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STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

NOV DEC

BODIES FOR THE WAX FACTORY

A THRILLING NOVEL OF BIZARRE MURDER

by ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

WEB-FOOTED DEATH DANCE

A NOVELETTE

by PAUL ERNST



WORKSHOP OF THE LIVING DEAD

AN AMAZING NOVELETTE
OF WEIRD CRIME

by

THORP McCLUSKY

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HERE'S
*How it
Happened*
by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS
SENT UPON REQUEST)



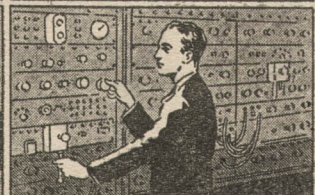
"I had an \$18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them."



"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make \$5, \$10, \$15 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



"When I finished training I accepted a job as serviceman with a Radio store. In three weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory."



"Eight months later N.R.I. Employment Department sent me to Station KXCR as a Radio operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUI. I am also connected with Television Station WEXK."



"N.R.I. Training took me out of a low pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio is growing fast. The field is wide open to properly trained men."



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Institute
stablished 1914

**Many Radio Experts
Make \$30, \$50, \$75
a Week**

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many \$200 to \$500 year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as \$30, \$40, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, and pay up to \$6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loudspeaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

**Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra
in Spare Time While Learning**

The day you enroll I start sending Extra "oney Job Sheets; show you how to do Repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that make good time money—\$200 to \$500—for hundreds, while learning. I send you special

Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This \$50-50 method of training makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAY, ALL-PURPOSE, RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time jobs after graduation.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and

those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH,
President,
Dept. 8MS9
National Radio
Institute,
Washington,
D. C.



J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8MS9

National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out spare time and full time opportunities in Radio, and explains your practical method of training at home in spare time to become a Radio Expert. (Please write plainly.)

Name.....Age.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

The Man I Pity Most

POOOR OLD JONES. No one had any use for him. No one respected him. Across his face I read one harsh word—FAILURE. He just lived on. A poor worn out imitation of a man, doing his sorry best to get on in the world. If he had realized just one thing he could have made good. He might have been a brilliant success.

There are thousands and thousands of men like Jones. They, too, could be happy, successful, respected and loved. But they can't seem to realize the one big fact—that practically everything worth while living for depends upon STRENGTH—upon live, red-blooded, he-man muscle.

Everything you do depends upon strength. No matter what your occupation, you need the health, vitality and clear thinking only big, strong, virile muscles can give you. When you are ill the strength in those big muscles pulls you through. At the office, in the farm fields, or on the tennis courts, you'll find your success generally depends upon your muscular development.

Here's a Short Cut to Strength and Success

"But," you say, "it takes years to build my body up to the point where it will equal those of athletic champions." It does if you go about it without any system, but there is a scientific short cut. And that's where I come in.

30 Days is All I Need

In just 30 days I can do things with your body you never thought possible. With just a few minutes work every morning, I will add one full inch of real, live muscle to each of your arms, and two whole inches across your chest. Many of my pupils have gained more than that, but I GUARANTEE to do at least that much for you in one short month. Your neck will grow shapely, your shoulders begin to broaden. Before you know it, you'll find people turning around when you pass. Women will want to know you. Your boss will treat you with a new respect. You'll look ten years younger, and you'll feel like it, too. Work will be easy. As for play, why, you realize then that you don't know what play really means.

I Strengthen Those Inner Organs, Too

But I'm not through with you. I want ninety days in all to do the job right, and then all I ask is that you stand in front of your mirror and look yourself over. What a marvelous change! Those great square shoulders! That pair of huge, lithe arms! Those firm, shapely legs! Yes, sir. They are yours, and they are

Send for my
Big New
Book

"Muscular Development"

64 pages and . . .

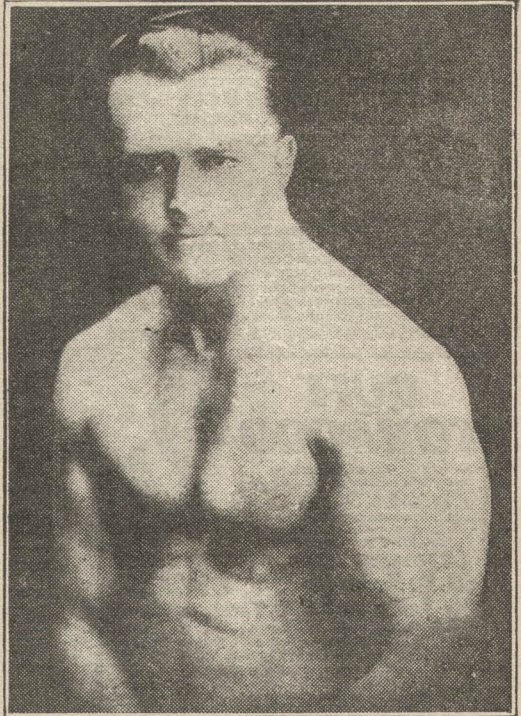
IT IS FREE

It contains forty-eight full-page photographs of myself and some of the many prize-winning pupils I have trained. Some of these came to me as pitiful weaklings, imploring me to help them. Look them over now and you will marvel at their present physiques. This will not obligate you at all, but for the sake of your future health and happiness do not put it off. Send today—right now before you turn this page.

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The most remarkable Kerosene Burner ever built. Boils down apple cider, maple syrup, molasses, etc., in half the ordinary time. Ideal burner for dairies, butchers, indispensable on the farm. **PRODUCES TERRIFIC HEAT WITH SILENT BLUE FLAME**

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WURLITZER

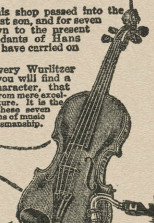
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STRANGE



DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

Volume Two

November-December, 1938

Number Four

A Detective Novel of Weird Mystery

BODIES FOR THE WAX FACTORY Arthur Leo Zagat 7
Eerie menace prowled New York's sinister night-emptied lofts. . . . Death left its footprints in its victims' bashed-in skulls—to stomp out the fantastic truth that Danny Deever had to learn before morning!

Four Unforgettable Novelettes of Bizarre Crime

WORKSHOP OF THE LIVING DEAD Thorp McClusky 30
Bullets could not stop those corpses that walked like men. On legs of bloodless flesh, they went their grisly earthly way, to robbery and murder. . . . And Red McNally followed, on a suicidal hunch, to the barracks of the living dead!

TWELVE BLUE CORPSES Henry T. Sperry 48
One of those twelve doomed New York physicians was dead already—when Gregory Thorne, lover of the arts, saw their faces in a Seventeenth Century painting. . . . And he never could resist a masterpiece in murder!

CASE OF THE EXPLODING MEN Ray Cummings 66
Even as a terrified client babbled his plea for protection, Dugan and Dugan, private detectives, heard that dread thunder of death—and torn fragments of bleeding flesh flung red banners above Broadway's panicked thousands!

WEB-FOOTED DEATH DANCE Paul Ernst 82
What was this hellish carnival of murder—with a paralyzed mining town under the bone-breaking grip of a fiend from another world? Even Malvern Early, the super-detective, was stumped—till he himself fell into the killer trap!

A Short Detective Story of Eerie Adventure

SATAN FILLS THE MORGUE Earl Pierce, Jr. 97
In the red-robed role of Satan, an opera star came back from the electric chair—with a tongue of all-consuming flame that bridged the gap to Hell!

Strange Detective Features

I CAN'T BE KILLED The Editor 4
They tried an axe on this strapping babe—but it didn't work!

FANTASTIC BUT TRUE Illustrated Feature 103
Don't scream if you meet a man with horns some dark night. It's possible!

CALENDAR OF CRIME A Department 104
Killers don't usually bear wings. Yet here's one who did!

ALL STORIES NEW



NO REPRINTS

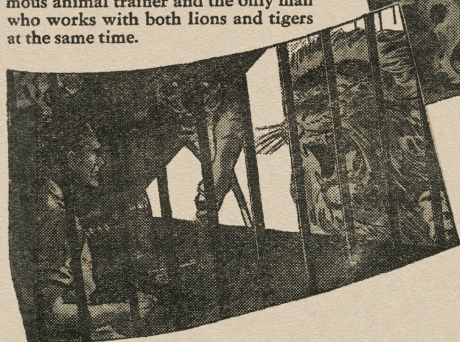
Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second class matter February 8, 1938, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent office. Copyright 1938 by Popular Publications. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A. \$6.00. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose self-addressed, stamped envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. PRINTED IN U. S. A.

"MURDEROUS 'JUNGLE-FEVER' WAS IN THEIR EYES"

CLYDE BEATTY, CAGED WITH SNARLING JUNGLE CATS, FACES
BLACKEST MOMENT OF DEATH-DEFYING CAREER



① "It was one of those days when you know something's going to happen," writes Clyde Beatty, world-famous animal trainer and the only man who works with both lions and tigers at the same time.



② "The animals had been sullen during the matinee. They came tumbling into the big cage for the evening performance with that murderous 'jungle-fever' still in their eyes, squalling, spitting and making passes. If they once drew blood it would be just too bad!

"And then, with that cage full of mixed cats raging at me and each other ... the lights went out!

③ "In the flicker of an eyelash the huge, glaring big-top went dead black! In the dark the snarls of the beasts sounded twice as loud. Green eyes glowed. In an instant they would leap for me!

"I jumped back, pressed hard against the steel bars of the cage. I whipped out my flashlight, flung the beam square in the startled face of the nearest cat, then gave it to another and another.

④ "In a moment (a mighty long moment), the trouble was repaired, the lights flashed on again and a tremendous sigh rose from the crowd. I was still alive. The power of fresh DATED 'Ever-ready' batteries had held at bay the fury of the jungle!

(Signed) *Clyde Beatty*



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With your new Remington Noiseless Portable we will send you—absolutely FREE—a 24-page booklet on typing. It teaches the Touch System, used by all expert typists. It is simply written and completely illustrated. Instructions are as simple as A, B, C. Even a child can easily understand this method. A little study and the average person, child or adult, becomes fascinated. Follow this booklet's instructions during the 10-Day Trial Period we give you with your typewriter and you will wonder why you ever took the trouble to write letters by hand.

● SPECIAL CARRYING CASE

Also under this new Purchase plan, we will send to you with every Remington Noiseless Portable, a special carrying case sturdily built of 3 ply wood. This handsome case is covered with heavy du Pont fabric. The top is removed by one motion, leaving the machine firmly attached to the base. This makes it easy to use your Remington anywhere—on knees, in chairs, on trains. Don't delay...send in the coupon for complete details!

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Remington Rand Inc. Dept. 193-11
465 Washington St., Buffalo, N. Y.

Tell me, without obligation, how to get a Free Trial of a new Remington Noiseless Portable, including Carrying Case and Free Typing Instruction Booklet for as little as 10c a day. Send Catalogue.

Name.....

Address.....

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I Can't Be Killed

BACK in the fall of 1937 we brought out a magazine called *Strange Detective Mysteries*. Then, while the first issue was still on the newsstands—and before we'd had a chance to learn how it was doing—the "recession" came. It was like a virulent epidemic, sweeping the country. Businessmen everywhere backed into their corners. New ventures were called off; they could wait till the storm blew over. Publishers, being human, caught the fever And "the powers that be" decided to call off the infant magazine, *Strange Detective Mysteries*.

But as the months went by, they found that here was one husky infant that refused to be disposed of so arbitrarily. Two issues had been printed and circulated before the axe fell. The infant had got around—and made friends.

Letters began pouring in, wondering this and wondering that. What had happened to *Strange Detective Mysteries*? The first two issues were swell, but where was the third? Could stories of bizarre, unusual crime such as Paul Ernst's "The Corpse with the Third Eye" or Arthur Leo Zagat's "Patients for Dr. Death" be found in any other magazine?

Here was something new in our editing experience—a magazine that refused to be killed. We had started something—something so unusual and spectacular that readers demanded more. Their appetites had been whetted, and there was no other magazine like it, to which they could turn.

The "recession" is still with us, according to some of the gloomy commentators. Many publishers are still backed in the corner, shaving expenses and starting nothing new. But recession or no recession, they can't fool us about the future of *Strange Detective Mysteries*. It won its right to survival, as an infant. And, in vigorous and confident maturity, it comes back into circulation.

To old friends and new, *Strange Detective Mysteries*—the fiction magazine that explores the sensationally bizarre byways of modern scientific crime—makes its bow.

THE EDITOR.



"SELDOM SEE AN I. C. S. GRADUATE OUT OF A JOB"

"IN ALL THE YEARS I have known of the International Correspondence Schools, I have seldom seen one of your graduates jobless."

A business executive made this statement in a recent letter commenting on the I. C. S. graduates and students in his employ and expressing regrets that it was necessary to reduce his personnel.

"However," he added, "all I. C. S. graduates and students will be retained, for I

fully realize their value in my business."

The reason so many I. C. S. men have jobs is because they are *trained men!* A recent investigation into the working conditions of 1000 I. C. S. students revealed only ten unemployed. You, too, can be an I. C. S. man.

Mark the coupon and mail it today! It has been the most important act in the lives of thousands of men.

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Name.....Age.....Address.....

City.....State.....Present Position.....

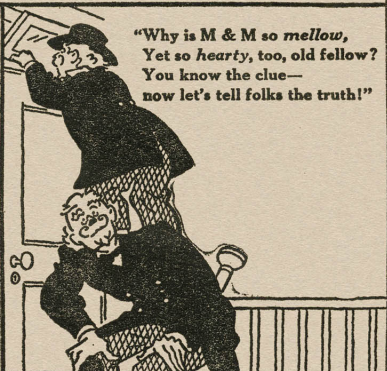
If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada
If you reside in England, send coupon to I. C. S., 71 Kingsway, London, W. C. 2, England

Mr. Mattingly & Mr. Moore track down a great whiskey value

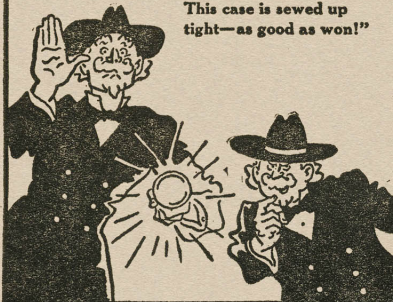
"Oh, Mr. Mattingly,
Oh, Mr. Mattingly,
Here's a mystery—and you're
a first-rate sleuth!"



"Why is M & M so mellow,
Yet so hearty, too, old fellow?
You know the clue—
now let's tell folks the truth!"



"Why, Mr. Moore,
Why, Mr. Moore,
This case is sewed up
tight—as good as won!"



"It's because folks realize
That the flavor they so prize
Comes from old-time slow-distill-
ing—the way we've always done!"



You're on the trail of a *real* whiskey value when some friend tips you off to Mattingly & Moore!

For M & M is ALL whiskey—every drop distilled by the slow, old-fashioned method. What's more, M & M is a blend of *straight*

whiskies—and that's the kind of whiskey that's *tops* with *any* man!

Ask for M & M at your favorite bar—or package store—today. You'll say it's just about the grandest whiskey you ever tasted—and you'll like its low price!

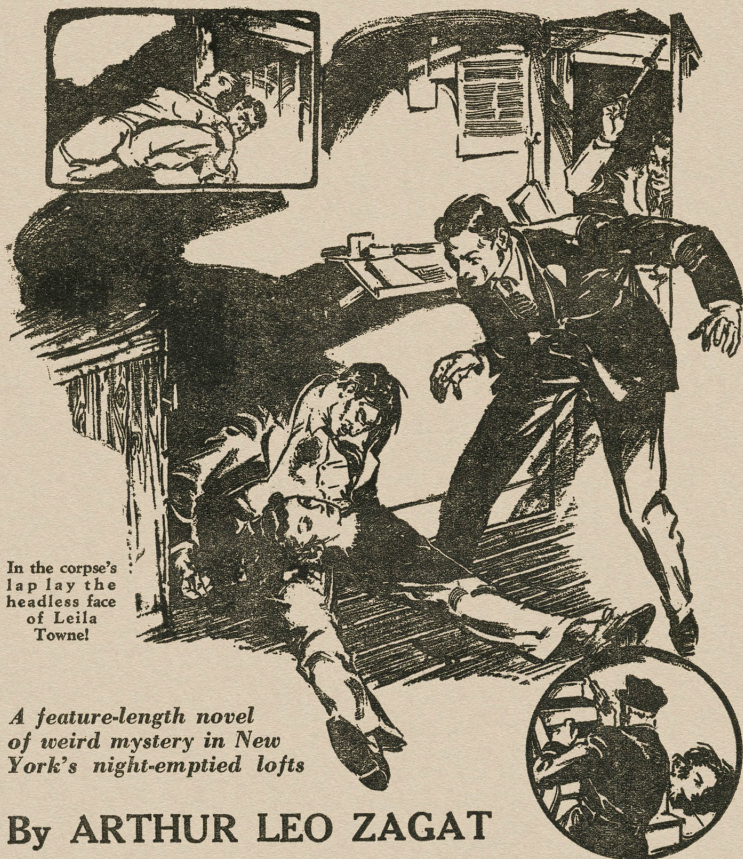
Mattingly & Moore

Long on Quality—Short on Price!

*A blend of straight whiskies—100% straight whiskies—90 proof.
Frankfort Distilleries, Incorporated, Louisville and Baltimore.*



BODIES FOR THE WAX FACTORY



In the corpse's lap lay the headless face of Leila Townel

A feature-length novel of weird mystery in New York's night-emptied lofts

By **ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT**

Two dead men sprawled at the top of a darkened stairway — and a bodiless head lay at the bottom... What was the incredible killer that Danny Deever hunted, on the fantastic night when the cold waxen figure of a gorgeous girl came to life — and Death left its footprints in its victims' bashed-in skulls?

CHAPTER ONE

Death Keeps to the Shadows

THE man in the derby hat nodded to the policeman, stopped, and lighted a cigarette. "This district gives you the creeps at night," he said casually.

He held the yellow flame in the cup of

his hand a few seconds, giving Officer 728 a good look at his blunt-jawed, knobbed, almost brutal countenance. His high cheekbones threw shadows that hid his eyes.

"Yeah," said the patrolman. "Couple hours ago you had to battle the mobs on the sidewalks if you was going anywheres. You couldn't hear yourself think, for the noise of the trucks. Now it's only a little after eight, and if I was to drop this nightstick you'd think a blast went off."

The man in the derby sucked flame into the cigarette he held between his thin lips. He was watching the officer's expression with close attention.

"You're new on this post," he remarked. He flicked out the match, and against the glow of the street lamp at the Eighth Avenue corner, his gray-suited body bulked chunky and powerful. "This is your first night, isn't it?"

"What's that to you?" The officer's grizzled face tightened into suspicion. He'd been tipped off that a lot of phonies cruised the Twenties. The dingy silent loft buildings around here held millions of dollars worth of furs, and there were plenty of crooks who would like to tap the vaults that held them—crooks with brains, not like the dime-a-dozen flat workers in the Bronx. "What difference does it make to you?"

The man's teeth showed in a tight smile. "No difference at all," he said softly. "Except that I like to know the cops working the neighborhood." He let smoke drift out of his wide nostrils. "And I like them to know me."

"Why?" the patrolman demanded, muscles knotting across the back of his shoulders. His face, the color and texture of old leather, became bleakly expressionless. "What kind of trouble would knowing cops be liable to save you from?"

The man shrugged wide shoulders. "I'm around here all hours. Sometimes I do queer things."

OFFICER 728's uneasiness deepened.

The quiet and gloom had been getting under his skin ever since the subway's iron mouths had swallowed the home-going crowds and the roaring traffic had spilled out of the streets. He was used to a Bronx beat where things began getting lively at this hour, instead of going hushed and dead.

"What kind of queer things?" he asked, his fingers tightening on the hard roundness of his stick.

"I couldn't tell—beforehand." The end of the man's cigarette got bright as he inhaled, and then his gloved hand took it away from his lips. "But that isn't what you want to know." There was covert amusement in his voice. "You're wondering who I am—and what."

"Yeah," the patrolman growled. "Who are you?"

"The name's Deever—Danny Deever. Don't bother to make up a crack about hanging in the morning. I've heard them all and they aren't funny any more."

"All right. You're Danny Deever. What's your game?"

"This."

The officer hadn't seen Deever's hand go to his pocket, but it was shoving a little white oblong at him. The cop took the card and held it up so the light from the corner would fall on it. He read:

DANIEL DEEVER

Investigator

FEDERAL INDEMNITY COMPANY

"Investigator?"

"Polite for shamus," Deever smiled. "I've got a private dick's license. I've got a permit to carry a gun, too, but I never do. Federal Indemnity's got something like half a billion in robbery insurance placed within ten blocks or so of here. It's my job to see not too much of it is collected. Which means keeping things

from starting to happen rather than going after the lugs who've made them happen. Get it, Ed Corbin?"

The cop blinked. "You—you know me?"

"You've been on the force twenty-two years, and you've never taken more than a banana from a fruit stand. You're a widower and have two children, a son at City College and a daughter at Walton High School. You are active in the Men's Club of the Church of the Mediator on Kingsbridge Road. You own a two family house on Briggs Avenue, half of which you live in. You made the down payment out of your savings, and the rent for the other half of the house takes care of the interest on the mortgage and the taxes. You never tried a promotion exam because you can't figure yourself giving orders, but you know how to obey them. All of which is why I asked to have you brought down here."

"Huh?"

"Figure it out, Corbin. And keep your eyes and ears open while you do the figuring. So long. I'll be seeing you."

Deever turned on his heel and went away from there. For all his size, his feet made no sound on the sidewalk. He was a derby-hatted shadow drifting down the block, towards Ninth, merging almost at once with the other shadows.

"I'll be damned." Patrolman Ed Corbin scratched his head with the end of his locust. "I'll be everlastingly damned." He stared into the lonely night.

FOOTFALLS thudded in the hush. Corbin turned to the sounds. A grotesque object turned the far corner at Eighth Avenue and moved west along the shuttered store fronts and dark doorways across the street. The cop studied the object and separated it into a thin man and a large bundle, much longer than it was thick, that was balanced across the man's shoulder.

In the Bronx it would be routine to investigate anyone carrying a bundle late at night. But this wasn't late at night, Corbin reminded himself, though it felt like it. And this wasn't the Bronx. This was a business district. Here and there in the grey-black walls of the street a few windows were still yellow with light. It was perfectly reasonable that some late delivery was being made.

But in Corbin's first glimpse of that package he had noticed something queer about it, something that was tightening the skin along his jaw. He couldn't see it distinctly now. The fellow was keeping close to the inner edge of the sidewalk, where the shadows were thickest. Maybe he was looking for a number.

He came into the luminance of a street lamp a hundred feet down the block, and again the cop could see the bundle distinctly. It was wrapped, but its outlines were unmistakable. It had the shape, exactly the shape, of a human body!

"Hey!" Corbin yelled, starting across the gutter. "Hey, you!"

The bundle carrier ducked into a dark space between two projecting store-window frames. A door slammed.

The officer put on speed. He reached the curb and went across the sidewalk fast, dragging his gun out with his right hand, nightstick clubbed in the other. His feet found three iron steps, carried him up them and into a vestibule. He came against a closed door, but the door moved inward a little as he shouldered it.

A younger cop might have barged right in—not stopping to think he'd be a perfect target silhouetted against whatever light there was in the street. Ed Corbin was too old a hand for that. Flattening himself against a side wall of the vestibule, he hung his stick on his belt and fumbled a flashlight from his pocket. He kicked open the door.

"Reach!" he shouted.

Nothing happened. There was no sound

from the blackness inside the door—no hint of movement, of any living presence.

Corbin thumbed his flash. A vertical row of faded signs showed on the streaked marble of the vestibule wall opposite that against which he was flattened. The light spray swept inward, and the cop cautiously poked his head out past the door frame. A narrow hall was lit by the torch. The doors of a small elevator were open, but a chain padlocked the control lever inside the cage. Further back, dirt-grey, worn wooden steps went up into obscurity. No one was in sight.

