the opposite seat. Ricky sighed and moved his legs. He did not look up until a soft voice said to him:

"The name is Roberta, but you can call me darling."

He looked up and she was smiling.

THE END

TORCH SONG

By BRYCE WALTON

Only in the sweet, terrible rapture of searing flame could Flamingo, the torch-singing toast of a mighty city, join the man who—living—bade her die. . . .

Her hair turned a brighter red, then yellow, as the flames shot up all around her.

SHE WAS murdered there in the Star Room where I was tending bar. The Star Room changed after that. So did I. I stopped tending bar there then, and became something of a character. Tourists were told to talk to me if they should come to the Star Room. "You simply must see Flat Nose Carl!" That sort of thing.

I had my special booth in the back where I sat every night by the big window. *The* window. It's hell, just sitting, remembering, but things happen that leave you with nothing else to do.

I sat there every evening, waiting for people to come over and talk to me about her. There was always somebody who wanted to, every night.

"That was the window, huh, right there?"

"Yeah. That's the window."

"You were right here in this booth I understand. You saw it happen?"

"I saw it. It was like a comet blazing in the sky."

Stuff like that. I'd been sitting there a year, and people still asked me once in a while about Flamingo. So I sat. And I waited. For just one more guy.

It ended for me on a Saturday night. A rainy night, too. I came in about eight and started for my private grotto back in the shadows by the big window. The Star Room is all glassed in, you know, and it's thirty stories up. New York always looks

so much better when you're way up high.

Elkins, who's been hopping bar there for about ten years, motioned to me, and I angled my long legs toward him. He handed me a double shot of bourbon.

"Good evening, Flat Nose." I smiled at him. Only very good friends call me Flat Nose, even now. "A guy's over there waiting for you. Probably another joker wanting to know about . . .Flamingo."

"Probably," I said.

Elkins laughed and slapped me on the shoulder, reaching up to his tiptoes. "Same old talkative Flat Nose," he said. "Always full of chatter. Say, you never did like to talk. I still can't get it, why you sit here every evening and answer questions about—"

I squeezed his arm playfully and he twisted away, tears in his eyes. "Okay," he choked. "So we don't talk about her any more."

"Right," I said. And I didn't say more because no words could tell him the way I felt, nor the reasons I sat there every night. Her body was like gleaming copper, but it wasn't at all cold like metal. I was thinking that as I walked over to my booth and sat down opposite my visitor. He had a shot of bourbon, already gone, clenched between white fingers. We just sat looking at each other for a while.

He looked sick, or tired. He was carelessly dressed in unpressed clothes. His hair was bushy and black. His eyes were dull and distant. Finally I said, "You want to see me?"

He nodded. The glass slipped to the table. He raised his hand. It was long and slim, and it trembled as he ran it along his lips. He blinked. There were tears in his eyes.

"I—I want you to tell me about her. Flamingo. . . ."

I smiled at him. There was always one more guy to tell. How long could I go on telling it to just one more guy? I had worked at nights at the Star Room for five years before she died. But after that I couldn't work any more. I took a part-time job at another bar and spent my nights at the Star Room.

"Why are you interested?" I asked.

His lips trembled. "It's been haunting me. I used to come here every night and listen to her sing. She wasn't real to me, quite. She was like a dream. When I read about what—what she did, it drove me a little crazy. I think. I've been imagining how it was for a long time. And I finally decided maybe if you told me exactly how it was, I'd stop thinking and dreaming about it. . . ."

"Okay." I said. "I'll tell you. Exactly how it was."

IT STARTS with me, because I'm telling you about it. She came out of nowhere like a flash out of the dark. Overnight, she became the sensation of New York and the whole country.

I was tending bar right here, so that I saw it all from the beginning. The first night she sang here I knew what she really was. I knew she was one in a million, and that she'd shoot clear to the top like a meteor. She had something she put into a song that I can't describe. But it got people, everybody, fast. She made them hang on to her voice right to the last notes of her song.

They called her Flamingo and arranged the club like the tropics for a backdrop. Her skin was golden, and her body was tall and slim with just enough roundness so that her bright red cellophane gown didn't look like a gown at all, but more like a part of her. Like a bird's plummage.

When she sang, the place seemed to die and wait for her song to end. It was so beautiful it was like pain. She sang too well. When she was sad with her songs, she was too sad. And when she sang about love, it was too real, too much like a broken heart. But then if I could explain it, it wouldn't have been what it

was. You can't explain pure emotion.

I guess I worshiped her. I never felt that way about anyone else. Over there behind that bar every night I worked mechanically, but I watched her all the time. She belonged to me, I imagined. Other people might enjoy her, but no one could see her as I did.

I'd think that way, and it always seemed so damned silly. Hell, she'd never even seen me, I thought. Oh, she'd said, "Hello, Carl," and smiled at me a few times, but that was all. She never called me Flat Nose.

She stayed later than usual one rainy night. She was rehearsing a new song. The pianist was there with her on that platform. They were working hard, and Flamingo was going over and over a number for the next evening. Her theme song, *Flamingo*. It fitted her, too well.

Her red hair and bright red gown were just like flame.

I was still around that night, cleaning up. I could have left earlier but I hung on just to watch her. And finally she came over and asked me to fix her a highball. She sat on that stool right there, where the old man's sitting now.

I just stared at her and gulped. I felt like a bashful kid. My stomach was empty all at once, and I had to inhale deeply.

I never saw hair as red as hers. Her skin was golden, and her eyes were so black they looked purple. Her lips were heavy red. Her body rose up and was full and soft so that it hurt you to look at her.

Up until then, she'd just said "Hello, Carl." But tonight she was very friendly, though I noticed that her hand was shaky on the glass. She was wanting to be friendly with me, I thought. Flamingo! You can see that I would be awed by her doing that, and you can maybe understand how much she meant to me then by doing that. Maybe it's corny, but she seemed like a goddess.

I was a little shaky myself.

"Tired tonight, Carl?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, and almost choked on it. Then I snapped out of the trance a little bit and added, "You were swell tonight."

"Thanks, Carl. You were pretty good yourself." But her mind was somewhere else. A troubled shadow went across her face. I felt my hands clench. I felt the hot rage going through me that I had felt in the ring before I gave it up. Too slow, too patient, they'd said. Not enough fire. A shadow didn't belong on her face. Something or someone was causing her to be troubled, and whoever it was, I wanted to beat the hell out of them for it.

She managed to smile then. It was a tired, beautiful smile. "You're my kind," she said then. "My dad was a bartender in Jersey." It was a surprise to me. I guess I stared at her. And I could feel the sweat breaking out on my face. But she wasn't seeing me then. Her purple eyes were far away. She was looking out the window.

I followed her eyes. There it was, stretching out down there, Manhattan. Her town. Sprawled out around her, worshiping her, listening, waiting for her.

She said, looking out that window, How can he feel tonight?" She whispered it. "Where is he now? What is he thinking about me, tonight?"

I DIDN'T say anything. I didn't know what to say. It was always a gag around there about my never saying much. But that hot, red rage burned high in me again. She was in love with someone and that didn't seem right to me. Everyone should love Flamingo, but it didn't seem right for her to feel that for anyone else. She was a star in the sky. Beautiful to look at, but blazing too far away to hope for. That's the way it seemed to me. But how wrong I was.

I suddenly got to thinking about my

own looks. I stared at my big red hands and blunt fingers. I saw my broad, flat face in the mirror. It shone damply. The nose broken twice, the battered ear and the sunken eyes.

"Don't judge everyone by yourself," I said to myself then. "She could love some guy. Somebody with a face instead of a map."

She was smiling at me again when I turned around; then she said something that almost folded me up. "Carl . . . take me home," she said softly.

Maybe you know how I felt then. I can't tell you. My feet came up off the floor and I floated there trying to get control of myself.

"Sure," I said. I went back to the dressing room, threw some water over my face, combed my hair and went back out. She had a white fur jacket over her shoulders, but she had changed the bright red cellophane dress for something that could stand the rain.

She rested her hand on my elbow.

Take out the needle now, I thought. Take it out and send me to my one-room dump. I don't like dreams when I know they're dreams.

But the needle stayed in there. I thumbed down a cab, and then we were riding. "Where?" I said.

She leaned toward the cabby and told him an address way downtown, then told him to ride around first.

"Do you mind?" she said to me then. "I'd like to talk about some things. You're a good listener. Do you mind listening?"

Did I mind listening? I breathed deeply, sticking my face partly out through the open window. It was raining harder now, and the cold, wet wind felt good on my face.

"No," I said. I didn't have the nerve even to try to tell her how I felt about her. And, anyway, I'd have made a mess of it.

After a while she said, "I still live down in the same place—with him."

"Where?" I said. I had to contribute something.

"On one of the worst streets in town. It's really bad there. It used to be colorful and Bohemian, but now it's filthy and morbid. There are cockroaches in the walls and rats under the floor. And I still live there."

I looked at her. Her face was sharp in the dim light. It was drawn and she was beginning to cry a little bit. It was a silent kind of crying, but I felt it. And I really hated the guy then. Whoever he was. He was making her miserable.

"Why?" I said.

"Because I love him." I could hardly hear her say it. Then she laughed. It made me squirm because no one is supposed to sound like that when they laugh.

"I love him terribly, Carl. Do you understand what that means?"

I thought of her. I thought of what I would do for her if she would ask me. "Yes," I said.

But she didn't seem to hear me. "We met in a drama school, six years ago. He was an artist, interested in doing some experimental sets. It was a very arty little theater and it folded in a few months, but it brought us together. After that nothing else made any difference to us. It was frightening how much we became to each other. So we married.

"We never had enough to eat. We suffered, Carl. I mean it. For six years. I wanted to be an actress, and I knew that I could get there fastest with my singing. He helped me. He was so deadly, so frantically serious about things. He called me Flamingo. We helped each other. We said many times that neither of us would live without the other. We had to succeed, for each other. Do you see that, Carl?"

"Yeah," I said.

"It was me for him and him for me. I don't think we ever saw or felt anything

else, but each other all that time. But he—he's so strange, Carl. He's wild, and unpredictable. He has no sense of responsibility. I've had to take care of him, see that he had clean clothes, and that he ate enough to keep him from starving to death. But when I got this chance, I had to neglect him a little. He broods about it. He seldom talks to me any more. He's threatened to kill himself."

I SHOOK ALL OVER. I felt nasty words ready to burst out of me. "That's bad," I said. "I don't like it. He's not doing you anything but a lot of harm now. If he's for you, why doesn't he let you go on—on to the stars. . . ."

It sounded silly to me. It was about the longest speech I'd ever made, until later when I started telling people about her. After she went away.

She looked at me quickly. "I've thought of that, too. But I can't leave him. I've tried. I've been away from him for a week. And I've got to go back. But I'm afraid now." Her voice broke.

"He's got me, Carl, and there's nothing I can do even if I wanted to. He threatened suicide. Twice before. He paints terrible pictures, but they're fascinating too. They're all about death, about fire and smoke, and people dying in fires. He says that's the way we'll die, in flames. He threatened to kill himself that way. By locking himself in a car or a room and setting it on fire. Does it sound awful, Carl? Do I sound silly?"

I tried to think. I tried to understand. And then I said, "No. I guess not. People feel that way about each other. What can you do then?"

"I love what I'm doing now, Carl. I want so much to go on to the top if I can. But I can't. He's gotten too jealous of me. He can't paint any more. He just sits in that dark room drinking cheap wine, waiting for me to come home. I'm —I'm afraid of him now."

"But you can't leave him," I said.

"No," she whispered. "It seems as if I love him more than ever now. There's something insane and wild about him, but it's wonderful too. He makes the reality seem so dull. And he makes you want to find yourself in one of his pictures . . . away from everything else. . . ."

She leaned forward. Her hands touched her face. "His pictures . . . the fires. Their spell goes through you."

She put a hand on my wrist. A shock went through me like high tension wire.

"When he said he was going to kill himself in a fire, Carl, I told him I'd follow him. And I'd do it now just as easy, maybe easier, than before. I'd have to die with him. Can you help me? Tell me what's the matter, Carl."

I felt sick and very mad. But I felt helpless, too. I listened to the tires humming on the slick pavement. I watched the way the lights blurred through the rain.

Then she said, "It wouldn't be dying for him, Carl. But with him. It would be like becoming a part of one of his dark paintings, and living that way forever."

I shivered. The wind coming through the window was cold all at once, and I rolled up the glass.

She was sick. He had made her sick. She was under his spell, like a bird with a snake. This guy was something that didn't belong around her at all. Some guy living in a dark, slimy world of his own thoughts, and he'd made her a part of them, and she couldn't get away. I thought, how different from the Flamingo the public knows!

She could have the world of lights, laughter, songs and stars. But she had to go back tonight to a weasel brooding in a damp hole with bugs crawling in the cracks and rats running under the floor.

Flamingo, toast of New York and the nation. Flamingo, living in a dirty hole, with a sick man who brooded about people

dying in fires. A guy sitting in the gloom with the bugs and rats, and waiting for her to come running back to him out of her clean bright world he was jealous of. . . .

I couldn't say anything. I wanted to tell her how wrong it was. But she already knew that. She was trapped. What could I have told her?

And she was talking about dying with him.

I couldn't say anything. I could do something about it, though. I wouldn't tell Flamingo. But I'd get rid of him for her.

THE CAB stopped where she had told it to. The street was narrow and dark. The pavement gleamed in the rain. Dirty walls went up on either side. A drunk was stretched out on the steps, drooling, his white face staring sightlessly up into the rain.

The building was dark. A cat squawled from somewhere in back.

I walked her to the door. It was a narrow hole going down some steps. A stale smell came out when she opened the door. I was the only one who knew Flamingo lived here. She didn't belong. It was like some rare jewel displayed in a cheap, dirty pawnshop.

"Good-night, Carl," she whispered. She took hold of my hand. "Thanks for . . . listening."

I nodded, swallowed, fumbling for words. I couldn't find anything. So she went inside and shut the door. I stood looking at it, then turned to look at the rain. The cab still waited, but I kept on standing there trying to figure it all out.

The only thing I could decide was that I would get rid of him for her. I didn't know how. Maybe I could beat hell out of him and run him out of her life. But I'd go even further than that, I thought, for her.

I was suddenly afraid for her. My stomach went empty, then sick. I don't know whether I heard her scream or not. But she needed me, I knew, and I turned and slammed open the door. I remember looking at the mail boxes, finding her name and rushing back through the dark, stinking hall, then crashing through the door into the small, gloomy apartment.

I could hear myself breathing hard as I stood there, blinking in the dim light. One small yellow bulb was burning in front of a long table. The room was piled with dusty paintings, each more insane than the other. The long table was covered with easels and brushes and dried paint blobs.

She was staring at a picture standing upright on the table. The yellow light shone on it. I looked past her at the picture, and it made me sick at my stomach. It was so bright it hurt your eyes. It was all in yellow and red, flames. In the center a naked man was burning. Out of the flames he was reaching with his arms, reaching out of the picture.

He was reaching for her. It was sick, insane, evil.

Flamingo was holding a piece of paper in her hand.

She cried out, and I caught her just as she fell. I felt her soft limpness against me, and that hot blind rage came back as I eased her gently down on the couch. I got a cold cloth and put it under her neck. I massaged her cold hands. I felt the warmth coming back then, and her breathing sounding better. I looked at the note.

> I waited and waited for you to come back to me, Flamingo. I've lost you and I know it, and there's nothing for me without you. I told you I would go, rather than lose you. And I have gone, just as you have lived, like a flame in the sky. If you still really love me, the old way, maybe I'll know it, even where I am tonight—if you'll come to me. Good-bye, Flamingo.

I dropped the note and watched it

flutter through the dim light like a pallid insect. The place was too small for me all at once, suffocating, hot, and I had to get out of there, fast. The shadows sliced down the walls. Sweat soaked my shirt and coat and ran down my sides.

Her skin was deathly white. Her eyes were deep purple wells. They were stark and wide. But they were far away from me. I felt my fingers flexing, and my breath was quick and hot in my throat.

Then her eyes dropped into terrible clarity. Her fingers pressed her cheeks. She whispered, "Good-night, Carl. He's gone now . . . in the flames . . . ."

I started toward her, my hands working helplessly, desperately. How do you know? You have only the note, the pictures—"

"I know, Carl. He died in the flames. Somewhere . . . maybe days ago, but that's the way he went. I've been gone from him a week now, and it was hell for me, this first time. But I tried. It was greater hell for him. He got out, Carl. As he always told me he would."

"Wait. . . ." My words trailed off. I couldn't think of anything.

"He always said he would end it the way he had lived, like a flame in the sky."

Blindly, I reached out a hand. A big, clumsy, red hand. But her eyes pushed it away, pushed me away. "Wait," I said again. But it ended there.

"Good-night, Carl," she said again. "Thanks for listening."

AFTER it happened, I went back there to look around. But I couldn't find anything. Just the signatures on the paintings. His name was Berti, the signature said.

I couldn't find any description of him, nor anything about him, not even a picture. I went through the papers of the preceding week. There were accounts of several fires, both apartment houses, and two automobiles. In one of the automobile accidents, the man remained unidentified. The car had been stolen and had plunged burning from a cliff. There were also some unidentified dead in the two apartment house fires.

Any of them could have been Berti. But I felt funny about it. Funny and mad. I wanted to do something, but I couldn't think of anything.

The next night I got back here to the Star Room a little before I was to go on duty. A little after eight. I asked about her, but she hadn't gotten here yet.

I waited. My hands were like rubbery fish. I finally went to work, but I dropped glasses, mixed up orders and irritated customers. Finally Elkins advised me to take the night off and relax my nerves.

So I came over to this booth and sat down and started to drink. This has been my booth ever since. I've been sitting here every night since then—talking to people about her.

It was nine-thirty, and finally she walked out from behind those green drapes, between those two palms. A spot fell on her, and the room became suddenly very quiet.

I looked at her as she stood there, and I started to get up and go to her, but I couldn't. She was too beautiful. I was frozen here, right here where I'm setting now.

She sang. No one will ever sing like that again.

The spot followed her as she walked slowly, her body swaying softly to the music, to the words she was singing. She walked past me. So close to me, right there. Sometimes I think I can see her footprints burned in the floor.

She didn't look at me. Her head was raised. She wasn't here at all, and she was sending her voice into the night. Her hair was so bright, so flaming red. Her cellophane dress rustled stiffly, reflecting the light.

Then her voice sank to a whisper and died. She stood there while the orchestra carried the melody. I couldn't take my eyes off her, and I knew that every other eye in the place was glued to her that way.

She did it so casually. It must have seemed part of the act for a while, to the others. And I guess it was too casual for me to realize what was happening until it was too late.

She lifted a cigarette to her lips. She had a lighter in her hand. She raised it. I guess she had the bottom off, and the wick out so that it was filled with fluid. Either that or she had poured it over her dress before she came out. Anyway, she flicked the lighter on, and right here, all at once, she burst into flame.

I yelled. A terrible feeling went over me. I heard her scream. Her hair turned a brighter red, then yellow, and the flames shot up toward the ceiling. I lunged at her, and the place was filled with screams.

I felt the heat against my face. I screamed again as she stumbled away from me, faster than I could move. She shattered the big window—that window—with her body. She left pieces of burning cellophane on the floor.

I reached out through the broken glass . . . too late.

She was like a comet falling to earth. Bits of flame from her body floated off and died in the dark, and I watched her falling, and below me it burst suddenly, like an explosion of sparks. And then it all went out.

I FINISHED telling the bushy-haired young man about her. And then I sat there looking at him. I had told it I don't know how many times before, but I knew now I'd never have to tell it again.

His face had become like grey wet putty. He blinked and carefully wet his lips. His thin face seemed almost to fall apart. He wiped his mouth and flexed his fingers. Long and white. Artist's fingers.

"So that's the story of Flamingo," I said to him. "I knew that some day you would have to come to me and hear about the way it happened."

"Me . . ." his voice shook.

"You," I said. "I guess being a bartender gave me some ideas about how people talk and seem, and how they really are. I knew from what she told me that this Berti wasn't a guy with guts to burn himself alive, for anyone. Not even for himself. I knew that if I talked to enough people that I'd finally talk to Berti."

"You're crazy," he whispered. His eyes were wide and bright. Sweat gleamed on his white face. "Why would I—I mean why should anyone . . .?"

I smiled at him. "She was too beautiful, too big for you, Berti. Every time she left you, you were afraid you might lose her. And I guess you thought the only way you could keep her was to have her die for you."

He cried. His lips trembled. "I was going to do it," he whispered. "After she did it. I was afraid she wouldn't do it. But then I couldn't. *I couldn't!*"

"You knew her so much better than she knew you," I said. "You knew she would die, the way she did, if you convinced her that you had done it, too."

"No! I didn't know."

"You killed her, Berti. The same as if you'd used a knife or a gun. But that night when she set fire to herself and jumped out that window, that wasn't when you killed her. You did that a long time ago, when you made her love you. She committed suicide then. But you wouldn't believe it. . . ."

His hands came up. He started to get up with them. He moved quickly, like a cat. He shoved the table into me and tried to get away.