The cop went into that dusty lobby, cautiously. The man who'd been carrying a bundle that looked too much like a rigid body wrapped in heavy paper had probably gone up the stairs. But he might be hiding under them, waiting for a chance to slip out. Better look there first.

Corbin got only as far as the foot of the stairs. A bumping sound, as of something hard dropped on wood, stopped him, pulled his eyes upward. *Bump. Bump. Bump.* Something was rolling down the steps. The cop's flash-beam found it, half-way down. It was irregularly round, the size of a head. *Bump. Bump.* It was a head, a woman's head! Corbin saw the rouged face, the red lips. *Bump.* He saw a cluster of brown ringlets. *Bump.* The head reached the bottom step.

The cop grabbed for it with his gun hand, to stop it, to keep it from rolling on out into the street. The flesh was hard, cold, against the side of his hand. . . . A laugh rasped the cords in his throat.

It wasn't flesh that was hard and cold, but wax! The hazel eyes that peered up at him were painted glass. The head was the head of a display dummy!

What a jackass he'd made of himself! The thing he had thought was a wrapped body, murdered and being carried down to watery burial in the Hudson, was a *papier maché* figure with a head of wax. The messenger had probably knocked the

head off turning a landing above, and hadn't noticed it.

Corbin hesitated. He ought to call to the fellow, call him down to get the head. But that would be giving away what a fool he'd been. If—

A groan came down from the darkness above. It came again, muffled, quivering with pain. Then there was a sound like that of a breaking eggshell. And silence.

Patrolman Corbin clicked off his flashlight and leaped up the stairs. No time for caution now! Someone was in trouble up there!

Old wood creaked with his weight. He felt a landing underfoot. He kicked something soft. Something yielding. Something that sent an icy prickle racing along his spine. No question about what it was. No question at all.

He couldn't blunder ahead in this tarry blackness—he'd step on the body. He chanced flicking the torch switch an instant. It brought a sprawled, blood-masked form out of the murk. Above him he saw stairs angling up from the landing. His thumb lifted from the torch switch, blanking it all out.

Corbin stepped high, to clear the corpse.

Something, sensed rather than heard or seen, swooped down on him! He fired a shot, blindly, aimlessly. . . .

Ed Corbin's skull smashed in—with a sound like a breaking eggshell!

CHAPTER TWO

Murder Can't Wait

DRIFTING down the long block, Danny Deever laughed quietly to himself, recalling how flabbergasted Corbin had looked when he'd sprung that—"All of which is why I asked to have you brought down here." And the tight suspicion in his leathery face during the talk before that.

It had been a wormy stunt, at that,

kidding the old boy. But Deever had wanted to see how he'd react to a hint of graft. He hadn't had to go far with it. The look in Corbin's faded grey eyes had told him enough. He was just as his records had pictured him, the salt of the earth. Not for the value of all the furs in the district would he conveniently be busy elsewhere just when a job was coming off, as his predecessor had been.

A muscle twitched in Deever's cheek. It still hurt him to think of a cop turning rat. He knew the force better than anyone could who had not fought beside the men in blue, who had not spent sleepless weeks working with them. He knew the courage, the devotion to duty, the fundamental honesty of nine hundred and ninety-nine out of a thousand of them. When the one out of a thousand showed up as rotten, it was almost as if a friend had double-crossed him.

Deever reached Ninth Avenue, halted, undecided as to whether to go up or down. He always took a stroll through the district after closing, his pores open for the feel of things. Often an instinct he could never explain warned him when anything off-color was brewing. Possibly it was not instinct at all, but his intimate knowledge of the vicinity, an attunement to the pulse of its life that was jarred by any irregularity in that pulse. He had an invariable routine for his wanderings, but that routine had been disturbed tonight by his visit to Corbin, hence the hesitation.

It must be kind of tough on the veteran cop to be pulled down here, out of the bailiwick that through the years had become comfortable as—

A faint thud blanked thought inside Danny Deever's skull. It brought him around, his nostrils flaring, to face up the block down which he'd just come. It might have been a backfire from some car on Eighth Avenue, but—

A dim form darted out of a doorway, about opposite where he'd talked with Ed

Corbin. It flitted toward Eighth Avenue. Some urgency in the way it moved started Deever into motion. He ran silently, devouring space with amazing swiftness, but the handicap was too great. Before he covered half the distance to the point where the figure had first appeared, it vanished around the distant corner.

Almost at once there was the *burr* of a starter. The roar of an auto engine crescendoed and then faded. Deever slowed, knowing that whoever the man had been, whatever the reason for his flight, he was beyond pursuit.

The insurance dick angled across the street toward the doorway out of which the man had come. There was a single row of lighted windows, high up over it. The fourth floor. That would be the office of the Blue Star. It was a chain of retail shops, and carried no stock here. They had only a hold-up policy in Federal. A holdup—better go up there and check on that shot. Deever was sure now it had been a shot.

Where was Corbin? He must have been near enough to hear the sound.

DANNY DEEVER went up the three iron steps and through the door into the dusty lobby. He listened for sounds of a disturbance, heard none. He got out his flash. Its light showed him the locked elevator.

The beam veered to the stairs. A wax dummy head lay against the bottom step. The molded face was pert, intriguing.

The corners of Deever's mouth lifted with a brief smile. "If the gals were all as close-mouthed as you, my dear," he murmured, "I wouldn't be scared of them."

He went up the stairs with the silent, effortless swiftness that was characteristic of him. Because the one who'd fired the shot was blocks away by this time, Deever kept his torch on.

The white beam slid up the rutted steps

ahead of him. Abruptly it spotlighted a crumpled corpse, another beyond it. Deever knew the nearer body was Corbin's—by the soggy blue uniform, by the number, 728, on the smeared badge, by the Police Positive in the outstretched hand. If he'd had to depend on the face to identify it he couldn't have done so. There was no face.

Danny Deever's teeth showed in a smile as he stood straddle-legged, looking down at what had been done to the cop's skull. There was something horrible about that smile. There was something horrible in the grey depths of Deever's eyes.

"I did this to you," he murmured. "If I'd let you stay up there in the Bronx you would have had an easy time of it for three more years and then you would have been retired on pension. But I had you brought down here. For this!" His hand curled into a sledge-like fist at his side. "I can't send you back to the Bronx, Ed Corbin. But I can get the lug who did that to you. I promise you I'll get him."

Danny Deever's eyes, hard now and expressionless, moved to the other corpse. The body was weazened, clothed in shabby grey. There was more of its face left than there was of the cop's, enough at least to show that it had been a face. A bruise was dark on the left temple, somehow left uncovered by the red film, but the top of the head was bashed in as a spoon crushes the tip of a hard-boiled breakfast egg.

There was another body where the stair flight to the next floor began! No, not a body. It was a *papier maché* torso with flesh colored arms and legs and no head. It was the dummy the head downstairs belonged to. It was smashed open down the middle, viciously, as if the killer hadn't had enough with bashing in the skulls of the two men, as if his kill-lust had made him keep on hammering away at everything in sight.

On the stairs above the dummy was the

paper in which it had been wrapped. The paper was whole. It hadn't been torn from the dummy but carefully unwound. Deever's brow wrinkled. There was something grotesque about all this, something wholly mad.

THE dingy hall walls, beyond the stair railings, were broken by an iron-faced door with a name painted on it: ACME FUR CO. The firm was a Federal policy holder. Wall plaster was pitted where Corbin's slug had hit, but the door was tight shut, its big lock intact. There were no marks of jimmying along its edges.

The untorn paper bothered Danny Deever. His light came back to it. Words were scrawled across it in black crayon: BLUE STAR. That's where the dummy had been going then.

The insurance detective picked his way carefully past the two murdered men. He went up the stairs, one flight, two. At each landing he swept the halls with his torch beam, found nothing out of order. When he reached the fourth floor a shadow moved on lighted ground glass set into a door. The glass had a blue star painted on it and the name of the chain organization lettered in a circle around the star: BLUE STAR DEPARTMENT STORES, INC. Deever doused his light and put it away. He got to that door, pushed it open.

A balustraded railing cut off a narrow space inside the entrance. Beyond it there were rows of desks, bare-topped or holding hooded typewriters. To one side, just the other side of the railing, was a telephone switchboard. A girl's coat lay over the chair in front of the switchboard and her hat was on top of it. The girl herself was standing beside the switchboard and she was lipsticking her mouth, looking at it in her compact mirror.

Halfway down the room a thin young man, spectacled, was taking his coat from a clothes tree. He already had his hat on.

Deever stepped in and closed the door behind him. The girl looked up. "Hello," she exclaimed. "We've got a visitor. Don't you know it's a quarter to nine, mister? Come around tomorrow."

Even with the cerise rouge on her lips she wasn't pretty, and she certainly looked too dumb to be putting on an act. The young fellow with the glasses appeared a lot smarter.

"That's right," he said, starting to come forward. "This office closes at six. You'll have to take up your business tomorrow morning, sir."

Neither of the two seemed to have a thought in their heads for anything except getting home.

"Sorry," Danny Deever said, "My business can't wait. Murder has to be attended to right away."

"Mur—"

The girl's mouth stayed open, but no more of the word came out of it. Her face went a light green, except where the rouge she'd put on splashed it with red. The man gulped, grabbed for an inkwell on a desk.

"Wait a minute," Deever said. "It's not either of you who's going to be murdered. There's a dead man on the stairs below. You got any idea who he is?"

The young man's mouth opened, closed, opened again.

"No!" came out in a thin, strained voice. "No."

"You?" The detective looked at the girl.

She shook her head in the negative, her mouth still open.

"Anybody go out of here in the last twenty minutes? Expect anybody?" Deever snapped the questions at them, watching their eyes and their hands, hoping for some sign of betrayal while the shock of his announcement still lasted. "Did you hear a shot about fifteen minutes ago?"

"We've been alone here since a little after six," the male answered. "We cer-

tainly didn't expect anyone. We heard nothing, but we've been working too hard, trying to get through and get out, to hear anything."

"Working is right," the female put in. "Believe it or not."

Deever believed it. But he was playing his cards close to his shirt, what there were of them. "Whom do you buy your display dummies from?" he demanded.

"What's this? A new kind of salesman's gag?" The girl had made a quick recovery. "It's a good one if it is, but it won't work, because Mister James buys the display stuff and he paraded out at five-fifteen, on the dot. It's only poor bookkeepers like Henry and me that's gotta stay late."

"I'm not a salesman. I'm a detective. I want to know where your dummies come from."

"I wouldn't know," answered the young man, whose name evidently was Henry. "But I can look it up."

"Do that," Deever instructed him. "Right away. And you, miss, get me the Tenth Precinct. Watkins 9-8242. Tell the desk sergeant Danny Deever wants to talk to Lieutenant Bannion."

"Danny Deever!" Inspiration gleamed in the girl's eyes. "No wonder you don't like doing business in the morning. That's when they—"

"Are hanging me," the dick put in, grinning humorlessly. "I've heard that one before. Get me the number quick."

THE girl leaned over the switchboard chair, stuck a plug into its hole, rattled the dial. The other Blue Star bookkeeper was flipping the pages of a big ledger he'd hauled out from somewhere. Deever went through the gate in the railing and picked a telephone instrument out of its cradle on a desk.

"I'll take that call here," he said.

"I've got it," Henry looked up, his finger on a sheet. "The Trutulife Figure Corporation, 72 East 28th Street."

"Here's your Lieutenant Bannion," the girl said.

"Hello, Frank," Deever said into the transmitter end of the phone.

"Hi, Danny," he heard. "What's new?"

"Plenty. Listen. I'm at—" Deever gave him the address. "That new cop of yours, Corbin, is on the stairs here, bumped. There's another corpse with him. Corbin fired one shot, but the killer got away. Good—"

"Hey," Bannion yelled in his ear. "Wait. You're holding out something on me. What is it?"

"I'm holding out nothing except a hunch. When it's more than a hunch I'll let you know. Goodbye." Deever chopped the phone down into its prongs, whipped around. "You two keep your eyes away from what's on the stairs if you want to hold on to your lunches." Their mouths were open, gaping. "When the cops come, talk straight and you'll be all right."

He was through the gate, clipped out the last of that with his hand on the doorknob. He went out and down the steps two at a time, his torch working again.

The mess on the second floor landing was no easier to look at. Danny Deever got past it without touching anything. He negotiated the last flight faster, if anything, than he had the others. He halted, a stride away from its bottom, whipped around.

His light hit the upright base of the lowest step and the floor in front of it. The beam held on a jumble of wax fragments, of matted brown curls. That had been the dummy head—and it was smashed now to smithereens!

Deever's eyes were like grey agate marbles. "Yes," he whispered. "That's it. Ten to one my hunch is right."

A muffled siren howl came in from the street. Danny Deever wheeled, crossed the lobby floor, shouldered the door open and plunged out through it.

CHAPTER THREE

The Face in the Window

MURDER hadn't made the dingy street canyon any the less desolate, but the siren wail imparted to the hush a quality of quivering apprehension. It came from the direction of Eighth Avenue, so Danny Deever turned towards Ninth. He loped soundlessly, hugging the dimness along the building fronts.

He'd gone more than half a block when the police car's motor-roar surged into the street and its horn hoot howled behind him. The squeal of brakes, the thump of feet pounding across a sidewalk, the slam of the door through which he had just lunged, told the detective he'd not been sighted.

He got to the avenue corner and went around it, slowing to a fast walk. This thoroughfare was blackly roofed by the trestle of the "El" but there was more life here, more movement. A lunchroom window laid yellow light over the grimy sidewalk. A cerise neon sign flicked on and off, proclaiming the availability of cut-rate drugs. A behemothan truck juggernauted between the steel railroad columns and in its wake a cruising taxi loafed.

Deever jumped into the gutter, flinging his arm out in signal to the cab. It rocked with the slam-on of its brakes.

"Seven Twenty-six—Twenty-eighth!" Deever barked at the driver, snatching the car door open and piling inside. "In a hurry."

The taxi started so quick the detective was thrown into its seat. It just missed hitting a cop who chose that instant to pop out from behind an "El" pillar. The driver braked again and the cop jumped on the running board.

"Let's see yuhr license," he growled. "Yuh wild-eyed cowboy."

The taxi man handed over a mica envelope. Deever disentangled himself from

his topcoat, stuck his head out of the door window.

"Skip it, Jim," he said. "I'm in a rush."

The policeman twisted to him. "Hello, Danny," he grinned. "Yuh takin' tuh clippin' the buttons off uniforms?"

"That's a good idea," Deever smiled back, "but I'm too busy just now to play games. Don't hold me up, old man. And don't hold yourself up. You're needed up the block. Better step on it. Bannion's there, and you know how he is."

"Yeah," Jim Tully grunted. "I heard his siren and was on my way." He dropped off the running board and ducked across in front of the taxi's hood.

"Get going," Deever snapped. "And don't worry about traffic lights."

The cab jumped into motion. "Gees," the driver exclaimed. "He forgot to gimme back me ticket."

"You can go back and get it when you've delivered me," Deever responded. "He'll be there a long time." He told the driver the number of the building where the cops would be. Then he said, "You haven't turned down your flag, but that's all right with me. I'm not working out of the Hack Bureau."

Doubly assured by this time that he was carrying a police dick, the man took full advantage of the chance to get all the speed he could out of his engine. The spaced steel columns became a blurred wall whirring past the windows. Before Deever could settle back they'd caught up with the gigantic freight truck, were shooting to its left, were pivoting on shrieking rubber and arrowing riverward on Twenty-eighth Street.

The stop almost catapulted Deever's head through the oblong window behind the cabbie's head. He flipped a bill through the aperture, shot out of the car. "On your way," he rasped, and got himself to the sidewalk.

The salt smell of the Hudson was in his nostrils. To his left a swift procession of

headlights traveled the high black band of the Express Highway. Gear clash and motor chatter behind him said that the taxi was on its way.

THIS block was as dim and as hushed as the one he'd left, but there was something slinking and ominous in its quiet. The buildings were lower, their ground floors not store-windowed but dark with truck-high wooden doors or edged with loading platforms. The one before him, 726, had no platform, but there was a smaller door cut into the big one fronting it. A bright glazed diamond in the upper part of the smaller door showed that there was light inside.

Deever tried the knob, got no results. He rapped on the panel, waited. Abruptly a face showed behind the diamond-shaped glass pane, which was just big enough to frame it. Deever gasped.

Ruby lips, pert, tip-tilted nose, hazel eyes and cluster of soft brown ringlets all complete, hanging there before Danny Deever was the face of the head that had lain at the bottom of the staircase on which Ed Corbin had died.

A lock clicked. The knob rattled. The door started to open. Deever pushed his foot over the threshold as soon as the slit was big enough to admit it, but there wasn't any need of that. The door kept swinging inward.

The face was alive. It belonged to a girl whose cornflower blue smock did nothing to conceal her slim young curves.

"Good evening?" She gave the greeting an inquiring inflection.

Her voice was a throaty contralto. No wax could possibly have reproduced the wistful quality of her smile. Garish light beat down on her from an unshaded three hundred watt bulb, but it was softened by the girl's hair, by the texture of her skin. That skin wasn't pink and white, it was a transparent-seeming, glowing ochre.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

A tinge of impatience in her question made Deever realize he was staring at her like a schoolboy.

"Is this the Trutulife Company?" he asked, trying to match her smile with his own, but making a poor job of it.

"Yes."

Half of Deever was still occupied with the girl. The other half saw that to one side scabrous wooden partitions were propped in a square by scantlings slanting down from the ceiling to make what must be an office, that beyond this, row upon row of paper-wrapped life-size forms receded into distant dimness.

"May I come in?" he asked, feeling thick-tongued, awkward.

Anger at himself started to smolder behind his eyes. He should have shoved in, grim and domineering, the technique he'd always found brought results. What the devil was the matter with him?

"Certainly." The girl stepped aside to make way.

The door shut behind the detective, apparently of its own volition. The girl's eyebrows lifted questioningly.

"MY NAME'S Deever. Danny Deever."

He caught a flash in the hazel eyes, waited for the usual wisecrack. It didn't come. This lass had sense.

"May I ask yours?" he said.

"Leila Towne." Amusement quirked the corners of her lips. "But . . . ?"

"I'm a detective, Miss Towne."

"A—detective?" There was no fear in her face, only the mild bewilderment to be expected. For some reason Deever was inordinately glad of that. "Why?" Her voice trailed off.

"You sent a delivery to the Blue Star Department Stores office a little while ago?"

"Why, yes. How—how did you know?" Her pupils dilated as she guessed at the implication of the question. "Nothing—

nothing's happened to Jimmy?" she stammered, her hand going to her breast, pressing against it. It was a long-fingered sensitive hand. But it was dirty! Bluish grime streaked it. "He—he hasn't been run over?"

"No," Deever dissembled. "Jimmy hasn't been run over. What's the rest of it? Jimmy what?"

"I— There isn't any rest. He's just Jimmy. He—he isn't quite right mentally. He does the porter work around here. And Ralph—Mr. Harding—lets him sleep on a couch in the office . . . Jimmy wouldn't do anything wrong, Mr. Deever. He's simple and sweet and—"

"Who else is here? Now, I mean."

"No—nobody. I was working late, and Jimmy—"

"Then it was you sent him to Blue Star."

"Yes." Puzzlement was replacing the worry in her face. "Mr. Harding called up from their office. He'd dropped in there on a social call and they said they needed a dummy in a hurry, were glad to find out they could get one tonight. I sent Jimmy right out with it."

Danny Deever was conscious of a dull pain at the pit of his stomach. She was lying. She was looking right into his eyes, herself all dewy-eyed innocence, and she was lying by the book. The late-working clerks in the Blue Star office had told him they'd been alone since six and he was certain they had told the truth. Therefore Leila Towne was a brassy liar. The anger behind his brow grew hotter, but his face stayed blank.

"What was special about that dummy?" he murmured, watching the hazel eyes.

She's going to say "Nothing," he thought. A girl who could knowingly dispatch a poor halfwit to his death would not be caught by as simple a trap as this.

"Nothing," she said. "It was just one of that shipment—" she gestured toward the rear "—that was ready to go out to

their warehouse in the morning. What makes you think—"

The shrill ring of the 'phone bell cut across her speech.

"Answer it," Deever directed. "But don't say anything about me."

Leila Towne's lips parted at his sudden gruffness. She went to the office door, stopped with her hand on the knob as Deever followed.

"You can't come in here," she protested, her voice clear and high above the bell's clamor.

"Says you!" the detective grinned mirthlessly. "But I've got a different idea."

WHITE teeth gripped the edge of her lower lips and flame flared into her eyes, but she opened the door, went through.

Danny Deever, close behind her, saw boards laid across wooden horses. On the rough table thus formed was a lump of clay, out of whose shapeless mass grew a beautifully modeled head. Deever understood now what the girl had been working at so late, dirtying her hands. A sculptress of no mean ability, she was creating the master-form for more dummy faces, to be duplicated a hundred fold . . .

The insistent telephone was on a desk in the shadows. Right-angled to it, the head of a leather couch showed from behind a screen.

Leila Towne took the receiver from its hook. The bell cut off. She bent to the mouthpiece of the upright instrument and said, "Hello."

Deever stooped too. He put his head against hers and tipped the receiver so he also could hear.

"Leila!" a man's voice exclaimed, excitement in it. "Where the hell's Jimmy with that figure? I've been waiting here an hour and he hasn't shown up."

The girl's free hand pushed at Deever, with as little effect as if it were pushing

at a wall. Tears of vexation wet her long lashes.

"But, Ralph!" Danny Deever's cheek tingled electrically with the feel of the girl's cheek against it. "I sent him out as soon as you got through talking." The fragrance of her hair was in Deever's nostrils, and his pulses were throbbing madly. "Why, he should have been there long ago."

"Are you sure you gave him the right address?" the voice in the 'phone asked. "Did you write it down for him?"

"You know he can't read, Ralph. I made him say it over, three times. 'Blue Star Department Stores.' Two—"

"Wait!" the receiver blared. "Blue Star Department! You damned little fool! It was the Blue Star Specialty Company I said."

"No, Ralph, no." There was consternation on Leila's face. "All you said was Blue Star and there was a shipment on the floor all ready to—"

"Leila! Was it one of those you sent out? Great Jupiter, girl, was it one of those and not the one I told Jimmy I'd want?"

"Jimmy didn't say anything. He must have forgot . . . Ralph!" Sudden puzzlement thinned the girl's voice. "If you told Jimmy earlier, you must have known you were going to want one. How did you know—"

Something hard crashed the top of Danny Deever's skull, and flame exploded within it. Darkness, oblivion, engulfed him.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the Corpse's Lap

DANNY DEEVER was swimming beneath the surface of a sea of inky molasses. Pain swelled his head to the size of a balloon. It burst, and started to swell again. Slowly, sluggishly, he fought

up out of the thick black stuff. A glug, and he was free of it—

His skull still throbbed, but it wasn't expanding any longer. Blurredly Deever became aware that he was lying on a hard surface.

"Leila," he moaned. "Lei—" Where the hell did he get that name? Memory, lagging after consciousness, returned, and he knew what had happened to him.

While the sweet-faced girl had kept him absorbed in the telephone talk, someone had sneaked up behind and conked him! How long ago was that? How long had he been out?

"Well," Deever muttered, getting a hand to the egg-shaped bump that had pushed up his scalp. "I sure fell for her, hook, line and sinker."

In spite of the pain hammering his head he could still feel the satin touch of her skin on his cheek, could still smell her fresh, clean fragrance. There was a dull pain inside his chest that couldn't be accounted for by the blow.

He tugged reluctant eyelids open. He was on the floor of the Trutulife office. Straight ahead, his crushed derby explained why he had escaped the fate of Ed Corbin. Those hard felts can break the force of a blackjack even in the hands of an expert, which was precisely why Deever wore them.

The room was empty, the door closed. "Skipped," the dick groaned. "Left me for dead, and skipped. But why?" He pushed hands against the floor, boosting himself up to a sitting posture, dizziness whirling within his head. "What her boss said, showed she'd made a mistake. It cleared her." Deever's lids slitted.