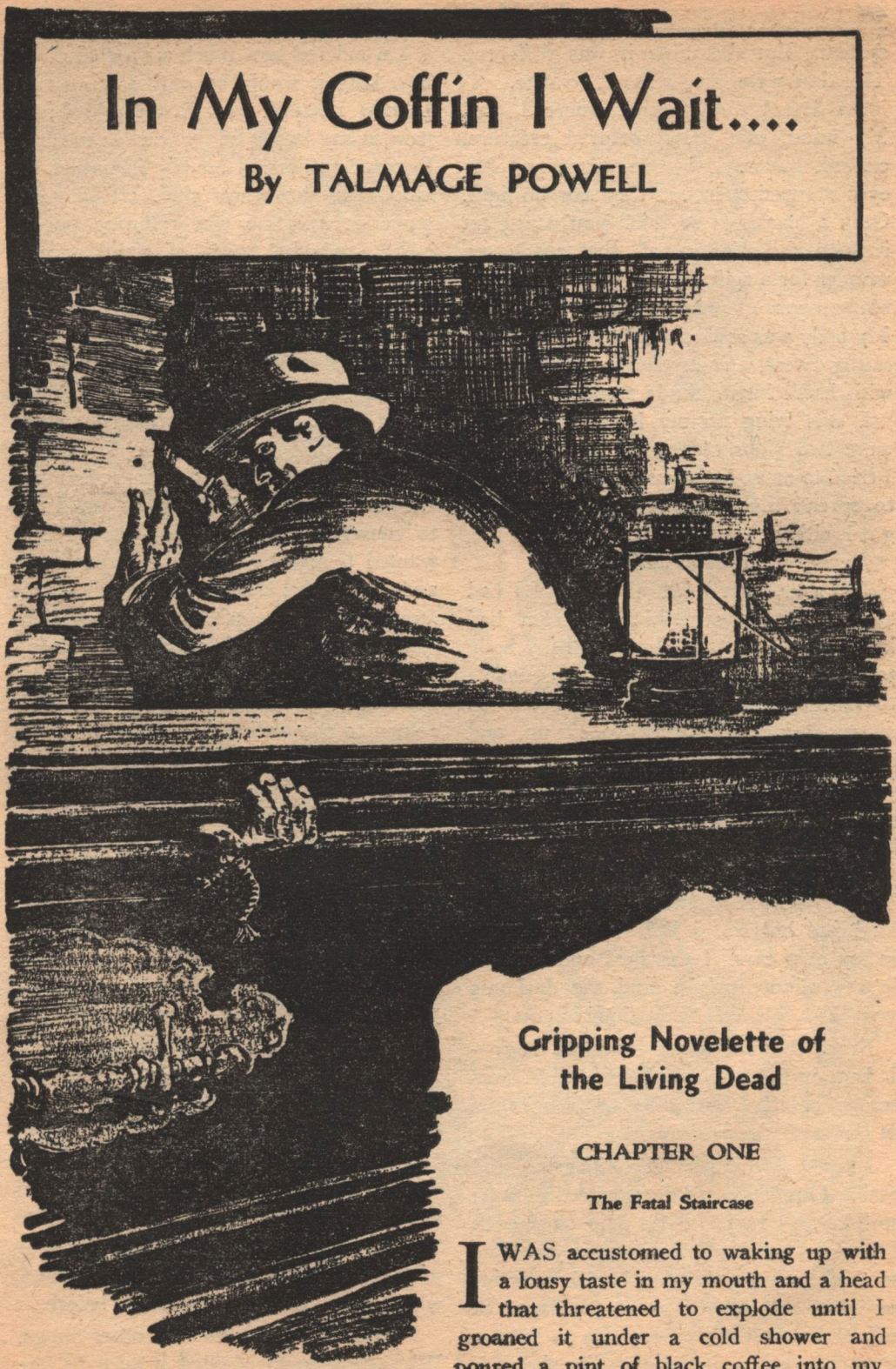
(Continued on page 98)

"Wait, wait!" I screamed. "Don't leave me in here!"

In the almost palpable black darkness of my coffin I lay there . . . listening to the hollow sound of her rapping on the outside . . . hearing her voice dimly: "Bill . . . Bill, are you ready to talk?" . . . waiting for the moment when all oxygen would be exhausted and my murder-haunted soul could flee forever to the company of the damned. . . .

In My Coffin I Wait....

By TALMAGE POWELL



Gripping Novelette of the Living Dead

CHAPTER ONE

The Fatal Staircase

I WAS accustomed to waking up with a lousy taste in my mouth and a head that threatened to explode until I groaned it under a cold shower and poured a pint of black coffee into my

system. But this time it was different. This time waking up was . . . strange.

At first I didn't know where I was. My mind, like some tortured creature, clawed its way to consciousness. My eyes snapped open, but they saw no light. Only a blackness so thick you could cut it with a knife, a pall that made me wonder for a split instant if my eyes were really open. I was gasping for breath. My body was soaked in a sheath of suffocating sweat, and my heart was laboring with hard, heavy thuds against my ribs.

I was lying on my back. My hands were two blobs of searing, darting pain. I tried to move them, and couldn't. I tried to spread my feet apart. That was no good, either.

I was bound, hand and foot.

For a moment I felt stifled, as if I had sensed already something of what had happened to me. I tried to roll my body to the right, then to the left. I was unable to move more than an inch or two in either direction. I tried to sit up, and something hard slammed against my forehead. I could feel the soft, insidious caress of satin-like cloth against my face as I fell back.

I began screaming with panic then. There was no echo, and my voice was very loud and hoarse, as if I were screaming in my own ears. I thrashed and writhed in my minute prison, and the darkness was like a live, evil thing clutching me.

From the sensations—and the odor—I had just experienced, my mind was screaming it! *I was shut up in a coffin, in the family mausoleum!*

I heard a whimpering, a gibbering, and realized my voice had degenerated to that; so I knew I had to get a grip on myself. I forced myself to lie very still in an effort to think. Under the sheath of hot sweat, my skin had turned to an icy layer of cellophane, and the silence was so intense it made a roaring in my ears, like the rush of mad blood.

I wondered how much air a coffin held, how long it would be until I suffocated. I knew I hadn't been in there long; the pain in my hands had wrenched me back to consciousness. I bit my lip until I felt blood run down my chin, crushing the panic down. She was counting on the coffin, and the touch of claustrophobia I suffered from, to break me down, to make me tell. I wrestled with hell's own demons in those moments, the demons that caused the coffin to get smaller and smaller and the darkness to become a black, velvet noose about my throat, strangling me. I didn't actually win. I couldn't destroy the panic, but a greater fear was the fear of dying. And I knew that I had to conserve every atom of oxygen if I wanted to live. I had to breathe slowly and shallowly; I must make no undue movement that would burn the precious oxygen out of my blood. She hadn't counted on my fear of death being greater than all other fears combined. She would return to the coffin. She would have to. Else there was no purpose in her having put me here. She would expect to find a slavering, broken half man who would tell her anything.

She was the only exit I had from the coffin—and I had to win. Maybe my fear of death was so great that it really made me out the craven creature she'd once called me. But if I had been less craven, I wouldn't have found this strength, this cornered, frantic determination to live. . . .

I CLUNG to that resolve, lying on my back, staring into nothing, my sanity trickling out like grains of sand in a glass, until I was sunk in a numbed state of nameless horror—as if I had sunk into the pitiless blackness of some nether world where only things hidden to man belonged, where man had never dared go before.

I tried to fill my mind with other things. With the thought of what it must be like outside. Early in the evening, a storm

had been rising, bringing night sooner than was usual in this section of Southern Mississippi. Over the whole hot countryside a hush had lain. Trees had stood out against the queerly colored sky like grotesque skeletons; the winding bayous and marshlands, where legend claimed strange beings roamed, had taken on that muggy quiet, warning that the storm was nearing in the Gulf.

I had gone to the window and looked out. The unreal quality of the silent, muggy countryside had sent a shudder over me. I had glanced across the expanse of lawn at the Collinsworth mausoleum. The big stone crypt had seemed to glow in the last ethereal light of the tortured, dying day. We Collinsworths had always been proud of that family crypt. All except me, that is. When I had come into possession of the place, I often had considered having it removed. But it was one of those things we never get around to. And I dreaded the contact with death when the workmen should come to take the mausoleum apart. There would be pounding, hammering, the sight of the crypt dissolving, as if it were dying its own death. There was Uncle Rabb, too, to consider. His body lay in a shelf of the tomb. If I had it removed, there might be suspicions. . . .

So the tomb stayed there to haunt me, to remind me that one day I would die. In Southern Mississippi, it is not wise to bury bodies in the water-logged earth. It isn't pleasant. It isn't the custom. You see many crypts like that of the Collinsworths. Looking at the tomb, I would shudder, seeing it as a black mouth that some day would swallow me, seeing it as a dark and sinister gateway . . . to what?

Had she ever regarded it as that? And how about him? Oh, yes, lying here now in the coffin, I thought of him too. He must be in there with her. How often had they discussed the tomb together? Had it held a queer fascination for them?

Yes, he must be in there with her. He must have carried me here. I doubted that she could have handled my bulk that way. We had been alone at dinner, she and I. After dinner we'd had drinks. I could remember that much. She must have put something in the cocktails. Outside the house, he must have been waiting, watching, hiding. Then she had opened the door, signaled to him. And now. . . *Now how close was I to Uncle Rabb?*

HER NAME was Janine. She was tall, had blonde hair and green eyes. There was something electric about her, but it wasn't good. It was like the brushing of lightning across a dirty, storm-filled sky.

From the first, I had known that she had designs against my Uncle Rabb. Nothing tangible, simply one of those things you sense from watching countless little things: the shifting of expression, the flickering of a light in her eyes at certain times, the calculating way she often looked at him, touched his hand, brushed his body with hers as she moved through a door he was holding for her.

But in Uncle Rabb she had chosen a difficult task for herself. He was a little man, round and fat as a ball of butter. But inside he was an unholy mixture of Faust, Midas and Scrooge. I think a great deal of his appearance was cultivated on Uncle Rabb's part. By the time a new business opponent woke up and lifted his heel, the adder had struck. Uncle Rabb had broadened Collinsworth holdings, until we were well fixed in oil, cattle lands and sugar. Yet he was a miser. Generosity wasn't in him, and I often wondered why he was earning the money. I don't think he knew himself.

Is there any need to sketch those weeks between the night Uncle Rabb brought her to the house and the night he died? Miss Elliston had married and quit his office; Janine was the old man's new secretary,

and had come home with him, the night I met her, to do some overtime work. I had been working on a fifth of Scotch most of the afternoon, and my memory of that night is hazy.

But she was standing in the library near the old man's desk when I walked in. My appearance seemed to annoy him, as always. But he introduced us, and from that moment I sensed something different, something strange about her. I sensed steel purpose—that she was the kind who'd make up her beautiful head to do a thing and then do it.

I suspect that she would have been more interested in me than in Uncle Rabb. I was nearer her age and still had hair on my head. But I was the penniless nephew, given only to drink and fun, and her relations with me were always careful, even abrupt, since she sensed this would please the old man.

As I decided that her intentions were to be more than just secretary to Uncle Rabb, I was amused. He had never courted any women except the Widow Higginbotham, who was a few hundred thousand richer than the Collinsworths. But I should have remembered the glint of purpose in Janine's eyes, for as the weeks passed, I noticed changes in the old man. He bought a trio of new suits, half a dozen ties and a couple of sports outfits. His step became brisker, his eyes brighter, and I caught him in unguarded moments now and then with a fleeting smile on his lips. He had always worked many overtime hours, but here at home. The overtime didn't cease. It increased: only now he did it at his office.

Then one night I saw them. Working overtime. Heads close together over wine glasses in a cozy little place where the tables were lighted by candle-light and a violinist was making his instrument cry with longing and hunger, the kind of hunger that was in Uncle Rabb's eyes as he looked at Janine.

I don't recall what I said to the girl I was out with. She was just one girl of many, and unimportant. Maybe she was disappointed when I gripped her arm hard, turned, and steered her right back out of the place. Maybe she had really wanted to eat there.

I knew this was only the beginning, that, as weeks passed, Uncle Rabb would change more and more. I would wake in a cold sweat, visualizing the future: she in bridal white, Uncle Rabb like a contemptible fat clown waiting at the altar for her. Then he would bring her home. To *her* house. *Her* cars. *Her* money. Uncle Rabb had always tolerated me because I was his brother's son. But what would be his attitude under her influence? I had regarded her first attempts with amusement, but her growing conquest of Uncle Rabb gave her a new substance in my mind, made her loom like a beautiful, cool Amazon with fires underneath, who could do anything.

I am sure there would have been no stopping her if Uncle Rabb hadn't fallen down the stairs, broken his neck and died. . . .

He lay in state for a day in Collinsworth Manor. A steady stream of people passed his coffin, the avidly curious, those who had hated him and came for their last drop of revenge by looking upon his lifeless form while they still lived. He had few friends.

I retired to my rooms upstairs. From the window I could watch the cars drive up for the funeral; I could feel the presence of death over the house, like the dark breath of the marshes to the west. And later, still from the window, I watched the pallbearers take his coffin out to the Collinsworth mausoleum, the hulking stone tomb that glinted so hatefully in the dying rays of the sun. I turned from the window, had a drink and slumped in a chair. For the first time in weeks I was beginning to relax. The recent ordeal had

been especially trying. The police, of course, had prowled here and there with their notebooks, suspicions, questions. . . . *Yes, Officer, I was in my room. We were in the house. I heard him cry out. I ran to the stairs, saw him lying in the lower hall. Yes, the runner is old and had been ripped for several days, but he was . . . well, parsimonious. In the early evening the lighting wasn't too good in the hall, and he must have caught his toe in the torn runner. Yes, he must have caught his toe. . . .*

CHAPTER TWO

Don't Be a Body, Baby!

SLOUCHED in the chair, I lighted a cigarette. I had my plans made. I would cut down on the drinking, become the grave young man who has been sobered by the touch of death and the sudden shifting of responsibility. It wouldn't be the first time a young man had sown wild oats until they were out of his system and then done an about-face. Bill Collinsworth's not so bad, they'd say. Just took something like this to wake him up. Maybe the old man was pretty much at fault, too, never giving Bill any incentive.

And when the last suspicions had evaporated a few months from now, I'd announce that I was taking over an interest in another company in a distant state. I'd sell the house and the Collinsworth holdings in the immediate neighborhood. And I'd never see the cold granite of that tomb again. . . .

I rose from the chair, stretched. The house was silent now. Evening shadows were lengthening over the bayous. I had been generous with the servants. Just leave me come cold-cuts, I had told the cook. I wanted only my room, I had said. To be alone. No, I couldn't bear to meet the people, to look upon poor Uncle Rabb. The mortician was taking care of everything for me. We had fought, Uncle Rabb and I, but he was all I had. And the housekeeper had almost wept over my little speech.

Now, in the silence of the house, I looked at the place where he had fallen, at the foot of the stairs. I controlled a shudder; I'd have to get used to tramping over that spot.

I went into the big living room where his body had lain. The bier had been there. People had sat here in the folding chairs the mortician had furnished, rustling softly as they eased cramped positions. There were three flower petals that had dropped to the floor, overlooked by the mortician's men. I bent to pick one up, and as I rose, I saw her.

My pulse froze for an instant. Janine was standing in the shadows of the far corner, watching me. Watching as the crushed flower petal dropped from my hand.

"You—you startled me . . . standing there that way," I said.

A smile compressed across her lips. She crossed over to a small table that had been moved against the wall to clear the room for the funeral. She got herself a cigarette from a box on the table. She didn't take her eyes off me. She tapped the cigarette on her thumbnail. "Aren't you going to offer me a light, Bill?"

I fired my lighter for her. My hand was trembling. She looked up at me through her lashes as she pulled flame into the cigarette. Then she walked over to a chair, sat down, crossing her legs and smoothing her dress over her knees.

"I suppose you wonder why I'm here, Bill."

"Yes . . . yes, I do."

"Come over here, Bill." And when I was standing over her: "Kiss me, Bill."

I stared at her.

"Kiss me," she repeated, reaching up and taking the lobe of my ear in her cool fingers and urging my head down.

I kissed her. My lips felt cold and stiff. I straightened and fumbled for a cigarette of my own.

"I don't get this," I said.

"I was seeing what it would be like, Bill. Perhaps it won't be too bad—being married to you."

I pulled hard on the smoke and just looked at her for a second. She met my gaze with an easy, knowing smile. "You know so little about me, Bill. Don't you think we should be better acquainted? Aren't you going to ask me about myself?"

"This is crazy!"

She snubbed out her smoke, and as if I had said nothing: "I was born in the back-bayou country, Bill. I had a hell of a life for a kid. Ever wonder if your old man was going to catch enough catfish to make supper? I had none of the things that little girls should have. So I went to New Orleans and got myself a cheap job and went to night school. I was plenty dumb, but I had sense enough to know that a girl had to get in the right company to make the right marriage. And a lot of men have married their secretaries. I skimped and slaved, Bill, and sometimes went hungry to finish that business course and get myself a few decent clothes. But it didn't matter, not even while it was happening—because I had only one thought in my mind, Bill. My whole body, my whole existence was for the future, for that thought. Money. There's little I wouldn't do for enough money, Bill."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because we're going to be married, darling. We should know each other's pasts, don't you think? Perhaps if I had married your Uncle Rabb, I would never have told him this—but I'm telling you, Bill, because I want you to know that I intend to win."

I turned and started from the room. "I think you'd better go, Janine."

She didn't move. She said simply, "No!" but the word, her tone, stopped me at the threshold, turned me to look at her again.

"I shall stay in your employ," she said, as matter-of-factly as if she had been reading back an unimportant piece of transcription. "After a month or so, you'll start taking me out a bit. When a decent interval of time has elapsed after your uncle's death, we'll announce our marriage."

"Just like that, huh?"

She shrugged. "People saw me going out with your Uncle Rabb. A woman who is to hold a high place in the community's social life in the future shouldn't get herself talked about. But in the meantime, you might make me a generous allowance. You really could do worse, Bill. I think I shall make you a very good wife—as long as you don't try to put too many strings on me."

"This is fantastic! I won't hear any more of it! I'll give you a month's extra pay and a good reference for another job. I'll—"

She threw back her blonde head and laughed. Until the house was ringing with sound. Until the sound, like icicles, caused the flesh to crawl along my spine and dark shadows to hover in the corners. Looking in her eyes, I was afraid.

"Silly Bill! You think I'd be satisfied with that? With even a year's extra pay? No, Bill—I want the Collinsworth name and everything that goes with it. You knew what was happening to him, didn't you? To Uncle Rabb, I mean. You knew that soon he'd be to the point where he'd get mooneyed and jump when I snapped my fingers. You knew that soon you woudn't be his closest heir—and to keep him and the Collinsworth money from getting away from you, you killed him!"

I swallowed, took a few steps toward her, my hand upraised. She laughed in my face. "Don't try to threaten me, Bill. I know you, know exactly what you are.

I'm not afraid of you. You haven't the guts, the nerve, to bring yourself to kill again. Even if you did have, you'd know that the police would be too much this time, as suspicious as they were about Uncle Rabb's death."

My lips felt slack and wet. "What're you saying, Janine? What do you mean by kill again? I've never killed anybody!"

"Oh, Bill," she smiled. "Really, let's be grown-up about this thing. I was bringing some papers over to Uncle Rabb, some things that had come up at the last minute after he'd left the office in town. I heard him cry out. I was standing outside the window. I saw you kill your Uncle Rabb, Bill. Will you give me a light, darling?"

Smiling, she regarded me lazily, and I shuddered. I was sick. You could see in her eyes that somewhere along the line—maybe her early struggles had done it—she had lost something. She had lost whatever it is that makes human beings human. And when you lose that, what have you got left? I didn't sleep any that night, and as far as the effect it had on me, the Scotch might as well have been water.

I don't think anybody ever would have suspected the deeper undercurrents of her nature. You don't suspect quicksand, either; and the insect never suspects the cannibal flower that is so lovely the instant before it closes and drains the life slowly from the inquisitive intruder.

SHE WANTED the wedding big, and it was that way. It was the biggest wedding Mount's Ford had ever seen. She had toyed with the idea of having the wedding in one of the city churches, but the Collinsworths *were* Mount's Ford, and she decided the town might as well know from the beginning who was its queen.

The honeymoon? South America. But I don't remember it very well. There was always a locked door between her room and mine. I think she had a gay and wonderful time—and for me there was always plenty of Scotch.

Back in Mount's Ford, she threw open the old house. She redecorated and let light into corners where no light had been for twenty years. For the first time, she began to have a satisfied glint in her eyes. She had just about everything she'd dreamed of, but now that she had it, she began to dream again and grow restless, and all the fear came back to me as the weeks passed. That's why I made the trips to New Orleans every weekend or two—until the late afternoon when I found the man named Ringo Eads.

He lived in a huge hulk of an old house in the French Quarter. The street was twisting, narrow. Over it hung the late afternoon heat, and the smells of age and much living. It was a dirty and romantic street that was having a hard time adjust-

ing itself to modern life. The houses were three and four stories, with delicate iron lacework like veils trying to hide ugly faces. I found Ringo Eads in his second-floor room.

He was in undershirt and wrinkled pants, a naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling behind him as he cracked the door. I couldn't see much of him, just his heavy, sloping shoulders covered by dark hair, like an ape, his broad face with tiny eyes in it that had seen everything there is in the world to see.

"Mr. Eads?"

"I might be."

"The private detective?"

"I could be. Who are you?"

"Bill Collinsworth."

"Oh, yeah." He opened the door then. He looked me up and down, a faint sneer on his thick lips. "I heard you were coming. I was told you'd been given my name. You know you wouldn't have ever heard my name if my friends didn't think you was okay."

"I know that," I said. The room around me was filled with huge, old-fashioned furniture, a vast, marble-topped dresser, a rumpled, brass bedstead. Dirty clothes were thrown carelessly over the threadbare club chair that sat near the cluttered table beside the bay window.

"How'd you go about finding me?" he asked over the flare of a match as he touched it to a half-smoked cigarette he fished from the ashtray. "Always interests me, how people go about the job of looking for a man like me."

"It wasn't easy. I spent days—been coming here for several weekends—dropping in clubs around the Quarter. At first nobody would talk to me about it though I was careful how I mentioned it or whom I approached. A friend of mine gave me the name of a man he'd heard a rumor about. I saw that man on the first weekend. Finally he came to me."