"Did she skip?" he whispered. "Or—"

He heaved to his feet, his knobbed countenance hard once more, grim. Little lights crawled in his eyes. He scanned the room as if the inanimate objects it contained could tell him the answer to the questions pounding at his brain.

Everything was as it had been. No, not quite everything. Two parallel streaks of smudge, about a quarter-inch wide, ran across the floor from near the desk to the doorway.

Danny Deever bent to look at them closer, stooping carefully because he felt as if a sudden movement would drop his head off his shoulders. He could make nothing of the streaks, but the act brought his eyes near his battered derby and he saw that the felt was impressed with the outlines of the club that had downed him.

The short hairs at the back of his neck bristled. It wasn't the mark of a club. It was a footprint, the print of a human shoe! He'd been *kicked!* But that was impossible. That kick had come down on the hat from above, and there was no high vantage point from which it could have been launched.

The sense of weirdness that had affected him at his first sight of the smashed and headless dummy on the stairs came back to him in this place to which the trail of that dummy had led him. There was something *not right* about all this, something quite mad.

There was no dirt, no mud, in the indentation at which he stared. It was clean. And that, too, was not as it should be.

Deever straightened, got moving toward the door in the partition. He opened it, halted in the doorway, nostrils flaring, eyes sultry.

The three hundred watt lamp was still on. There was no one in the front of the big loft, no evidence of anyone having been there since he'd followed Leila Towne into the office. But he sensed someone's presence nearby.

His head turned slowly, his biceps tautening. His slow look came to the front of the massed figures, traveled along them.

Waist-high to the figures, malignant eyes stared at him out of a pallid countenance!

Deever leaped back, pulled the door

across between him and the ambusher. He darted a look around the office, searching for a weapon. There was no sound from outside, no hint of movement. Something in that silence fascinated him. He pushed the door open again, slowly.

A mirthless laugh twisted his larynx.

The man, seated on the floor among the dummies, was quite harmless. He was as dead as Caesar. A slash in the breast of his brown suit coat, a dark stain spreading in the cloth about the gaping cut, showed how he had died.

Danny Deever stepped out, going toward the body for a closer look. Abruptly his stocky frame was sheathed with ice.

In the corpse's lap lay the headless face of Leila Towne!

DANNY DEEVER kept going toward that grisly thing, robbed by horror even of the power to stop the automatic movement of his legs. He got a different angle of sight on that which rested on the dead man's knees, and he saw that it was only a mask, the front half of a dummy's head.

The other half of the head lay on the floor, a hollow shell from the bottom of which protruded the dowel-stick that had held it to its pressed-pulp torso.

The murdered man leaned back against fleshlike wax legs. They were artfully modeled, somehow more lifelike than the dead man's face. Narrow-boned, sharp-featured, this was filmed over with a waxy sheen on whose pallor a crisp mustache blackly accented rapacious shrewdness.

The half-head on his lap had been cleanly sliced by a knife. By the knife that had just done murder, for the edge of the cut was smeared with crimson.

"That ties it," Danny Deever muttered. "Just as I figured, something was hid in one of the dummies and it was worth enough to kill for. Three men killed now—first Jimmy, then Ed Corbin, and now

you. What was it?" he asked the man who could not answer him.

He did not ask the corpse the other question. He did not ask it of himself. He knew the answer.

It does not require a man's strength to slip a knife between two ribs and into a heart! A girl can do that—a girl whose ochre skin is transparent and glowing and whose ruby mouth is wistful, a girl at whose touch a man's pulse pounds

"Get them up," someone husked hoarsely. "Get them high up before I let you have it."

There was threat of death in the voice. Deever's hands went above his head.

"Turn around. Slow."

Danny Deever obeyed The man just inside the closed street door was short, effeminately slender, but his swarthy Latin countenance was a mask of hate. The reptilian type of killer this was, malevolent, without conscience, and his fang was in his gloved hand, raised shoulder high and flatly angled back from a supple wrist.

That fang was a long-bladed heavy-hilted knife. It lay point fingertipwards along the first finger. That is how knives are held by throwers who do not miss. This one had not missed the last time, for the knife's steel was still visibly smeared.

Queer that seeing that, Deever's first emotion was one of relief.

"Well," the man with the knife said. "Did you get it?"

Deever's stiff lips made words. "Get what?"

"What we're both after." The fellow's shoebutton eyes moved between lid-slits, flicking over the pageant of wax figures. "Didn't have time yet, huh? What did you do, shuffle the dolls so Harding couldn't find the right one and then get mixed up yourself?"

"I still don't know what you're chattering about," the insurance dick said wearily—which was no lie. But the question

had told Deever a lot he wanted to know.

The dead man was the one whose voice he'd heard on the telephone. He'd come here in a hurry after that conversation had ended, and had been stabbed the instant he'd fingered what he thought was the dummy over which all the killing was going on. The slayer had sliced open the wax head and found—nothing.

WAS it Leila Towne who'd lured Ralph Harding to his murder, keeping on with her talk while Deever lay unconscious at her feet?

"Come on," the dick heard. "Get wise to yourself. If I can save ripping all them dolls apart it's worth something to me. Spill where you've got the right one cached and you get a quarter split. Keep on playing dumb and you'll get—*this*." A small movement of the upraised arm, like the little sway of a coiled mocassin's head before it strikes, indicated what 'this' would be.

The pattern had become very plain. The Towne girl and the Latin were in cahoots, planning to hijack whatever was hidden in one of the figures. Harding's call had given them their chance, but they'd figured that waylaying the halfwit messenger at his destination would leave Leila in the clear. The knifer had beaten Jimmy to the dark stairs, had ambushed him and bumped off both the errand boy and Ed Corbin. But search of the figure had drawn a blank, and the fellow had returned here for another try.

Deever's arrival had interrupted him. While the girl stalled Deever, the olive-faced killer had been in the office behind the screen. Harding's call had given them the chance both to put the detective out of the way and to get Harding to point out the right dummy.

The girl had skipped after the third kill and the second failure to find what they wanted. Her accomplice had returned, and come upon Deever.

"Well?" that accomplice mouthed. "I ain't got all night. What's the answer?"

Danny Deever licked his lips. "I'd like to oblige," he said very calmly. "But you're on the wrong track. I—"

Muscles exploded in his calves, flung him across toward the swarthy killer in a dive so flashingly swift that the knife wrist would not come into action before the dick had grabbed it. Deever's other hand, balled into a fist, drove at the olive-tinted jaw.

It missed its mark as the Latin jerked his snarling head to one side. Deever's feet found floor-purchase again, and at once the two were gripped in a death struggle.

Whipcord sinew, muscles of steel, belied the knifer's feminine slimness. Danny Deever was aware that the outcome of this scrap was by no means foregone. As he hung onto the hand that held his antagonist's knife, the killer clutched the wrist of his other hand, so that it could not launch a finishing blow. Taut and silent, the two men strained, their backs bent in quivering arcs, their lips teeth-bitten, their eyes glaring hatred.

Curiously silent that fierce fight was, and curiously static. The only sound was that of their labored breathing, the only movement the almost imperceptible shifting of feet on dust-grey flooring.

From the corner of his eyes Danny Deever could just see the silver gleam of the long narrow blade and the red smear of blood upon it. If it tore free there would be more blood on it—his own blood. It must not get free. It—must not. . . .

The Latin broke back, abruptly. Agony sliced up Danny Deever's thigh from his left knee as a sharp heel drove against the kneecap. The kick numbed his leg and it folded under him. His opponent surged forward and he went down.

The Latin's wrist tore free from Deever's clutch, and the sallow face was fol-

lowing him down as he fell. A knee dug into the dick's chest, pinning him to the floor. The knife flailed downward, a silver gleaming arc of death. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Killer At Large

THE knife clattered from nerveless fingers! Gun bark pounded belatedly against Danny Deever's ears and the weight toppled from his chest. His sight blurred, and cleared again, and where the hate-contorted countenance of the killer had been, a heavy-jowled florid face hung above the gasping detective.

"You all right, Danny?" a familiar hoarse voice demanded. "Did he get you?"

"Frank," Deever gasped. "Frank Bannion! How—how—"

"Easy, lad, easy," the police lieutenant warned him. "You're damn well shaken up. I pulled open the door, saw you going down under the guy, clip-shot him."

"Thanks, Frank," Danny Deever grunted, pulling his torso up from the floor. "You did me a favor and I won't forget it." His late antagonist was sprawled on the floor beside him, and a gaping hole in the back of his head was

guarantee he'd do no more knifing. "But you'll do me another if you'll tell me how on earth you got here." He let Bannion help him to his feet.

"You close-mouthed lummock," the officer growled. "Your hackman came around for his license. Jim Phelan had told me about stopping you, to explain why he wasn't on the job, and I got this address out of the cabbie. We're stumped. That's why I came looking for you as soon as I could get free of the Homicide Squad. I want to know what line you've got on the cop-killer."

"There he is." Deever nodded to the body on the floor. Another cop was crowding in from the street, gat in his fist. "There's the lug that got Ed Corbin."

His columnar legs straddled, Frank Bannion glowered down at his victim. "Too bad," he rumbled, "I had to shoot so quick and put him out. The boys would have liked to have had a session with him in the back room." His mouth tightened to a cruel slash across his face and his hands opened and closed, opened and closed at his sides as though their banana-like fingers were throttling someone.

Danny Deever had a momentary vision



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of an ochre-tinted, pulsing throat in the grip of those fingers, and he shuddered.

"Gees, lieutenant," the cop in the doorway exclaimed, "There's another stiff over there." He jabbed a thumb past the group, pointing to that which had been Ralph Harding.

Bannion wheeled, took a look, and twisted to Deever. "What's been coming off here?" he blurted. "What took *you* here, and what happened? . . . You, Ginsburg, find a 'phone and call the house to send Homicide over here."

"There's one in that office," Deever said, pointing. The policeman went into it, and the insurance dick turned to Bannion. "I came here to find out the reason for murder—and I found more murder."

"Yeah," the lieutenant growled. "Damn near for yourself. But stop beating around the bush and spill what you know."

"**A**LL right." Deever told of hearing the shot from Ninth Avenue, of seeing the shadowy figure flit towards Eighth and vanish, of his discovery on the stairs. "It was evident that Corbin saw or heard something, investigated, was killed for his pains. It was the motive for the killing of the other man that would give the clue to the murderer.

"My first thought was that he had accidentally come upon someone chiselling into a fur loft and been slugged to keep him silent. But none of the doors in the building showed any evidence of being worked on, and I couldn't see any explanation for the way the dummy was smashed.

"That might have been the work of a mad killer, but somehow I thought not. A lunatic would not have bothered to unwrap the paper from the figure so neatly. I had a notion that somehow the murder revolved around that dummy, so I went up to the Blue Star offices to see what I could find out about it.

"The couple there hadn't ordered it,

knew nothing about it. Not only their saying so made me sure of that, but the fact I found them getting ready to go home in a perfectly calm and normal manner. I decided to trace the figure back to where it came from. Ten to one it was the establishment that regularly supplied the store organization, and I asked for the name.

"My notion about the figure was confirmed when I found that the killer had taken a chance on returning to smash the head, that it evidently had rolled down the stairs when he attacked the messenger. It was clear then that something was hidden in the dummy, or in some dummy, so valuable a man would commit murder to get hold of it. I hustled over there hell-bent on finding out what it was.

"When I got here—"

Deever broke off. He was looking at Frank Bannion's hands. They were big and they were strong and they could be very cruel on occasion. They could be cruelest when they had a cop-killer in their clutches, or one through whose complicity a cop had been killed.

"Go on," the lieutenant grunted. "You got here, and then what?"

The detective pulled a shaking hand across his forehead. "Sorry, Frank. Guess that scrap took more out of me than I realized." He came to a decision—he'd say nothing about the girl, Leila. "The door wasn't locked. I barged in. The place was empty." There was time, a lot of time, that had to be accounted for. "I yelled and got no answer. I went in the office there, found nobody, decided to look around for papers, for something that might give me a clue to what it was all about. I was very careful to leave no trace of my search, so it took me quite a while, but I found nothing. Just as I got through I heard someone come in, and right after that heard a groan.

"I jumped out, saw this lug standing over the corpse he'd just made, calmly

slicing open a dummy-head as if it were an apple. Like a damn fool I forgot all about my automatic, tried to take him barehanded. He turned out to be more than I could handle and—and the rest you know."

BREATH whistled from between Bannion's teeth. "All of which ought to teach you not to try and be a police force all by yourself. But you did damn well, at that. I'll admit the case had me winging, what with the busted up dummy and the way it looked like the two stiffs had been kicked to death."

"Like they'd been *what*?" Deever exclaimed sharply.

"Yeah," the lieutenant said. "When we started making measurements to reconstruct what they'd been cracked with it turned out to be exactly the shape and size of a shoe. But how the hell this bozo had power enough to crumple skulls with a shoe I can't make out."

A pulse pounded in Deever's temple.

"They're on the way over, Lieutenant," Officer Ginsburg reported. "They'll be here any minute."

"When they get here you might have some of the boys rip apart all the dummies," Danny Deever said. "Whatever this bird was after is still in one of them. In the meantime I'm going in there and sit down. My knee is giving me hell."

"Go ahead."

Deever's legs were rubbery under him as he limped into the partitioned-off room, but it was his brain that was giving him the most trouble. He got to the swivel chair at the desk, put his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

Jimmy and Corbin had been kicked to death. The attack on Deever himself had been made with a strangely lethal shoe. But the Latin had used a knife on both Harding and himself. Killers stick to a single weapon, unless there is some reason to make them change. *Was* the man

Bannion had shot to death the murderer on the stairs? Or was there someone else?

Thought broke off. Deever was looking down at the knee the olive-skinned knifer had kicked.

The truth pounded Danny Deever's skull. He felt certain now that Leila Towne had not run out of here, with an accomplice in crime. She had been *dragged* out, by a murderer who kicked his victims to death, crushing their skulls. She had been carried off, God alone knew where, by a slayer who was not, who could not be, the knifer who lay stark and harmless out there by the street door!

DANNY DEEVER jumped up—and the name he'd been about to shout was choked in his throat. He couldn't tell Bannion about the girl now, after he'd withheld all mention of her. He couldn't say, "While I thought she was mixed up in these killings I shielded her; now that I know she's not, I'm asking your help to find her." He'd be through with Frank Bannion, with the police. He'd be through with his job.

But while he kept silent, what would happen to Leila Towne, captive of an evasive, shadowy someone who *kicked* his victims to death? . . . He had no right to keep silent. He lurched to the door.

"Hey, lieutenant," he heard as he jerked it open. "Looka this." It was Patrolman Ginsburg's voice and it came from far back in the loft. "Here's the way the killer got in."

There were bulbs lit now, and the place was ablaze with light. What could Ginsburg mean? Deever knew the Latin knifewielder had entered through the front door.

"What you find?" Frank Bannion called back.

The thud of his heavy-soled feet sounded, somewhere among the ranked

dummies. The dick couldn't yell what he had to say. Deever started towards the back too, to get hold of the lieutenant and make his confession.

The rows of completed figures occupied only the middle third of the loft. In the space beyond were dummies in various stages of assembly, stacked arms and torsos. A half dozen legs stood in a row before a long table, weirdly without apparent support. Huge cases, broken open, revealed dozens of wax heads, blonde, red-headed, brown curled. Each of the latter had the face of Leila Towne.

Dozens of hazel eyes stared reproachfully at Danny Deever, and momentarily he seemed caught up in some surrealist nightmare. Letters in black paint splashed on the yellow wood of the cases said: "*Fragil! Defense de Faire Chaud! Produit de France.*" One of them showed the name of a line of ocean freighters.

The two cops were at one of the windows in the rear wall. "See there!" Ginsburg was pointing to rusted iron bars covering the window. "He filed them through here, and bent them back. He must of been strong as a bull for all he was so little."



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"Any lug that could lick Danny in a scrap is powerful," Bannion said, and turned to the clutch of Deever's hand on his elbow. "How about it, Danny?"

"Listen," Danny mouthed. "Listen, Frank, I—" Speech froze on his lips.

Turning, Bannion had uncovered the filed iron stumps jutting up from the sill. A bit of cloth was caught on one of them. A bit of cornflower-blue cloth that could only have been torn from Leila Towne's smock!

"What's bothering you, Danny?"

"I—I just got an idea," Deever answered, regaining his dead pan. "The guy who was knifed must be Ralph Harding, boss of this outfit. Maybe he's got papers in his pocket will tell what all the manslaughter's about."

"Maybe he has," Bannion grunted. "We'll find out when Homicide and the m. e. get here. You know we can't touch the body till then."

"That's right. I should have thought of that." Deever pulled the back of his hand across his forehead. "I'm—I'm feeling kind of sickish. I need air." He shouldered Ginsburg aside, knuckled the window sill and pushed his head out through the opening.

"Take it easy, Danny," he heard behind him, but he was trying to pierce the gloom outside.

In the luminance from the loft windows, he made out a street-level backyard cluttered with debris. A decrepit wooden fence running toward an alley mouth was dimly outlined a hundred feet to his right. Beyond the fence rose the rears of another set of buildings, ominously black and lifeless.

"Maybe you got knifed somewhere you don't know about," Bannion said.

"No," Deever answered. "No. But I guess I did get kicked where it isn't doing me any good."

The corner of his mouth twitched. Not all life was absent from those structures

the other side of the fence. A yellow hair-line, horizontal and perhaps a yard long, threaded the stygian wall of one of them, a little to his left. . . .

Siren howl hooted through the night, and there was the purr of a powerful racing motor. "Your Homicide Squad's coming, Frank," Deever said. "You better go let them in. I'll be all right in a minute."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

He heard the thump of the cops' foot-falls going away. The melancholy hoot of the police auto was nearer. Danny Deever turned sidewise and stepped over the sill into the backyard.

CHAPTER SIX

The Foot That Kills

HE WENT to the left, noiselessly swift, crouching low so as not to be silhouetted against the glaring windows. His fingertips brushed a pile of rubbish and he let his hand trail it, hoping to find something that might serve him as a weapon. He felt something fairly large and round, picked it up.

He almost laughed aloud when he saw, at the edge of the beam of radiance from the last window, that it was a dummy's head he clutched. Its back was bashed in, accounting for its having been thrown out, but its face was unmarred and it was the face of Leila Towne. It would make a poor club, but for default of a better he kept hold of it.

The fence wasn't high, and Deever got over it easily. It was only a step to the fouled brick wall in which that thread of light showed.

It came through under the black oblong of a corrugated iron sheet that ran in grooves, shuttering a warehouse window, and it was head-high to him. Deever straightened, got his eyes to the slit. He

saw a small room, walled by whitewashed boards. He saw the thighs and middle back of a man, hulking, black-clothed. Beyond the man was a rude cot and a slim blue-smocked form lying on it, ropes binding hands and slender ankles.

A voice came faintly to Danny Deever. "The last chance I give. Where is it?"

"I tell you I don't know." Leila Towne's eyes were big with pain and dread, her lips not red but grey. "If I knew I would have told you long ago, but I don't even know what you're after."

"So you no believe Boris Bornov," the first voice grunted. "Two already have die in his search for the big doll, and now you—"

There was movement alongside the half-torso Deever could see, and then slowly, threateningly, a foot came up into the range of his sight, was lifted above it.

It was no human foot. Poised now above Leila Towne's curly head for a crushing blow, it was a heavy piece of metal, a foot-shaped club that would crush a skull by its own weight. The picture of how Ed Corbin's skull had last looked lightened across Danny Deever's aghast brain.

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His free hand pushed upward at the window slide. It moved an inch, and stuck. It was jammed.

"Wait!" Leila cried. "Wait. I'll tell you. It's the fourth one in the third row from the back."

"The fourth in the t'ird row," the guttural voice grunted. "I go look."

"Yes. Go look." The terror was still in the girl's eyes. "You'll find it there. But untie me first. These cords are hurting me."

"No," Bornov grated. "Not till I see if you lie."

The black-clothed figure moved out of Deever's vision. The dick crouched. He'd come out of the window and—

BUT the heavy footfalls moved away from the window, and there was the sound of rusted hinges creaking. Deever cursed softly with disappointment. This Boris Bornov was Ed Corbin's killer. He was going out into the street. He would come around through the avenue. Seeing the squad's car in front of the Trutliffe establishment, he would make his getaway. A warning to the cops wouldn't help.

There was the sound of hinges again, and movement in the blackness. A door opened, closed. Against pale sky-glow a hulking, simian figure showed, a big-thewed giant. Clutched in one great paw, Deever could make out the terrible foot that had already taken two men's lives.

"She fool me!" Bornov grunted, and was motionless, gazing at the lighted rear windows of the loft that was his objective. "She make trap for me."

He would be a formidable opponent unarmed. With that metal club, he was unconquerable. Deever could not even hope to hold him long enough for aid from the cops to come. The killer of Ed Corbin, warned by those blazing windows, was about to duck into the black rabbit warren back here and escape.

"The hell you will!" Danny Deever muttered.

A humorless grin bisected his face. Shifting his hold on the dummy head to the dowel stick projecting from its neck, he lifted it into the bar of light seeping out of the window.

"Police!" he cried in a high, piping voice. "Help! Police!"

Bornov whirled, saw what appeared to be the face of the girl stuck out of the window and calling for the police. His arm swept up and he hurled the heavy foot at that face.

It struck squarely, with a sound like breaking eggshells. In the same instant Deever let go of the mask and lunged for the giant who had hurled the club. His hard fists were swinging.

Thud! Thud! Those fists landed, one on a craggy jaw, the other in a muscled abdomen. The unexpected onslaught staggered its hulking victim. Then, instantly, Danny Deever was involved in a furious maelstrom of combat. That initial advantage, though, had given him time to let out a shout for help, and it enabled him to hold his own till dark forms piling out of the loft's back window and pouring over the fence rescued him from Boris Bornov's pounding, pile-driver blows.

Battered and bleeding, Deever reeled back against the wall. "Hold on to this boy, Frank," he gasped to Lieutenant Bannion. "He's the guy who did for Ed Corbin, not the other one. You'll find the foot he did it with up the alley here."

"A foot?" Bannion goggled at him in the illumination provided by the Homicide Squad's flashlights.

"A metal foot," Danny Deever responded, "like those you'll find weighting the legs of all those dummies in there so they'll stand by themselves. And now, if you'll excuse me, I've got someone to see, inside here." He turned and vanished through the door out of which the killer had come.

BORIS BORNOV was on his way to the Tenth Precinct Station House, his guards wondering whether they dared disobey Lieutenant Frank Bannion's injunction to wait with their "questioning" of him till said lieutenant's return. The Homicide Squad was busy with its camera shots and its dusting for fingerprints and the rest of its variegated activities. Danny Deever and Leila Towne and Frank Bannion were closeted in the office of the Trutulife Figure Corporation.

"When I sat down in here to rest," Danny Deever was saying, "I got thinking and I saw there was something screwy about the set-up. In the first place this place was all lighted up when I came in. 'There must have been someone here just before that,' says I to myself, 'and since they haven't come back yet, maybe they didn't go out of their own free will.'" He winked at Leila, and from that point reverted to the truth.

"I noticed those streaks on the floor there, and I got a hunch they'd been made by shoe polish. I looked closer and sure enough there were little shreds of leather—see—there and there. I was sure by that time someone had been dragged out of here, the back of their heels scraping along the floor.

"But it wasn't enough to get you all hopped about. You see, I—"

"Kind of wanted to make the kill yourself, huh," Bannion cut in. "Feeling that Corbin's popping off was your fault for talking me into having him transferred."

"Right," Deever said, and went on with what he'd heard in the backyard.

"The fourth dummy in the third row," Bannion exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell us that before? Here the boys are breaking in the heads of all them dummies, and all the time you know which one—"

"But I don't," the girl said demurely. "I didn't even know it was a dummy that awful man wanted me to tell him about till he let it slip, with that foot hanging

over me. I said anything then, to stop him, to gain a little time. I said the first thing that came into my head. I hoped if he went looking something would happen."