"He was looking into you," Eads said. "You can't be too careful in this business."

"I know." I wiped my palms on my pants.

"Just what is it you want done, Collinsworth?"

"I want you to kill my wife," I said.

He nodded and seemed to think about it. He walked over to the cluttered table and picked up an absinthe bottle. He poured himself a tiny taste of the liqueur, and his eyes glittered as he looked at it. The bottle was empty.

"It'll cost you a good bit of money," he said.

"I'm prepared for that. How much?"

His eyes swept me again, the sneer still on his lips. "Ten thousand dollars."

"All right. I won't quibble on a job like this. But I've got to know I'll be absolutely safe."

"I'll let you know before it happens. You'll have time to build yourself plenty of alibi."

I swallowed. "How—how will you do it?"

A thin grin came to his face. "Any particular way you want it?"

I shook my head, hard and quickly.

"I'll shoot her," he said. "I'll make it look like the work of a professional thief who broke into the house and shot her. That kind of kill—the quick, clean, professional kill—makes up the three-out-of-five killings the cops of this country finally put in the unsolved file. Meantime, there'll be plenty of people to swear that I never left New Orleans."

"You . . . make it sound simple."

"It will be." He came across the room until he was very close to me. He walked like a grizzly. "You're sure this is the only way out for you? Divorce?"

I shook my head.

"She knows something that's dangerous to you—is that it? Maybe you got to gag her forever?"

The flesh of my face felt stiff. "No," I lied, "not that. It's—it's money matters.

That doesn't concern you, anyway, does it?"

"I guess not. Here is what you do. I'll be in Mount's Ford in front of the theater tomorrow at three o'clock. You walk down the street with her, grip her elbow, and cross. Give me a good, long look at her, so I'll know her, so I won't make any mistake. Then you forget it. I'll get in touch with you before it happens."

"All right," I said. "All right."

I was at the door when his voice stopped me. "Something in advance, Collinsworth?"

"I'd forgotten," I mumbled. "How much do you want now?"

"Only a grand," he said. He glanced almost wistfully at the absinthe bottle. "That way I'll have something backlogged, won't I? I won't worry about collecting the other nine grand. A man in my business never has to worry about collecting his bills or his clients keeping their mouths shut."

I saw what he meant. I handed him ten hundred-dollar bills from the envelope I drew from my inside pocket. He touched the money, licked his lips and looked at the absinthe bottle. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Bury Them Deep!

I WONDERED if he'd remember I'd ever been there.

He did. He was waiting in front of the theater in Mount's Ford the next afternoon right on schedule. It had been easy to get Janine to drive into town. She was always ready to go shopping. I saw Ringo Eads in front of the theater, and when I gripped Janine's elbow, she winced. "Sorry," I mumbled. I was shaking and could feel the sweat breaking out on my face. I led her across the street, past him, watched with the skin roiling on my back as he stamped her image in his mind, something stark and terrible in his eyes. Her executioner. . . .

But nothing happened, and two weeks dragged by.

I had an undreamed of capacity for Scotch, but it had long ago lost its kick. I watched and waited for Eads to appear, and every shadow became a living thing, every sound jarring my ragged nerves to an agonized sensibility. I knew it couldn't go on. It didn't. I sensed that the end was nearing the afternoon I returned home early and without warning. I had told her I'd be in New Orleans overnight. I'd intended to look up Eads. But in Mount's Ford, buying gasoline, I found that in my haste I'd left my wallet at home. I drove back, and as I pulled in the driveway, I saw his shadow darting behind the old carriage house. I saw only that—his silhouette—but I was sure it was he. That build, that bearish way of moving his body. . . .

I stopped the car and got out, my throat tight and thick. I passed my hand over my face and started toward the carriage house. It was an old building, made of solid, large blocks of stone, out of use for years since the more modern garage had been built closer to the house.

Fear crawled in my veins and my heart hammered as I thought of facing him, but I had to see, make sure.

I finally pushed myself around the corner of the carriage house. No one was there, but I lifted my gaze and stared at the landscape ahead. He could have made his way through the bushes and trees that had been allowed to grow up here, and on beyond he could have lost himself in the cane fields.

I knew, then. I could see what had happened as plainly as if I'd been an eyewitness. Why kill Bill Collinsworth's wife for ten thousand, when Collinsworth was, himself worth so much more? When his widow would inherit it all, when his widow was also desirable. . .?

But she wasn't a widow yet. Eads had double-crossed me, gone to her, made a deal, and I didn't know when it would happen. But I wasn't through yet.

I turned back toward the house with the whole thing churning in my mind. She had me pretty much where she wanted me. At any time she could start the police hounding me again with an anonymous phone call. This time the cops might find something new in Uncle Rabb's death. You never knew. She could easily deny that she had forced me into marriage. As far as that goes, the cops might look upon her as a little extra ingredient in the motive for Uncle Rabb's death. The old man's money and the beautiful woman he was about to marry, but in the end whom I had got. . . .

I could run. But the thought of running, penniless, brought nausea to life inside of me. Where would I go? What could I do? In the end the police would hunt me down, find me cowering in some stinking hole of a room. If I ran, she'd surely have them on me. I had threatened her, she would say. I had said I'd kill her if she opened her trap, she would weep, but now that I had run, she could tell.

No, I couldn't run like that. I had to have money, lots of it. Another country. A new identity. Some place where neither she and Eads nor the police would ever find me. That meant I'd have to convert all the holdings I could into cash, quietly, and when I had enough, just as quietly vanish.

I had got the shakes stopped by the time I went in the house. Upstairs, as I walked the hall, I could hear her humming in her room. I paused in the doorway. She swung around. She was putting on make-up before her dressing table to go out.

"I thought I saw you at the carriage house, Bill." There in her eyes. The question. She was tense, wondering.

"Yeah," I said. "Thought I saw a tramp running from the house. Guess I was wrong. But you want to be careful."

She relaxed, turned back to her mirror, humming again. "Would you really care if a tramp killed me, Bill?"

"Not so much," I said. She laughed, and I went on down the hall.

I waited until she was gone. Then I got busy. I needed time to raise cash. I thought I had a way to get a few days. I had a busy afternoon.

It was almost dinner time when she returned. I stood on the long, sweeping porch and watched her get out of the car. When she came up on the porch, I took her arm. Something in my face must have startled her, but she allowed me to lead her into the library. I closed the door, faced her across the book-lined room. "That was Ringo Eads who was here today, wasn't it?"

"Who is Ringo Eads, Bill?"

"Never mind that. He was here, and between the two of you, you're planning to kill me."

She looked at me, her eyes like liquid fire. "I hate you, Bill. You brought Eads into this. You're a dirty coward."

"We won't go into that, either. I just wanted to warn you. If I die, you're not going to inherit a thing, Janine. I've made a new will, hidden it. This afternoon. Only one person, a lawyer who will get a check in tomorrow morning's mail, a man I think I can trust, knows where the will is. Even he doesn't know what it is, just that he is supposed to look in a certain place for a very important document thirty days from now unless he hears from me to the contrary. So you see, it will do you and Eads no good at all to kill me, Janine."

She let it all sink in for a few moments; then she smiled fleetingly and said coldly, "I hate you, Bill. I'd like to do something really horrible to you, such as roasting you alive!"

She left a trail of heady perfume as she slammed out of the library. I slumped in

a chair, too weak for minutes even to get up and get myself a drink.

SO NOW I was here. In the coffin. Some of the amusement in the situation struck me, but it was the amusement of horror. . . .

We were stalemated—Eads, Janine and I. None of us could go to the police, for there were too many secrets in each of us that had to remain hidden. None of us could go anywhere for outside help, for I had done that, and see what had happened when I had brought Eads, an outsider, into it.

Now I could only lie here, staring into the strangling, stygian darkness, waiting, until they should come. Or until my oxygen was all gone. . . .

My thoughts were interrupted by a rapping against the coffin, echoing in my brain like a pebble dropping in a vast and silent tomb. I heard the rapping, and I heard her voice dimly, "Bill . . . Bill, are you ready. . .?"

I didn't get the rest of it. Not then. I was screaming. The screams of relief, of hysteria. I was mouthing pleas for my release.

They must have glanced at each other, out in their world of air and freedom. Glanced and waited. She and him. The golden doll and the sweating grizzly. They had to have that will. Then in its hiding place they must put another document, though of a different nature. Then they must kill me. They must do it in such a fashion as to make it look like suicide. Whatever charges were leveled at them, at Janine, could never be proven, and what people in Mount's Ford thought about them made no difference. Because now it wasn't the conquest of Mount's Ford. They had the whole earth ahead of them. All the fine things that money can buy in all the fine cities of the whole planet.

"I watched the change in Bill," Janine would say. "Yes, he killed his uncle. I knew, but I never dared speak. He forced me to keep silent, to marry him. He hated his uncle because of me, and for his uncle's money. But I saw his mind slip down the ladder. I saw Bill begin to believe that he was hunted, persecuted. And now—suicide. His uncle's death was just too much on his conscience. And you know the sort of stuff Bill was made of. . . ."

Then, later, she'd meet Eads some-

where. She would think three times about double-crossing a man like that. He knew it. He must know it.

And now they were out in their wide, spacious world of darkness studded with stars, and they were trying to make me understand that I must tell where the will was.

I was panting. The oxygen was going. I could hear a ringing in my ears. I had to stop this. But I couldn't.

"In the old carriage house," I screamed, wondering how well they heard me through the coffin, how my voice must have sounded. "Behind the third stone from the bottom in the left, rear corner .... The will is there .... But you can't leave me in here! Wait, wait! You don't dare leave me in here . . . because there is something you must know about that stone . . . something you must do before trying to get the will. . . ."

How much of that did they hear? I guess I'll never know. In their eagerness, they cared only for the location, cared nothing for my warning. Because I had fixed the will so only *I* could get it out in safety. I had tried to tell them that. It had been my last bit of insurance; I had fixed it so I'd have to be with them when they got the will. I might get a chance under those circumstances for a break, I had thought.

Or—I would have it: revenge. If they forced me to tell where the will was and ignored my warning and killed me on the spot, I could die with the knowledge of revenge. That was all I had now. If I couldn't have the Collinsworth money, neither would they! But somehow, now, it was little comfort in the coffin. . . .

My senses swam off, but the horrible fear of death came back to give me a grain of sanity. I stopped my gasping, my laboring for breath. Even with my wrists bound, I managed to work a hand under the coffin lid so that enough air would seep in around the lid of the coffin to keep me alive until somebody came. And somebody would come. Oh, yes, I knew that. Any moment now, there'd be the explosion, and somebody would investigate. Perhaps then I could scream loud enough in the coffin to attract them.

WHEN—and if—I was found, I knew I was lost. But I had borne it long enough. I was ready, even eager, to confess everything. Lying there in the coffin with my hair going white at the roots, I was ready to take life. And life in prison was what they'd give me if I confessed of my own free will and took a plea. It was the safe way. Insurance that I wouldn't die in the electric chair. A lifetime in a cell . . . but suddenly I wanted it. . . . Anything was better than dying.

For any moment now I would murder Eads and Janine. When I had hidden the will and replaced the stone in the old carriage house, I had done it very carefully. The dynamite hadn't been too hard to get.

And then I heard it, even in the cell of the coffin, the hundred claps of thunder rolled into one. An explosion that must have shaken the sky, that caused the Collinsworth mausoleum to tremble, as if there had been a small earthquake. So I knew they had found the will. They had pried the stone in the old carriage house loose, Eads doing the work, she holding the light. And my bomb had worked. At the moment the stone slipped out, hell itself had erupted in their faces. Hell had come to claim its own. And now the old carriage house would be but a huge mound of rubble upon the smoldering earth, a huge pile of heavy stones, and under the whole crushing weight of the blasted carriage house, Eads and Janine were lying. Perhaps they were clutching the tatters of the will in their dead hands. No one would know until the stone that had become their tomb was opened.

THE END

CONNOISSEUR OF CORPSES

There was just one thing that Edward Morlock needed to complete his collection of murder curios: The twisted, powerful hands of his killer-brother, Cain!

By ROBERT JAY ARTHUR

THE PACIFIC combers crashing on the beach far below made the only sound in the room—a rhythmic beat, half felt, half heard. Edward Morlock, in his rubber-tired invalid's chair by the wide south window, gazed with pleasure down at the bay, where fishing craft, ancient wharves and dilapidated canneries were distant enough

to be both picturesque and odorless.

Morlock was gratified. Of course—and he half turned so that he might survey the room—the setting was not precisely an appropriate one. His room in the San Francisco house, now—that had been an artistic triumph. This one, all sunshine and openness, with the cabinets along the wall almost indecent in their newness, was bad stage setting.

But, then, one could not have everything. And San Francisco's atmosphere was, at the moment, definitely less healthy than this. Morlock had been reluctant to move, but now that it was done he was well satisfied. Here, four hundred miles to the south, was an entirely new world for him to enjoy. A year of it, say, and he would return to San Francisco refreshed and invigorated. By then the danger to his health should certainly have passed.

Nodding, Morlock took a small silver bell from a niche built into the arm of his chair. He tinkled it twice, and before he could replace it Jennings had entered.

"The morning mail, sir," Jennings announced in a voice discreetly subdued—for Morlock liked all sounds to be subdued. Jennings was quite the model of a gentleman's gentleman. Morlock would have been lost without him.

"A package and the usual papers, sir," Jennings added, advancing with the items themselves.

MORLOCK took them. Letting the newspapers rest in his lap, he held up the package in hands which trembled slightly with eagerness.

"Ah!" he said. "From Holmes, in New York."

With a small Florentine knife which had once taken the life of a duke's mistress, he slashed the wrappings and drew out a cardboard box.

"Can you guess what is in this, Jennings?" he almost crowed. "You know what it is, eh?" He ripped the box open.

"I rather imagine," Jennings said, "that it has to do with the sad end of those two old ladies in Brooklyn last spring. The ones who were choked to death with a cashmere shawl, sir."

"Precisely!" Morlock's voice was a purr of sheer pleasure. He took from the cardboard box fold on fold of shimmering material and let it ripple down his knees like a waterfall of color.

"A cashmere shawl, centuries old," he said, his eyes glistening. "A shawl that snuffed out two human lives. See this scarlet thread running through it. It glows like blood itself. A nice symbol. Very nice."

"Yes, sir," Jennings agreed. "A very nice addition to your collection, sir. Will there be anything more?"

"You might take this litter out. And come back for the wrappings of the papers. I hate debris around."

"Yes, sir," Jennings said, and departed as Morlock slit open the paper he had been accustomed to read each morning at breakfast in San Francisco.

He spread it open, and an intent observer might have seen him stiffen. But the surprise was quickly gone. When Jennings returned, Edward Morlock was himself again.

"Look here, Jennings," he said. "This will interest you."

Obediently, Jennings took the proffered paper. His gaunt features turned grey.

"Playboy Killed in Fog," Jennings read aloud. "Victim's Neck Broken by Strangler. Police Seek Killer on Waterfront."

"Yes, I judge by that, that Cain is back. He was bound to show up about now."

"Your brother back!" Jennings' countenance slowly returned to its normal pallor. "He's looking for you!"

"No doubt of it. It appears my decision to move when he was released from

Auburn was a wise one, Jennings."

"He'll kill you if he finds you!"

"Yes," Morlock agreed, and the word was a sigh of regret as well. "The poor fellow. It has become a monomania with him to kill me. Nothing will convince him I did not turn him over to the police when he sought refuge in my home. I did, of course—but he merely guesses it. He has no evidence."

"What are you going to do, sir?"

"Nothing." Mr. Morlock bobbed his head. "Nothing, for the moment. After all, Cain is my brother. His little quarrels with the law—I look upon them as his own affair. I believe in being tolerant, Jennings."

"Yes, sir. But if he finds you—"

"I'll cross that bridge when he does. I hardly think he will. But speaking of the police, I'm having guests for tea. Neighbors. They're coming to view my little collection, now that it's installed. For, after all, why have a hobby if you can't display your treasures now and then to an appreciative audience?"

"Of course, Mr. Morlock."

"So I have invited the head of the local police, Commissioner Tennant, who lives down the hill. With him is coming a friend, a writer on criminal affairs. Lansing, I believe his name is. John Lansing. They will appreciate my small treasures, I feel sure. Four o'clock, Jennings. Better make cocktails."

THE TEA could not be called a success, not truly a success. But it was not Edward Morlock's fault. He did everything a thoughtful host could be expected to. He served fine Scotch whiskey. He displayed his most interesting treasures. And he discoursed upon them in his best manner.

"This knife, gentlemen, this knife—" Morlock's voice caressed the blade he was displaying as another man's fingers might have stroked his beloved's hair—"this knife at a single stroke opened the throat which held Europe's second loveliest singing voice of the Nineteenth century. One slash of this steel, and that gorgeous voice was no more than a wordless bubbling which had in a moment ceased."

He held the knife up. It was Turkish in workmanship, with an enameled hilt. The blade glittered like a razor.

"It was her manager who did it. He heard a man's voice in her dressing room. He burst in. There was no man there. But the window curtains were still fluttering. He was Italian, and impetuous.

"This knife, given her by a Bey of Constantinople, lay close by. He snatched it up, grasped her hair with his left hand, jerked her head back to expose that white, swan-like throat, and slashed. . . . He was later mysteriously poisoned as he awaited trial."

Morlock's voice trailed away. He stared for a moment at the knife as if hypnotized by it. Then he placed it back in its cabinet.

"You must excuse me, gentlemen," he apologized, turning his invalid's chair toward his audience of two. "I have expounded too long on my little collection.

"But murder—it is a subject of boundless interest in which, once the imagination has embraced it, it is possible to find ever new and fascinating vistas. Do you not, as professionals, find it so?" he asked, his plump, pink features beaming.

Commissioner Tennant, a lanky man with sandy hair whose red face had held a look of vague bafflement almost from the moment he had entered the house, shook his head uneasily.

"Can't say I do," he muttered. "When people kill each other, it's generally pretty messy, not interesting at all."

Morlock dismissed this view with a motion of his plump, well-kept hands.

"In the general run of things, yes—messy, I concede you," he acknowledged.

"But if these inarticulate creatures with whom you deal could but express themselves, what feelings, what emotions might they not reveal? For what experience in life can shake the soul more mightily than death? And murder—violent, unexpected—how the onslaught of it must thrill to their very souls both the slayer and his victim!

"For the victim," he went on, "what a shattering emotion must course through his nerves and veins in that moment when he feels death upon him! What a thrill of dread must beset him. In that second of death he is more alive than ever he was in life.

"And for the slayer—though his reaction must be something less, what an explosion of emotion must wrack him as he strikes home, as he feels life quiver and shake loose from its rooted foundation in the other's being! What a storm of feeling must grip him as the inescapable finality of his deed, the monstrous magnitude of it, confronts him!

"Ah, yes, gentlemen, even the most cloddish murderer must feel something of this, though he is at a loss to express it. And in these relics of mine, even now the vestiges of such great emotions still linger.

"Sometimes at night I can sit among my little treasures and feel, stirring over them like a vagrant breeze, hatreds, fears and terrors as tangible to the mind as my words are to your ears. And sometimes I pick up one of them—the knife I just showed you, perhaps—and feel it twist ever so slightly in my fingers, as if a dead hand were striving to strike with it just once again.

"But gentlemen—" Morlock smiled apologetically— "I have overdone my lecturing, as usual. I do get carried away when exhibiting my prizes to a new audience. Let's forget murder and hobbies both. I'll have Jennings serve brandy, genuine Napoleon."

"Thanks," Commissioner Tennant said, almost hastily, "but I've got to be getting back home, I'm afraid."

"And I too," John Lansing agreed. "I have an engagement for dinner."

"Dear me, it's six o'clock, isn't it?" Morlock exclaimed. "Two hours, or very nearly, I've been talking. It was kind of you to be so patient with me."

"Very interesting, though," the commissioner mumbled, already turning toward the door. "Can't say it's a hobby I'd pick for myself, but your collection certainly seems complete. Everything in it but a murderer and his victim, practically."

He showed his teeth, to indicate the amiability of his remark, and Morlock nodded back delightedly.

"True, very true," he said gaily. "Very true. Well, good-bye Please come again."

As Jennings appeared with their hats, Lansing paused at the door. "I'd like to talk to you again about your collection, Mr. Morlock. I find it extremely interesting."

His pale grey eyes met Morlock's with a curious appraisal which Morlock chose to overlook. He beamed and nodded.

"Any time," he agreed. "Please drop in and have a drink with me any time."

THE RELIEF with which Commissioner Tennant seemed to leave indicated it was unlikely Morlock would see him soon again, but that failed to trouble Morlock. When they were gone, he became quiet and thoughtful—a thoughtfulness which extended through dinner later, so that the discreet Jennings stared at him furtively more than once.

When Mr. Morlock was as immersed in reflection as he seemed to be, his thoughts sometimes turned out to be very curious ones indeed.

* * *

When Jennings entered with the glass of milk which Morlock always drank just before retiring, he found the room dark

save for the streaming moonlight that seemed to fill it with pale shadows just on the point of moving.

The wheel chair was in position before the south window and Morlock himself, chin cradled on his plump fist, was staring down at the silent bay, where ghost ships rode the waters in the midnight luminescence.

"Your milk, Mr. Morlock."

Morlock turned, snapping on the floor lamp at his side. The shadows that filled the room gave a little leap and vanished.

"Very good, Jennings." He took the milk and proffered a sheet of notepaper.

"Read this, Jennings," he directed. "See if you approve. It's an advertisement to be placed in the personal columns of the San Francisco *Chronicle*. It is a message to my brother Cain. Read it aloud."

"Yes, sir." Jennings gulped slightly and read. " 'C.M. If the gentleman with the unusual hands will visit his brother in Santa Villa, he will learn something to his advantage.' "

Morlock nodded. "He'll see it. He'll come here. Then once and for all I shall put an end to this menace to my life. You were right when you said he would kill me if he found me. He's my brother—but I must protect myself."

"Yes, sir," Jennings said.

"You're worrying, Jennings," Morlock said agreeably. "I quite understand. You're afraid of Cain. That time he came to hide in my home, just before the police caught him—he made a strong impression on you. It was the first time you had ever seen him."

"Yes, sir." It was both a statement and a sigh.

"You need not be worried." Morlock put the tips of his fingers together and looked thoughtful. "I believe I can handle Cain. And he is quite harmless to outsiders—unless they give too much attention to his hands."

"I—I understand, Mr. Morlock."

"Cain's hands." Morlock pursed his lips. "An odd phenomenon. His grandfather had such hands. And perhaps *his* grandfather before him—the records do not show. Very large, twistedly misshapen, and covered with hair. Perhaps Esau would have been a more fitting name."

Jennings made no answer. None was required.

"Even as a small boy, Cain's hands were noteworthy. They were never still. In his sleep I have seen them clench and unclench. But he used them delicately, gently—until I became curious to know how much strength was concealed in them. It was I who egged him on to throttle our pet cat."

Morlock paused again and stared out the window, dreamily appreciating the moonlight-flooded bay.

"Then, at my urging, he killed a neighbor's dog. It was fascinating to me to see those huge hands close in one swift movement, to see the animal give a convulsive leap—and to render up its life in a single instant. Where did that life go? I often wondered. I used to watch with the utmost eagerness, hoping to see it leave. Boys have strange fancies."

Still Jennings was silent. Morlock nodded.

"Strange fancies," he repeated. "Of course, in time it became a habit Cain could not control. But he did not get into trouble until the other children began to notice his hands and make fun of them. Then he throttled a classmate, much larger, and almost killed him. He went to reform school for that. I confess it was I who put the idea into their heads to mock him. I was bitter at Cain. Some months before, after he had killed several small animals that I brought him, he rebelled and turned on me. He threw me down the stairs. I have never walked since."

Morlock was silent for a time. Then he roused himself.

"Enough of reminiscing," he said. "Mail that advertisement to the *Chronicle* tonight. And when Cain arrives, do not worry. Simply ignore his hands and you will be quite safe."

EDWARD MORLOCK sipped the brandy Jennings had brought him.

"It will be tonight," he said confidently. "Last night Cain was in Los Angeles—that murder the morning papers screamed about was his work. Some poor devil who stared at his hands, I fear. When he comes, Jennings, whatever you do—*don't* look at Cain's hands. He is morbidly sensitive about them."

"I understand, Mr. Morlock."

"If he comes to the door, simply show him in as if he were a welcome visitor. If he doesn't, he'll come by the window. In that case, listen for my ring."

"Yes, sir."

"When you hear it, bring in a glass of milk."

"Yes, Mr. Morlock."

"Be sure there are three sleeping tablets dissolved in the milk. Better add some chocolate to disguise the taste."

"Three sleeping tablets and chocolate. Yes, sir." Jennings nodded and was gone.

Morlock continued to stare down at the bay. He did not change position in his wheel chair, merely snapped out the light. An hour passed, and another. The sea was calm; not a murmur came through the half-open French window until the scraping of a shoe on concrete broke the silence.

Presently the sound came again. Then the moonlight was obscured by a great shadow bulking outside the window. At last Morlock spoke.

"It's all right, Cain. The window is open. Come in and chat." He switched on the light.

The shadow outside hesitated. Then the window swung inward with a faint, protesting squeak. A moment later Cain Morlock stood within the room.

"I've found you, Edward," he said, his voice a monotone. "Now I'm going to kill you."

"Of course, Cain," Edward Morlock agreed. "Though I wouldn't exactly say you found me. I sent for you, you know."

"I'm going to kill you." The big man's eyes were fastened on the invalid's pink face. His hands were jammed into the pockets of a shapeless coat. When he spoke, thick lips seemed to form his words without movement.

"To be sure," Edward Morlock agreed again. "But let's talk first."

"There's nothing to talk about. I'm going to kill you." With a shuffling step, Cain Morlock came forward. Edward scowled.

"Cain!" he said. "Sit down! I want to talk to you!"

The other hesitated, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"Sit down!" The tone was insistent. "I want to talk to you!"

"All right." The big man shuffled his feet like a small boy, then sat, tense and upright, on the edge of a wicker chair. "But just the same I'm going to kill you."

"I'm sorry you still think I'm your enemy," Edward said. "Because, really, I want to help you. You're in trouble again, you know, and I want to help you."

He shook his head chidingly.

"You shouldn't have killed that man in San Francisco. Nor that one in Los Angeles last night, either."

"They looked at my hands. They were disgusted. I had to kill them."

"I know. I know it wasn't your fault."

"I'VE NEVER killed anybody!" The big man's voice rose, tortured. "My hands did it. I couldn't stop them. Do you hear! That one in San Francisco—he gave me a light for a cigarette, and

when he saw my hands he dropped the match. So they choked him. I couldn't stop them."

"I know, I know," Edward Morlock said soothingly. "Don't think about it any more. You're here, and I'm going to take care of you. You must be hungry."

"Yes, I'm hungry. I haven't eaten since yesterday."

"Then I'll have Jennings bring you something. But please don't frighten the poor fellow, Cain. He's mortally afraid of you."

"Of me?" The big, blank features worked convulsively. "Why is he afraid of me?"

"It's your hands. He dreads the sight of them. But you mustn't take offence. He can't help it."

"He dreads the sight of my hands. He's afraid of my hands."

"Yes, yes, but just don't think about it. Now I'll ring for him."

The small bell tinkled. Jennings entered, bearing a silver tray and a glass of milk.

"Yes, sir. Your milk, sir." The quaver was manfully concealed.

"Thank you, put it down here. Now, Jennings, Cain has arrived for a little visit. Fix him something to eat, will you? . . . Why, Cain, what is it? Why are you staring at Jennings like that?"

"My hands . . . disgust him." The word were a gasping exhalation through lips that worked like those of a small boy about to weep.

"Cain," Edward Morlock said mildly, "what's the matter with you? Sit down."

But there was no vigor in the command, and the big man did not heed it. He advanced toward Jennings, and the butler stood rooted in terror.

"Mr. Morlock," he screamed, "don't let him— Make him stay away. . . ."

"My hands disgust him!" Cain Morlock said slowly, and then the hands themselves leaped from his overcoat pocket and flashed toward Jennings' throat. They grasped, twisted, wrenched. The shriek that came from the throat was cut short, became a bubbled sigh. There was a sharp snap, and the contorted face above the dark, hairy, monstrous hands relaxed. The mouth opened, like the staring eyes, and remained so.

Cain Morlock stared at the lifeless creature for a long instant. Then he shuddered and closed his eyes. His fingers opened. Jennings crashed to the floor.

"He's dead. I've killed him. No, I haven't! It was my hands. They did it. You saw them!" He turned toward the invalid. "You saw them!"

"Yes, of course I saw them." Morlock's voice was soothing. "Now sit down and drink this milk. It'll make you feel better."

"All right." Obediently his brother took the milk, in three gulps drained the glass, and put it carefully back on the tray.

"Now sit down there and go to sleep, Cain," Edward Morlock said. "That's it. Now sleep . . . sleep . . . and leave everything to me."

"Sleep. . . ." The other's eyes closed. In a moment he was nodding. In another he was unconscious.

Morlock had said three sleeping tablets. He wondered how many Jennings had actually used in his desire to play safe.

He waited a moment, listening to the heavy breathing. Then he propelled himself across the room to the telephone. It took him only a moment to get the connection.

"Hello, Commissioner Tennant," he said into the mouthpiece. "This is Edward Morlock. I'm very sorry to wake you like this, but could you come at once? I'm afraid I have to report a murder."

MORLOCK yawned. The events of the day had been fatiguing. Indeed, the whole of the last three months had

been fatiguing. But that was to be expected. Unavoidable.

The trial had been difficult. Still, he could not honestly say he hadn't enjoyed it. It had been an interesting experience. He had given his testimony rather well. What's more, he had a whole collection of newspaper clippings and press photographs of the event, together with a copy of the official transcript of the trial. It lay in his lap now. A nice item for his collection.

He let the pages riffle through his fingers, then stopped them at random. His own testimony echoed back at him from the page. Uncanny how vivid mere print could be when it related to a scene you yourself had experienced.

It had been touch and go as to whether Cain would be adjudged insane. But in the end common sense had prevailed. The jury had found him guilty and the judge sentenced him to the gas chamber. Poor Cain! Poor, afflicted Cain! Better that he should die painlessly than that he should go through life always tormented by the demons within him.

Mr. Morlock closed the transcript as he heard the doorbell ring, and the footsteps of José, his new Filipino boy, going to answer it.

A moment later he heard the rumble of voices and more footsteps. Then José ushered into the room Commissioner Tennant and John Lansing. A good lad, José. He had almost proved himself the equal of the unhappy Jennings. José vanished, and Morlock waved his guests to seats.

The commissioner cleared his throat.

"Got your message," he said gruffly, "asking us to drop in."

Morlock beamed pinkly at him.

"It was kind of you to indulge me. I'm returning to San Francisco next week, and I was most anxious to have your opinion of my latest acquisitions before I leave."

"Acquisitions?"

"To your collection?" John Lansing asked, his eyes fixed upon Morlock's face.

"Yes," Morlock said. "I believe it is complete at last." He took a small bronze urn from the table beside him and turned it in his fingers so that it threw off burnished glints. "What do you say to this, eh?" he asked expectantly.

"It looks like one of those funeral urns they use in crematoriums," Commissioner Tennant ventured. "What're you getting at?"

"Getting at?" Morlock raised his eyebrows. "Nothing, my dear commissioner. Except to say that this urn holds the ashes of poor, dear Jennings, my devoted servant.

He nodded solemnly.

"Poor Jennings, brutally murdered by a strangler's hands. And here he is, all that is left of him—to remain in my service forever more."

Lansing still did not speak. But the commissioner's rawboned features turned a shade more scarlet.

"You mean you've put your butler in your collection!"

"Precisely," Mr. Morlock assented. "I did think of embalming the poor fellow and keeping him with me—ah, intact, as I might say. But second thought convinced me that would be too ostentatious. This serves the purpose, is more dignified, and takes up less space. Jennings would have appreciated the honor, I am sure."

"I never heard of such a thing!"

Morlock felt called upon to protest. "But, my dear fellow, you suggested it to me yourself! You said my collection was complete, except for a murderer and a victim. And so it was. But now sad fortune has remedied that defect. Here is the victim—the ashes of Jennings, slain by the brutal hands of a strangler!"

John Lansing drew a deep breath.

"And there . . .?" His gaze turned

toward a box on the table beside Mr. Morlock's wheel chair.

"Quite so." Mr. Morlock lifted the box to his lap and raised the lid. "And here are those very hands themselves—the hairy, misshapen hands that took at least five human lives. Now they will float forever in alcohol beside the ashes of their final victim. What collector can ever hope to equal two such unique items? What collector will not gnash his teeth in envy when he learns of them!"

At the sight of what the box contained, Commissioner Tennant had shot to his feet.

"You've put your brother in your damnable collection!" he cried.

John Lansing stood up, too.

"I think," he suggested quietly, "that we had better be going. There is nothing we can do."

THE PLUMP MAN in the wheel chair chuckled, and for the first time lifted from the box the two objects that reposed there. With a pleasure that had yet an uneasiness in it, he stroked the hairy things that sprawled on his knees like great, unnatural spiders.

"How heavy your hands are, Cain," he whispered, "and how large! Five people they killed, and maybe more. But now they'll never kill again. They'll float forever in a jar of alcohol, and sometimes when I have guests in to see them, they'll turn and twist in the liquid—turn and twist and clench as if you were still trying to close them around my neck the way you always swore you'd—"

Edward Morlock paused abruptly. The room was deathly still.

The severed hands in his lap had moved.

They moved again. The fingers clenched, uncurled, reached out. They caught the edge of his dressing gown and drew themselves up with lightning swiftness.

Edward Morlock's brain swirled in a red mist. He screamed and heard his own voice dim and distant in his ears. Too late, his own hands, pink, pudgy, flashed to his throat to protect it. One strangled breath he managed, after the scream; then fingers closed upon his windpipe with a giant's strength. Deeper they sank into his soft throat, and deeper, and foam flecked Morlock's lips as he fought to unloose them.

For seconds the struggle was silent and deadly. The invalid's eyes bulged; he tried to scream again, but only flecks of bubbly froth came from his mouth. The room swam in redness, and he was past feeling sensation save for the pressure that would not loosen, the pressure that no effort of his could unlock.

A moment longer the struggle continued, and his body rocked and swayed and twisted. The wheel chair fell over, and across the floor Morlock writhed and squirmed convulsively in the battle he knew he could not win. His heart strained in his chest with a knife-sharp agony that abruptly ceased with the explosive violence of a taut string breaking. Grotesquely twisted, Edward Morlock lay still.

When Tennant and Lansing, hearing his scream from a hundred yards away, returned, they found José crying out hysterical gibberish, and Morlock quite dead.

Two hands still clutched his throat, the fingers embedded in its softness with the strength of madness and frozen there now by the sudden rigor of violent death. But not Cain Morlock's great, dismembered hands. They lay quietly on the floor beside the body. The hands about Edward Morlock's throat were his own.

"We are not afraid of death here," the judge said. "The day a Bernaise is born a place is made for him among the dead, with his name inscribed on a crypt. . . ." So it wasn't her name on the empty stone sepulcher that frightened Alina Marie.... No, it was the prophetic entry in that Hell's own roll-call, The Book of the Damned: *"Alina Marie Thibaut-Bernaise. Hanged by the neck until dead. 1948."*

CHAPTER ONE

The Book of the Damned

DUSK CAME to Royal Street like an old woman, creeping over the flags, lonely and friendless and grey. It peered in the locked doors and through the wrought-iron balconies, and

She turned from the dead man, then, and watched the white figure disappear into the mist. . . .

Eerie Novelette of Old New Orleans

laid a shroud over the narrow street, blocking out the red of the dying sun.

A shroud. Death. William Springer could feel it, a cold and somber foreboding in the air as he stood there, clutching that book to his heart. He turned and locked the door of the antique shop behind him. It made a quick, hard sound, of finality, as though he were shutting out all his past. An old man with a book, standing in a grey dusk shroud.

He began walking, the first few steps slow and hesitant, as if he might turn back, and then faster and faster and faster, his feet chasing each other in a queer, hobbling eagerness, beating against the pavement like thudding black wings.

On the corner of Canal he stopped a taxi. He was short of breath by then, and it took him a moment to talk. "Take me to the Thibaut-Bernaise house."

The man behind the wheel was plump and dark and polished as a chocolate bonbon, and his eyes were white as almond meat. "That house, boss? You want me to go there with dark coming on, there where the deep wall is and the walking ghosts?" He grabbed the door and slammed it in the old man's face. "Sorry, boss, but I just remembered I got business somewhere else."

The second taxi driver didn't hear anything about the Thibaut-Bernaise house. The old man got in and shut the door and spoke very softly. "I want you to take me south along the river. I want you to keep on going till I tell you to stop."

It was a long way, with the smell of the wet in their noses, and the boat whistles like lost owls shrilling in their ears. They came to the last house in New Orleans, and then beyond, in a stretch of marsh, were lights—half a dozen lights peering out of windows over a high brick wall.

Marsh grass crowded against the brick, and a water-filled drainage ditch cut like a silver sword through the dark green. The house was tall and turreted and old. It had been built a long time ago by a Frenchman; one could see that in its peaked towers, in its leaded windows, in the tight-shut, iron-studded door. It might have been lifted bodily out of Normandy two hundred years before and brought here in one castled lump to New France. Brought here for hope and laughter and peace.

And murder.

That was also what inhabited the book the old man carried. It said so on the queer, brown parchment cover. *Murder. The Book of the Damned.*

This taxi driver was frightened, too. He wouldn't stay, wouldn't even drive up to the door, but stopped at the beginning of the wide road that stretched across the marsh to the wall with its arched gate. The old man's footsteps were very loud in the silent night; even the insects seemed to be stilled, listening to those eager feet pounding to the gate. Even if he had walked on tiptoe he would have been heard, because there was no grass here, no earth, only rough brick pavement as dark and dully red as old blood. So rough was the pavement that every now and then he stumbled, and the last time, he caught hold of the bell rope.

IT WAS a fine-sounding bell, full and soft. The old man rang it a second time just to hear it again, and as he listened, it seemed to come from a long way off. It was a sound a man wouldn't forget, once hearing it. A man might remember it for twenty years. And this time it sounded as though someone were crying.

Alina Marie Thibaut-Bernaise listened to the ringing of the bell. She stood quite still in front of her mirror, an old pier glass, with a mahogany frame and four gilt candle holders fastened on the sides. There were candles lighted in them now, reflecting in the glass, burning there as brightly as the brown of her eyes, glowing in the tumble of her soft red hair as

she stood there, frozen, listening to the ringing of the bell.

It was strange. Somehow it seemed different than ever before. Maybe it was the silence of the night; maybe it was the quick way it was rung a second time, and yet not wholly rung. Whoever was outside the wall had not released the bell rope; the clapper trembled and clung to the great bronze circle and set up a queer throbbing, like someone crying from far away.

Alina Marie ran out onto the gallery and down the clattery iron stairs, then past the black pool and into the deep wall. A time-yellowed light hung there in this gateway in the wall—the wall that was more like a narrow, bricked tunnel running around the house, roofed taller than a tall man and eight feet deep, with an iron door at the end and an iron bar. And the stranger outside still clung to the bell, the rope twined hard between his fingers.

"Don't do that!" She was quite breathless. "It makes such a frightening noise!"

"I'm sorry." He had a thin, querulous voice, and his hand was thin as he unwound it and let it fall emptily at his side as though it were something that didn't belong to him. The bell rope swung between him and this slim creature who was so young and so alive and so proud. All of a family's pride would be in her. Light caught at the rope and made a shadow of it on the wall, long and black like a striking snake. Or like a tight-knotted noose swinging from a gallows. He watched it on the bricks and he watched it cross her face as it swung slower and slower, and that was what it made him think of. A noose.

But he must talk. It was too late for thinking. He must talk. "I'm William Springer. I have an antique shop." He looked like one, too—old and grey and dusty. His eyeglasses were dull as unwashed windows. His face was corrugated with the years. His clothes were old and baggy with great pockets bulging as though they held a thousand secrets.

"My shop is on Royal Street. I've been there for fifteen years and from time to time the judge has bought books from me for his collection. Today I came across a manuscript I think he might want." He licked his lips. "I thought I would show it to him."

"Why of course, Mr. Springer." Alina Marie smiled a welcome. She had heard about this queer little man. He was humble, almost fawning, and yet in his shoulders there was an arrogance, a sort of challenge that didn't go with the rest of him. He had interested her father. The judge had often said that William Springer seemed to be two men, one beaten and broken, and one wholly savage. The judge had tried to know him better but Springer had always escaped into his shell. Yet now he was standing outside their door. "I have heard father speak of your shop, won't you come in, Mr. Springer?"

"No." He backed away quickly until he was almost out of the circle of light and standing alone in the night. "No, I won't bring this book into his house without his permission. I wouldn't bring it into anyone's house."

It wasn't the words, not really. It was the warning in them and the fear, as a man might sound if he were introducing the devil.

"See, read them yourself, out here where it can't touch your father's house. Read these words written on a book bound in human skin."

That was what held her. She wanted to run from it, and yet there was a strange fascination about the binding. Words written on human skin.

She read the title:

Murder. The Book of the Damned.

Trembling fingers lifted the cover and on the yellowed sheet beneath was a fine hand scrawl.

Do not hold this book lightly. It was once a man. And now it is the names of countless tortured men. Take care that yours is not added to the list.

Do not bring this book beneath your roof, unless your soul be clean.

Do not lay your hands on it lest they be bathed in blood.

And still Alina Marie did not scream. She couldn't. Her breath had caught in her throat and she stood numb and quiet, reading that page over and over, and the next page and the next, as her nervous fingers let them fly. Just names. Long lists of names and dates. All the names of men who had murdered in New Orleans since the beginning of time.

A name stood out here, and another there, etching sorrow in her heart.

Benai Partout. Skewered on a sword for patricide. 1712.

Francois Rennard. Hanged by the neck in payment for killing three. 1747.

Emil Bertrand. Hanged to a tree for having poisoned his wife. 1763.

Porter Williams. Shot on his horse. He had killed eight. 1795.

Henry Foley. Hanged on the new gallows. 1815.

Westrin Thorne. Hanged twice, once for killing his wife, and again for drowning his son. The second hanging not being a success by reason his neck broke on the first. 1873.

Alina Marie began to scream then, a shrill, high, unending scream that wouldn't stop, yet her eyes couldn't stop reading.

Michael Wynen. Hanged for robbery and murder. 1912.

Guillaume Printemps. Hanged by the neck until dead for having butchered his sweetheart. 1927.

There were more, too many more, and the last date in it was 1947. A dozen hands and pens and inks had written the book. The first names were fine as spider scrawl and faint with age; the last were black and glaring.

JUDGE THIBAUT-BERNAISE was glaring as he ran up with a dueling pistol in his hand and an oath on his lips. Others came in answer to the screams, too—a young man, moving fast, and another young man, anxious and slow, carrying a white cane and the lonely stare of the blind. There was an older man, too, almost as old as the judge, with the same white hair. The last were women, two white and one black, who gathered around Alina Marie and tried to lead her away. Only she wouldn't go.