"And it did," Deever said. "That was about the quickest thinking, and the smartest, I ever heard from a gal." He beamed proudly.

"It wasn't anything," Leila demurred. "Not in comparison to the way you worked out the whole thing. That's positively brill—"

"Listen, you two," the police officer protested. "You can postpone this mutual admiration business till I'm not around. Just what's the result of this positively brilliant thinking you've done, Dan?"

"Well," Deever grinned, "the way I figure things is this: The fellow with the knife's been identified as Ramon Gonzales, one of the partners of the Blue Star Specialty Company, dealers in all kinds of novelties, including jewelry that they sell at surprisingly low rates."

"Right. We've always figured them as fences, but we've never been able to get anything on them."

"They weren't fences, but outlets for a smuggling ring. Something in very small compass but exceedingly valuable was sent over hidden in one of the dummy heads, which Leila has told us are made in France from the master models she sculps. Harding kept all his workers here in ignorance of what he was doing, would send Jimmy out at night with the figures he was specially interested in.

"A delivery was due tonight, but Leila was working late, so Harding 'phoned her to send the figure over. She got her signals twisted and sent the wrong dummy to the wrong place. Bornov had gotten wind of all this somehow, overheard her drilling Jimmy in the address, hijacked the errand boy, killing poor Corbin in the process. Finding out he was fooled, Bornov came back here and kid-

napped Leila, figuring on getting the secret of the real dummy out of her.

"Meantime Harding came back here with Gonzales, who saw a chance to doublecross his partners and Harding by sheathing his knife in the latter. But he was a little too previous with his killing, because Harding had somehow gotten mixed up on the figures, and the one he pointed out wasn't the one in which the—whatever it is—is hidden."

"I think I can explain that," Leila interrupted. "After Ralph went out I told Jimmy to dust off the dummies. He must have gotten them all disarranged."

"That's probably it," Deever agreed. "Well, that's about all of it, Frank."

"Except that we still don't know what it's been all about," Bannion explained. "It sure must be something to—" A knock at the door cut him off. "Well?" he called. "Come on in."

THE office door opened and Captain Ryan, of the Homicide Squad, entered. "I thought you'd like to see this, Frank," he purred, and opened his big hand.

An iridescent sun lay in the calloused palm, or so it seemed.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Ryan achieved a masterpiece of understatement. "You know what it is?"

"What?" Bannion gasped.

"The Tourjanevsky diamond! Down at Headquarters we've got a circular on it from the Paris Surete. It was originally one of the Imperial Russian Crown Jewels, disappeared at the time of the Revolution, showed up in Paris, was stolen about a month ago from its owner. It's worth—oh—somewhere around three or four hundred thousand. A pretty good bait for murder, I'd say."

"Gug," Danny Deever choked. "Gug."

"Hey," Bannion exclaimed. "What's the matter with you?"

"Matter enough," Deever spluttered. "That—that diamond was insured by Federal's Paris office."

"Well, I'll be damned," Bannion blinked. "Three men get killed and a fourth is booked for the hot squat, and you get credit for saving your bosses something like half a million, all on account of a hunch."

"Right," Danny Deever grinned. "And I've got another hunch, right now."

"What is it?"

"That I've got something more than that out of tonight's work," Danny Deever answered. "Something that's worth a damn sight more than half a million to me." He was looking right into Leila Towne's eyes when he said that. And, curiously enough, there seemed to be understanding, and assent, in those long-lashed hazel orbs.

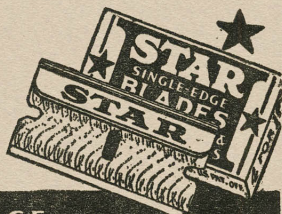
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A smashing novelette of unearthly crime

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CHAPTER ONE

Grisly Calling Card

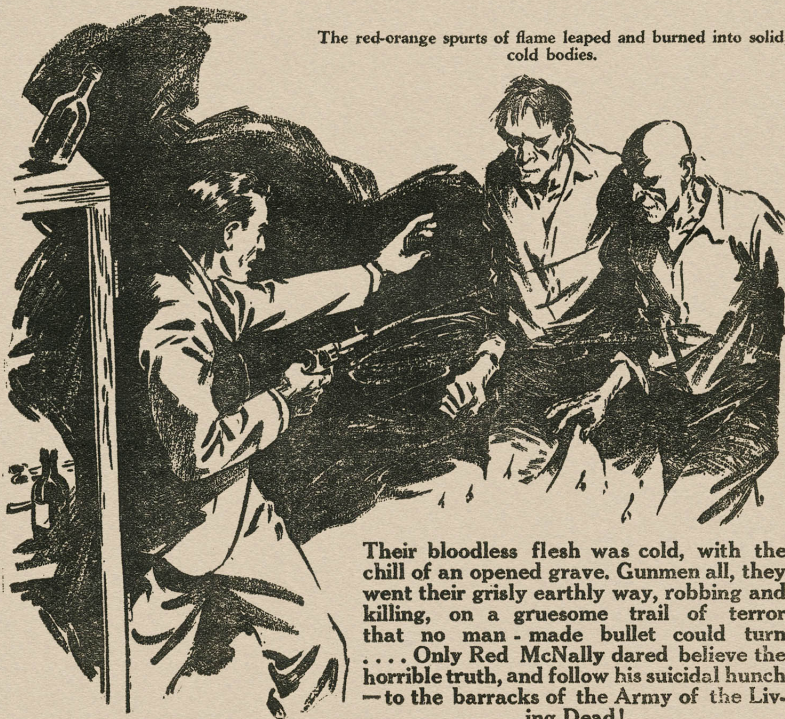
DETEKTIVE Lieutenant Edward McNally took a last deep inhalation from his cigarette and tossed it aside. Bareheaded, his red hair a beacon in the noonday street throng, he emerged from the narrow shade of the sidewalk awning and crossed the street. He was ascending the six granite steps to the Detective Bureau when he heard the whine of a siren.

A police car, jammed with plain clothes men, careened down the narrow alleyway between the Criminal Courts Building and Police Headquarters. In that hair-trigger second McNally was down the steps, catapulting his lean body onto the running board of the roadster. As the car took the curve into the street and the siren broke into a screech, he carefully climbed over the door and into Detective (First Class) O'Brien's lap.

"What's up now?" His voice was small against the yell of the siren.

Sergeant Orlich, who was driving,

The red-orange spurts of flame leaped and burned into solid, cold bodies.



Their bloodless flesh was cold, with the chill of an opened grave. Gunmen all, they went their grisly earthly way, robbing and killing, on a gruesome trail of terror that no man-made bullet could turn . . . Only Red McNally dared believe the horrible truth, and follow his suicidal hunch—to the barracks of the Army of the Living Dead!

LIVING DEAD

spoke from the corner of his mouth without turning his head. "Garfield Street Bank—holdup—shooting."

McNally disposed his long legs in the scant space beneath the dashboard. "Hope I'm not too heavy for you, O'Brien."

O'Brien grunted. Orlich, his chubby face expressionless, the knuckles of his knotted hands white, wheeled and twisted the car through the motionless traffic.

Five minutes, and the car slid with an abrupt clenching of brakes to the curb

opposite the white marble bank portico. Two radio cars were already double-parked before the bank. Several harness cops with police positives dangling helplessly in their hands stood on the sidewalk.

McNally leaped to the sidewalk, O'Brien close on his heels. O'Brien had



not lifted the machine gun from its clips behind the seat. There was no need. The bandits had already got away.

As he ran across the street McNally heard the radios in the two cruisers blaring the code numbers like a quarterback's signals. Headquarters was isolating that section of town.

McNally and Sergeant Orlich plunged into the bank. O'Brien stayed outside on the sidewalk, herding together eyewitnesses.

The first thing that grasped McNally's attention was the obvious fact that there was no body, nor even a wounded man.

"It came over the telephone that there was shooting going on here, Red," he explained, pushing toward where McNally stood before the long row of tellers' cages.

McNally did not seem to hear. He was listening to the incoherent words of an assistant cashier.

"There were three of them. They came in together, but nobody paid any attention—they were so well dressed. Then all at once one of them pulled a little machine gun from under his coat. And the others had short automatics—"

"Belly busters," Orlich growled.

McNally made an impatient gesture for the sergeant to keep silent.

"One of them went down the cages," the bank employe continued. "He had a big cloth bag he stuffed with money. He didn't go into the vault. Then they turned and went out. It didn't take more than a couple of minutes altogether. I shot at them while they were going out. I think I hit somebody, too."

"What!" Orlich yelled, startled out of his usual phlegmatic calm. "You shot at them?"

The youth nodded. "There's a gun on a shelf beneath the till. Just as they were going out I grabbed it up and fired. The rear man sort of jerked. But I couldn't have hit him bad, because he walked on out after the others."

"Good Lord!" McNally exclaimed. "Didn't they keep you covered until they got outside? Didn't they blast back at you?"

The youth shook his head. "They turned their backs on us and walked out as though they didn't care whether we shot at them or not."

"This beats the devil, Orlich," McNally muttered. "Bandits who turn their backs and walk out as calmly as you please after staging a bank robbery! What on earth does it mean? Some new kind of bullet-proof underwear, maybe."

Abruptly he turned and strode toward the revolving doors. "Where was the man when you fired—about here?"

"Yes, sir, about there."

McNally glanced about. In the brass-bound door cylinder were two brightly grooved scars. The marble paneling was chipped.

Suddenly McNally stooped, picked up something he held gingerly before him . . . That something was a neatly severed human index finger!

"Good God, lad!" McNally exclaimed, looking at the grisly object. "You shot one of his fingers off."

He was looking at the finger with a curious intentness.

"Orlich," he said abruptly, "look here." His eyes swept the polished floor, came back to rest with puzzled fascination on the bullet-severed finger. "Why in hell isn't there any blood in sight, either on the floor or on this—thing?"

An uncontrollable chill raced through his veins as he stared at the bit of flesh and bone in his hand. His mind reeled with a strange horror.

"WELL," Sergeant Orlich grunted, "we've identified two of them, at any rate—"

McNally and Orlich, their fingers stiff from the handling of innumerable photographs, sat facing each other across

McNally's Detective Bureau desk. Absent mindedly, McNally nodded.

"It's a start," he admitted. "Those bank people agreed pretty well on Angel-face Moran and Louis Santoro. That points rather definitely to—Mike Corelli. We'll know more after he's picked up."

"It's funny they didn't bother to wear gloves," Orlich said. "You might even—good Lord!—you might even say they were *criminally* careless about that. And the way they turned their backs and walked out of the bank! Anyhow, Cullinan'll find out who that finger's off if it takes him all night."

McNally nodded. "Yes. But I was puzzling about something else. How on earth did they get away? We had thirty cars and two hundred cops ringing that district within ten minutes."

Orlich shrugged. "They jumped out fast. They ran into an alley that goes through to Bisbee Street. Nobody would notice anything funny about a truck pulling out of the other end of that alley; it's a commercial district. Lots of cops aren't very thorough when they put the eye over a respectable looking truck, Red. Anyway, that's a suggestion."

McNally thoughtfully rubbed his lean smooth-shaven chin. "I guess you're right, Orlich," he said slowly. "Let's hope that the routine investigation turns something up."

At that instant the buzzer on the scarred oaken desk sounded. McNally reached forward, lifted the inter-departmental phone. Cullinan's voice rasped metallically. Even from across the desk Orlich could hear every word he said.

"That finger, Red." There was a brief smug pause. "It's off a fellow named Cote—James, alias Whitey, Cote."

For a moment McNally and Orlich were silent. Then McNally, his voice harsh with incredulity, asked, "Are you sure, Cullinan? You couldn't have made a mistake?"

The rasping voice, a little impatient now, as though its owner suspected that his intelligence was being questioned, answered, "Absolutely sure. It's an identical print."

Red McNally stared at Sergeant Orlich. Then he leaned slightly forward over the desk. "Okay, Cullinan," he said tersely. "Thanks." Slowly he cradled the receiver.

The chubby, middle-aged Orlich was on his feet, his face dark. "That's a hell of a joke!" he snarled. "No wonder there wasn't any blood, if that finger came off Whitey Cote's hand! The Elmwood police have positively identified Whitey as one of three gunmen who stuck up the Bijou Theatre cashier at eight forty-five last night and got away with the night's receipts. Only Whitey wasn't in that gang today. He couldn't have been, because he's dead!

"Last night that Bijou Theatre house dick came running out of the house into the lobby and pumped a gunful of slugs into Whitey's guts just as Whitey was climbing into the getaway car. He didn't miss, either, because Whitey jerked like a fish on a line as those slugs went into his middle.

"God, Red, this gives me the creeps! Whitey couldn't have lived more than a few minutes at the most. So that finger couldn't have been shot off Whitey today; it was *cut* off last night or this morning, after Whitey died—and dropped on that bank floor as a deliberate, grisly dare to the police! What a calling card! Boy, just wait until we tangle with that mob! Their sense of humor is a little too much for me to stomach."

CHAPTER TWO

The Unburied Dead

IT WAS three thirty P.M. Across the narrow cobbled street from the H.C. Gilbert Company, makers of precision

tools, a small laundry truck had parked. The steady hum of machinery droned from the four-story concrete and steel structure, drifted out across the low roofs of suburban homes, garages and vacant lots. The H. C. Gilbert factory was more than eight miles distant from the Garfield Street Bank.

A man wearing a white jacket and a visored red-banded cap sat in the cab of the truck—a small, wizened, gray-faced, watery-eyed man who kept glancing fearfully toward the factory. Only a moment before three men, similarly clad, had emerged from the truck and crossed the street. They had disappeared within the building. One of those men carried a bundle of laundry sacks over one arm.

A fifth man crouched on the floor of the cab. He was swarthy, black-haired, fat. A sub-machine gun lay between his knees.

A TILED corridor bisects the office of the H. C. Gilbert Company. Down that corridor strode the three men in laundry uniforms.

Before the paymaster's door stood a company guard, a holstered .38 dangling at his hip. He watched the three approach.

"Laundry's back there. Hey, what the—"

The muzzle of a Thompson gun, jammed into his middle, silenced him. His hands reached ceilingward.

One of the three opened the door. Bandits and guard filed into the office.

Behind their desks the paymaster and a bookkeeper leaped to their feet. Their hands, too, abruptly went up. There was something unhuman in the grim cold silence of these men.

Without haste one of the bandits stepped forward and stuffed a laundry sack with the small pay envelopes, swept the neat stacks of coins and bills into its canvas maw.

Coolly the three men turned their backs and walked from that office. The door closed softly behind them.

Seconds passed before the petrified guard and paymaster realized that they could have poured a volley of shots into the backs of those men. For the guard's .38 still hung at his waist and a sawed-off shotgun stood against the wall within easy reach. The paymaster and guard rushed to the windows.

The three men were crossing the street toward a small truck parked diagonally opposite. They were not running. They were walking as calmly and slowly as though they were out for a pleasant stroll. Their guns were hidden once more; a laundry bag concealed the Thompson gun.

The guard jerked out his automatic. He aimed carefully at the foremost bandit. The gun crashed—four shots in rapid succession.

The man down there swerved sharply forward, stumbling from the push of the heavy slugs. But he did not fall. He walked steadily ahead toward the rear of the truck.

And then the heavy shotgun boomed. The rearmost bandit spun about and sprawled headlong. He began to crawl on hands and one knee toward the truck. His left leg dragged flabbily.

The guard was staring incredulously down at the smoking .38 in his hand. He *knew* that he had hit that first man—yet the fellow had not gone down! Uncertainly he fired again. But he was not sure if his shots took effect. His morale was gone.

The shotgun boomed again. A head peered momentarily around the side of the truck—vanished. The two foremost bandits were climbing within the paneled body of the truck. They had made no attempt to rescue their wounded comrade.

Abruptly the truck hurtled backward,

swung in a sharp arc and roared down the street.

"God!" The paymaster shuddered.

The wounded man on the pavement was crawling, dragging his crippled body after the rapidly receding truck.

RED McNALLY and Sergeant Orlich stood unobtrusively in a ring of some fifteen police and medical men grouped about a high white bed that had been wheeled from a public ward in the Wellsboro General Hospital to this larger lecture room. The doors were locked. Overhead a battery of high-powered lights glared down with cruel intensity.

The white bed was covered by a strong canvas shroud laced to the bed by flat canvas straps. Beneath that shroud a man, with his head visible through a hole in the canvas, struggled to escape.

The medical men were talking among themselves, taking notes with feverish intensity, examining the writhing thing on the bed with incredulous, microscopic care. Their voices were high-pitched, close to hysteria. For they were examining something that could not be, yet which was.

"Red!" Sergeant Orlich plucked at McNally's arm. "Did you touch—him?"

McNally nodded, shuddered. The clammy, snake-like coldness of that thing on the bed still clung horribly to his fingertips. He rubbed them against his clothing.

Doctor Guldenberg, senior physician at Wellsboro, was speaking. And his voice trembled as he spoke.

"This thing—it is an impossibility! Three hours we have had him here—yet still he struggles as though something calls to him! There is no discernible heartbeat. There is no warmth in this man. He is like one dead—yet where is the rigor mortis? It is not in him. His muscles tense and relax with his struggles."

He had begun pacing back and forth, back and forth before the circle of men surrounding the bed.

"*Gott in Himmel!*" he whispered. "This man doesn't even bleed from his wounds!" He wheeled back to the thing on the bed, almost crying now as he stared down at it. His lips moved tremblingly.

"*Mein lieber Gott!* Can I be going mad? He struggles on—without pulse, without losing blood! And there are four bullets in his torso, and the left gastrocnemius is torn in two by little shot. And he is cold as a dead one!"

Abruptly he turned, faced his colleagues. His fists were clenched, his eyes haggard.

"Gentlemen," he said slowly, "we must not let ourselves conjecture too much. We must stay close to sanity. How this man moves and struggles, I know not. His flesh, it is as if dead. And progressively he grows weaker. His energy wastes, gentlemen; *that* is something upon which we can center our minds."

Orlich's chubby hand was plucking at Red McNally's sleeve. "Red!" he muttered. "Let's get out of here. I feel sick."

IT WAS late at night when Red McNally dropped Sergeant Orlich at the latter's little suburban home and turned his battered old coupe back toward the city. Yet Red drove slowly, his thoughts preoccupied with the incredible events of the day, shivering chills occasionally crawling across his flesh. The pattern of events had begun to point toward a solution too fantastic for his mind to admit.

For that thing he had seen struggling beneath the frightened eyes of Wellsboro's surgeons had once been a cheap punk named Angelface Moran, and the bullets in its unbleeding entrails had been fired by the assistant cashier at the Garfield Street Bank!

And only an hour ago Doc Greene had telephoned that that ghastly enigma beneath the canvas shroud at Wellsboro Hospital was still feebly twitching. . . . That thing that had not uttered a word or a groan throughout its struggles; that thing that had begun to *blat!*

Red, parking his car in the ramp garage near his apartment house, tautened and relaxed his body as though by doing so he could stake off the memory of something unclean. Riding upward in the elevator toward his little bachelor apartment, he did not speak to the elevator boy, although ordinarily he had a grin and a joke for everyone.

He unlocked and opened the door to his apartment with an odd feeling of relief. This was home. This was refuge. His fingers reached toward the light switch.

Four hands, like tongs of steel, grasped his arms! Across the darkened room a bridge lamp flashed on.

Mike Corelli sat beneath the glow of that lamp. Hunched in McNally's wing-backed chair, he looked for all the world like some loathsome fat spider.

McNally lunged. But the quadruple grip on his arms was firm as the clenching of Salem's stocks. Too, the men stood close together behind him. He could not even twist his head around enough to glimpse their faces. Their hands felt strangely cold. Momentarily he wondered why they should be cold.

Corelli gestured. McNally felt himself propelled forward, shoved down into a chair. He stared with hot contempt at the obese gangster.

"Well, Mike?"

Corelli grinned. Slowly he took a cigar from an inner pocket, bit off the end, lit the smoke.

"You're a smart cop, for a young fellow. Maybe too smart. The rest of you boys are just mulling around, but I heard you were down around my way tonight

lookin' for me. So I just thought I'd drop in and find out what's up."

McNally's mind was racing. This fat spider before him was a cold-blooded killer, he knew, and a creature so cunning that the police had never been able to pin a charge on him that would hold up in court. And there was no evidence, as yet, to link Corelli with the twin robberies of today. A writ of habeas corpus would get him out of jail within ten minutes.

Then why had Corelli come here? What did the pendulous-lipped snake with the guileless greasy smile want?

"WHAT'S on your mind, Mike?" McNally asked quietly.

Fat lips pursed. "You got imagination, pal—something the rest of those cops you run around with never even heard of. So I just wanted to put you right in advance. Red, they tell me that two of my boys were mixed up in that Gilbert factory holdup. Okay. But don't try to tie me into it, see? Since repeal I just been in a legitimate little protection racket. You know that. I don't want no trouble; I been paying my taxes."

"You don't want to burn, that's certain."

Corelli's face flushed and he moved restlessly in his chair. "I hear they've got Angelface Moran in Wellsboro Hospital with a bullet in him," he said slyly. "He didn't talk, though, did he?"

McNally spoke slowly. "No, he didn't talk." Suddenly he snapped the question, "What about Whitey Cote's finger? Whitey, Angelface and Louis Santoro were your trigger men. Who dropped one of Whitey's fingers on the floor of the Garfield Street Bank?"

For an instant Corelli's face was blank with astonishment, lax with something that may have been fear. His eyes, suddenly roving wildly, seemed to look above and behind McNally. They dropped

again quickly, guardedly, as though to veil his thoughts.

"Whitey Cote's finger!" he muttered. "But I got a straight tip that that Bijou Theatre dick filled Whitey full of holes last night—that Whitey died afterward!" He paused, then added harshly, "Why, sure, Whitey *must* have died after taking that sort of a plugging! That finger must have been somebody's idea of a joke."

"That somebody was most logically you."

Corelli leaned forward. "Get this straight, Red." He punctuated his words with stabs of a fat forefinger. "You're a nice boy, and I'm going to give you a friendly tip. Here it is—just keep out of my hair, that's all."

He heaved himself to his feet, reached down, unscrewed the mouthpiece and diaphragm from the telephone and put them in his pocket. Crossing the room with noiseless waddling strides, he picked up McNally's key from the rug where it had fallen from Red's fingers as he entered the door.

"We'll just lock you in now. After you've hollered yourself out you'll find these things in the back alley."

He took a snub-nosed automatic from a belly-holster and covered the lean red-haired detective.

"All right, boys," he said, "we'll be on our way. Remember what I told you, McNally."

For a few seconds after the door had closed Red McNally remained sitting in that chair. Now that Corelli had gone, his body had suddenly begun to tremble.

He had not seen the faces of the two men who had been holding him, but he had glimpsed their hands. And the hand clutching the biceps muscle of his left arm had been a hand with only four fingers. The index finger was missing! And where that finger had once joined the hand, the flesh was raw and bloodless, and a splintered bone gleamed!

CHAPTER THREE

Cherchez la Femme

THE sun was shining brilliantly when, at eight-thirty the next morning, Red McNally parked his car in the court behind Police Headquarters and walked slowly into the building. On the ground floor he looked for long minutes at the teletype. At last, with strangely sagging shoulders, he climbed the stairs.

In the Detective Bureau he found Sergeant Orlich standing moodily before one of the long windows.

Without turning his head, Orlich said, "You've seen the teletype."

McNally walked to the window. "Yes," he said heavily.

Neither man looked at the other.

With slow intensity Orlich spoke. "A lone gunman broke in Tony Vendetti's hideout over on Bald Hill Road last night and machine-gunned the mob—including Vendetti! He used a stolen Hudson sedan, with stolen license plates. We've got the car."

"I know," McNally said mechanically. "And Corelli hated Vendetti like poison."