"No!" The screams were dead now, and just this whisper was left. "Don't let him in, father! Don't let him bring his book into our house."

"His book?"

For a moment there was no answer. There was nothing at all. It was like a picture painted with an ugly brush, these silent people standing in a frozen huddle beneath the light. All except one. William Springer stayed alone with the night.

"Your daughter speaks of this book of murder. There's a warning in it that violence might follow where it goes." He let the word fade, and cocked his head as though he were listening. "Perhaps it does. I don't know. That is why I would not bring the book into your house without your permission, and yet I thought you might be interested."

The judge *was* interested. His hands trembled with eagerness as he fondled it and pointed out the places where the writing had changed, and he wondered who had formed those letters. Who and why. Whose had been that first delicate hand, and whose this last black writing, crossing its *T's* with great flourishes that slashed across the page like saber cuts. Had it been the hangman who had written that name, Guillaume Printemps—written so boldly the letters might be lips screaming, "Murder!" Was that what this strange book was—the private diary of hangmen?

"Where did you get it?"

"A sailor sold it to me, a French sailor who wouldn't talk."

"A pity. I like to know more about my books."

"It is not your book, father. Don't touch it. It belongs to those names, and death." Tears of fright were in her eyes, unnoticed and unknown.

"Alina Marie, whatever is the matter with you?" He was angry and puzzled.

"I'm afraid."

"Rubbish!"

"No." The antique dealer slapped at a bothersome moth. "Your daughter is a sensitive girl, Judge, and this book is strange. It does have the feel of death."

"The feel of death! What sentimental rot!" Judge Thibaut-Bernaise's ragged mustaches shook in anger. "Alina Marie has lived with death all her life and it has never bothered her. All of the Bernaise family lives with death. Don't you know the story of our house?"

"It is something about a deep wall and walking ghosts."

"Yes." The judge touched the brick. "This is the wall, eight feet deep. The Bernaise men have always been tall, and this was made so their bones might not be cramped. A man is dead so long. He must plan for his comfort as best he can, thus more than two hundred years ago a Bernaise planned for himself and for his children and his children's children. He counted on a hundred to follow in his steps and he built a crypt for each, so many they made a wall. Fine New Orleans graves high enough to be out of the swamp and out of the river rises and out of the dampness of the earth."

The judge took William Springer's hand. "Come, let me show you."

ALL OF THEM followed through the tunnel entrance into the house yard, keeping close against the wall, walking in the silent grass. After a few steps the judge lit a match. The flame was like a bright star in the night, playing on an old iron door, a small, square door with a name cut in it: "Jeremail Bernaise. 1732."

There were other names. All around the wall were these little doors, high above the ground as a man's waist, each with a deep-cut name. And the last letters spelled out, "Alina Marie Thibaut-Bernaise."

The judge kept a chain of light going, matches hissing into life. "Do you see how it is, Mr. Springer? The day a Bernaise is born his name is cut in one of these crypt doors. That is why our house is more than a house of death—it is a house of peace. Because as we are born there is a place made for us to die. We can never be frightened about the future; we always know where we will be. Even our graves are home, warmed by the memories of all our lives."

Mr. Springer shivered. He was much too old to talk of these things.

The others in the crowd—the blind boy, the old man and the other young man, the women—all nodded. As though it were a comfort to live by your grave.

"And it is a comfort." Judge Thibaut-Bernaise snatched the thought right out of the air. "Yet we own one other thing in our home that gives us peace. Our ghosts. They are the reason we cannot keep a servant after dark." He smiled fondly on the black woman. "Only Emma is brave enough. Surely, Mr. Springer, you have heard of our walking ghosts?"

"Yes." He wet his lips. "All of New Orleans knows that three times, on the three last nights before a Bernaise dies, he will see his ghost walking by his side." It was hard for him to speak, his tongue blotted so dry. "I did not believe it."

"But you should. That is why death does not frighten us. We are always sure of at least three days more. That is why I am not afraid of your book. I have lived well and honestly. In all my years on the bench I have been fair. No bribe has

ever touched me. I have never condemned a man to death unless he had first condemned himself.

"I am not afraid of ghosts and dead men. Nor words written by dead men. Let us go into the house where we may have better light."

Alina Marie broke away from the women and held the judge to her. "Don't take it in! See, even in the moonlight you can read the warning in the words." She touched the book clasped tight between his fingers and traced the letters on the first page. "The words say, 'Do not hold this book lightly.' And you have, father. You've laughed at it. Don't do more. Don't take it in the house!"

The judge felt her cheek. "Alina Marie, you are to go to your room." He nodded to the old man by his side, the one with white hair and the piercing eyes. "Dr. Peters will go to you there."

She moved from him, back into the moonlight. "I hadn't wanted to tell you." She looked at the fierce, proud old man and at the fragile little lady with a face like a cameo and a growing terror in her eyes. "I hadn't meant to tell any of you what I know. Only I must stop that book before it enters this house.

"I saw my ghost last night. I saw it walking by me, plainly in the moonlight. Hair that was almost as red as blood, and a noose about its neck."

No one moved. No one spoke. Perhaps no one breathed. There was not even the mercy of a scream to give them release. They might have all been waiting ghosts, their eyes dulled by the sight of a noose.

Alina Marie spoke softly, as though she were talking only to herself. "I prayed last night that I was mistaken. I saw the ghost in the garden here and I had been asleep. I prayed that it was only an evil dream and I made myself belive it. Until I heard the bell. Until I saw this book." Her lips trembled; she could not stop them. "That warning is for me. It must be for me. Because there is the noose. What else are people hanged for, father—besides murder?"

Still no one spoke. They were all thinking the same thing: "On the last three days of a Bernaise's life he sees his ghost walking by his side."

Alina Marie was watching them. "Which one of you am I going to kill?"

She held out her hands as though she had never seen them before. They clawed at the sky like miniature branches of a barren tree. And then they snatched at *The Book of the Damned,* and she screamed at the stars.

"Maybe it is not too late! If no one has the book, if it is torn and finished, something done, and the shreds thrown in the swamp to rot, maybe then there will be no curse!"

She twisted the book, and there was the sound of tearing. The antique dealer jumped to take the manuscript and the judge grabbed for it.

"No! That book is priceless! It's a treasure!"

For a short moment they struggled. Then the binding split and there was the shine of silver along its back. Where the pages were all sewn together, nestled close against the thick stitching, was the needle-fine blade of a stiletto. It fell out of the broken parchment into her fingers and she threw it from her. The book flew in the air, and there was the tinkling of glass as it went through a window.

The Book of the Damned was in the house.

CHAPTER TWO

Murder

ALINA MARIE ran from them, from the sound of the falling glass. She ran over the brick walks, over the black green of the grass, past the rose garden

and the clipped maze of the camellia trees. Beyond all of them she went, out of the moonshine into the dark embrace of the giant liveoak. And it was there Charles found her, walking slowly yet proudly behind his white cane, following the sound of her weeping.

He laid his cane on the ground and he put his arms around her. "Don't cry, Alina Marie. Can't you see it's all a terrible nightmare? You're frightened and sick about nothing. Because you couldn't kill. Not ever. I know, Alina Marie."

She stopped crying and just stood there with her head on his shoulder, silent and quiet as a waxen doll. That was how they heard the judge and William Springer saying good-bye. They heard the house door opening and the iron gate closing. And after that there wasn't a sound in the night, until the quick echoes died and the frogs in the marsh began croaking again.

"He's gone, Alina Marie, and all this is past and done with. That was a bad dream you had last night. And this evening was nothing more than an unfortunate coincidence. Forget them both and remember only that I love you."

She would have that for all her life to remember. That he had loved her. There was something else to remember, too, and never be able to forget: his blood—one drop, shining on her finger like a jewel.

He had gone to the house to get her a drink of water and a damp towel to wipe her eyes, and she let him because he was proud to do things for her, to prove his blindness was only an inconvenience and not a handicap. So he went away, and that was all she was sure of, watching him go down the path. She was so tired she lay down in the black lace hammock to rest a moment. That was all it was, a cat nap, for when she woke the moon still shone on her face. She lay there watching it and marveling that she had slept, when she thought she never would again. At least not here, not in the garden. But she had; she had been so very tired. Charles would change that when he got back. Just having him near made everything right.

But he was near. And nothing was right.

It was a full minute before she saw the glass sitting on the little iron table, a glass and a white towel. She sat up and something tumbled out of the folds of her skirts. It was the stiletto, the one that had been in the book. It fell and stuck into the earth as though she had been playing mumbly-peg. Then she saw Charles, lying beside it, his hands clawed into the earth as if he were trying to hang on to something. Perhaps life.

He lay on his stomach, his head twisted to one side and his eyes open, and just at the bottom of his hairline where it came to a little point at the nape of his neck, there was this one drop of blood.

Alina Marie didn't think; it was all automatic. She knelt and touched the blood and it came off on her finger, and she kept staring at it because she couldn't quite understand, couldn't believe. Then suddenly she had the strange, prickly feeling she was being watched.

And she was. A blur in the shadows by the deep wall was watching her, and even as she saw it, it disappeared, walking slowly into the mists that rose out of the swamp and made small, grey clouds as they floated over the wall and swallowed up this white blur with red hair and a yellow rope tight about its throat.

Her ghost with a rope around its neck.

"What else do they hang people for—besides murder?"

She lifted the stiletto. It was small and cold in her hand, and somehow it fitted there naturally. She tried striking at the earth, and the blade went in with almost no effort at all. Even the tree trunk was not too hard. She pushed the knife all the way up to the hilt, slowly, living every

inch of its journey. Supposing the tree were a man, could she do this? Could she feel the tug of flesh and blood—could she kill?

His words came back to her! "You couldn't kill. Not ever. I know, Alina Marie."

Had he? Dear God, how could Charles have known when she didn't herself.

PERHAPS the part that was most frightening was the instinct she had about this murder—the very fact she knew it was murder without questioning it at all. She knew she mustn't tell, mustn't let anyone see the stiletto. She must wipe her fingerprints off it and bury it deep in the earth. She must take that damp towel and wash off the smear over the tiny hole the stiletto made as it pushed up into his brain. That was the worst. She knew how he was killed. She'd read about it in a book once, how there'd be only one drop of blood, how if it was a very small blade it would make so tiny a hole a doctor might even miss it. She would have to tell them—not about the knife but about Charles—right away. Waiting would only make it look as if she were hiding something. Her father would have to know, and Dr. Peters, and the rest of them. She'd have to tell them. She would cry and cry to show her grief, but she must never let them see her fear.

But of course they did. It was in her eyes. It was in their hearts from that first moment when she'd come running into the library. Her father was there and Dr. Peters and her cousin Roice, all of them leaning over the desk.

The words came out in a tumble as if they couldn't wait to tell this awful thing. "Dr. Peters, there something wrong with Charles. He's fainted and I can't waken him."

Dr. Peters couldn't either. He knelt there on the ground with the liveoak whispering above his head, and the frogs croaking and the wind sighing softly. He studied the good Louisiana earth, the fine garden soil, pocked with a dozen tiny holes. Ant runs they appeared to be, only the earth at the top didn't round up into a little hill; it was pressed in. He smoothed them over with his fingers, blotted them out forever.

He took his small flashlight and ran the beam all over Charles' face and head and neck, and it didn't seem to hesitate. Not even there where the hair came down to a point. Finally he turned the light out and he looked up at Mrs. Thibaut-Bernaise standing in her husband's arms. He saw years passing—all the years the judge and his wife had helped people, the boys who had gone wrong and whom the judge had taken into his home and showed the right way. He thought how the judge was a legend in Louisiana, standing for everything that was right and good. Besides that, he was his friend.

Dr. Peters turned his gaze on Alina Marie. She stood alone. Frederica hadn't tried to comfort her, nor Emma. She stood alone, and she was afraid.

"Twenty years ago I brought you into this world. That makes a sort of special bond between you and me, Alina Maria. It means we shouldn't ever have secrets from each other. No matter what the truth, we must never lie." He stood and took both her hands, hands so cold they might be dead. "Tell me about Charles when he died."

"I don't know." The words trembled on her lips. "I was asleep. I can't remember."

Dr. Peters sighed. "Well, it doesn't matter. Heart failure is what I shall write on the certificate." He looked down at the body. "Poor boy, he suffered so much in the war. And he loved you, Alina Marie. I think it will please him if the death certificate is written so."

And not murder. No one said it, not out loud, but it was in their eyes. It was

in the key they turned in her sitting-room door, locking her in. It was in Frederica, sitting stiff and silent in Alina Marie's room—Frederica who had been her governess since she was born but who hadn't slept in her room since she was fourteen. Until tonight. It was in the way Dr. Peters had gathered up her scissors and her nail file and the little pistol she used for snakes, and took them all away. It was in the padlock the judge fastened on the gate in the deep wall, and to which he hid the keys so she couldn't find them.

They didn't know that it didn't matter. She could have a hundred keys to unlock her room and she could find a thousand keys to open the gate. Yet she wouldn't be free.

Because she was locked behind the deep wall of fear. Not the deep wall all of New Orleans talked of around the Thibaut-Bernaise house. This wasn't a wall of brick and moss-slicked stone. It wasn't a wall of mildewed graves, dark and lonely behind their iron doors. It was a far deeper wall and a higher wall, the most impassable of any in the world—the wall of fear.

She wasn't alone behind this wall. Her mother was there, and her father. They would be locked behind that deep wall of fear for all their lives. It would slowly destroy them because they would never trust her again. But it wouldn't be too long. For she had seen her ghost twice.

That was a comfort to remember. They would only have to wait a day; no one would ever know that she had murdered. Because she must have. She and Charles had been in the garden alone, and besides, who would want to kill Charles? Unless they had gone mad. It didn't matter. He was dead and she was as good as dead. She would walk beside her ghost once more and it would be all over, no one would ever know.

The rope. Alina Marie touched her throat, high up where her heart beat in it, where the knot of a rope would press and purple it. A rope. There had been a rope about her ghost's neck.

So she was to be caught. Caught and convicted. And hanged.

THERE was the smallest of sounds from the sitting room as though Frederica, waiting in there so patiently, had thought about the rope, too, and moved back in terror. There was a sort of whispered sigh, then a click as if the door handle had been turned. Alina Maria heard all of it because the night was suddenly quiet, the frogs in the swamp still. That meant someone was coming down the road.

It was dark in her room, black as the last hour before dawn, so no one could see her as she leaned against the gallery

window and watched the lights come—two white lights and one red light. The police were here. She could hear their voices below.

"We're sorry, Judge Bernaise, we just received a call from your house. The person tried to mask her voice and wouldn't give a name, but it sounded like a woman. She said your daughter had committed a murder."

Alina Marie almost fell out the open window. She caught hold of the curtains and listened to the calm words of her father.

"My daughter? I'm sure there must be some mistake."

"The call came from here. We traced it, but of course that doesn't mean there's any truth in it. Maybe some crackpot is playing a joke on you and us. If we could just see her a moment—"

"Of course." The judge turned. Then he stopped to stare at a young man in brown among all those blue uniforms. There was a press card in one hand, a camera and flash bulb in the other.

The young man grinned. "*Times-Picayune*, Judge. There was a duplicate call to the paper. Of course, we didn't believe the murder part but it smelled like a story so I rode out with the boys."

The judge's shoulders sagged, but he managed a smile. "Someone has been playing a joke, a joke in very bad taste. My daughter is in her room. You may speak with her and then with our physician. The young man died of heart failure, not murder."

But it was murder. Murder all the horrible, hot, bloody way. And this time it wasn't a young man. It was Frederica with her grey hair dyed red where it lay in the pool of blood.

It was the blood Alina Marie noticed first, the hot, tart smell of it in the dark. She didn't know what it was except that it was strange and somehow frightening. And then she had seen her, Frederica, lying on the sitting-room floor near the door.

Frederica wasn't dead. Dead people didn't bleed. Dead people didn't move their lips. "It hurts, Alina. The knife hurts."

That was why she pulled it. Because it hurt, because Frederica's eyes had begged her to. So Alina Marie grabbed hold of the handle and pulled.

And that was the picture the *Times-Picayune* got, Alina Marie leaning over a woman with a knife in her hand. A woman who died a moment later with a word shuddering on her lips.

"Alina!"

Those who heard it would never forget. Not if they lived beyond the end of time. *"Alina!"* Sorrow was in it, and fear, and a terrible regret, as though she couldn't go, couldn't leave her with that knife in her hand.

Alina Marie dropped it on the floor. She ran out of the room, through the door her father had locked and that wasn't locked now. The hall was dark, and that was what gave her her chance. There had been only the flaring light of the flashbulb as the men crowded in the gallery windows and the police were blinded by it, and then by the dark, but mostly by what they had seen.

Alina Marie was running for her life now, down the stairs and through the lower hall into the empty library. The book was on her father's desk. The book that had once been a man and was now the names of countless tortured men.

And one woman.

There it was, right beneath the name that had been the last. In the ink that was scarcely dry were the letters, "Alina Marie Thibaut-Bernaise. Hanged by the neck until dead. In 1948." Black, glaring letters with the *T*'s crossed so savagely they were like saber cuts slashing across the rough parchment and screaming murder.

CHAPTER THREE

The Living Dead

THERE were feet on the stairs, a multitude of feet, and voices. Alina Marie gathered up the book and ran out into the night. But there was no place to go. She could hear the police screaming orders, could see the guards by the gate. The top of the deep wall was bathed in moonlight. If she tried to crawl over she would be shot. The thought came to her, that shooting would be better than hanging.

It would be quick, so quick she might never even taste the pain, nor the greater hurt of having to meet her mother's eyes. Of sitting in a cell and hearing a woman weeping because her daughter was to hang for murder. That was what a bullet could buy. It could finish everything, quickly, finally. They could say she had been ill, that she had been crazy.

All she had to do was stand in the moonlight. There must be a half-dozen guns searching through the garden. It would be so quick. There wouldn't even be time to answer the question in her heart: "Am I mad?"

The thought came to her then: "You can't be mad. You couldn't have killed Frederica; you were watching out the window, remember? There was the pin in the edge of the curtain that pricked you. This isn't like it was in the garden. You weren't asleep; this time you know! You did hold on to the curtain, and you heard the door click."

There was other things nagging at her, little things. Like a woman's voice calling the police, and the writing in *The Book of the Damned*. Ghosts didn't talk and ghosts went through doors. They didn't open them, and they didn't write. At least no Bernaise ghost had ever written before; they had only walked and showed the way to a tomb. That was where Alina Marie went now, out of the moonlight into the dark, to the one place they would never think of looking for her, that was truly her own. To that little iron door with "Alina Marie Thibaut-Bernaise" cut deep in the rust.

The hinges were oiled. They made no noise. She smelled the oil, and she moved it slowly, and it was as if she were opening the door to life. And hope. Someone had oiled the door to keep it silent, perhaps to hide there. Waiting there the night before, waiting and watching while she slept. Watching while she buried a dagger. Someone of flesh and blood walking into a crypt, and looking like a ghost that disappeared in the mists. A red-haired ghost with a noose about its neck.

And inside the crypt, where there should be nothing more than lizards and lichen, there was a yellow rope tied into a noose. And a hank of red hair, and a long, white gauze robe, stuff to make a ghost. Alina Marie cried into it. She sat on the cold brick and let the tears bring her relief and peace. And then, in time, she could think and ask more questions—questions that somewhere had answers. Because these questions weren't based on madness and fear; they were based on a wig and a rope.

Who had worn them? Who hated her so much? Who would gain by her death?

They all would. Try hard as she could to set one of them free, every person in the house would gain by her death. Her mother and father would inherit half of the two-hundred-thousand-dollar legacy left by her grandmother to Alina Marie. Dr. Peters would get the other hundred thousand. Her cousin Roice would be the only Bernaise left after her father and mother, and he would receive everything.

Even William Springer had gained by this night. She touched the book in the dark and wondered what fabulous price her father had paid for it. She tried to remember what the antique dealer had sounded like when he left. Had he been

glad? Had there been the sound of money in his voice? She tried so hard to remember. And all she heard was the croaking of frogs.

Not really. There wasn't a frog croaking in the swamp now. But there had been after William Springer closed the iron gate.

Alina Marie began to shiver. The crying bell . . . the huge pockets that looked as if they bulged with a thousand secrets . . . the writing in the book . . . her name with the *T's* like saber slashes, in the same handwriting as all those other names back to the first that had been written so: "Guillaume Printemps. Hanged by the neck until dead for having butchered his sweetheart. 1927."

Guillaume Printemps.

Alina Marie crawled out of the deep wall—the one that was covered with moss and fern—and she took one step over that other deep wall, the one that was built of fear.

She ran through the black garden. By now, the police had gone. In her father's library the light still burned, and on his shelves were the bound books of his career, all the clippings of the trials he had heard. In the year 1927 there were pages and pages devoted to Guillaume Printemps.

TWENTY-TWO he had been, handsome, with great, dark eyes and yellow hair and pouting lips. They were proud, spoiled lips, and he was spoiled, rotten all the way through, for when his sweetheart broke her engagement to him because she could no longer stand his tempers, he killed her. He cut her up in little pieces and threw her in the river. He confessed. He had even boasted of it, said he would do it again. No girl could fool around with *him* and get away with it.

All the world had hated him. The jury hadn't even left the box. It was Judge Thibaut-Bernaise who condemned him to hang. On the last page there was a small item—a picture captioned: "On the eve of execution Butcher Boy's father calls on Judge Thibaut-Bernaise." It showed him ringing the bell. And even after all these years Alina Marie could see he was crying.

Under the picture there were words: "Guillaume Printemps Sr. offers his fortune or his life in exchange for his son, but Judge Thibaut-Bernaise does nothing. 'The law is the law. Your son has been proven to have murdered willfully and brutally. He cannot escape punishment.' "

Guillaume Printemps.