Orlich was squinting into the sunlight. "Sure he did," he said softly. "But—you didn't get the whole story on the teletype, Red. Vendetti's gang put up a fight. They managed to empty a couple of automatics into that bird before he mowed them down. *And he didn't fall!* Vendetti said that he didn't fall!"

"Vendetti?"

Orlich gulped. "He didn't die until after the neighbors got there. One bullet left a skull wound that looked as if it had blown his brains out. But he was conscious, even though he looked dead.

"And, Red—" Orlich's voice was shrill "—after the shooting was all over, another man followed the lone gunman into Vendetti's hideout. He was a little wizened, pasty-faced fellow. And he

didn't look like a gangster. He looked more like a professional man—a dentist or a doctor or maybe a college professor. Vendetti didn't recognize him. But he was the boss, all right. He was Number One. He looked at Vendetti's boys—two of them were still squirming and groaning—and he said something to that trigger artist of his, and the two of them carried those two fellows who were still alive out of the house and loaded them into the Hudson and drove away with them.

"The back seat of the Hudson was full of blood when it was picked up. But those two rodmen of Vendetti's were gone. Alive or dead, they were gone. What in the name of Heaven do you think that little man wanted them for, Red? *What did he want them for?*"

"I don't know, Orlich," McNally whispered inanely. His body felt suddenly cold.

Hoarsely, Orlich finished, "Vendetti said that the gunman was Louis Santoro."

McNALLY, after a brief silence, spoke grimly. "I had a caller last night—Mike Corelli. He told me pretty plainly to leave him alone. Two of his guns were with him. You may think that I'm mad when I tell you this, Orlich, but one of those men was Whitey Cote!"

He paused. Orlich's fist, on the window sill, clenched and relaxed.

"No, Red, I don't think you're mad," he said quietly. "I had expected something like this. It may sound incredible, but I am certain that Whitey Cote's body—the body that according to all testimony should be as dead by now as Dutch Schultz or John Dillinger—still moves about like a living man. Fingerprints don't lie, Red."

McNally's lips formed, rather than uttered, his next words. "We've got to talk this thing out, Orlich."

Orlich nodded. He asked irrelevantly. "Red, did you ever cook frogs' legs? Watch them jump around in the pan?"

There was stark horror in McNally's eyes. "Lord, I'd like to talk to Doc Greene," he said uncertainly. "He might offer some solution that wasn't insane."

Orlich shook his head. "You won't talk to Greene. He skipped out for Hot Springs last night. You won't see him until next week, and by then he'll be as bland as an oyster."

With a sudden dogged gesture, McNally turned toward his desk. "Let's sit down and talk."

Orlich complied. Carefully McNally marshaled his facts.

"We know now that Mike Corelli's in this. And we know that he's mortally afraid we'll find his hideout. Why? He doesn't mind a pinch in town, because he knows that we've no evidence that'll hold him. It's our snooping—yours and mine—that's got him scared. And listen, Orlich—" his blue eyes were suddenly hard—"Vendetti was right. Corelli's just the muscle man in this thing. There's somebody or *something* behind him that's the brains; some devil pulling the strings—obviously that wizened little fellow Vendetti saw and described before he died."

"*Something!*" Orlich croaked. "Don't you think the man's human?"

For a long moment McNally was silent. "I don't know—whether he's human or not," he said at last.

The telephone burred sharply. McNally lifted the receiver, took the call. And as he listened a greyness deepened in his cheeks and the muscles along his lean jaw tensed. Almost tenderly he cradled the phone.

"Orlich," he whispered hoarsely, "they've found that laundry truck. There's a lot of half-melted ice in it—and Louis Santoro's body. Louis' body's begun to rot, Orlich. God!" Almost hysterically he added, "He's got four bullets

in his back—bullets out of that guard's gun at the W. C. Gilbert factory!"

KAY EDWARDS put down her white gloves and linen bag on the Chipendale table in the tiny foyer of her apartment and leaned forward to inspect herself in the mirror. It had been hot downtown today; Kay's soft brown hair, restrained by a vivid bandeau, was alluringly disheveled.

It was a little after four. The apartment was deliciously still. For a few moments Kay wandered slowly about the living room, luxuriating in the restful quietude. She started toward the kitchenette, to make some iced tea.

The foyer bell buzzed. Kay wondered idly who it could be as she went to the door. Sometimes Red stopped by in the afternoon to say hello. But he wouldn't be coming today—he had called earlier to say that he was so busy he might have to break the date they had for tonight.

A wizened, gray-faced man stood in the corridor. He was glancing up and down fearfully as the girl opened the door.

"Miss Kay Edwards?" he quavered.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Red McNally sent me to bring you. There's been an accident. Red's been hurt—badly."

For an instant Kay's fingers clenched against the door jamb. Then she said, her voice small with apprehension, "One moment, and I will come with you."

Quickly she turned, gathered up her bag and gloves. The man watched her, his watery blue eyes wary. Together they went out into the corridor.

A Cadillac sedan waited at the curb downstairs. Without hesitation Kay stepped into the car. The wizened man followed her. The sedan glided at once into the city's traffic.

Then Kay glanced at the man sitting on her left, a man who neither moved nor spoke. The grey-faced man, too, had

not uttered a word since entering the car. Suddenly Kay felt afraid.

"You're taking me straight to him?" she asked quickly.

The man made no reply. She noticed now that the side curtains of the car were half drawn, the windows closed.

Terror swept her like a chill driving storm. She looked wildly at the driver. He was a fat man, the hairless back of his neck an obese jellylike pillar of flesh. He wore a grizzled beard.

A scream tightened in Kay's throat. For that beard was fastened beneath the man's ears by two unobtrusive wire hooks. The fat driver wore a disguise!

Kay's scream was never uttered. The grey-faced man's hands flicked out, clamped across her mouth. As she began wildly to struggle, he panted a quick command.

The silent man on her left turned toward her, with strangely terrifying deliberation. Pendulous criminal hands reached toward her, touched her. The man's face loomed over her.

In that instant needles of ice burned in her veins, her heart contracted. For the man's face was bloated, ruddy with a curious loathsome tinge of disease or decay. And his eyes were glazed, expressionless, dead. A stench came from the face so close above her own, a stench that was unmistakably the odor of rotting flesh!

The hands on her shoulders were cold!

Black waves of unconsciousness obliterated her thought, her terror. Her body relaxed, lay still. . . .

"I HEARD you were looking for Mike Corelli." Pudge DeVito, a pick-pocket by profession and a stool-pigeon by instinct, was talking.

Red McNally and Sergeant Orlich looked him up and down distastefully.

"How news does get around," McNally grunted. "Go ahead, shoot."

DeVito licked his thin lips and grinned furtively.

"I don't know nothing except that four, five weeks ago I heard that maybe Mike was going to quit selling protection and retire. Louis Santoro told me that Mike had been driving up around Van Steedenskill, looking at old farms."

He spread his hands out, palms outward, and shrugged.

"All right," McNally said after a moment. "You can go. And listen." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "The next time you roll a drunk be a little more careful. We can't shut our eyes to everything, you know."

The pallid, furtive DeVito shuffled out.

McNally was reaching for the telephone. "We'll try the town clerk's office up there."

Orlich nodded. "Funny thing. I just remembered that a fellow I went to school with is living up in Van Steedenskill—Doc Boyd. Swell fellow—Charlie Boyd."

The Van Steedenskill check took only a few minutes. As McNally had anticipated, the town clerk in that small hamlet had no record of any transaction involving Mike Corelli by name. But he identified the man from McNally's description, and stated that an abandoned farm had been leased a few weeks previously by the swarthy racketeer.

McNally, hanging up the receiver, stared thoughtfully at Sergeant Orlich. "What do you say, Orlich?" he exclaimed abruptly. "Shall we drive up there and snoop around a bit? It's not far. I'll stake you to a bite to eat on the way. We should be back by eight-thirty or so. Only I've got to call Kay and tell her I'll be late. We've a date tonight to go to some roof place where it'll be cool and dance a couple of hours."

Orlich grinned appreciatively, but said nothing while McNally dialed Kay's number.

"She's not home yet. I'll try the rag."

From the Herald's switchboard operator McNally learned that Kay had left at three o'clock. Frowning, he tried the lobby clerk in her apartment house. For a moment that seemed to Orlich an eternity, they talked back and forth. Then McNally set down the phone and swung toward the sergeant. His face was grim and bleak.

"She went out over an hour ago with a shriveled-up little man, a stranger. And she seemed in a great hurry. They drove away in a big Cadillac sedan. There were two other men in the car."

"Sounds like Corelli, Red," Orlich muttered. "He knows you're after him. Maybe he's decided to give you a scare."

McNally's eyes were stony hard. "Perhaps Corelli's scare'll backfire," he rasped, his voice like thin hot wire. "DeVito's tip—he didn't plan on that."

His right hand momentarily caressed the ominous bulge at his hip.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killers' Hideout

AS CONSCIOUSNESS returned to Kay Edwards she gradually realized that she was being carried by two men through tree-shrouded woods. The men halted abruptly, and close beside her she heard the click of a car door. She felt herself being lifted into a second automobile. She opened her eyes furtively, glimpsed the bloated expressionless face of the man who had sat on her left in the Cadillac. Again the odor of rotting flesh came suddenly, strongly, to her nostrils.

For the second time that day she fainted.

When she came awake again she was lying on something flat and hard in the center of a low-ceilinged room. A single naked electric light bulb glared overhead. She turned her head from side to side and struggled to rise, and quickly she realized

that her body was bound to the white top of a metal table by linen bandages.

But she could see clearly the room in which she was imprisoned. It was a room aged and decayed. The wallpaper was discolored, and in many places it had fallen away from the plaster beneath, while here and there patches of dusty lathing showed like naked ribs. The windows were covered by long panels of beaverboard.

At one end of the room were two large zinc tubs, beneath which ran several snow-flaked pipes. One of the tubs was full of fragments of ice. From somewhere beyond the room she sensed, rather than heard, the steady throb of machinery.

The little wizened man stood over Kay. A second man, fat and gross-looking, lounged in a chair tilted against the wall. Kay recognized him; she had seen pictures of him. He was Mike Corelli.

The smaller man was looking down at her.

"You are awake now?" He spoke quietly, yet she sensed an evil timbre behind the low-pitched words, a timbre almost maniacal.

Her terror had returned. She tried to speak, but only an incoherent moan came from between her lips. The man shook his head reproachfully.

"Do not be frightened, little one. We are not going to hurt you. We are merely going to put you to sleep."

"Oh, God!" Kay moaned. "Help me!"

The wizened man spoke soothingly. "It is very necessary. Your sweetheart, Red McNally, has been inquiring about us. We must stop his investigation. You are to be, in effect, our insurance against him."

For an instant Kay found her voice. "But why—put me to sleep?" The words choked off in sudden silence.

The man bending above her smiled slyly.

"Ah, the sleep?" he asked. "That, too, you see, is necessary. We are only two men. Our—colleagues—are really not very intelligent. It would be difficult for us to guard you. Obviously, it would be simplest for us to put you to sleep. And it would be much more comfortable for you. You will not hunger, or thirst, or feel afraid. You will only—sleep. And even in your sleep you will possess a sort of dim consciousness, like a tree or a flower perhaps; you will live a sort of sluggish, twilight life. Perhaps you will even be happy. I do not know."

Beneath the cold glare of the electric bulb Kay's face paled.

Softly the wizened little man added, "Of course, after we have put you to sleep we will immediately let your so indefatigable sweetheart know that no man in the world, other than myself, can ever hope to restore you to consciousness again! Unfortunately for you, that statement will be a lie. Once the sleep has claimed you, you can never, never be brought back to normal consciousness! But your sweetheart will believe me—because he will want so terribly to believe me!—and he will certainly see to it that no police officers annoy me. And he will be very careful not to trouble me himself, I'm sure."

KAY'S fingers were clenched deep in the palms of her hands, "Who are you?" she whispered at last.

The man drew his shriveled figure proudly erect. "No matter," he said shortly. "Call me by any name you please. What does it matter? I will tell you only this concerning my identity. My true name is a laughing stock—"

He made an impatient angry gesture; then, almost instantaneously, and with a strange resurgence of dignity, he added, "Still, it will do no harm to tell you what I have accomplished. . . .

"Girl," he continued slowly, "I have

created a solution which, when injected into the human bloodstream, turns men and women into living robots! Robots, indeed, in far more than name, robots almost in actuality, for I have been careful to incorporate in my formula synthetic, inorganic, and radium-activated foods which completely obviate any necessity of my ever having to feed my brain-children either vegetable or animal nourishment of any sort.

"They are robots almost in actuality. My robot's heart pulsations are very slight, and they pulsate only rapidly enough to keep my solution—thick and viscid as cold molasses—moving with imperceptible slowness through their veins. Girl, my robots are far more invulnerable to physical injury than ordinary men. Their bodies, possessing always the temperature of their surroundings, feel neither cold nor warmth.

"And in still another way they are different from their normal brethren. When injured they bleed, yes, but more slowly than even the oozing of sap from a tapped maple. Were I to hack the hand from one of my living robots' wrists, he would not, in an hour, bleed more than a few drops of my solution-impregnated synthetic blood!

"Now can you begin to understand my great plan—my plan to create a practically mindless, soulless race of human robots, capable of a sort of dim perception, capable of obeying simple commands, but beyond that incapable of thought? Why, that race will be utterly subordinate to the intelligences of the relatively few members of the carefully chosen ruling class and they ultimately will perform all the routine work of the world."

He paused, sighed, then added slowly, "But my solution is not yet wholly perfected. For some strange reason my living robots are appallingly vulnerable to the attacks of inimical bacteria. Seem-

ingly my solution in some obscure manner destroys their powers of resistance to bacterial infection. They rot away as rapidly as dead flesh. Invariably and inevitably they perish within a few days after inoculation. My only present method of preserving life in them for more than a day or two is by keeping their bodies, insofar as possible, in a state of mild refrigeration. My next task, obviously, will be to discover how to give them bacterial immunity. When that task is accomplished my formula will be complete. And, thanks to my criminal ally, I have now found a method by which I may, whenever necessary, replenish my slender funds in order to ensure the continuance of my work."

Abruptly, he paused. "But, enough of this." He turned away, selected a large glass-barreled hypodermic syringe from an orderly litter of glittering objects arranged on a small table conveniently close at hand. "I am now going to inject the contents of this syringe into your veins."

THE sun had already dropped behind the serried ridge of wooded hills in the west when McNally and Orlich turned away from the clapboarded old house where the Van Steedenskill town clerk lived.

"About three miles north, until we pass a stone grist mill," McNally repeated as they drove through Van Steedenskill's elm-lined Main Street. "Then we take the first dirt road to the left and continue on another two miles. The house is old colonial, with a grove of chestnut trees in the yard. It should be easy to identify."

Orlich grunted, "If the road's as bad as this all the way it'll be dark before we get there."

McNally's comment was terse. "Maybe that'll be to our advantage."

A taut silence fell between the two men.

The low hills had turned to mysterious masses of purple, and the brighter stars were already visible when the ramshackle coupe reached the fork in the road. McNally turned on his headlights. Minute by minute the veiling night was deepening.

This side road was little more than a stony rut between walls of underbrush and trees. The car crawled along. Night engulfed the earth.

Orlich, staring intently into the blackness beside the road, suddenly grasped Red's arm. "I think this is it."

They were passing a thin grove of gnarled black-boled trees. Through the trees Orlich had glimpsed a greyish shadowy mass, a house. And the trees were chestnuts.

"We'd better drive on past."

The car crunched on along the stony road, sighed to a gliding halt a hundred yards beyond. McNally turned off the headlights, looked at Orlich, a black shadow beside him in the sudden darkness.

"I'm going back alone, Orlich. I won't be long. You wait here."

The older man expostulated, "But, Red—"

McNally put his hand on Orlich's arm. "We're not police officers here; we're trespassers. We're working on a theory so wild no jury would indict, no state prosecute. And until I get concrete evidence I'm not dragging you into this thing. I want to find out where Kay is, and I can get that information better alone, and with less danger of detection. Stay here, pal. If I get in trouble I'll fire a shot."

Without sound the car door opened. The shadow sitting beside Orlich was gone. Down the road a soft crunching of gravel died into quick silence.

Except for the steady cold gleam of the stars, the darkness was absolute. No light came from the invisible house beyond the grove of chestnuts. The narrow road was

only a lessening of the intense gloom. McNally came to a deeply rutted driveway, turned in beneath the trees.

"Perhaps," he thought, as he crept ahead, "we've come on a wild goose chase. There aren't any lights in the house."

The house was near, ahead and to one side, vaguely seen and monstrous. McNally, his nerves alert as little live snakes, turned in toward it. He was moving silently, with almost phantomlike slowness.

And then, sudden as a bolt of lightning striking from the ground beneath his feet, a million tongues of prickling flame leaped through him! Convulsively his muscles tensed to iron hardness. His arms tautened against his chest; his legs contracted beneath him. Through the terrific pain searing his body he knew that he was falling forward. And then white-hot oblivion. . . .

ORLICH stood in the darkness beside McNally's coupe, peering down the road toward the house hidden among the trees. Only a moment ago he had heard a muffled thud, unmistakably the sound of a body striking soft earth.

A moment passed, and then a rectangle of light gleamed from among the trees and vanished. A door had opened and closed. Immediately the light was supplanted by a mobile beam that appeared and disappeared eerily. Orlich heard the sound of excited voices.

He was thinking with chain-lightning speed. They had trapped Red, that he knew. Should he leap into the car, speed away, and return with police reinforcements? Or should he remain and try to help McNally?

It was a simple decision to make. Like a dissolving wraith, Orlich's solid figure merged with the black trees.

After a few seconds the light, flashing up and down, approached the road. Two

men were walking rapidly toward the car. Reaching it, they paused. Orlich, not twenty feet away, could have shot them down easily where they stood. But he held his fire. To kill those men would not free McNally, and the sound of shooting might bring a swarm of gunmen from the house.

He could hear their words clearly: "There's only one set of tracks in the grass. He must have come alone."

The answer was an animal snarl. "He always was a reckless fool, that McNally. But the electrified wire got him."

Orlich's flesh crawled. The men were clambering into the car.

"We'll drive it into the barn until we decide what to do."

Slowly the small coupe backed down the road, paused, turned into the yard and around behind the house. For a few minutes there was a confusion of sounds. But at last a light shone momentarily from the house, and then there was darkness and silence.

Orlich waited, his nerves jumping and crawling, until he felt reasonably certain the men would not come out again. Then he went directly to the road and plunged into the underbrush on the opposite side. The darkness was absolute, for he dared not use his flashlight, and the thought of the electrified wire made his flesh shrivel whenever his outstretched fingers touched even a leaf or a shrub. Doggedly he searched until he found what he sought—a dry dead tree with moistureless branches.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fire, The Purifier

RED McNALLY awoke to racking pain. His nerves shrieked. Every muscle ached as though his body had been subjected for hours to the most excruciating torture. A face—grey, cadaverous,

with watery mad eyes—was bending over him. Thin grey lips writhed in a toothless leer.

"You are coming around, eh, McNally? Apparently you are not severely burned. We broke the circuit promptly."

Red McNally looked upward into the wizened mad face.

"Where—is—Kay?"

The lips pursed thoughtfully. "She is here. We were holding her as an—antidote against you. And now we have you, too." The man began to laugh crazily. "It is funny, eh?"

Abruptly he turned away from the table and the bound recumbent man.

"Obviously we must leave here at once, Corelli. It is possible that other policemen may follow McNally here. But, before we go, we must inject both McNally and the girl. It is fortunate that McNally followed her here today. I need more subjects, many more subjects, for my experiments. We must work rapidly, though. We have been interrupted once—we must not be interrupted again!"

INCH by inch the weatherbeaten door of the old house was opening. A silent invisible figure stood in the musty hallway. The door slowly closed.

The heavy dry stick that had led Orlich safely past the electrified barrier was probing the opaque gloom. Orlich was taking no chances.

Twenty feet down the hallway a narrow pencil of light, waist high, pierced the blackness. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Orlich approached that light. At last he knelt and looked through the old-fashioned keyhole.

The scene within that ancient room was like the climatic episode of some insanely fantastic motion picture. In the center of the room, beneath an unshaded electric light, a wizened man stooped above a white metal table, upon which lay a lean bound figure. A smaller table,

upon which were arranged a number of stoppered vials, syringes, hypodermic needles and graduated measures, stood close at hand. An obese swarthy man, smoking a cigar, sat in a straight-backed chair tilted against the wall; it was Mike Corelli. Two zinc tubs loomed vaguely at the further end of the room.

Red McNally had not moved. But suddenly, as Orlich watched, he bowed his body convulsively upward against the restraining bonds. The wizened man stepped back. Corelli took the cigar from his mouth.

The wizened man spoke. Orlich could hear him clearly.

"The bonds are strong, eh, friend? Well, be patient. Within a few seconds you will cease to struggle."

He lifted a large glass-barreled syringe. His right hand reached down and grasped McNally's wrist. The silver needle gleamed.

In that instant Orlich lunged against the door, plunged into the room like a bolt hurled by some mighty catapult.

A scream, high-pitched and ululant, burst from the wizened man's lips. He stumbled back. The syringe dropped from his hand, shattered against the floor.

Mike Corelli, his fat hand tugging at the gun in his belly holster, was rearing to his feet. The gun lifted, like the head of a blue-black snake.

Orlich's automatic barked, two shots. And Corelli's fingers dropped the gun and clawed at his silk-shirted chest. Coughing, he sat down, gradually slid off the edge of the chair and sprawled on the dusty floor. His feet drew up behind him, then relaxed.

"Orlich!" McNally was straining, fighting his bonds.

Orlich plunged toward the white-topped table. The wizened little man had run behind one of the great tubs.

And then the light went out. Blackness engulfed the room.

Orlich cursed. Somewhere in the utter darkness beyond the table on which McNally lay, beyond the two zinc tubs whose purpose he could not even remotely guess, crouched and yammered the wizened little man. And that man might be armed. At any instant a spurt of red flame might split the abysmal blackness.

Orlich dropped to his knees, crawled silently along the floor toward the zinc tubs. Behind him he could hear McNally's struggles. In the blackness ahead the little man was talking, muttering in a high-pitched, fear-shot voice. . . .

And then chill, crawling fear congealed Orlich's blood! From one of the tubs ahead had come scaly clinking sounds. Whatever that tub contained was stirring, dragging itself out.

THE air close to the tub was definitely colder. A wave of damp air beat gently against Orlich's face.

Whatever had been in that tub had climbed out, was close to him! There was a sound of shuffling. Something brushed his arm, grasped him.

It was a human hand, cold as ice! The odor of decaying flesh struck him!

Orlich whipped up his automatic and fired. The invisible body beside him jerked, but the hand did not relinquish its grasp. Orlich tore himself from that weird chill clutch, leaped back. And two more pair of icy hands grasped him!

He was firing, blasting away recklessly now, and the red-orange spurts of flame leaped and burned into solid cold bodies. There were no longer three, but more—how many he could not know. Slowly they were forcing him to the floor. . . .

No words, no groans, no panting sounds came from his invisible assailants as they struggled with him!

The automatic clicked futilely, and Orlich smashed it into the nearest face, felt cold flesh rip and slough away. Yet from the invisible mouth came no moan or

oath. The cold fingers still clutched Orlich's shoulders. . . . He heard his own voice screaming.

The cold bodies had forced him to the floor, were piled heavily upon him, like sentient cadavers. And then, through waves of horror, he realized that the room was oddly still. The little man's yammering had ceased. It was as though he was listening, listening. . . .

The rustle of stealthy cautious movement whispered through the stillness.

"You have him safely pinioned, eh, my children?" The quavering words came with startling unexpectedness. There was a pause, then a dry chuckle.

"I think that it is safe now. Quite safe." The voice became more decisive. "You came here tonight only to meet death, my unknown friend." A musing plaintiveness crept into the cadenced words. "It is a pity that my experiments have been so rudely interrupted. And yet I can begin again. I have money now.

"But I must leave your bodies here, all your bodies, for my criminal ally is dead and I cannot drive a car. It is a pity. . . . I will turn on the light."

A second passed, and the room blazed with light. For an instant there was silence, as dazzled eyes strove to see.

From somewhere behind him Orlich heard a plunging rush. Instantly the little man squealed, a horrible unintelligible sound.

Suddenly a voice was shouting, "Keep your hand away from that switch! And don't try to command those half-dead *things* of yours! One move from them, one move from you, and I empty this gun into your heart!"

It was McNally's voice, steely with loathing.

Shrilly the little man squealed, "You can't take me alive! They'll put me in a madhouse. I'll—"

There was the quick beat of his footsteps as he leaped back. And then a

rasping metallic sound, a horribly dry crackling *snap*, like the breaking of a stick, and a hissing, a sizzling. . . .

"God!" McNally plunged across the room.

There was an interminable pause. At last the hissing ceased. There came the thud of a body falling to the floor.

Orlich was struggling to free himself from the mass of flesh beneath which he lay, the mass of flesh that had become suddenly, strangely motionless! And instantly he knew the explanation. Now that the wizened little man was dead, the dim minds of the human robots were left without a commander, without a ruler; their bodies had relapsed into an inertia literally indistinguishable from death.

It was as though Orlich writhed out from beneath a jumbled heap of corpses! At last he stood free, swaying.

Tumbled there about his feet, laxly still, like gruesome waxworks, lay the bullet-riddled bodies of Vendetti's gangsters, 'Slim' Candela and Luigi Sliva. And two other cheap punks whose bodies were apparently without wounds, 'Little Percy' Boisseau and Frank Nelson.

And among them, swollen and bloated, lay Whitey Cote, last of the three who had participated in the Garfield Street Bank robbery. . . . Whitey Cote—who should have been dead days ago!

McNally was rising from the seared reddened thing on the floor beneath the naked copper switch. He looked at the chubby older man. His eyes were oddly blank, as though horror upon horror had numbed his brain.

"He's dead, Orlich. No heartbeat."

Abruptly he paused. His dazed eyes, mechanically searching the room, had seen a small still figure huddled on the dusty boards between the further tub and the wall.

"Kay!" The name burst from his lips in a tortured sob as he leaped toward her, gathered her in his arms.

McNALLY'S rickety coupe clattered and roared through the night, its bright headlights gyrating crazily around stony curves, touching sombre silent woods and racing on. McNally was driving like an inspired demon.

Kay Edwards' head lay limply pillowed against Red's shoulder. His right arm held her close; he was driving with one hand. From beyond her, above the roar of the motor, Orlich's words came to him. He heard Orlich only vaguely. His whole mind was urging the car onward, faster.

"She'll be all right, Red," Orlich was reassuring him for the hundredth time. "He didn't get the chance to complete his devilry. We'll be in Van Steedenskill in a few minutes, and Doc Boyd'll bring her to. Swell fellow, Charlie Boyd! And he'll keep a tight mouth."

McNally was silent. Ahead loomed the rolling hill beyond which lay Van Steedenskill. The roar of the motor deepened.

"How the devil did you get off that table, Red?"

As though from a great distance McNally heard his own voice answering: "The bonds went across my body and were fastened beneath the table. When the light went out I began to squirm and kept squirming until I dropped out the end. . . . I couldn't find Corelli's gun until the light went on."

The car was climbing the long grade. Orlich's words kept reaching out to McNally, like tattered banners: "That drum of gasoline we found in the barn came in handy. We couldn't have left them the way they were. God, they were rotting to death! It was a merciful deed to put bullets through their brains and hearts and end their horrible existence! I did it, and I'm not sorry—but before God, I don't know if I could ever do it again! Lord, that fiend kept them on ice, like lobsters in a restaurant, so they wouldn't *spoil!* Imagine that!"

His words trailed off into silence. But after a moment he went on, musingly, "Fiend or no fiend, sane or mad—he was a great man. He'd done something incredible, and he was on the trail of something more. Thank God, we stopped him—forever. . . ."

The car was rounding a long curve at the top of the rise. In the valley below the infrequent lights of Van Steedenskill glimmered faintly. Orlich leaned out into the wind and peered back over the miles and miles of black forest and valley.

"Look back, Red," he said.

McNally turned his head, glanced for a swift instant through the rear window. Far below, far behind, he saw the glow, the motionless tiny glow of distant flames against the calm back night . . .

THE END



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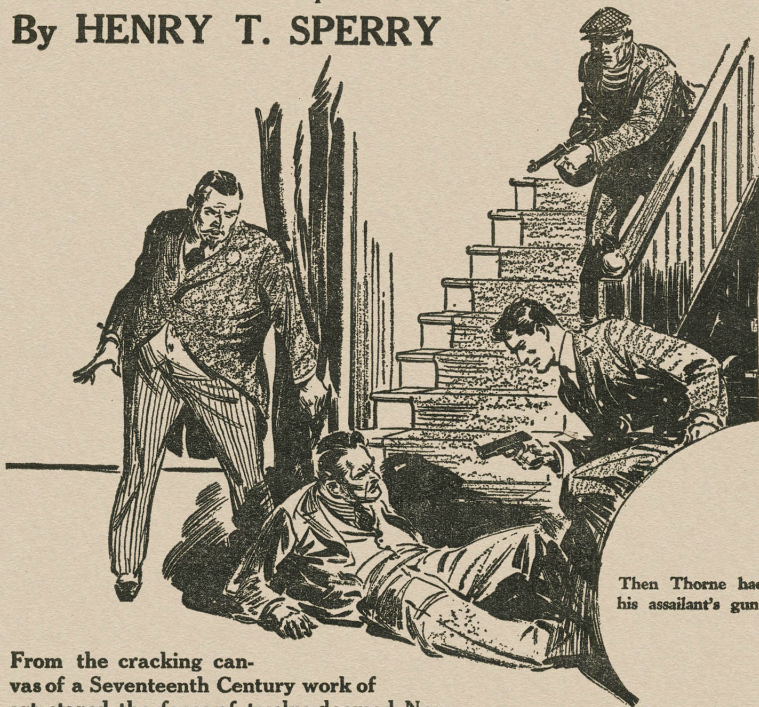
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CIGARS

The bizarre case of death by design in a modern metropolitan hospital—a novelette

By HENRY T. SPERRY



Then Thorne had his assailant's gun.

From the cracking canvas of a Seventeenth Century work of art stared the faces of twelve doomed New York physicians . . . One already was dead, with skin turned hideous blue, and one was dying—when the amazing case literally fell into the lap of Gregory Thorne, lover of the arts, who never could resist a masterpiece in murder!

CHAPTER ONE

Death Has Two Heads

JHADA SINGH stood in the doorway of the studio and said, "One comes, Master, bearing a painting of twelve men with two heads. It is an omen of evil—"

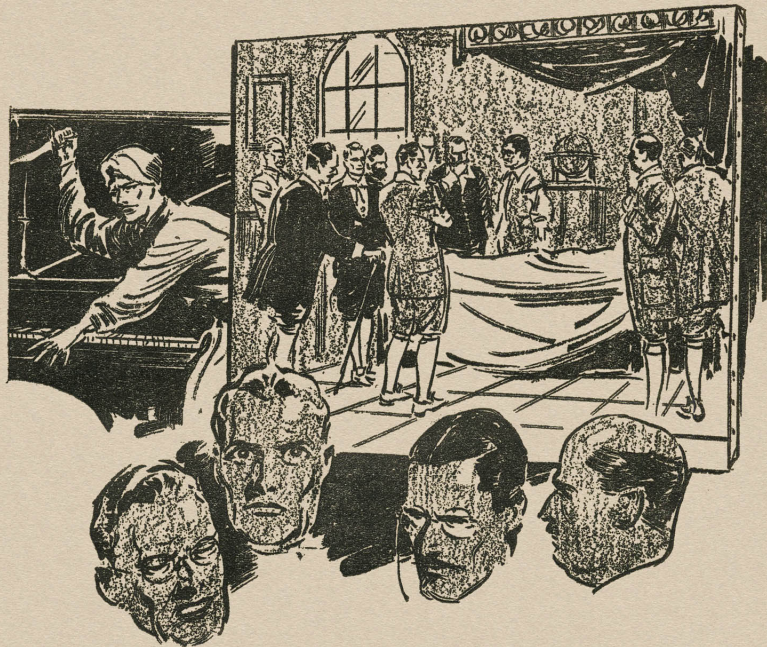
"Good Lord!" exclaimed Gregory Thorne. "I should think so, Jhada. A picture of twelve men with only two heads between them could hardly be a good luck piece."

"It is not what you describe, Master," said Jhada Singh impassively. "The picture is of twelve men, each having two heads—or so it is interpreted to the eyes of my soul by that vision vouchsafed to us of the Atharva-Veda."

Thorne lay down his brushes and turned away from the canvas upon which he had been working. He stepped back a few paces to survey the model on the dais with narrowed analytical eyes.

"My friend," he said, still speaking to the Hindu, "I have often wondered whether your preternatural gravity wasn't

TWELVE BLUE CORPSES



just a cloak for a truly penetrating sense of humor. It seems that my suspicions were not unfounded. But I'm afraid you'll have to explain the joke."

"I jest not, Master," said the turbaned Brahman solemnly. "Even now the man who brings the painting descends from a taxi at the front door. It is Monsieur Marcel Renart, the art dealer."

Thorne did not even go to the window to verify his employe-companion's announcement. Through long association with the mystic Hindu he had learned to accept his predictions unquestioningly. He sighed a trifle regretfully and nodded to his model, a demure dark-haired girl, and the latter immediately gathered her kimono about her lissom form and descended from the dais to disappear through a door in the wall behind it.

A door bell tinkled softly below-stairs. "All right," said Thorne, "show him up, painting and all. But I warn you, Jhada, if this turns out to be a detecting job, you'll have to do it. I've got to get this study done in time for the Professional Men's Exhibition and I've got only a week left."

Jhada Singh smiled inscrutably and left the room. To Jhada Singh, who had renounced his Far Eastern possessions to master the philosophies, and subsequently had attached himself to the young American, Gregory Thorne was the modern prototype of Sherlock Holmes, the Hindu's favorite character in fiction. They made a peculiarly effective team, and in the space of a few years Thorne had risen to a place of national prominence as an amateur sleuth.

Jhada Singh smiled, for he was well acquainted with his friend's reluctance to take any new investigation—and he was equally familiar with Thorne's almost rabid energy and enthusiasm once he was fairly launched on a case. . . .

A few moments later a fat little man in morning coat, high collar, ascot cravat, striped trousers and white spats came bustling into the room, carrying an oblong paper-wrapped parcel almost as long as he was tall. He stood the package just inside the door and leaned it carefully against the wall, then came forward with a pudgy hand outstretched to Thorne.

"My friend," he said, puffing a little from his ascent of the stairs, "I had to bring it. The most marvelous bargain—unheard of. . . . You will not breathe a word, of course—but I had to tell you about it."

"Ah, the fox is living up to his name once more," smiled Thorne. "You've been outwitting some poor devil of a millionaire again, Renart."

"Indeed—it must have been a species of a millionaire," agreed Renart, wagging his round head solemnly. "Who else could be in possession of Dublok's 'Consultation of the Surgeons'?"

Thorne gave a start and looked at the little art dealer in amazement. "You don't mean it?" he exclaimed. "But that painting's been lost for two centuries. There aren't even any prints of it in existence. It's only a myth."

Renart chuckled gleefully. "It may be that I have been—what you call?—stung," he said. "But for a hundred dollars, it is worth the chance. I bring it to you for you to decide. There is none other in the city I would trust."

He gave a wave of his hand to Jhada Singh, who had taken up his usual post near the door, and the Hindu began unwrapping the parcel Renart had brought with him. A few moments later the painting was resting on an easel, the three

men gathered before it, examining it closely.

The canvas was unframed, tacked to a stretcher, and gave immediate evidence to Thorne's expert eye of having been recently cleaned. It portrayed a group of twelve men gathered at the sides and foot of a huge canopied bed upon which lay a white-visaged apparently unconscious body. The men, in Flemish ruffs, satin pantaloons, silk hose and silver-buckled shoes, were grave of face, some looking speculatively at the patient on the bed, others gathered in groups, seeming to talk together in low tones. The colors were rich, mellow, overlaid with the price-less patina of age. The style of the painting, with its meticulous portrayal of detail and the high finish of the colors, gave unmistakable evidence of belonging to the greatest days of the Early Dutch Period.

Suddenly Thorne glanced up at Jhada Singh, his eyes glinting humorously. "Twelve men," he said, "and twelve heads—not counting the one on the bed. How do you account for that, Jhada?"

The Hindu was staring at the picture with a rapt, intent expression in his dark eyes. "No, Master," he said quietly, "not twelve. Twenty-four heads. And this one—" his slender, brown right forefinger reached out and touched the first of the group from the left—"is dead. This one—" he touched the next figure—"is dying. And all are marked with the shadow of doom."

RENART, who had been looking from Jhada Singh to Thorne during their strange colloquy, with ludicrous amazement stamped on his vandyked visage, suddenly broke the silence which had fallen between the two men.

"*Au grand nom de bon dieu!*" he muttered. "What is this talk of twenty-four heads? Who is dead? But of course they are dead, *mon ami*. The men who

posed for this picture have been dead these three hundred years."

Suddenly, without replying to Renart, Thorne interrupted him by turning away and walking quickly to the door of the models' dressing room. After a preliminary tap which aroused no response from within, he opened the door and disappeared inside. He returned in a moment, catching up a large magnifying glass from a side table as he passed it. Then he stood in front of the picture, and with the pin he had obtained from the dressing room, he carefully punched a tiny hole in the painted jowl of the first figure from the left.

Renart gave vent to a startled exclamation, but Thorne paid no attention to him. He raised the magnifying glass and peered intently at the hole he had just made. Then, silently, he turned away from the painting and handed the glass to Renart.

The little Frenchman glanced questioningly at Thorne's uninformative face, turned a shade paler, and himself peered intently at the tiny pin-prick with the glass. After a moment he turned away, his face paler still and his whole attitude one of dejection and disappointment.

"So be it," he said with a sigh. "For this once the fox has been out-foxed. I hope *le bon dieu* will not let that barbarian, Liebnitz, hear of this. He will make of me the laughing stock—"

"Liebnitz would give his soul for that painting," interrupted Thorne quickly. "The hole is round, with smooth edges, showing the paint is new. But look at this. . . ."

He bent and made another small hole near the lower right hand edge of the picture, glanced briefly at it through his glass and then handed the instrument to Renart with a nod.

Renart gave a Gallic cry of rapture as he looked through the glass. "Ah—around the edges of the hole are many small cracks!" he exclaimed. "This paint

is very old. Then it is *la chose veritable!*"

"It's the real thing, all right," agreed Thorne, "although the faces, for some mysterious reason, have been repainted. However, the x-ray will show up the original faces—and it will be an easy job for an expert to restore the painting as it was executed by Dublok. You have a priceless treasure there, my friend."

JHADA SINGH, who had taken no part in the examination, stood gazing at the picture with the same expression of fixed intensity on his face which had been there ever since it had been first uncovered. But now he raised his hand and pointed to a figure, a bit taller than the rest, which stood alone beside the bed, gazing down thoughtfully at the body which reposed upon it.

"This man is known to you, Master," said Jhada Singh. "He has called here many times. His name is Dr. Theodore Collins."

Thorne, his taut, hawklike face quickening with interest, examined the figure the Hindu indicated. "By George!" he exclaimed after a moment. "It is a striking likeness of the man. A mere coincidence, of course, but. . . ."

Then suddenly he fixed his attention on another figure in the painting, that of a man standing near the right edge of the picture. This figure he studied for a long time, scanning the details of the face with his magnifying glass, and then returning to the first—the one Jhada Singh had pointed out—to subject it to a closer scrutiny.

"Damn queer," he muttered as he turned away, at last. "It *can't* be—and yet. . . ."

Renart looked at him in helpless bewilderment. "Please do not be mysterious, my friend," he pleaded. "I cannot stand more suspense today. What is this that is queer?"

Unheeding of him, Thorne crossed quickly to a hand-set telephone stand near

his working easel and silently dialed a number.

"Hello—Collins?" he said after a moment. "Gregory Thorne speaking. Are you too busy to pay me an unprofessional call right away? . . . No? Good. I'll be expecting you."

He hung up and turned back to the other two men. "I'm positive," he said, "that Collins was the model for the head of one of those figures in the painting. I'm almost equally certain that another one is a portrait of Dr. James Hale, whom I met at the Professional Men's Exhibition last year. There's something strange afoot here, my friends. . . ."

DR. THEODORE COLLINS was a slender man in his late thirties. He had intensely black hair and small mustache. His skin was dark in complexion—so dark that Thorne, who had seen him only a few days before, almost commented on it as the physician was ushered into the studio.

After introducing Marcel Renart, Thorne led Collins over to the painting, paused with him in front of it.

"Ah," said Dr. Collins. "A new acquisition, eh? Very nice."

Obviously he was not greatly interested in the picture, and it was equally apparent from his manner that he was wondering why he had been summoned merely for the purpose of viewing it.

"I believe that I have discovered something rather strange about this painting," said Thorne after a moment. "I wish you would inspect it closely, Ted, with particular attention to the faces of the subjects."

Collins looked at him searchingly for a moment, then turned back to the painting with renewed interest. As he did so, Thorne again remarked to himself on the extreme darkness of his friend's complexion. He attempted to explain it with the theory that Collins had spent a good

deal of time in the open recently—but the trouble with the theory was that the weather during the past few days had been consistently overcast.

Then his half-formed questions on the subject were dispelled by a sudden exclamation from Collins. The physician, who had been minutely studying two or three of the faces in the painting, now was quickly inspecting all the rest, and his attitude showed a growing excitement.

"I'll be damned!" he exclaimed, straightening with a laugh and turning to Thorne. "This is quite a *tour de force*, Gregory. How you got such remarkable likenesses of us all is a mystery—for I know I didn't pose for this, and I suppose none of the other men did. You used photographs, of course. And you've even got poor old Goldmarck—did you know that he died yesterday under very mysterious circumstances? Looked like silver nitrate poisoning, at first, but—"

At Collins's last words Thorne had given a sudden start, and the physician broke off. Thorne reached forward and grasped his friend by the arm.

"Ted," he said in a low tense voice, "have you made a flying trip to Bermuda or Florida during the past few days? Or have you been using a sun lamp?"

"Why, no," said Collins, regarding him curiously. "Today's the first time, since I saw you last, that I've experienced any sunshine. When you called I took the opportunity to get out and soak a little of it into my hide. It's little enough we get of it in this damned town, even in spring—"

"Quick!" interrupted Thorne. "What's an antidote for nitrate of silver poisoning?"

Collins looked at him in amazement, but after only a moment's hesitation replied, "Why—saline solution, or soap and water in large quantities, milk, white of egg. . . . But what's up, Greg?"

Swiftly Thorne turned his head and

noded at Jhada Singh. The Hindu quickly disappeared out the door, and Thorne turned back to his friend.

"Tell me," said Thorne, removing his hand from the physician's arm and attempting to make his voice calm and impersonal, "what was this about the man whom you called Goldmarck? You mentioned silver nitrate poisoning. I was just wondering how there could be any doubt concerning what killed him. You sounded as though you weren't sure."

But Collins had ceased listening. His hand raised in a vaguely questioning manner to his cheek—and suddenly he turned and darted toward a mirror which hung on the east wall near the windows. Thorne tried to grab his arm and restrain him, but without success. Within the past few seconds Collins's face had turned to a deep shade of bluish-brown. . . .

When Collins turned back from the mirror his eyes wore an expression of horror, but his voice, when he spoke, was as calm as ever. "I've got it, too, Gregory," he said. "The same thing that finished off Goldmarck—silver nitrate poisoning. Only they found nothing but minute quantities in his blood-vessels. Not a tenth of enough for a lethal dose. The stuff I told you about—the antidotes—won't do any good in this case. That's for a lethal amount taken orally—no good when it's in the blood. . . ."

Suddenly he coughed and clutched himself. His face turned darker, and he staggered. Thorne caught him, and began to ease his friend into a chair—but a sudden spasm seized Collins, and he wrenched out of Thorne's hands to fall to the floor, writhing there in agony, tearing at his collar with fingers which had become frantic while the great veins swelled in his temples and a bloody froth appeared on his lips.

He gasped out one word, as Gregory Thorne knelt above him. To the detective it sounded like, "Blue. . . ."

Then he rolled over on his face. His body contracted in one last spasm. Just as Jhada Singh appeared in the doorway, his hands laden with a basin, towels and bottles, the physician's body relaxed and lay still on the floor of the studio.

CHAPTER TWO

Conference of the Condemned

GREGORY THORNE surveyed the assemblage gathered in his living room and cleared his throat. "Gentlemen," he said, "it was at my request that the District Attorney's office summoned you here today. As you are all physicians, I feared that a lesser authority would be unavailing in keeping you from the professional duties which, I know, must in many cases be pressing."

A low murmur, decidedly irritable in tone, broke out as he paused. One man, a corpulent important looking personage who occupied most of a divan against the north wall, snorted.

"'Pressing'!" he echoed—his name, Thorne had learned, was Dr. Jerome Caraway. "I have an appendectomy to perform in the next fifteen minutes. If my substitute makes any mistakes, young man—"

"We will hope for the best," interrupted Thorne. "I shall be as brief as possible as to my reasons for having you summoned here. In a word, gentlemen, those reasons may be summed up as—murder!"

He paused again, and after a moment a broken chorus of exclamations and questions broke out among the men seated about the room. Thorne held up his hand, and after silence was restored, continued.

"Most of you are now aware of the mysterious death of Dr. Otto Goldmarck yesterday. None of you, excepting Dr. Hale, know that another colleague of yours, Dr. Theodore Collins, perished

under identical circumstances upstairs in my studio some two hours ago. After I had summoned the police, I called Dr. Hale to examine a strange painting which came into my possession this morning. Dr. Hale identified your portraits in this painting."

He turned toward the painting which stood on an easel beside him, and the assembled doctors leaned forward with growing interest. Thorne went on to tell them about Renart's call that morning; how he had discovered that the original faces had been painted over; how he had called Dr. Collins first, and then Dr. Hale—the only two men he recognized—and how Dr. Hale had identified all the other faces as belonging to physicians on the staff of the Pasteur Hospital. . . .

"How did your friend, Renart, come into possession of this painting?" asked a stooped, grey-haired man with pince-nez, looking up from a close scrutiny of the picture which showed him talking to the fat Dr. Caraway and a lean cadaverous physician Thorne knew as Dr. C. Lester English.

"It was one of those things which occasionally happens among even the most reputable art dealers, Dr. Rhine," explained Thorne, addressing the rest of the gathering, as well as his questioner. "A suspicious looking individual approached my friend, Renart, late in the evening, exhibited only a corner of the painting, and offered it for one hundred dollars. Renart knew, of course, that the painting was probably stolen—but the ethics of the case are a little different than in the usual lines of merchandise.

"The practice among dealers is to buy up all such paintings—if circumstances are not favorable to calling the police—and then advertise the painting in catalogues and newspapers. The real owner inevitably comes forward, sooner or later, and is always able to prove his claim more satisfactorily than the owner of, say,

an automobile would be able to. Really valuable paintings are comparatively scarce, and are universally known. One is never sold without a complete bill of sale dating back to the date of its first transfer. The owner then pays the price the dealer has paid to the thief—usually a sum less than the reward which has been offered—pays, also, the difference, and the dealer collects as much or more than he customarily makes on a sale commission."

"But what's all this got to do with murder?" put in Dr. Caraway testily. "And why are all our portraits in this painting?"

"I think," said Gregory Thorne, "if we are able to discover the answer to your second question, the first will be answered automatically. To be frank with you, gentlemen, I haven't the vaguest notion. I asked you here for the double purpose of warning you—and in the hope that you might be able to throw some light on the subject, yourselves."