Guillaume—the French for William. Printemps—the word for spring. William Spring, or perhaps William Springer.

A man who seemed like two men, one broken, and one wholly savage. A man with so seamed a face you could not tell what he might have looked like when he was younger. A man with pockets that could have bulged with a wig and a gown and a rope. A man with a thin voice that over the phone might sound like a woman. A man who, when he had closed the iron door and was supposed to be walking away from the house, had stayed. The frogs had told her that. The frogs croaking in the swamp. If she had only had the wits to think she would have known he hadn't gone, because whenever anyone was on the road the frogs stopped to listen. William Springer, a man who could hate her father so much he would want to see the daughter hanged for murder. An eye for an eye. A shame for a shame. And a child for a child.

He hadn't told her this. And it wasn't really her heart that told her, a woman's heart understanding so much and not knowing how. It was the bell that told her. It had sounded like someone crying from far away. From more than twenty years away. Someone trying to buy his son from the hangman.

Looking at this picture she could understand.

Revenge had reached out and caught Charles. And Frederica. And was trying to catch her.

The shadow of a gun fell across the page. Alina Marie looked up; the room was filling with silent, tiptoeing men—policemen and her father and Dr. Peters.

She was calm. It was strange how very clearly she could think. "Why are you here? What do you want?"

No one answered. Not for a minute and she didn't wait, there was so little time.

"You want to hang me, don't you?" That set them back; it was like a slap in the face. "You took a picture of me with Frederica's blood all over my hands, and I'll never be free, will I?" She looked at Dr. Peters. "You won't be able to get me off, will you?" She looked at her father. "And you can't help. The law is the law. For twenty years you've said that."

She looked at the police stenographer talking all this down in his little book. "And what you're writing there doesn't matter, not anything I say, because I've already been tried and convicted. The picture did that. Those extras that are probably already flooding Canal Street. All that is left is to hang me."

She smiled bleakly. She stooped to the floor and picked up the yellow coil and threw it on the desk. "I can even furnish you the rope!"

That was another picture the *Times-Picayune* man took. Alina Marie turned to him.

"Take all you want. Pictures last so long and tell so much. Here is one from the *Times-Picayune* twenty years ago. Look at it and listen."

They did.

But they didn't believe.

"You've fixed a clever story, but that's all it is. A story. We saw the knife in your hand. We heard the woman scream your name as she died."

There it was—they had heard Frederica. Staring into their eyes, these cold, unpitying, unmoving, condemning eyes, once again she felt the deep wall of fear closing in on her.

"No! You're wrong! Go out and look through the tombs, look everywhere and you will find William Springer."

THEY DIDN'T find him though they looked. They were essentially honest men; they wanted to be thorough. "He isn't here and he couldn't have gotten away. We were at the gate when the governess was stabbed. The doctor's testimony proved that she couldn't have lived more than two or three minutes with that knife in her. The road has been guarded ever since."

"He could have gone over the wall."

"Into the swamp—the mud and the moccasin snakes and the bottomless pits? He would be mad."

"He would be fighting for his life." Alina Marie watched the newspaper photographer. He was right beside her and she couldn't help but think how much he looked like the butcher boy of so long ago. Dark eyes and a great shock of butter-yellow hair.

It was absurd how easily she did it, fooling all those watching men. But then, of course, they had thought she was helpless and trapped. They didn't know that ever since she was a little girl when Dr. Peters had anything to hide he hid it under the huge blotter on her father's desk, and tonight he had taken away her scissors and her nail file and her little dueling pistol. She could see the corner of the blotter bulged up, and it was lightning the way she snatched the gun out and held it against the newspaper photographer's neck.

"I'll kill him, you know. If any of you try to hurt me, I'll kill him first."

That was how she got away, walking safely behind her hostage. And she made him carry things, the book and the rope and his camera.

Going down the gallery stairs, he spoke just once. "I don't get it, sister. You're either crazy as a bedbug, or you've got something to show me."

"I have. A wall of fear. I'm going to help a man build a wall of fear about himself. Only I don't think he will have the strength to tear it down. And only he can do it." She was talking to herself, like whispered promises. "I know that. Only *you* can build the deep wall of fear around yourself. And only *you* can tear it down, brick by falling brick."

Outside the iron gate, low and dark and almost hidden in the drainage ditch that cut across the swamp like a sword, was a log bateau—a small, flat-bottomed boat. She made the young man get in it and take the paddle, and together they slipped into the morning mists.

It was the grey time, with fog like a thousand ghosts dancing over the hummocks and through the cypress and the water oaks. And there were signs pointing the way the boat should go. Green slime parted in a path, moss broken off a bank leaving the mud like a black scar beneath, water hyacinths bobbing where there was no wind. Going through the stillness they finally saw him, leaping from hummock to hummock, falling on a log here, splashing in a fern-frosted pool there, knocking against trees, looking back over his shoulders, always back. As he had looked for twenty years.

The boat didn't close down on him. For a long time it kept even, just out of reach. A boat with a red-haired girl in it and a rope around her neck. And a yellow-haired boy with a rope around his neck, too. A boat building a wall of fear.

Springer couldn't stop to rest, to breathe. He couldn't even watch where he was going for fear the boat would slip up on him, the boat and its dead. Because they were dead—that was what she said.

"Don't you recognize him? Don't you recognize your son?" The words were lost in the stillness, in the vastness of the swamp. "I have brought Guillaume back from the grave to welcome his father. You are both murderers now."

"No! It isn't so! It's a trick! You're Alina Marie and you're going to hang. I've waited twenty years to shame Judge Bernaise, to let him know disgrace. To let him know fear. To let his heart beat on within him, and yet be dead. That is the sorrow of losing your only child to the gallows.

"I have waited so long to take from him what he took from me. My son." He wasn't running now. He was crouched and trembling like a man meeting hell. "I have waited too long. I'll have to hang you myself."

William Springer leaped then, straight out for the boat. He didn't see the mass of twisted vines hanging down from the cypress beside him. He didn't know the mud earth would break just as he sprang and throw him to the side into those creepers that were strong as the hands of God.

Alina Marie Thibaut-Bernaise looked away and started writing in the book. She wrote with her finger and swamp water. It was pale green, almost like ghost writing.

> William Springer, once Guillaume Printemps Sr. For having killed Charles. And Frederica. Hanged by the hand of God from the deep wall of fear. 1947.

She looked up. That was what it was. The vines, living hands of God. And William Springer had been blind to his fate because he had been locked behind the deep wall of fear.

THE END

"Why should I fear death, Nathan? All this happened *before* Della died. . . ."

A VISITOR FOR THE DEAD

"Come into the mausoleum, Nathan . . . Della is there . . . I hope she's dead. . . ."

By
BRUCE CASSIDAY

I'D CLOSE the dining room door, Nathan, but I like to hear the wind outside. Does that seem so strange? You really don't have to look at me like that. Why should I lie to my own brother about why I keep a door open?

The wind doesn't bother you, does it? It shouldn't. It used to groan in the oaks just like that long ago when we were children. Or don't you want to think back?

Pour yourself another brandy. Brandy

will smooth out the kinks in your memory. Relax you. There's no sense in us brooding across the table from each other, Nathan. Tonight is a good night for us. Reunion night. I'm glad you could come back after all these years to see your own brother. . . .

That's better. Yes, the brandy is good. Tell me, is it the way the candle-light flickers on your face, or are you watching me, Nathan? My God! What could there be between us after all these years that would require such study?

But, then, I keep forgetting that you're a doctor. I keep forgetting that you're paid to search, to question, to probe. Anyway, maybe I'm only imagining your interest. It's been so lonely since Aunt Della's death. I'm not used to having anyone look at me. It's been gloomy as death ever since she was carried out into the tomb back of the old oak trees.

You remember the tomb—where all the caskets are neatly piled in dreary caches lining the four walls of the sealed crypt? That's where Della is now.

Poor Della! All that money, and no chance to enjoy it. A pity she never married. A pity she left no heirs. Only us. Only us and this huge fortune to divide between us. A pity, Nathan. A great pity.

Don't misunderstand me, Nathan. I meant it was a pity she died, not that we must divide the money. . . .

She grew moody. Introverted. Della never went out with the men around the neighborhood. She'd plead excuses when they'd drive by in their automobiles to see her. Their visits stopped after several years. Della told them—what a laugh—that she couldn't go with them because she had to take care of me!

She said she stayed here and never married on account of me—but that was a lie! She was afraid—deathly afraid—of men. All men but me. She said she couldn't be afraid of me. She said she liked me—as much as anyone could. I laughed at that. That was a drollery, Nathan. She used to laugh with me. Lots. We had great times together, Della and I. We shared almost everything.

The only thing we couldn't share was the trouble with the walls, Nathan. The trouble with the closing-in walls and the self-locking doors.

THERE'S no use trying to explain about the doors. It all began five years ago, Nathan, when I was sitting in my room one winter day. Just sitting. I had nothing to do. Della was cooking, and she didn't want me in the kitchen. I was sitting in my room, Nathan, with the door open an inch. I remember that distinctly—one inch.

I was watching the wall, the north wall. Just staring at it. You know the wall, Nathan. Plain white, with a landscape in the center. As I sat there, staring at the wall, it moved. The wall moved.

It moved toward me. Not to the side, or up and down, but toward me, swinging down as if it were hinged at the floor, and pushed from the top. Like the lid of a coffin. It moved toward me, slowly, but it never stopped. If I'd stayed in the chair, I'd have been crushed. I ran to the door to get out of the room and—

The door was an inch open. In my haste I pushed it closed. I was so anxious to get out, I couldn't move my fingers. I turned around but it was like being buried alive, Nathan. In a cold, stone tomb.

Della was shaking me when I came to. I must have screamed when I passed out. She told me everything would be all right. She was wrong.

It got steadily worse. The moment a latch would click anywhere, I'd see the walls turning into stone slabs, see them toppling clumsily over onto me, feel the air growing stifling, smell the rank, brassy smell of the tomb enveloping me. . . .

You smile, Nathan—the secret, tolerant,

indulgent smile of the physician who knows the trouble and is amused at his patient's terror. I'd be interested to hear your diagnosis, Nathan. Go ahead . . . .

So. You think it's fear of death. Hallucinations. Claustrophobia. I know your doctor's degree allows you to make many learned pronouncements, but don't you think *that* diagnosis is a bit far-fetched?

Why should I fear death? This happened *before* Della died. . . .

All right, Nathan. Stop grinning like a little bronze Buddha. Maybe you can cure me. That's why I was glad to see you when you came. We do have to settle the division of the estate, true, but the real reason I was glad to see you was because I thought you could help me free myself from this hideous obsession. Or whatever it is. This disease in my mind. . . .

Afraid? Of course I'm not afraid of the old tomb. Why should I be? Because it's a symbol of death? I know what's inside. I know it's lined with dead people. I know it's only stone and metal and . . . ashes. . . .

You want me to go inside it and . . . remain alone there for a minute in the dark? To prove to myself I'm not afraid of death, of being in a tomb? Come on, Nathan. That's the easiest assignment I've ever heard. You aren't being comical, are you. . . ?

Blow out the candles, Nathan. I've got the flashlight right over here. Put on your coat. It's going to be cold outside. And your gloves. Don't forget your gloves. They're right here. . . .

The keys? I have the keys to the tomb in my pocket. Let's go. I'll close the door to the house. . . .

No, the estate hasn't changed a bit. As lonely as ever. Ten miles to the Miller house. That's the nearest one. Della never sold the land between. That's for us to share, Nathan. You and I. All for us. And on the other side—nothing until the Jacoby place. No one for miles around. A fabulous estate. . . .

Yes, it is bitter out. That desolate northwest wind! Look out for the swamp grass over there. You'll sink to your ankles if you don't watch it. . . .

THE TOMB does look bleak, doesn't it, Nathan? I thought the same thing when Della came here. Wait a minute, I'll insert the key and open the lock.

Damn! The flashlight. It's down here somewhere. Must have broken the light when I dropped it. Stupid of me. I can't see a thing. Got a match? I'll unlock the door.

Wait a minute! Nathan! Nathan, do you hear that? A . . . noise! *Inside* the tomb! Come here and listen.

You don't hear it? Don't be a fool, Nathan. Your ears are as good as mine. You must be able to. Don't look at me like that. Is—is it something else wrong with my head? Nathan, is it all part of these hideous halluncinations? Am I *dreaming* it?

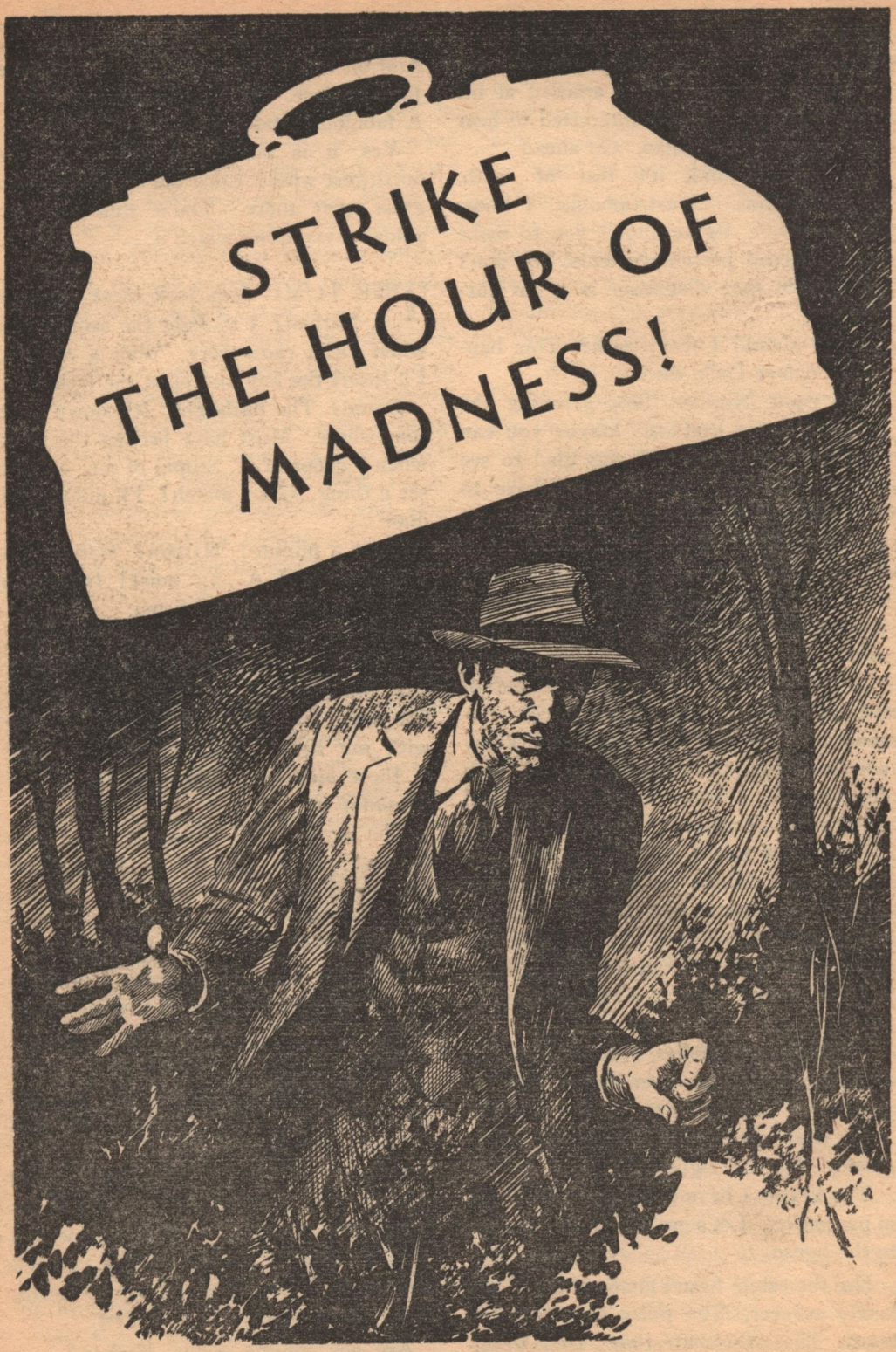
The key . . . it's stuck. It won't turn the lock. Here, you try it. I don't feel like meddling around with it any more. Those voices. Nathan, come over here and take this key.

Thanks. My God, Nathan, I must be insane. I distinctly heard a voice inside that tomb. . . .Oh. You have it open. I —Nathan, I can't do it. I can't go inside. You were right. It's useless for me to try. Give me that key. I'll lock the door and—

Nathan. Stop! That noise again! Nathan, *you* go in and look. The flashlight? No, it's gone. You go inside and be sure. Then I'll come. After you tell me it's all right. I'm scared to death, Nathan. All right, I'll go in first.

Are you coming inside, Nathan? . . . Are you in? I can't see anything in here.

(Continued on page 97)


STRIKE
THE HOUR OF
MADNESS!

Terror-Packed Murder Novelette

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Behind her, she heard his heavy, pounding steps, his panting breath. "Run, Annie," she told herself. "For God's sake, *run!*"

Behind him lay the living-death world of the insane asylum. . . . But for tonight he would forget the padded walls, the shock treatments and the screaming sirens. . . . Tonight, he would think only of Anne. . . . "Eat, drink and be merry," as she put it, laughing. . . . And his mind filled in the rest: For tomorrow . . . or tonight . . . with his hands on her throat—she would die. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

The Lodger

THE NARROWNESS of the street appealed to him—that and the way the old buildings were crowded together and the inner hush that comes to forgotten thoroughfares walled in by

the clamoring growth of a city. Mrs. Finch's place, where he had found a room, squatted halfway along the block between a tenement that had been gutted by fire and a red-brick warehouse. It remained determinedly white among its sooty neighbors, a story-and-half bungalow with scalloped cornices, the turned porch pillars set in pairs and corner-braced to the roof by quartered Catherine wheels. Beyond the door, behind its beveled glass and the chubby angels that floundered in the ecru net curtain, there was a sort of time-capsule staleness about the atmosphere. But you expected that in any sanctuary.

His own room, up under the roof, was small and snug, but there were times when fear crept stealthily from some shadowed corner to start the apprehensive chills along his spine. Then he would move to the single window, raise the opaque green shade suddenly to surprise . . . the blank brick wall of the warehouse a scant two feet away, offering neither toe-hold nor chink from prying eyes. Or he would stand motionless for minutes, listening, placing each sound where it belonged. The creak of Mrs. Finch's rocker in the parlor. Dishes clattering in the kitchen. The muffled but incessant voice of a radio that was owned by one of the women roomers on the first floor. But upstairs . . . nothing. No sound from Mr. Wadell's room across the hall.

The trail was broken. He was still alone. Finally, triumphantly alone.

HE SANK into the chair. *His* room, he thought dazedly as of a dream that had at last been realized. His dark and listless eyes took inventory. One bureau, walnut finished, minute nail scratches around the brass drawer pulls, its scarred top covered by an embroidered linen scarf. One Jenny Lind bed, reproduced in some cheap wood and spread with a quilt of faded scraps. One grey, threadbare rug exactly framed by the varnished pine floor. And then the chair in which he sat—mission oak with cracked brown leatherette cushions.

He had brought with him only the black satchel that rested on the floor beside the closet door, and though this was his third evening with Mrs. Finch the room was curiously empty of his personality.

He stared at the end of the satchel. Worn leather had settled into tired lines like the face of a drowsing old man, fat, with heavy chops, familiar yet enigmatic.

He had to get out a clean shirt, he thought. It was a very commonplace thought, but he savored it. In the hospital they always told you what to do and when to do it—when to wash, when to put on clean clothes—but now he was alone, and he meant to enjoy the luxury of making his own decisions. With a pleasant, anticipatory quickening of his pulse, he got up from the chair, moved over to the bag and stared down at it, eyes squinted because he'd lost his glasses somewhere. Red paint neatly lettered the name Max Kreutzer across the side of the bag and somewhat above center. There were flecks of red beneath the name as though once there had been an address that had worn away.

His mind was proudly capable of supplying an address: c/o Mrs. Finch, 346 Burr Oak Street. He had to remember that. They were always asking him if he remembered where he lived. If he had some red paint he could print the street and number beneath his name, so he'd always know. But that was rotten taste—having your name and address in red paint on your satchel.

He got down onto his knees, touched the oval brass release button of the lock on the bag with his thumb. You pressed here, and the lock would yield with a snap, the bag would yawn open a few inches with a sticky crackling sound. But sometimes it jammed.

It was jammed now. The pressure of his thumb, at first explorative, became a concentration of all his strength. Still the button didn't yield.

Locked, he decided, and the thought momentarily dammed the cold flood of disappointment that was rushing over him. He stood up. His hands moved deliberately in a methodical search of one pocket at a time. A very small brass key, easily lost in a pocket, and as he searched for it that inner mocking voice he sometimes heard whispered to him.

"You know, don't you, that you've done all this before? You've tried to open the bag, and it was locked. You've searched for the key, but you've never found it."

Not necessarily, he argued, his mental calm incongruent with the trembling of his fingers as they searched a barren pocket. There's a thing called memory of the future that would account for the notion that he'd done this before. He once overheard two doctors talk about it in the hospital. It's like coming to a place that seems familiar when you know damned well you couldn't possibly have been there. It's a queer sensation. . . .

There was nothing in any of his pockets except the money—that thick, tight roll of fives and tens and twenties. No keys. He'd lost them somewhere along with his glasses. Where had he had them last? When? Last night? The night before?

It was on the night before last he had come to Mrs. Finch's. He'd stumbled out of the dark into the yellow rays her porch lamp pushed into the dingy narrow street, a man pursued, fear-ridden, on the shaky edge of exhaustion. Behind him—far behind, he hoped—was the faceless crowd in which he had glimpsed and recognized his hunter. Standing in warm gentle rain he looked in at the lighted porch. There was a sign in Mrs. Finch's front-room window, pinned to the curtain. Without his glasses he didn't know but what it ordered bread or ice, but then he squinted and the blurred letters sharpened against a dark blue ground.