"**B**UT confound it," interrupted Caraway, "what are you warning us about? Just because our pictures—"

"You're being a little dull, Caraway," broke in Dr. Hale irritably. "Don't you think it's rather ominous that two of the men in this painting—men who have been our colleagues for years—have died under identical circumstances? And isn't it reasonable to suppose that the rest of us may expect the same dose—since we're in the picture, too? Whoever painted that thing did it as a warning to us. Why he should warn us, I don't know—may want to make us squirm before he—"

"But why should anyone want to—er—do away with us?" put in a young red-haired man who, Thorne remembered, was the most recent addition to the Pasteur staff.

"Exactly," said Thorne. "Why—and who? Have you gentlemen any enemies

PALS

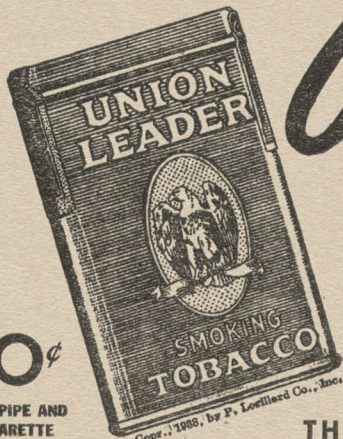
...through the years



IN 1907... "Meetin' the right pipe tobacco is pretty near as difficult (and important) for a man as courtin' the right girl. I didn't get hep to Union Leader until a travelin' man loaned me some about the time this picture was made. But I've had cause to thank that fellow ever since for my favorite smoke."



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THE GREAT AMERICAN SMOKE

that you know of? Would anyone be benefited by killing you off?"

"Only our patients—probably," said Caraway sardonically. "But as to the perpetrator of these dastardly deeds—hadn't you better look, Mr. Thorne, for a man who is schooled in two arts?"

Thorne had an uneasy feeling that he knew what was coming, but he was forced to prompt this seemingly obtuse but—Thorne sensed—actually very keen fat man. "Will you explain, Dr. Caraway?" he requested.

"Why," said the corpulent physician, "I understand that no one has been able to decide just how Goldmarck and Collins were killed. It seems to me that it would take a pretty smart physician to put it over on a man like Job Cochrane, the Medical Examiner. So our man must know something about *materia medica*—probably he's an expert in toxicology. On the other hand, this painting seems to indicate a man who is also clever with a brush. . . . Well, who answers both descriptions?" And with an amused but malicious gleam in his small flesh-imbedded eyes, he looked straight at Dr. James Hale.

A BABBLE of protests broke out, but under cover of it, Thorne was doing some intensive thinking. He knew that Hale was an excellent painter—good enough to have done those life-like portraits. He had captured the blue ribbon at the Professional Men's Exposition the year before, and had even talked some of giving up his practice to devote his whole time to art. But if Hale were guilty, he knew it was too early in the game to accuse him openly. There was no case, as yet—and if he felt genuine suspicion was being directed against him, Hale would, through being forewarned, be able to cover his trail all the more efficiently.

Again Thorne held up his hand for silence. "We must accept the possibility,"

he said, "that the person we are seeking is a physician and an artist. On the other hand, we must not overlook the chance that he is actually neither. The real murderer may only have availed himself of a special knowledge of poisons, on the one hand, and the services of an artist on the other. At any rate, it seems to me that your most logical route of inquiry, at present, lies in determining just how Doctors Goldmarck and Collins died. The Medical Examiner told me that the autopsy on Collins's body would be held tonight at eight o'clock, and suggested that you gentlemen might wish to be present. He will welcome your assistance in determining the cause of death."

Dr. Caraway rose ponderously to his feet. "Good," he said. "I, for one, shall be there." He spoke a little breathlessly, as though the labor of raising his body to an erect position had been almost too much for him. "It seems to me," he continued, "that Mr. Thorne has shown us the manner in which we are best equipped to help ourselves in this matter—if, as I am not yet quite convinced, someone is determined to kill us off, one by one. If the problem presented by a mere *post mortem* proves too much for us, we deserve to be knocked off—before our inefficiency as physicians takes too heavy a toll among our patients."

He laughed huskily, deep in his throat, his vast, heavy-jowled face darkening with a plethora of blood. For some reason Thorne began to feel a vague uneasiness as he watched him; but now the gathering was beginning to break up, the physicians strolling toward the doorway in groups, talking to each other gravely; marked, it seemed to Thorne, by a more serious air than they had worn when they had entered this room. He told himself that Dr. Cochrane's autopsy that evening would be well attended; he was confident that his warnings had not fallen on barren ground.

Hale, he noted, had already left, doubt-

less being unwilling to linger after the pointed manner in which Caraway had alluded to his dual abilities as physician and artist. Dr. Rhine, the aged, pince-nez'ed physician who had brought up the question of Renart's possession of the painting, approached Thorne and began some question about Collins's death, when the sound of sudden alarmed voices from the hallway outside interrupted him.

Thorne, in the wake of the men who were still in the room, rushed out. A group surrounded the huge struggling form of Dr. Caraway, who lay on the floor, throwing his great limbs about in a wild frenzied manner, his small fat-rimmed eyes starting out of a face which had turned the color of old deep-stained leather.

His brother physicians had loosened his collar and tie, when Thorne reached Caraway's side. Plainly the man was suffocating, his barrel of a chest working in rapid but ineffectual spasms, while his heavy lips turned dark blue and the sweat beaded out on his forehead.

Thorne heard someone cry, "Cyanide!" and saw the young red-haired Dr. Titus Colburn tearing open the bag which he, alone of all the physicians, had brought with him.

Colburn filled a hypodermic from one of the case bottles in his bag, quickly thrust the needle into Caraway's left forearm, while his colleagues held the fat man still. Then the others stepped back, as Caraway's now lax body was lowered to the floor.

Colburn produced a stethoscope and placed its transmitter above Caraway's heart. Then he moved it to that point high on the right side of the chest where, many times, the life beat will still register when it has completely disappeared from the cardiac region. In the meantime Thorne had dispatched one of his guests to telephone police headquarters and the nearest hospital, with directions for the

latter to bring oxygen tanks. But as young Colburn rose to his feet and stood looking down at the moveless lump of flesh which Caraway had become, Thorne knew that it was all over. Caraway, as he had said, would be present at the autopsy tonight—but not as a spectator. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Death's Filing Cabinet

JHADA SINGH had not returned from an errand Thorne had sent him on earlier in the day. So the detective left directions with his housekeeper for the Hindu to follow him to the Universal X-ray Laboratories, where he had an appointment to meet Renart. Then, putting the picture beside him on the seat of his sleek black Standard Swallow, he set out for the laboratories. As he toiled his car through the midtown traffic he thought over the events of the day in detail, trying to make coherence out of the murder-maze in which he had so suddenly found himself wandering.

Everything about this business, he reflected, was a baffling riddle. Even the murder method was still as complete a mystery as ever. Confidently predicting silver nitrate poisoning, the physicians who had performed the autopsy on Goldmarck had been baffled by finding only a minute quantity in the cadaver's blood. Then Caraway, perishing in the very presence of his colleagues, some of whom were practitioners of nation-wide fame, had reacted like a victim of prussic acid, or cyanide—although his face, too, had shown the telltale pigmentation of silver nitrate.

Collins, in his death spasm, Thorne realized, had suspected cyanide. He had whispered, ". . . blue—" and Thorne knew, now, that he had been trying to say "methylene blue," which had lately been advanced as a specific antidote for cyanide poisoning. Yet Colburn had shot a

strong dose of the dye into Caraway's blood without result.

The motivation for the murders, and the identity of the murderer, were if possible even more obscure. Why, out of a staff of a hundred and fifty men, should these twelve physicians attached to the Pasteur Hospital have been selected as victims? It was possible that Jhada Singh might be able to throw some light on this when he returned—but Thorne rather doubted it. He had sent the Hindu to the hospital with instructions to discover, if he could, whether these twelve men had ever been in consultation on a single case. Supposing that the motive were revenge for the failure of the twelve doctors to save a patient's life, a logical suspect would be the survivor of the patient. But it seemed highly unlikely that such a large number would be called in on a single case. . . .

Lacking more circumstantial evidence, he did not consider that there was sufficient grounds for suspecting James Hale as the *deus ex machina* of the plot. It was true that Dr. Hale was both a painter and a physician—but somehow Thorne could not seriously regard him as being a criminal of the type he would have to be in this case.

At the x-ray laboratories Renart was waiting for him. An operator conducted them into a fluoroscope room and was in the act of mounting the painting behind the frosted glass screen of the instrument when there was a telephone call for Thorne. It was Dr. Hale.

"Your housekeeper told me you were down there," said the physician. "I thought I'd better call you. When I got back to the hospital I found a note waiting for me. I'll read it to you:

"Three of twelve have died. The nine survivors may purchase life. Have ten thousand dollars in small bills ready before you go to Bellevue Hospital tonight. Wrap them in newspapers and include a slip bearing your name. On the way to

the hospital you will enter First Avenue at Seventy-second Street and proceed at twenty miles per hour to Forty-second, keeping well over to the right-hand side of the street. Somewhere along the route a man will jump on the running board of your car. Immediately hand him the package, without slowing down. If you are not alone in the car, if you have in the meantime made any attempt to get in touch with the police, you will have signed your death warrant. The enclosed sticker is for the purpose of identification, paste it on the lower right-hand side of your windshield."

"That's all," finished Hale. "The note is unsigned, typewritten. English and Manx have received identical letters—they were waiting for us in our mail boxes when we got here. After I'd read mine I made it a point to check over the boxes of the six other men, and I found envelopes like the ones containing our notes in all of them. What do you advise us to do?"

Thorne considered the situation rapidly. "Get the money ready," he advised. "Get in touch with the other men and tell them to do the same. Don't try to call in the police, and don't permit them to. Someone is well aware of every move we're making. Arrange matters so that you will be in close touch with each other all the rest of the day. I'll have definite instructions for you later."

He hung up and turned to see Renart beckoning at him excitedly from the doorway. "Come—*vite!*" cried the little Frenchman. "It is *la chose veritable*—a genuine Dublok. One can see, now, the original faces through this marvelous machine. Ah, *quel bonheur!*"

THE fluoroscope showed clearly the broad checkerboard strokes of the under-painting beneath the new pigment—and faintly, under that, the faces of the original characters.

Renart was beside himself with joy.

"I shall advertise," he chortled slyly, "but it is in my mind that the former owner knew not the identity of this *chef d'oeuvre*. If so—why has he not told the police of its theft? *Sans doute*, my friend, it has lain neglected and unknown these many years in the garret of some ignorant American dealer—"

He broke off abruptly as Thorne continued studying the image of the painting with fixed intensity. "But you say nothing," went on Renart in a suddenly worried tone. "Is it that you doubt—"

Thorne straightened and looked at his friend with a wry smile. "I hate to be a wet blanket, Marcel," he said, "but this is not a Dublok. It is a very old painting—but it is not the 'Consultation of the Surgeons'. It may be a copy—by one of Dublok's pupils—but I'd stake my reputation that it is nothing more."

"But—but," stammered Renart, "can you be sure?"

"We will call in Cory and Count Corneille," said Thorne. "One can be guided only by hunches in cases like this—spirited differences, a jarring note in an otherwise faultless imitation. Those faces, to me, lack the strength and ruggedness of Dublok's brushwork. . . . But we'll be able to tell with greater accuracy after the painting has been restored—and, as I say, Cory and Corneille will give you independent opinions."

The girl who had summoned Thorne to the telephone entered again and, in a rather surprised manner, announced that a tall dark gentleman wished to see Mr. Thorne.

Recognizing Jhada Singh from even this meager description, Thorne excused himself and went out to the ante-room. Singh delivered his message tersely.

"The twelve doctors, Master," he said, "all conferred on a single case only six months ago. It was an operation for Addison's disease. A mistake was made—I do

not understand what it was. The woman died. It was Mrs. James Hale."

Thorne gave vent to an involuntary exclamation. "By George! Dr. Hale's wife! And Addison's disease—the skin turns brown, the patient dies in agonizing convulsions!"

HE WAS interrupted by Renart's petulant voice from the doorway. "Please, Gregory, *mon ami*, come back and look some more. It mus' be that you have made the mistake."

Thorne caught up his hat from the table and waved it vaguely at Renart. "Sorry, Marcel, I've got pressing business to attend to. We'll go into it later. Call me tomorrow." And he went out of the door, followed closely by Jhada Singh.

The two men emerged from the building at the street level, turned right toward Lexington Avenue, where Thorne had parked his car. It was late afternoon, but few people were on the narrow side street.

As they neared the corner, Jhada Singh suddenly looked over his shoulder—and an instant later plucked at Thorne's sleeve. The detective twisted half about, his hand going beneath his coat lapel on the upper left-hand side. He was too late. A couple of brawny blue-chinned individuals had fallen into their wake as they left the building, immediately closed up on them.

"Leave your gat where it is, buddy—or we'll give it to you right here," snarled one of them at Thorne. "Keep walkin' straight ahead till you get to Lexington, then turn left till you get to Twenty-eight' Street. Then turn left ag'in. We'll tell you what to do after that."

Thorne glanced at the significant bulges in both men's right-hand jacket pockets, then up at the brown impervious face of Jhada Singh. He shrugged faintly, and walked on with the Hindu at his side.

There was a scattering of people on

Twenty-eighth Street, but at their guides' direction, Thorne and Singh almost immediately turned off of it and went into an areaway between two houses near the corner.

Ahead of them, Thorne saw, was a hospital ambulance. The rear door stood open, apparently ready to receive a victim of sickness or accident. But Thorne had little time to speculate on the reason for the ambulance being in such an unlikely place. He saw Jhada Singh, at his side, suddenly lurch forward—and the next instant something crashed down on his cranium, bringing with it a flash of searing pain, and then—quick oblivion. . . .

THE vague sound of voices was the first thing to register on Thorne's returning consciousness. He lay perfectly still with his eyes closed and listened.

“. . . got by, so far," said a voice which he had no difficulty in recognizing as belonging to one of his and Singh's captors, "with these white coats. But I wish she'd hurry. The coats ain't goin' to do us no good if one o' those croakers wanders in here."

He was interrupted by the sound of an opening door, and Thorne allowed his eyelids to part a mere trifle—only to close them promptly. He had seen a nurse standing in the doorway, a tall striking looking brunette. He felt uneasily that she had been looking directly at him as she came in. Her first words confirmed his worst fears.

"Thorne has regained consciousness," she said. "What have you two been talking about?"

"Nothin', lady," said the man who had been speaking. "We was just wonderin' when you'd come, on account—"

The nurse interrupted him by addressing Thorne. "It will be best for you if you continue to lie quietly while the table you are on is wheeled into the next room, Mr. Thorne," she said. "You will be shot

instantly if you attempt to cry out or escape. . . . I had to wait until the attendant was off duty, you fool," she went on, evidently addressing the thug now. "Hurry up. You take Thorne. Maxie, fall in behind him with the Hindu. Quickly, now!"

As the tables were wheeled from the room, Thorne felt the pressure of leather straps over his wrists and ankles and knew that he was helplessly bound. He realized that he was on an emergency operating table, and surmised that the room he and Singh had been occupying was one of the usually numerous "admitting rooms" of a large hospital. He debated the advisability of shouting for help, but decided against it. In this place, such cries must be all too frequent to attract attention.

Through slitted eyes he saw that they were being rapidly wheeled along a dark corridor. Presently the rolling table came to a stop, and his captor—Thorne saw now that he had a white coat over his flashy checked suit—opened a door which let into the left wall. Then the fellow disappeared from his view, and the next moment he felt the table being pushed into the room.

It was a long dimly lighted place, about thirty feet wide by a hundred long. The longitudinal walls were lined with what appeared to be large drawers, like a huge filing cabinet—and a chill shot up Thorne's spine as he realized that they were in a morgue.

Rapidly his table was wheeled down the line of those ominous squares, to come to a halt at the far end.

"Okay," came the nurse's voice. "In these last two. There won't be any use for these for at least a week—unless an epidemic breaks out."

And then, before Thorne fully realized what was happening, the last great drawer in the line had been pulled open, his table had been wheeled around flush with it—and with a violent shove the top of the

table bearing his body had been shot off the wheels onto the slab bottom of the drawer, and the drawer, itself, slammed shut.

He cried out then—but the manner in which his voice battered back in his ears, in that airless closed-in place, proved to him how useless it was. He heard a dull clicking sound and a muffled slam nearby, and guessed that the noise had been caused as Jhada Singh's body was thrust into the vault adjoining his.

He struggled fruitlessly against the straps pinioning his arms and legs, but with no result other than to rub his wrists and ankles raw. And suddenly he ceased struggling. A faint almost imperceptible odor drifted in, stiffening his body into the rigidity of pure terror.

Instinctive fear had preceded even his identification of that faint but ominous odor—and when memory had brought its name into his brain, he knew that he and Jhada Singh were beyond help. It was cyanide gas!

Thorne renewed his struggles to get free—and again abruptly abandoned them. It was beginning to be difficult to breathe. He would last longer if he breathed as little as possible and refrained from any sort of muscular effort.

He took a deep breath of the still relatively uncontaminated air and held it. The stifling heat of the vault—apparently the refrigeration pipes connected with it had been turned off—was all but unbearable. The sweat stood out in great beads all over his body as the labor of retaining that last desperate inhalation became more intense. To keep his mind occupied Thorne counted off the seconds. He had reached a hundred and fifty before the convulsive movements of his chest warned him that he had only a few seconds left. His body, of its own accord, would soon break the bonds imposed by his will.

One hundred and sixty . . . seventy . . . seventy-five. . .

His teeth clenched so tightly together

that they seemed to be grinding each other to powder, Thorne felt his control over his muscles deserting him. For almost three minutes he had held his breath—a feat he would not have believed possible. One hundred and eighty. . . .

He had reached a full three minutes—and then with a rattling gasp the air rushed into his aching lungs

But that breath was no breath at all. So saturated had the air become, during those three minutes, it was now almost pure cyanide. To Thorne it seemed that his burning lungs abruptly collapsed in his chest cavity. He had a few moments of livid burning pain which extended the whole length of his body from crown to toe, while he writhed and twisted fruitlessly under his stout straps. Then, mercifully, darkness closed in on his senses—and he knew no more. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Exits—Laughing

THROUGH a haze of stifling pain Thorne fought back to consciousness for the second time that afternoon. He felt pressure being exerted on his chest, followed by a quick release—then the pressure again.

There was something over his nose and mouth—and a cold stream of revivifying air poured into his lungs, while that rhythmically applied pressure and release continued. Suddenly strength flowed back into his limbs and he raised his hand to his face, only to encounter a rubber cone-like thing over the lower part of it.

"He's comin' out! Now I gotta call an M. D. They'll raise hell with me—"

Only then did Thorne open his eyes. Over him stood a white-uniformed young man, and next to him was the turbaned form of Jhada Singh.

"No," said Jhada Singh. "This man is a detective—from the District Attorney's office. See—" Singh flipped back

Thorne's lapel and exhibited his badge. "We are here for the police." The Hindu's left eye winked down at Thorne.

"Well—okay. . . ." The fellow began removing the oxygen cone from Thorne's face. "But you gotta back me up. It'll mean my job if—"

Dizzily Thorne raised himself from the table and got to his feet. "My assistant is right," he said, a trifle shakily. "You are not to report this until you receive orders from the police. Now—how can we get out of here without being seen?"

The morgue attendant swallowed convulsively, and then pointed to a door in the wall nearest them. "That'll let you right out on the street," he said, "but—"

Thorne gave him no time to make any further objections. "Come on, Jhada," he said, and the next minute they were walking down the street in the dusk.

"How did you do it, Jhada?" asked Thorne as they strode along.

"When I saw them place you in the vault, Master," explained Jhada Singh, "I knew that I would soon suffer the same fate. I foresaw that we should probably be suffocated, and I gave the message to my soul that I was to remain unconscious for five minutes. I had heard them refer to an attendant who, it seemed was temporarily off duty, and I took the chance that he would return within that time. I dared not make it longer, for fear that you would be beyond help."

"I gathered the same thing," said Thorne, "but, not being able to invoke the transcendental power of the Yogis, I was unable to hold out any longer."

"It was a near thing," went on Singh. "When my soul returned I was able to cry out but once. Then it seemed huge masses of cotton were thrust into my mouth and nose. However, the attendant had returned and he heard me. I did not entirely lose my senses and he quickly brought me back to the earth plane. Then, with his aid, I released you—and both of

us, in time, were able to restore you. All praise to Brahma, the benevolent, the all-merciful—"

"Good," said Thorne. "The next step is to get in touch with the police. Dr. Hale must be put under arrest—and that nurse. She must be his accomplice."

"No, Master," interrupted Jhada Singh gravely. "I think this cannot be. That nurse is the one who gave me the information about the death of Mrs. Hale, and who showed me the records which gave the names of the twelve doctors on the case. I do not think she can be his accomplice—although I sense that there are bonds of both love and hatred between them. It comes to me that there is one—"

Thorne had come to a sudden stop in the middle of the sidewalk. "Say," he said abruptly, "who is this girl? What sort of a job has she got there at the hospital?"

"It appears that she is in charge of the records," replied the Hindu. "Her name is Miss Mary Fox."

Thorne stared at his friend for a long moment, there in the soft light of evening. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers.

"Fox!" he exclaimed in a sort of whisped shout. "Miss Mary Fox! Where the devil have my wits been all day? . . . Come on, Jhada!"

And he set off at a brisk pace toward his parked car, Jhada Singh striding along at his side, an expression of secret amusement on his ascetic bronzed face.

AS THEY reached Fifty-seventh Street, Thorne started to turn left off Fifth Avenue, but the pressure of Jhada Singh's hand on his arm deterred him. "It comes to me that we shall find him at his home," said Singh. "We must hurry, Master—the wings of flight tug at his soul."

Thorne grinned. "In other words, he's about to take it on the lam? But not before he's collected his ninety grand."

Nevertheless, he pressed down on the accelerator and sped up the avenue until

they had reached the Upper Sixties. He pulled up in front of a narrow grey house with a modern stone facade, and the two men got out of Thorne's car and approached the dark-panelled door. There was a considerable wait after Thorne had pressed the bell button, but at last the door opened and Marcel Renart's short rotund form appeared.

"Ah—Gregory!" exclaimed the little art dealer. "It is a happiness to see you. Come in—you, also, M'sieu' Jhada. I have let all my servants go since my daughter left this place. It is much better being alone. A philosopher like myself must have his place of refuge in the busy city."

He chattered on while he ushered them into a sparsely furnished living room. He motioned Thorne and Singh to chairs near the doorway leading into the hall, then crossed to a small Louis Quinze table on which rested some glasses and a brandy decanter, and poured out three drinks.

"Please," said Thorne, "no liquor, Marcel. Sit down. I want to talk to you."

"Oh?" The little Frenchman seated himself in a straight-backed chair facing Thorne. "So, now, what does my friend, the celebrated detective, M'sieu Thorne, wish to say to me?"

Thorne stared at the art dealer for a long moment. Then he said quietly, "I didn't know you were so desperately hard up, Renart. Things must have been going very badly for you lately."

Renart gave a Gallic shrug. "You know how it is, in this business. I had hoped that the Dublok would prove my salvation. But, alas, Gregory—you have destroyed that dream. Not that I hold it against you, *mon ami*—"

Thorne shook his head. "No, Marcel. You knew perfectly well it was only a worthless copy. You made your first misstep when you brought it to me, pretending that you hadn't made the elementary tests, yourself. No dealer in his right mind would risk even a hundred dollars

on a painting until he had at least determined the age of the pigments. But as the case developed I thought you were only being used as a tool. Someone wanted that painting to be brought to my attention—wanted me to recognize the two doctors who were known to me. It was only natural that I should get in touch with them, and that they, in turn, should recognize the other ten on the Pasteur's staff. After that, the stage was set. I played into your hands perfectly. I built up, in those doctor's minds, the very fear-psychology you were counting on."