Room For Rent. Sanctuary. An end to space and restless motion. A door that he could bar. He'd clutched the heavy satchel, put one foot before the other until his steps had dragged him onto the narrow porch. He'd knocked and listened. Voices, footsteps, and somewhere within the house a radio was playing.

THE DOOR was opened by a girl of about twenty, small, slim, with a soft prettiness about her face, light brown hair, a gentle mouth. Anne Dunfrey . . . Mrs. Finch had introduced them, one flabby arm about the girl's slight shoulders . . . "Mr. Kreutzer, this is Miss Dunfrey, my youngest roomer. My baby, I call her—don't I, Anne?—she's such a little tike." And Anne Dunfrey had endured Mrs. Finch's mothering hug, had laughed away embarrassment. . . .

But that was later.

He'd asked the girl about the room, and she'd told him to step in while she called Mrs. Finch. He stood dripping in the tiny hall while the girl went through a door on his left and disappeared. Her blossom-fresh scent lingered for a moment and then was overpowered by the smell of stale air and disturbed dust.

Voices, the radio, footsteps. . . .

He'd looked through the partly open door of the parlor. There was a phonograph—the old style, spindle-shanked, hobble-skirted, swelling to a thick shapeless bosom in red mahogany—and above that hung an incredible moonlit scene in brightly luminous oils against black velvet.

Voices dwindling, footsteps drawing closer, and Mrs. Finch had sidled through the parlor door. She was like the phonograph, as dumpy, as thickly shapeless. She was like the picture in her tawdry elegance—black dress splashed with multi-colored beads, a large moonlike cameo brooch. Yellowed grey hair piled loftily above an

old face pale with powder, its flabbiness suspended from hard, strained lines about the faded mouth. Her eyelids were thin and crinkled.

Presently she was saying in her dry voice, "I didn't catch the name."

The name? He'd coughed. "Max—Max Kreutzer."

"Hmm," she'd said thoughtfully. She'd drawn a breath against creaking stays, and her eyes had dropped to the bag he carried in his hand. "Where're you employed, Mr. Kreutzer?"

He'd licked his lips; they were wet with rain. "I'm not—" Instantly, he was aware of her widow's caution—the thinning lips, the hard bright glint in her eyes. "That is," he'd gone on desperately, "I've been sick. Very sick. . . ."

"You don't look it."

". . . but I'm better now. I'm only tired." Don't tell her you've been running. Don't tell her there's a man who's following you, bent on your destruction.

Mrs. Finch perked her head. "Don't tell me. I know. I've heard it many a time. You've been tramping the streets all day, looking for a room. But I'm not just sure I'm going to rent this room, Mr. Kreutzer. It's pretty small. . . ."

"Really, I don't mind." Any room is larger than a coffin.

". . . nice for storage, though. That's what I used it for until yesterday one of the lady roomers asked why I didn't rent the store-room out. It should bring—" her plump hands sifted beads calculatingly —"oh, eight-fifty a week."

He realized the price was high, that she was trying to scare him off because he wasn't employed.

"I have money," he said. He showed her the money. He had trouble getting the thick bankroll out of his pocket once his fist had closed around it. Possibly that was when he'd dropped the satchel key. Mrs. Finch had blinked her lizard eyes, impressed by the roll of money. She'd grasped her gaudy beads. She'd made a sound like laughter.

"Well, if you want to see it . . . I don't know if it's just what you want. Nice, though. It's a mighty convenient location, this here." Panting, she climbed the stairs. "This here's the *old* bathroom—" she waved a hand—"and you and Mr. Wadell would have it to yourselves. Plenty of hot water—I keep the gas on all the time. Mr. Wadell is out of town right now—death in the family—but you'll like him. Here's his room, right there, and it's real nice."

WADELL. The name was strange, scarcely real. Perhaps, he'd thought, it wasn't real. . . .

"Wadell," he murmured.

"That's right. You've got to be careful you don't call him *waddle*." Mrs. Finch flung out an arm, pushed a door open. "And here's yours, right across the hall." A gasping laugh. "Mercy, I do run on, and you haven't even seen it yet!" She flipped a switch. "You look it over real good. Take your time. You'll find it clean. This here chest-o'-drawers I always liked, it holds so much. Here, try the bed." Her splayed fingers pounced upon the bed, demonstrating its comfort. "New mattress, practically. Try it. I always say you get a good night's rest and it's worth lots. Never skimp when you buy a mattress." She turned, top-heavily.

"Here, you get your air through here, you leave your door open and Mr. Wadell leaves *his* open, and you get a nice draft—what they call cross ventilation." She jerked at the green blind, and it slipped from her fingers to roll up with a crack like a pistol shot. "Mercy!"

He recoiled from their translucent ghost reflected darkly in the windowpane.

"Startle you, Mr. Kreutzer?" Mrs. Finch laughed. "It always does me."

Yes, it had startled him. He'd thought for a moment—but then that was absurd.

"And here—" Mrs. Finch brushed past him, her scent combining violets and something like varnish, each so pronounced it was difficult to tell which was intended to mask the other—"here's a nice, roomy closet." She'd opened a door to reveal a narrow empty space . . . .

The closet was still empty. The drawers of the bureau were empty. Everything he owned—his shirts, his socks, underwear, toilet articles—must be in the bag, and now he couldn't find the key.

Irritably he kicked the satchel. There was a dull metallic clank and a thinner, lighter sound, a tinkle as though from a ring of keys. . . .Keys?

His short laugh fell harshly into the lonely quiet of his room. He must have locked his keys up in the bag. He'd heard of people doing cr—well, odd, absent-minded things like that.

He turned his back on the satchel, went to the chair and dropped heavily into it. That was what he'd done. He'd locked his keys up inside the bag somehow, and there wasn't anything he could do about it except take the bag to a locksmith. . . .

From there his mind spun thin, frail thread that sank like a fisherman's weighted line toward unfathomable depths of still, dark water. There it snagged. On something formless and terrible, it snagged. He couldn't drag it to the surface—the thread would break, as it had always broken—and to follow where it led was death.

He shivered. He stared down at his hands where they lay on the broad arms of the chair. Large, powerful hands that were trembling. A jagged thumbnail found an opening in the grain of the oak and dug into it. . . .Stop. Stop that! he told himself. Do you want to go back to the hospital? Back to the shock treatments? Back to the tasteless, chopped-up food? And when you said you couldn't eat they made a pulp of the food and forced it into you through a tube shoved in your nose. That was worse than anything. Do you want to go back to that? Listen: Your name is Max Kreutzer and you have money. This is your room. No one followed you here. No one could have followed you. There's nothing to fear. *Nothing.*

The hands steadied. They locked on the chair arms, and he yanked himself to his feet, stood for a moment, swaying. He put a hand up to his face, rubbed his jaw reflectively.

"You need a shave," he said aloud. And his razor, of course, would be in that damned locked satchel. But wasn't there a razor in the bathroom—an old one that one of Mrs. Finch's roomers must have forgot?

He took purposeful steps to the door, opened it, went out into the hall and closed the door behind him. He looked up and across the hall and then stopped breathing.

The opposite door was open. Feverish yellow light illuminated Mr. Wadell's room and the figure of a tall man with broad, square shoulders. The face was a blur, yet he knew it, feature by feature and line by line. It had turned up unexpectedly in the hospital, in crowds, dogging him with its deep-set, dark, and secret eyes. A face that was square and big-boned, a short, thick-bridged nose, thin lips, and coarse black straight hair above a wide brow.

Straight hair. The thought moved elusively through his mind, and he sensed in it a wrongness, as though once it had been curly. He pictured it curly—soft black ringlets that straightened behind the swift strokes of a brush then coiled again like springs of fine steel wire. Plump white hands held the brush. Plump white hands touched the curls with motherly tenderness. . . . *Then I brought home scarlet fever from school—the only thing I ever enjoyed sharing with you—and she cried when your hair began to fall out. "Buddy, Buddy, your lovely, curly*

hair. . . . It's all fallen out. . . .

The brush was gone. The hands slimmed to girlish slenderness, one finger weighted by the heavy gold of a highschool class ring, the glint of it playing hide-and-seek among the dark curls.

His eyes dropped. For a moment he stared bewilderedly at his own big, naked hands where they trembled against the dark green cloth of his suit. He looked up and deep into the opposite room where the other stood motionless, watching. . . .

He thought, when Mrs. Finch first mentioned Mr. Wadell, I was afraid it might be you. I had a hunch. Well, what are you going to do—no, I *know* that. But *how* are you going to do it?

Someone in Mr. Wadell's room was humming, a girl's thin, sweet voice, following the tune that came from the distant radio. Anne Dunfrey, he decided as he turned in the hall and stumbled blindly toward the bathroom.

He felt sick. Sick with fear.

CHAPTER TWO

The Darkness of Death

ANNE DUNFREY came out of Mr. Wadell's room. As she closed the door, a pair of bright-bladed shears that were too long for the tiny pocket of her postage-stamp apron clattered to the floor. She said, "Darn!" only it came out "arn" because she had half a dozen pins between her compressed lips. She transferred the gay plaid dress she was making to her right arm, being careful not to strain the basted seams, stooped to pick up the shears with her left hand. She straightened. Too bad, she thought as she started down the hall, that the slim black skirt she was wearing hadn't a deeper hem that she could let out. It was still good, but like practically everything in her closet, it was too short. Her brown suit, though, she could let down. Then if she bought that basic black in Polson's window . . .

"Why—" the pins sprinkled from her lips and onto the plaid fabric—"why, Mr. Kreutzer!"

He'd startled her, slouched there against the banister at the top of the stairs, motionless, his shoulders hunched. He lifted his head. Dark, haggard eyes peered into her face and then reached back along the hall.

She came a step nearer. "Is there anything— You're ill, aren't you, Mr. Kreutzer?" She'd always been completely helpless in an emergency. Annie, the hand-wringing type, she thought reproachfully of herself.

His legs stiffened, and he stood tall and swaying above her, one huge hand clasped on the rail. "I—I'm all right, Miss Dunfrey. I just—" his smile struggled—"slipped."

"Oh." She was relieved. "You have to watch this floor." She moved to the top of the steps.

"Maybe I felt a little faint," he said hurriedly as though trying to detain her. "I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast."

"Not really!" But then she knew how it was when you lived alone. Nothing dulled the appetite like the prospect of the blue-plate special at a table for one in the corner greasy spoon. She looked over her shoulder at him, found him rubbing dark beard stubble.

"I'm going to shave. . . ."

Yes, she thought, that *would* help.

". . . and then I was wondering if you would, if we might—that is, if you haven't had dinner—" He broke off helplessly.

Of all the poor awkward things she'd ever stumbled across, this Max Kreutzer took the prize. "No, I haven't eaten—" She took a quick breath. Soft-hearted Annie, they call you, she thought, with a head to match. You don't know a thing about this Kreutzer person except that he

isn't bad looking and that Mrs. Finch says he has money—"a roll big enough to choke a horse." And, she thought, looking at him, he's pitiful. Sort of aimless and knocked-about looking.

He was saying, "Could we go somewhere and have a steak, do you suppose?"

"Thanks, Mr. Kreutzer—" Her smile was intended to soften a refusal, but she thought, Why not? She hadn't gone anywhere for three weekends now, not since she and Dan had decided it wasn't love. She'd kept to her room, had busied herself, trying not to stir dead ashes that somehow always managed to get stirred anyway.

"Well?" he prompted gently.

"Could you give me thirty minutes? I'll have to change."

He nodded. "Sure. Whatever you say."

"Thirty minutes is all. And on the nose. You'll see." And then, laughing, she ran on down the stairs.

CLEO BUDGE who had the back room —was exactly where Anne had left her, on the edge of Anne's bed, sampling Anne's lacquer on the nails of her own plump fingers. Cleo was blonde and round and rather pretty, though she insisted that she saw in Mrs. Finch her own inevitable and dismal future.

"It fits, thank heavens," Anne said happily and placed the unfinished dress down carefully on the end of the bed.

Cleo said, "I think you're terribly clever, Annie, to be able to make some of your own things. Wish I could wear plaids." She stretched out an arm and examined the nail lacquer critically. "Have you got a lipstick to match this, honey?"

"Uh-huh." Anne had gone to the closet. She took her brown suit from the hanger and carried it to the bed, laughing as she noticed Cleo's curious frown.

"Where are you going?"

Anne started to unbutton her blouse. "I have a dinnah engagement, pet," she said loftily.

"Yeah?" Cleo put the top back on the bottle of nail lacquer. "Since when? I didn't hear the phone ring."

"It didn't." She took off the blouse. "He is what is known as the dark, silent type. He uses smoke signals." She rolled up pansy-brown eyes to indicate the floor above. "Very dark. Very silent."

Cleo's round face fell open. "No!" she gasped. "Not him! Kreutzer?"

"Uh-huh." Anne stepped out of the black skirt and turned to the closet for a hanger. Cleo's "But Annie—" drew an over-the-shoulder glance. "Why? What's wrong with going out with Mr. Kreutzer for a steak?" She was actually wondering. There *was* a certain will-o'-the whisp wrongness about it.

Cleo stood up. She shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. I just like to know a little more about a fellah before I go out with him, that's all."

Anne's laugh was traced with scorn. "Yes, like you knew that Peter What's-his-name, that boy who worked in the same office with you for years and came from one of the best families!"

Cleo's pink cheeks reddened. "Don't we all make mistakes? I just hope you're not making one, that's all."

Anne said, "That's exactly what you said the night Mr. Wadell asked me to help him with his act, and he's absolutely the most harmless person I've ever met."

Cleo went to the door. "Your business, Annie, dear. I merely want to point out that there are *some* mistakes we can only make once."

Anne flung a robe about her shoulders. "Pooh!" she scoffed. "Anyone using the *new* bathroom?"

Twenty minutes later she was ready, hat on, seams straight, she hoped—she simply couldn't run upstairs again to make sure. She stepped to the little mirror on the skirted dressing table for a final okay.

Too much war paint, she decided and snatched up a cleansing tissue to kiss off some of her lip rouge.

His knock came timidly. She picked up gloves and a matching purse, went to the door.

"What did I tell you?" she crowed. "Thirty minutes on the nose." Then she saw him standing there, hands stuffed in the pockets of exactly the same dark green suit he always wore with no fewer than the same number of wrinkles it always had. His shirt, she suspected, was not quite clean. His ties was practically the same cheerful number her grandfather had always worn at funerals. . . . And the promised steak, she decided, would undoubtedly be ground!

Was it definitely too late to develop a headache? It was. Girls with headaches didn't romp to the door to welcome the ardent swain the way she had just now.

"You look nice," he said shyly, "Anne."

"Thank you, sir." But cool. She stepped from the room, looked up into the big somber face with its hurt-looking eyes. Poor, big, dumb ox, she thought. After tonight she'd be able to say she'd done everything. When Mr. Wadell had asked her to help him with his act and she'd had to put on the briefest possible costume and jump through the roof of a dollhouse, she'd thought that was everything. But this really was. Here she was all prettied up to paint the town red with a king-size scarecrow for company. . . . Annie, you want to bet we panhandle a cuppa coffee before this gay soiree is over?

They were out on the sidewalk now, going south. His big hand cupped her elbow as though it were the handle on a vacuum sweeper. She transferred her purse to her left hand, dropped her right arm, and that put an end to the elbow pushing.

"Where'll we go?" he wondered.

"Andrew's is always nice," she said. "A block over on Sutherland and three blocks north across the river." Because, she vowed, you're going to pay for this, *Mister* Kreutzer. Through the bankroll, and yes, I'll have a cocktail. Also the Porterhouse, thank you.

Crossing against traffic at the intersection, his big fingers fumbled her arm and finally dropped to her wrist where they clutched. As though she were a little girl, she thought . . .or he's a little boy. That's more like it. Annie, your mother instincts got the better of your judgment tonight, and that's for sure.

SHE TRIED to talk to him. Lovely evening, wasn't it. And his agreement was complete though unqualified, as though he wasn't aware of tender new green leaves on the maples and the soft sweetness of the air. As though he wasn't aware, period. A strange, dark man, she thought, locked out of himself.

"Anne—"

"Yes?" In the dim night glow she found him looking at her, his eyes worried.

"I want you to have a wonderful dinner. Anything and everything you want."

And just what kind of a response did that call for, she wondered, and decided on something banal. "Eat, drink, and be merry. Is that it?"

"Yes. That's it."

Was his quiet, gentle laugh tacked on, an after-thought to rob his reply of seriousness? . . . Annie, Annie, what a perfectly fantastic idea. You've a marvelous imagination. He's simply trying to be nice to you, and he doesn't quite know how. He means only the best is good enough for you. You ought to feel flattered. Look, Annie, people and street cars, and automobiles. Lights and noise and radio music. A very real world about you. This is a sort of blind date. You're disappointed in what you drew, but he isn't. He likes you, and you've got to be decent to him.

They came to Andrew's glass front, and

before he opened the door he looked both ways along the street. They went in. There were soft lights and a piano playing behind a white trellis where ivy climbed. They were given a corner table. Before the waiter came she said she loved Cole Porter's music. He had no comment. His eyes stared vacantly into the crowd. She thought she'd try prodding him out of his silence with a direct question.

"Max, what do you do?"

"Do?" He seemed struggling with the idea. "What do you do?"

"I'm a file clerk in a casualty insurance company."

"That—that's nice," he said.

Oh, it is, is it? "Max—" she would try another approach, "you know I saw that name Kreutzer recently in the papers. Just yesterday, wasn't it?"

His eyes sharpened on her face. "Yes?" It was only slightly challenging.

"Oh, it wasn't you." She inserted a little laugh. "Of course not. But it was someone by that name who was—was killed." Murdered was the word, but oddly she could not bring herself to use it. "Someone named Kreutzer was killed and robbed."

He stiffened in his chair. His eyes stirred out of their usual muddy apathy, brightened as though with alarm, and she said hastily, "If it was a relative of yours I'm sorry I brought it up."

He was shaking his head. "You're sure you read that?"

"Why . . . yes."

The fingers of the big hand that rested on the edge of the table were trembling. "There is such a thing as memory of the future. Did you know that?"

She stared across the table at him. His face in the soft light was like the head on an old, old coin, cheekbones shiny and all the hollows tarnished with shadow. Fear had caught and fixed the eyes. Cold, paralyzing fear. A menu floated down in front of her, and her gaze escaped to it. She wasn't hungry. Thirty mintues ago she'd been half starved, but now she didn't think she could eat a thing. A cocktail might help, though. A very dry martini, the kind Dan used to order for her. Dan . . . She wondered achingly where he was, with whom, and had she and Dan been very sure it wasn't love? Dan, she thought, had been sure. . . .

"Was the name *Max* Kreutzer?" came to her from across the table.

She didn't look up. Tears pricked her eyelids. "No, I don't suppose it was. I didn't read it, just the headlines and a sub-head—'Police Fear Burglary Outbreak,' or something like that." She clasped her hands tight, forced herself to study the menu. "The porterhouse dinner looks good, doesn't it?"

"You order anything you want, Anne. Get something good. Then afterwards we'll go to a movie."

Oh, but we don't have to go to a movie, she thought. That's what this is. Girl meets Boris Karloff. Girl remembers reading in the paper that Boris was killed and robbed two or three days ago, but when she mentions this, casually, to Boris, Boris blames it on "memory of the future," whatever that is, and says he isn't dead—yet. . . . Annie, he's smiling at you, the poor thing. He wants you to have fun, to be gay. Maybe you're good for him. Maybe you can draw him out of his shell. The world must have treated him miserably, and now he's come to you.

She said, "Max, I'd like a martini."

AFTER the drink she felt warm and generous, and she thought her companion might turn out to be a rather nice person when she knew him better. Their steaks came, and she found that she was hungry. While she ate, she tried to draw him out with her chatter. She talked about Mrs. Finch. About the people who worked with her at Western Mutual. About Edin-

burg, Indiana, where she'd spent her childhood. About the lake she'd gone to on vacation the previous summer. But he didn't say he knew anybody who worked in an insurance office. He didn't say he'd ever spent a week at any lake. He didn't say he'd ever been through Edinburg, Indiana. He didn't say anything until he picked up the check, and then it was, "Now we'll go to a movie."

Now we'll have pink lemonade, she thought. It was exactly like that time Uncle Walter had taken her to the circus and hadn't wanted her to miss a thing. Years later she'd realized what a perfect martyr Uncle Walter had been, for he hated elephants and peanuts, and sawdust aggravated his asthma. . . .

They were going through the door into the world of half-light outside, his hand impersonally on her elbow. The song that trailed them to the street was *I'll See You Again*. Who, she wondered—who'll see me again? Which was a perfectly ridiculous and a rather morbid thought.

She said, "That was delicious, Max. I enjoyed every bite." Not to mention the sparkling repartee that accompanied the meal!

There were scattered couples along the sidewalk and she peered at them furtively, enviously, as through the windows of some grand mansion. Couples that passed laughing, chattering, their footsteps synchronized with the languor of the evening. But not *this* couple, she thought. She and Max were moving purposefully and in a silence almost grim toward Micky Mouse and popcorn or bust.

"Max—" she stopped in her tracks, looked up at his shadowed face—"Max, is it compulsory? I mean, we'd get in right in the middle of the picture, wouldn't we? Do you mind awfully if we don't go to the movies?"

He stared at her in silence. Then, "Why, no. I just thought you'd like to go. I don't care for the pictures myself."

"It's nearly ten," she said. "If we walk back slowly to Mrs. Finch's, down Sutherland and across the bridge, it'll be almost bedtime when we get there."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, it will."

They turned back, walked by Andrew's again. Ahead of them the bridge that spanned Big Indian River pushed graduated beads of light out and up, down and far into the thin grey mist.

"It's like a tiara," she said of the bridge.

"I guess so."

She tried to laugh. "Are you always like this—so talkative, Max?"

He drew a deep breath. "I like to hear you talk," he said. "I like to hear you call me Max." They were crossing the deserted boulevard to get to the foot of the bridge. "Isn't there a bench over here somewhere? We could sit and talk for a little while, couldn't we?"

She knew the bench. Thirty yards or so down a gravel path from the foot of the bridge was a little area of park bordered by overhanging willows along the river bank, and there was a bench with a boulevard light for a chaperone. She pointed it out to him in silence, for a rumbling trolley was crossing the bridge with a snarl of motor traffic behind it. He nodded, thrust gently on her arm to guide her down the path. Now perhaps he'll talk, she thought, and ten to one it'll be about some girl he can't forget.

THERE was no one on the bench, no one anywhere about. The rush of the swollen river moved into the foreground above the diminishing whine and bumble of the trolley on the bridge.

"This *is* a nice spot." She sank onto the bench, the very end of it, and stared up at the twinkling lights along the bridge. He sat on the opposite end, not leaning back, broad shoulders hunched, arms down between spread knees, his big hands clasped.

"Tell me," he said finally, "tell me

something about Mr. Wadell, Annie."

Surprised, she asked, "What about him, exactly?"

"Everything you know."

She fingered the flap of her purse. "Well, he's nice. You'll like him a lot."

"That means you like him." Flat, accusative.

"Why, yes," she admitted, somewhat piqued.

"What is he?" He hadn't moved. He wasn't looking at her.

"A machinist," she told him. "But then he makes quite a bit on the side with the act he performs before clubs and lodges. He's a very good magician."

He was thoughtfully silent a moment. Then, "Yes, that explains a lot."

"Such as?"

"His being everywhere. I suppose he knows how to get in and out of all sorts of places."

She laughed. "I've seen him escape from a strait-jacket."

"They couldn't keep him in the hospital." His voice labored; it reminded her of a spirit medium speaking in a trance. "He was there when I was. We were always sick together."

"Mr. Wadell?" When was that? What hospital?

"That isn't his real name, of course. . . ."

"No?" she broke in, curious.

". . . and his hair isn't really straight."

Her laugh had an edge. "What hair, Max? He's bald as a turnip." And, she thought, I don't think we're talking about the same person. But then she noticed he was accepting Mr. Wadell's baldness with a nod.

"Mother was always afraid of that," he said. "When we had scarlet fever, and I just about died of it, she was mostly worried about his hair falling out. He was younger, you see, her baby—"

"Max," she gasped, "who—*what* are you talking about?" She was conscious of a surging pulse at her throat.

"He followed me to Mr. Finch's. I don't know how he did it. . . . Yes, I guess maybe I do." He slid a glance in her direction, then looked away, his shoulders sagging. "Maybe I know. You're in cahoots with him, aren't you, Anne?"

Cahoots? Oddly, that was the word Mr. Wadell had used when he'd asked her to help him with the dollhouse illusion he'd performed at the Elks party. She said, "Well, just once I was. I had to pop through the top of a dollhouse like a jack-in-the-box. . . ."

"What were you doing in his room this evening?"

"Seeing if the dress I'm making fitted—" She broke off. Angrily, she thought, Just what business is it of yours, *Mister* Kreutzer? What is this—jealousy? She might have laughed except for the odd notion that she was close, perhaps dangerously close, to the tragic truth.

He said, "You're lying, Anne. You're his girl, aren't you?"

"Well!" She stiffened on the bench. "Max Kreutzer, if this isn't the most ridiculous, the most—" Childish? Was that the word? She jerked around to stare at his square-jawed profile against the light. Suddenly some of the disconnected fragments of his scanty conversation fell together with a frightening clatter. . . .

Mr. Wadell was a magician, and that explained his being everywhere. Mr. Wadell could get out of a strait-jacket, so they couldn't keep him in the hospital. What *kind* of a hospital were you in, Max, and how did *you* get out? And Mr. Wadell had followed Max Kreutzer to Mrs. Finch's, which was perfectly impossible—Mr. Wadell wasn't even in town—just as the entire situation was impossible, unbelievable, fantastic—yet here she was in the middle of it, right now. The kind of situation that you read about in the papers, but you don't think could ever happen to you.

SHE HAD read about it. Or she had heard her mother and father talking about it. Years ago. Or it was something like this. Two brothers in high school, and the elder was insanely jealous of the younger. There'd been a girl—one of those things called puppy-love until it had assumed tragic proportions. Until it had led to murder.

Murder. She stood up in slow motion, watching him. He hadn't moved, hadn't changed from that hunched position. Like that statue, The Thinker, it occurred to her. She fought back a wild impulse to laugh, or possibly to scream. . . . No, Annie, don't make a sound. Just move quietly away. He's jealous of you—no, there's no reason. There doesn't have to be a reason, because he's all mixed up. He's got poor old Mr. Wadell confused with his own brother. . . .

She was taking careful, backward steps, the sort she would have taken had she come upon a sleeping panther. . . . But watch him, Annie, she thought. Watch the poor wild thing. Now you're beyond the reach of any sudden spring. Turn and . . . run. Run, Annie. Run, run, *run.*

The gravel of the path had a special slipperiness she hadn't noticed coming down. It rolled beneath the thin soles of her pumps, and once she fell forward, fingers reaching down nearly to the ground, then caught her balance to race on and up to the sidewalk. She turned left onto the bridge. She glanced back, and there was the bench in the island of light. The empty bench. There was the intervening sea of shadow where *he* must be.

Run, Annie, *run!*

Where were the cars and the trolley now? Where were real things, where was anyone at all? Nothing along the vast stretch of bridge. Nothing but the marching row of lights blurred by the rising mist from the river. How impotent they were, like dummy police, like scarecrows. The slight rise that approached the center of the bridge seemed mountainous, applied a quicksand suction to her failing strength. Her legs seemed limp as rope, and as rope they tangled, tripping her. The heel of her hand scuffed concrete. She'd dropped her purse—but never mind. Get up. Run.

He'd gained on her. She heard his heavy, pounding steps, his panting breath. His shadow reached, monstrous, ecliptic.

"No—" That was all. Her lungs were empty of air. He'd reached her now, his hands—she remembered the latent power of those hands. She turned, gasping, lashed out once, then shut her eyes against the picture of his strange, dark face with its wild, mad eyes.

"Max, I won't go near Mr. Wadell again. I won't. I won't!" And even as his hands closed on her throat her mind kept screaming, *I won't. Please, Max, I won't.*

And, of course, she never did.

CHAPTER THREE

The Murderer

"NOW GIVE Buddy your Sandy Andy. Let him play with it. Always remember he's younger than you. You've got to be more generous with your little brother. . . . There, there now, Buddy, don't cry. Here, take the pretty Sandy Andy. Umm, Muvver's darling baby."

Muvver's darling baby! Yah! With hair like a girl. And dumb—look, the dummy thinks it's a pull-toy. "Hey, don't, Buddy, you'll bust it!"

Don't let him have it. He's taken everything—don't let him have the Sandy Andy. Grab it now. Throw it down. Kick it and stamp on it so he won't want it, so she won't give it back to him. Smash it to bits—the litle red car that ran on the track, the little tin man that pulled the string, the hopper where you put the sand, the shiny metal wheels, all

the brightly painted parts now twisted, broken trash. Throw them all away in the trash so he'll never, never have the Sandy Andy again.

And all the while the hot tears blinded him.

He stooped to the sidewalk and picked up the shining bits of mirror. He picked up the brown purse, the compact that had spilled from it, the lipstick. He threw them all over the rail of the bridge. Then there was nothing of her left. Nothing left for Buddy.

He turned, panting, and lurched toward the north end of the bridge. A car came south on Sutherland, swept onto the bridge, splashed light upon it, rushed on by. Radio music, sucked in by the vacuum, sang "I'll see you again," then trailed thinly into silence. It was like a promise. Like a threat. Because he *would* see them again.

"I always do," he muttered. Buddy and the girl—Buddy's head in her lap, her fingers touching Buddy's dark, curly hair, the glint of the heavy gold ring on her finger.

"My ring," he whispered. "My girl." And then it was with her as with the Sandy Andy, as important, in those later years, as the toy had been, as necessary to destroy, to kill her. And afterwards his throat had ached, as now it ached.

He kept on walking until he found the narrow street and the squat white bungalo between the tenement and the warehouse. C/o Mrs. Finch, 346 Burr Oak Street. That was the address. He must always remember that.

He went up onto the porch, opened the door quietly, stepped into the hall. Mrs. Finch's parlor door was open, and he heard the old woman saying, "Now wait a minute. When it's a telegram I got to sit down. . . . All right. Go ahead. I'm sot."

He turned to the stairs and went on up, passed the *old* bathroom to stand between his and Mr. Wadell's doors a moment.

"Buddy's door," he said softly and looked at it. It was closed, naturally, because Buddy wasn't there. Buddy had gone for the police. It was ridiculously simple to know what was to happen when all of this had happened before.

He went into his room and closed the door behind him. My name, he thought, is Max Kreutzer, and once I lived with Mrs. Finch at 346 Burr Oak Street. They'll ask me that, and this time I'll remember.

He stepped to the door of the empty closet, stooped, picked up the heavy satchel. He dreaded its weight and the endless hours of walking with it, but he couldn't leave the satchel behind. . . . His clean shirts, his socks, his underwear—everything they let him take to the hospital, everything he owned and everything he was—were tied up in the satchel. . . .

He carried the bag to the door and there put it down. He stood erect, listening. Heavy footsteps sounded on the staircase, on the bare boards of the floor along the hall. He leaned defensively against the panel, heard the door of the room across the hall open. The footsteps moved into the room, then an inner door, perhaps a closet, was opened violently so that it struck a wall. And then the shattering clash of breaking glass.

Mrs. Finch's voice gasped, "Mercy!" Then, after an instant of shocked silence, "Cleo! Cleo honey, can you come up here a minute?"

He waited, listening at the door. He heard Cleo's step upon the stair, then along the hall.

She said, "For heaven's sakes, Mrs. Finch, how'd it happen?"

"Oh, him and his damned—no, I won't cuss, though if ever a little cussing was needed, now's the time. On top of all the expense, it's seven years bad luck beginning just as soon as Mr. Wadell gets back and sees he's got no way to practice

his sleight-of-hand and such. Help me pick it up, honey. Then we got to pack up some of his things. He's got to stay at his brother's place longer than he expected. That's what he telegraphed just now, and would I send him some more clothes. . . . Here, we'll use this bag."

Cleo said, her voice low, "*He* just came in. Across the hall."

"Mr. Kreutzer?"

"Uh-huh. But alone. Where's Anne, do you suppose?"

"Here, put the pieces in this dirty pillow case to carry down to the trash. Watch you don't cut yourself. . . . Anne was out with him, you say? Hope she don't stay too late and keep me up all hours to see the door is locked. You know there's a burglar scare? I read it in the papers. They say some locksmith's tool bag has disappeared, and probably it was a burglar got them, and there ain't no home that's safe if that's the case."

HE STRAIGHTENED away from the door. His head turned slowly to the left, then down. He stared at the satchel, then stooped to pick it up with a jerk. Something inside clanked—metal on metal.

"What was that?" Mrs. Finch's voice came from the room across the hall.

"Oh, him."

He opened the door. In the opposite room the two women straightened from a brown fiber box from which two straps coiled loosely like flat, brown snakes. Cleo's arched eyebrows soared. Mrs. Finch's mouth fell open, closed again.

"Mr. Kreutzer—"

He turned wordlessly, the bag in hand, and stumbled toward the stairs.

"Mr. Kreutzer, where's Anne? Didn't she go out with you, Mr. Kreutzer?"

Yes, she went out with me, but she was going to sneak off with Buddy. They planned it that way, just as they did at the high school picnic. . . .

He kept on down the stairs, his big hand following the banister. He opened the front door, went out onto the porch, down the steps, into the narrow street where he turned south. Frequently, as he walked, he stared down at the bag in his hand. His frown steadily tightened until he felt the drawn ache of it.

Last night, he thought—no, it was the night before, before I came to Mrs. Finch's. I must remember that. Buddy was following me. He always does. He wants to kill me, of course, or set the police on me, or call the doctors. But he was following me, and I saw him in the crowd downtown. Beside me in the crowd. He startled me, as he always does, and I ducked and ran out into the street. Maybe that was what he wanted—to kill me by driving me out into the street, into the path of a car. But it didn't get me. And he didn't. I kept on running and lost him, but there was someone else who followed me, someone in cahoots with him. One of the doctors from the hospital, I think, because he carried a clinking black satchel in his hand. A little grey-haired man, and he followed me into a narrow, dead-end street. There was a shop of some sort back there with a sign shaped like a big padlock over the door. I tried to get in, to get anywhere away from the little man, but the door was locked. When I turned on the step, there he was, the little man with the clinking satchel. He smiled, knowing that I was trapped, knowing that now he could take me back to the hospital, *thinking* that he could, that he was big enough to take me back. Then I blacked out. . . .

His steps had carried him to Sutherland, to the foot of the bridge across Big Indian River. There he stopped, his head low, peering at the satchel. Slowly, regretfully, his fingers straightened from the satchel handle until it fell to the sidewalk. Then he shoved big hands down into his pockets. There was nothing in his pockets except the thick roll of money, and he

brought this out, looked at it curiously.

The little man's money, he thought. Not mine. His. I must have picked it up. The little man must have been a locksmith going into his place of business. That was what the giant padlock over the door must have meant. And that was what the bag must be—a kit of locksmith's tools. And I thought he was a doctor. . . .

He tossed the roll of bills into the gutter. He gave the satchel a shove with his foot until it toppled from the curb. Then he walked on slowly south.

A trolley wobbled and jiggled up onto the opposite end of the bridge. He watched the yellow lights wink through the mist. The sidewalk trembled beneath him as the trolley passed, and then the rumble, the whine and the clatter were gone. There were no sounds left in the night except the high thin hum of wires and the distant rush of the swollen river.

He stepped to the thick stone rail. It struck him slightly above the waist, and he rested his elbows comfortably upon it. He looked out and down where the mist swirled above the water.

He tipped his head to the left, listening. Footsteps again. But there were always footsteps. He looked disinterestedly to the south, the direction of the footsteps. The blurred figure of a man showed itself for a moment in the circle of light from one of the lamps along the bridge. There was a starry glint of brass and burnished nickel against deep blue cloth, and then the man came on into comparative darkness.

Buddy must have sent for the police, he thought, curiously detached. But then all this had happened before. He wondered vaguely just how many times before it had happened just this way.

HE TURNED his back to the rail, rested his palms on the sloping edge, boosted himself up onto the broad surface. Then he lifted his legs until he could get his heels onto the rail, then turned farther still until his legs were dangling over the other side.

It would, he thought, only take a little push with his hands. Then motion through space, and finally an end to space and motion. An end to repetition, too, for *this* had never happened before.

"Max, she called me," he said. "Max Kreutzer." He gave his head a little jerk of denial. Max Kreutzer was a locksmith.

"Hey, you on the rail! Get off, you crazy fool!"

The cop. He heard the hurried footsteps, but he didn't look around. His arms straightened, pushed down and back against the rail. There was a little scuff of sound that was quickly lost in the scream of upward rushing air.

That instant, before he stuck the water, something rose in his mind, like a scream in his throat: *But if I'm not Max Kreutzer, then who in God's name am I?*

THE END

LETHAL OLD LADIES

By JHAN ROBBINS

IN THE DAYS since Sir Robert Peel invented the redoubtable London bobby, the police force of the city of London has lost many a temporary round to the criminal element, but never before in its history did it take such a beating as it received in the year 1884 at the hands of two sweet, eighty-year-old ladies.

The Misses Angela and Bessie Givens, both spinsters and the last of their clan, lived in a bleak old house along the edge of the Thames embankment on a street that was almost dead. Like so many other details of the case, its resemblance to the Brooklyn mansion where lived the two heroines of *Arsenic and Old Lace* is so strong as to suggest the probable source of the play. Only a few other windows along that square showed lights at night, and when they did, they were flickering and ghostlike.

But there was nothing ghostlike about Angela and Bess. Although theirs was not the most cheerful neighborhood in the world, they liked it fine. From their tower windows they could keep a lookout over all the narrow little lanes that ran down to the bustling, foggy river. No one set foot in that area without at least one pair of sharp, black eyes plotting his or her course at every step.

"There's old Mrs. Suthin—in 'er cups again," Bess would announce gleefully, and together the two would stand behind a curtain and watch their less dignified neighbor wend her wobbly way homeward from the corner pub.

Or, more charitably, "Look at poor old Mr. Cobbles and his little grandson coming along. They seem half starved, they do." And either Angela or Bess would run out into the street with a cup of steaming hot broth for the two unfortunates.

The two spinsters were extremely tender hearted and could hardly bear to see another human in any kind of distress. Even sparrows and stray mongrels knew they could always find crumbs and bones at their back door.

The winter of '84 was unseasonably cold. Ice chunks floated in the Thames at New Year's, and the London fog was mixed half the time with sleet. At a twilight hour on the fifth of January, Abner Collins, the corner policeman, was only too glad to accept the sisters' kind invitation to a cup of hot tea by their sputtering coal grate fire.

"Miserable weather," mourned the bobby conversationally. The two ladies nodded in sympathy and Collins, encouraged, went on with a pathetic recital of his woes. He did not care for his semi-military profession, and the picture he painted of the hopeless, cheerless, danger-filled, weather-beaten life of the average policeman filled the sympathetic sisters with horror.

" 'Twould be a kindness," he said, as he returned to his beat, "if someone would just put me away quietly—at least me wife would 'ave me pension. This way, there's nothing and never will be."

Angela patted his arm. "Cheer up," she said brightly. "We'll think of something!"

That night, they thought of something. Most bobbies would rather be dead than alive, they convinced each other. Very well, then, they would attend to it—in a painless and refined manner, of course. Probably arsenic.

Most of the time, they used arsenic. Once or twice it was strychnine, and the

last event featured Paris green. But the routine was the same. A chilled, foot-sore minion of the law would be asked in to tea as he came off his route at sundown—and he would never leave. His body would be buried with the others in the earthen floor of the lower basement. A pious inscription and a few flowers would be scattered on each fresh mound.

Meanwhile, Scotland Yard, Commons, Buckingham Palace and virtually every other center of authority in London was in an uproar over the sudden upswing in the casualty rate of bobbies who patroled the East End. Finally, the Lord High Chancellor himself offered fifty pounds reward for any and all enlightening information as to the disappearance of the five policemen. "Foul play feared!" screamed the posters that advertised the newspapers.

That very evening, two indignant old ladies knocked at the palace gates and demanded an immediate audience with the chancellor. Steered persuasively to the nearest police headquarters, they demanded angrily of the officer in charge, "How can you talk about foul play? And fiends? And disappearance? My goodness gracious, those five poor men lie comfortably buried in our own cellar and let me tell you, sir, they're a sight happier than ever they were when they worked for you! Foul play, indeed!"

* * *

Two weeks later, with the speed characteristic of English law, the Misses Angela and Bessie Givens left their house on the Thames, after scattering crumbs for the sparrows for the last time, and were taken, under stern chaperonage, to an insane asylum in Yorkshire. There they passed their few remaining days. In 1887, both died, still gentle, still tender hearted, and still deeply concerned over the unhappy lot of the average London bobby.

A VISITOR FOR THE DEAD

(Continued from page 77)

Nathan! Nathan, for God's sake! Don't close the door! I'm in here! Stop it! I'm still in here! Open up! I'm—

. . . Locked! So you knew. You swine, you knew all the time I was trying to trap you. You *knew* and you let me trap myself instead. You and your damned brilliance! . . . Oh why am I screaming when you can't hear me. . . .

Finished.

Well, Della, he was smarter than you were. He knew it was a trap. All of it. The feigned madness. The fake claustrophobia. All a device to get us out to the tomb. Even the voices inside here. But you—you didn't know until I'd tricked you inside and pushed you down these stairs, did you?

Della! You're moving around! *My God* —hasn't a week been enough to finish you off? Della, for God's sake—get away from me! Don't come any closer. You smell of death! God! Still alive! Get away from me with your clawing fingernails! Della! *Della—no!*

(Continued from page 37)

I caught him with one hand and dragged him to the window. His hands clawed at me. I heard people yelling, too, behind me. But I knew no one would reach me in time.

It was all over now. But I wasn't happy or glad or anything. There was just a kind of calmness, with a hot blind anger underneath. I hit him. I held him tight with one hand, and hit him again and again with the other. I could feel his face crush in and become faceless and red. And then I hit him the last time, harder than the other times, and just as I hit him I let go of him.

I didn't look. I turned around as his body went through the glass. I was listening to the glass crashing as I felt them take hold of me. Elkins, little thin Elkins, his face wild and sweating and white, as he kept hold of my arm. His mouth was working, but nothing came out.

I could hear the people running around, going to the window. But I wasn't interested in the window any more.

"You can call the cops, Elkins," I said. "I'm okay now."

He was leading me out of there. I could feel a hundred eyes burning at me. Several others were around me, guarding me. But none of it interested me.

I took hold of Elkin's arm. "You can let somebody else have the booth now," I said. "I won't be needing it any more."

Elkins licked his lips and tried to say something, but he only kept shaking his head up and down. I smiled at him. I knew he wouldn't understand so I didn't try to explain it to him. No one has ever been able to understand the way I really feel. I guess it's because of the way I look, my face and all.

I'm wondering now if Flamingo understands.

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ROOKIE HUNT

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