Renart's face had gradually assumed an expression of injured amazement. "But what are you saying, Gregory?" he exclaimed. "Do you really think that I—"

"There were two things lacking," went on Thorne, blandly ignoring the interruption. "A link—and a motive. The motive—the real motive—became apparent after the doctors received their extortion notices. The link was provided by your daughter—the link which connected you with the hospital and placed the means of death in your hands. When I learned of Miss Fox I remembered that you told me, several years ago, that you had a daughter who was a nurse. She had anglicized her name when she entered the profession, but it was hardly a disguise."

Thorne heard a hissing breath at his ear and saw, from the corner of his eye, the body of Jhada Singh go tense.

With one movement, Thorne leaped from his chair, threw himself across Jhada Singh's body, sending the Hindu crashing to the floor, chair and all, and dove through the doorway to hit the man who had suddenly materialized there.

The man went down with Thorne on top of him. The automatic in the fellow's hand went off, the bullet imbedding itself harmlessly in the ceiling. Then Thorne whipped over on his back, pulling the man's body over his own just as a chattering roar broke out up the stairway.

The man on top of Thorne went limp, and one bullet from the sub-machinegun on the stairway pierced his body, to strike Thorne's left shoulder a stunning blow. Then Thorne had his assailant's gun. He fired a blast—and the shadowy form up there suddenly swayed, pitched forward and came tumbling and sprawling down the steps, preceded by the clattering fall of the automatic rifle.

Thorne pushed aside the dead body of the first thug and rose shakily to his feet. As he did so, the front door slammed open, and he saw Renart's coat-tails disappear through it. Before he could move in pursuit, he saw the hand of the man who had fired the machinegun dive into a jacket pocket and produce a pistol.

Thorne leaped for him. But before he could reach the fellow the gun went off.

"So he was goin' to run out on us, was he?" he croaked. Then he rolled over and lay still just as Thorne snatched the pistol from his hand.

The detective looked out of the door in the direction in which the man had shot. Renart's still form lay sprawled on the sidewalk just outside.

GREGORY THORNE nodded to his model. "You may rest, Miss Grayson," he said.

The girl, with the peculiar modesty of the profession, demurely drew a shawl about her lithe nude form and sank back on the settee.

Jhada Singh, at his post by the doorway, also relaxed. He always conscientiously kept his gaze as far from the model as possible.

"You see," said the detective, as he began cleaning his palette, "Mary Fox—or Marie Renart, as she was born—had been in love with Dr. Hale. Hale threw her over and married another girl. Then Mrs. Hale developed Addison's disease and, of course, was brought to Pasteur Hospital. Mary Fox arranged to be

appointed her nurse—and that spelled finish for Mrs. Hale. She killed Hale's wife by giving her tiny doses of arsenic. Hale administered adrenalin-cortex derivative, but his wife continued to sink. He called in everybody on the staff who might be able to help. At one time twelve of them were in consultation.

"But even Mrs. Hale's death would not satisfy Mary Fox. Hale continued to repulse her—and when Renart became desperately involved financially and was casting about for any means to recoup—legitimate or otherwise—Mary Fox's clever brain hatched a complex scheme.

"Physicians and nurses, constantly in contact with contagious diseases, as they are, regularly submit to anti-toxic injections of various kinds. Mary Fox usually gave the typhoid injections to every man on the staff. They are given in three doses, at three-day intervals. Mary had made herself an expert on toxicology, and she knew that there was a way of combining certain elements of cyanide with nitrate of silver, to form a temporarily deadly gas. She included a very small amount of cyanide in the first inoculations she gave Goldmarck, Collins and Caraway. In the final inoculation she included nitrate of silver—and her victims generated a lethal gas in their veins. When the saturation point was reached they died—and within a half hour every vestige of evidence as to what killed them had disappeared. The gas simply dissolved and was absorbed in atomic form by the nitrate.

"It was, of course, Renart's fertile brain which concocted the idea of the painting as being the most dramatic—and therefore impressive—means of bringing home to the intended victims the fact of their peril. Of course, they were actually in no danger—since all but the three men who were already dead were not due for typhoid inoculations for some time. The trick was to use these three deaths to make it *seem* that if they did not

cough up ten thousand apiece they would suffer the same mysterious fate."

"It would seem, Master," put in Jhada Singh, "that Renart was placing his head in the tiger's mouth to come to you."

Thorne smiled. "Thank you, Jhada," he said. "Actually, he was being very clever. He and Mary saw to it that there were plenty of signposts pointing along the path they were sure I would follow—and yet they were very careful not to make those signposts too obvious. Renart was watching me very closely, and fate played into his hands when I received Hale's call at the x-ray laboratories, after Hale had received his extortion note. Renart eavesdropped on the conversation and heard me tell Hale not to warn the police. But, knowing that I, in all probability would call the cops, myself, he took immediate steps to put us both out of the way. He had had us shadowed constantly, and the minute we left the laboratories he called two of his thugs, who were waiting downstairs in a drug store, and told them to put on the heat.

"Mary Fox had procured interne's jackets for them, and they were able to get out with one of the Pasteur ambulances without being detected. When they carried our unconscious bodies into one of the receiving rooms, nobody thought to question it. We looked like just another couple of accident victims. She had

us held there while she called the morgue attendant off duty for a few minutes—then had us filed away on a couple of cooling slabs, breaking an ampule of cyanide in our chambers."

Suddenly Thorne looked up quizzically at his dark-skinned friend. "It seems to me, Jhada," he said, "that your intuitive faculties were not working quite up to par on this case. Usually when crime's afoot, you get something buzzing in your head that sounds like a three-alarm fire—or so you have told me. How was it that you didn't react that way to Renart, when he brought up his painting?"

Singh smiled faintly. "I did, Master," he said. "But I sensed that you, too, suspected something beneath the surface. As you have just said, you immediately became suspicious of Renart when you found that he had not, seemingly, tested the picture before purchasing it."

"Ah," said Thorne. "And believing me to be on the right track, you kept discreetly silent—not wanting to rob me of any of the glory. Very thoughtful of you, Jhada. But hereafter, my friend, let me have the full benefit of your valuable cerebration. I would rather live to share my glory than die, a lonely hero."

"Very well, Master," said Jhada Singh; and Thorne nodded to his model and resumed work on his painting.

THE END

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Larry saw the body of Georges Bedard explode into gory flying fragments of mutilated flesh!

CASE OF THE EXPLODING MEN

CHAPTER ONE

The Frightened Man

WE DON'T want the case, Mr. Spence," I said. "Look here, you can get any flatfoot to guard you

for ten dollars a day. Why don't you do that?"

"You see, Mr. Spence," my brother Larry put in smoothly, "while we appreciate your coming to us, just to guard a man who feels his life is in danger. . . .



A novelette of amazing murder at the crossroads of the world

By **RAY CUMMINGS**

Half-mad with fear, Dugan & Dugan's terrified client babbled his plea for protection . . . Even as he spoke, there came that fearful, gruesome sound, and torn fragments of bleeding flesh flung red banners above the panicked thousands, while a city became a charnel house of ghastly, exploded corpses!

Well, you see it just isn't in our line."

Larry coats everything in sugar; I always speak my mind, and you can take it or leave it. We were in the private office of our suite in the Marberry building, with windows looking down on midtown Broadway. It was about four o'clock of a hot summer afternoon.

"I see what you mean," the prospective client agreed. "I'm sorry—I've heard a lot of good things about you young fellows, and I'd have confidence in you."

He was mopping his heavy florid face with a big handkerchief. Obviously he

was tense, apprehensive. His name was J. J. Spence, of the firm of Livingston and Spence, Contractors and Builders—a big, heavy-set fellow with sandy hair, somewhat baldish. He could have been fifty; a bit paunchy now from wealth and good living. But in his younger days, unquestionably, he had been a rugged fellow. His face still had an outdoor, weatherbeaten look; and he was plenty muscular, despite his years.

We had never met him before, but we had heard of Livingston and Spence, of course. They were constructing an office

building now only a few blocks up Broadway. The sound of their riveters was making the afternoon hideous with clatter.

"There was an accident on your job last evening, wasn't there?" Larry was saying. "One of your men killed in an explosion?"

"There was," Spence agreed. "We have some explosives stored there in the shanty. How a stick of dynamite could have gotten out of the shanty and touched off and killed that fellow is a mystery. What I'm getting at—that explosion may not have been an accident."

"You mean—sabotage?" Larry said.

"Yes," Spence admitted. "Somebody's got it in for the firm of Livingston and Spence. As I told you, Mr. Dugan, I've had threatening letters. . . ."

He began his argument with Larry all over again, trying to hire us to guard him against what he thought was danger to his life and property. And just that minute I got a sudden hunch.

You may have been led to think that a successful detective works always by skillful mathematical deduction—"this plus that" must inevitably equal something else. Don't you believe it. The patient trial and error method is still very much in use; and for quick results, a hunch is often effective. Me, I always play my hunches.

"You wait here," I told Larry and Spence. "I'll be back shortly."

The harassed-looking Spence brightened. "You mean you'll take our case? Mr. Livingston will be glad."

DUCKING out of the office, I grabbed a taxi and went to the Morgue. I had read the newspaper accounts of that explosion last evening on the Livingston and Spence construction job. The employe who was killed—a young fellow named Thomas—had been blown to bits, but the damage to the property was slight.

Thomas' body wasn't at the Morgue;

relatives had claimed it. I located it at a midtown funeral parlor, where the undertaker, without much fuss, gave me a look at it. Just my hunch—there had seemed to me something queer about the way the newspapers had described that explosion and the condition of the body.

And I will say that the body was queer. It was pretty well blown apart—a gruesome damned thing—but the undertaker was working on it to get the face in shape for the relatives to see.

"Anybody who had my job on this one," the undertaker commented, "would keep away from explosives all the rest of his life. Seen all you want, Dugan?"

"Sure have," I said.

I beat it back to the office. It was now nearly five-thirty, and I found Larry doing some routine work at his desk. A queer thing about Larry and me—we're twins, but you'd certainly never guess it. Larry is about six feet one; a hundred and eighty pounds of flesh and pantherlike muscle. A handsome fellow with curly brown hair—sort of a cross between a movie actor, a collar ad and a college athlete. He's slow of speech; generally easy-going, though when aroused, he's a bad man to fool with. Well, I'm just the opposite—smallish, red-headed, sort of freckle-faced and certainly not much to look at more than once. And they tell me I'm pretty bad-tempered, even at my best.

"Hello, Tim," Larry greeted. "Where did you go? Mr. Spence is still waiting."

He gestured to where Spence was nervously pacing back and forth by the windows. One glance showed me that the waiting hadn't benefited Spence any. His collar had wilted in the afternoon's humid heat. His heavy florid face was purplish-red, wet with perspiration as he mopped it and his bald spot. As I came in, he stopped at one of our windows, his attention caught as he gazed down into the street.

"There's Livingston now!" he ex-

claimed. "I guess he's coming here to join me."

Larry and I went to the window. It was only three stories up. Spence's senior partner—Henry T. Livingston—was on the opposite pavement, walking alone, coming down evidently from his construction job a few blocks north. The work up there was finished for the day; the riveters were silent.

Broadway was pretty crowded, but we had a good look at Henry T. Livingston as he passed the cross-street at the corner—waiting carefully for the green light. He was an elderly man with shaggy iron-grey hair; a man of about sixty; tall, erect and vigorous looking.

"I told him I'd be here," Spence was saying. "I guess he—"

Spence got no further than that.

Livingston had reached an open space on the sidewalk, just beyond the marquee of a restaurant diagonally across the street. He didn't totter; there was no sign of haste or distress about him in any way. But in that second as we stared, his body burst apart!

The roar of the explosion sounded a split-second later as Livingston's body flew into fragments, with what was left of it wilting down into a gruesome pile of mangled flesh upon the pavement!

Spence, Larry and I stood gazing from the window. We couldn't say a word. The street went into a turmoil of gathering crowds and tangling traffic. The bloody, shattered remains of Livingston were engulfed in a second by the milling crowd. A woman screamed and fainted, which added to the confusion. Heaven knows, she had a right to faint,—for a fragment of flying, gory flesh had struck her. The excited crowd was all but trampling her. And now in the distance, a police siren was screaming.

I shoved a chair under Spence as Larry gripped me.

"Tim—that explosion last night," Lar-

ry murmured. "You think it had some connection with this?"

"You're damn right!" I said. "The explosion that killed Thomas seemed queer to me—so just now I've been taking a look at the body."

That queerness was obvious now. Thomas hadn't been killed by an external explosion—no dynamite going off accidentally near him, or anything like that. The explosion had been *within* his body—the middle of him blowing outward!

"The same thing as Livingston," I said. "This isn't the first murder—it's the second! We'll take your case, Mr. Spence!"

CHAPTER TWO

When Death Comes Creeping

IT WAS after eight o'clock that night before we three left the office. Larry and I didn't rush out to horn in on the police activities; that's not our style. We were getting plenty of information from Spence that seemed significant; and we had a few ideas of our own.

When supper came up from the restaurant across the street, Spence didn't want anything to eat or drink. That was reasonable enough, after seeing his partner's body bursting from an internal explosion. But when I showed Spence that nobody knew he was here—the food was for Larry and me—he managed to choke down some of it.

One telephone call showed us that the police weren't going to get anywhere with an autopsy. You couldn't even find Livingston's internal organs, much less submit them to chemical analysis. But the information from Spence put us on a trail.

He and Livingston had had two anonymous threatening letters—which Livingston, like an idiot, had burned. Livingston and Spence were bidding on a big government job; so was the rival firm of Merkel and Merkel, of Washington. The threat-

ening letters had told Livingston and Spence to lay off, or else. But they had gone ahead and bid.

That was yesterday. And the "or else" immediately had gone into force. Thomas was killed last night; and Livingston this afternoon.

"It would be pretty tough trying to pin anything on Merkel and Merkel just because they might benefit," Larry commented.

"They're reputable men," Spence exclaimed. "Business rivals, but they're our friends just the same. But this fellow Georges Bedard—well that's different."

Georges Bedard was a well-known Broadway character—Spence didn't have to tell us about him. In prohibition days he had been one of the slickest of the racketeers. The police never actually pinned much on him, but it was known that he had cleaned up quite a sizable fortune. He'd had several run-ins with the federal income tax people—and half a dozen of the old-style gang murders were doubtless his work.

But he had turned over a new leaf. He now had a restaurant in the West Fifties which was one of Broadway's snappiest night-spots, with a floor show of high class nudity that attracted every butter-and-egg man who visited the metropolis. Everybody knew all these details of Georges' checkered career.

But what wasn't well known—as Spence now told us—was that Georges had invested a good many of his extra thousands in the contracting firm of Merkel and Merkel, one of whose headstrong daughters he had married.

"So you think he's trying to run Merkel and Merkel's business by the strong-arm method?" I suggested.

That was Spence's general idea. There was a cool million profit in that government job. For a fact, it did sound like Georges Bedard, as he had been in his heyday, ten years ago. . . .

At about eight-thirty I took Spence to his midtown hotel. He was a bachelor; lived there alone in unpretentious fashion, despite the fact that he was reputedly a very wealthy man.

"I've got a permit to carry a gun," Spence told me. He displayed a little revolver. "I'll be all right—"

And he did seem less frightened now. We ducked a crowd of reporters who were laying for him in the lobby and I got him upstairs and into his rooms.

"You stay here," I told him. "I'll be back in two or three hours. By the way, just to play safe, I wouldn't order up any food or anything."

He tried to grin. "You're damn right on that," he agreed. "Don't worry."

I had a logical trail of my own to follow, which I didn't think would take more than a couple of hours; and Larry meanwhile had gone to Georges'.

The place, he told me later, was crowded, as always, and lurid with gay colored lights. The floor show, which was continuous from nine P. M. to three A. M., was just getting under way when Larry arrived. He took a table over in a corner; ordered a drink and a sandwich which stood the firm of Dugan and Dugan a quick two dollars.

Larry knew Georges Bedard by sight. He could see the ex-gangster occasionally threading his way among the tables, greeting his more important customers. Georges was a tall, handsome, slickly black-haired fellow who still looked in his twenties, though he was nearly forty.

Larry made no effort to talk to him; but within an hour that handsome brother of mine had connected with a cute little number whom the head-waiter recommended as one of the dancing hostesses.

HER name was Vivian Delaire. It wasn't her pale, blonde beauty or her short dancing frock that attracted Larry. He had been watching her for half an

hour, he explained to me, and had seen her across the restaurant with Georges. They seemed to be on exceedingly familiar terms, so that she looked like a good bet to Larry for pumping.

Larry's a fast worker. By ten-thirty they had had several drinks, and I guess the girl liked Larry all right. And then he made his first stab.

"Quite some excitement on Broadway this afternoon, Vivian," he said. "A man blew apart—exploded into bits. Read about it? I hear they're just about to catch the murderer."

You can sometimes tell more by watching a hand than a face. But Vivian's scarlet-nailed fingers didn't quiver.

"Is that right?" she responded. "Boy! That was a weird explosion. Was it murder? I was too busy getting ready for the job here to read much about it."

So far as Larry could guess, the Livingston affair didn't mean any more to her than to a million others who had read about it. And then the break came.

A waiter arrived, calling Vivian to the phone. She was gone maybe five minutes; and when she came back she was totally changed. Frightened. Larry couldn't miss it.

"Well," he said, "let's have a drink, Vivian."

"I—Oh, thanks, I can't," she stammered. "I've got to go." Her gaze was roving the restaurant. "Thanks a lot just the same, Mr. Green. You've been swell. Hope I see you again."

Her hands were twisting the white table cloth. The telephone call, whatever it was, had frightened her. And now she had to go somewhere, though Larry knew she was scheduled for a dance number in the floor show within ten minutes.

As her apprehensive gaze came back to his face, he said pleasantly, "Going out? Too bad. I just had an idea that the Livingston murderer—"

He let his voice trail off.

"Livingston murderer?" she gasped. "You know something about—?" She bit back her words.

It seemed to Larry that her terrified gaze darted across the restaurant to where the sleek, handsome Georges Bedard was standing. Larry had an idea then that Spence wasn't far from right in his suspicions. But in that same second everything was changed again. The garish, luridly lighted restaurant room was filled with a dull, muffled roar. And Larry had just time to see the body of Georges Bedard explode into gory flying fragments of mutilated flesh!

CHAPTER THREE

Terror Strikes at Night!

THE turmoil in Georges' restaurant that night was just about a panic. In the midst of it, Larry had only one idea—to keep Vivian Delaire in sight. He was convinced now that in following her he was on a hot trail. That telephone call had totally changed her attitude toward the Livingston murder; that was obvious. The commotion immediately separated Larry and the girl. Half the tables in the room were overturned in the rush of people trying to get out or, according to their temperaments, trying to get a closer look at the mangled, ghastly remains of the handsome Georges.

Larry and Vivian were swept away. Then he saw her struggling toward a recess from which in a second she darted back, with a long cloak over her shoulders. She went through a side exit. Frightened diners were pouring from every door, and Larry reached the sidewalk just in time to see Vivian hail a cab on the comparatively secluded cross street.

"That yellow Checker," Larry snapped as he caught another taxi. "See it, driver? Don't lose it!"

Larry's ten-spot convinced the driver

that he couldn't possibly lose that yellow-checked cab. He didn't. It was a long drive, north and east; but at last they were rolling through a shabby street of the Bronx and the car ahead showed signs of stopping.

"Easy, driver," Larry warned. "Looks as if we're about where we're going."

The other car had turned a left corner; but the corner had an empty lot so that it was still possible to see the girl's taxi, poking along as though trying to verify the house numbers. And then it stopped and the girl got out.

Larry, on the other street, was out almost as quickly. "Keep going—turn right," he ordered. "Good-bye—and thanks."

His cab rolled on, turned the next corner in the opposite direction from the girl, and was gone.

It was a shabby neighborhood of ramshackle frame houses, with occasional little shops interspersed by empty lots. Two or three blocks ahead, the street ended at a waterfront. The night was darkly overcast; the streets here were only dimly lighted. Now, at midnight, there was little traffic and only a few pedestrians. Most of the houses were dark.

As his cab rolled away, Larry stood by a rickety fence, peering between two dark houses to the other street, where he could see the girl. Her taxi was gone; she walked slowly along, then crossed the street and stood very much as Larry was standing, apparently peering at a house nearby.

Larry slipped between the houses, crossed a dark backyard, and emerged near the other street. Telephone wires were strung low here; and for a moment he deliberated on calling our office, to see if I were there. He could easily have done it; we always carry a small test set with us in case of emergency. But Larry decided against it; the girl was moving forward again.

THE other street was darker, more deserted, with more empty spaces than houses; and the empty lots here were mostly tree-shrouded. There is no one better than Larry at this sort of tailing; and Vivian Delaire was certainly not an experienced quarry.

Unseen, Larry got fairly close to her—close enough to see that she was watching a dark, tumble-down, two-story, frame house that looked as though no one had lived in it for years. Its broken windows were partly boarded up; its front yard was overgrown with grass and weeds.

Then suddenly the girl seemed to make up her mind—or perhaps she had overcome her fear. Larry could see that she was furtive as she darted across the dim street, circled the dark ramshackle front verandah and stopped at the side of the house. He got himself behind a tree in that same side yard within a minute. The agitated girl was knocking on a small side door.

"Fred! Oh Fred—let me in!"

Then the little door opened. There was a vague light-sheen that could have been from a hand flashlight. It disclosed a bareheaded, a slack-jawed youth in his early twenties. The girl threw herself into his arms.

"Vivian!" he said in a low voice. "You shouldn't have come!"

"I had to. Oh—I'm so frightened!"

"Damn it, I wouldn't have told you this address if I'd thought—"

"But. . . Oh, Fred," she cut in, "there's been another!"

That could only mean the death of Georges Bedard! The little door closed as the youth drew the terrified girl into the house.

It wasn't hard for Larry to get through a broken cellar window and up the stairs into a dank, mouldering kitchen, but it was difficult to avoid noise. The night was windless, the dark, tumbledown house so silent that every creak Larry made seemed

startlingly apparent. In the black kitchen, roaches scuttled with legs scratching; a rat squeaked and dashed away.

He heard the murmurs of Vivian and the slack-jawed youth again now; they seemed to be seated in the front hall, on the stairs that led upward. But he couldn't distinguish their words. Automatic in hand, he stood in the back of the hall by the kitchen door. The house—what he had seen of it—had no furniture. The air was dank, fetid with the smell of rotting wallpaper which here in the hall was coming off in strips.

He wondered if he should try to get closer, to hear what they were saying. Or should he seize them, take them down to the office? But he had no time to make any decision; for the silence of the old house was abruptly broken by the sound of a door opening—the side door through which the girl had come. Hushed footsteps sounded in the little cross hall that led toward the stairs.

LARRY heard Vivian give a low cry of terror. Then he heard her leave her companion and come back farther into the dark hall. She passed within a few feet of the crouching Larry, wavering as she sank down, crouching in the deep shadows made by the angle under the ascending stairs.

"Mooney? You, Mooney?" the newcomer asked.

"Yes, sir. I'm here."

The slack-jawed youth stepped forward to meet the visitor. A faint torchlight beam flashed from the hand of the man who had just arrived. By its light Larry saw that he was a big fellow in a long black raincoat; a cap was drawn low over his eyes and a black handkerchief masked the rest of his face. He moved now with the slack-jawed youth whom he had called Mooney, through an archway into the dark front parlor. Their low-toned voices became inaudible.

From the back of the hall, Larry crept cautiously forward. Evidently the girl was not yet aware of him. He shifted until he could see through the archway; and caught their voices again.

". . . and as far as you're concerned, it's finished, Mooney. But by God, if you ever open your trap—"

"Oh, I won't, sir. How could I, when I don't know—"

The other man chuckled. "Well, here's your money. You'd better park it right here for a few months. Don't flash it around."

The pay-off! Mooney took a wad of bills that the masked man handed him. The pay-off for the murders of Thomas, Livingston and Georges Bedard? But to Larry, it didn't seem quite that. . . .

I have no doubt but what within another few seconds Larry would have nabbed both the men. Then, abruptly, as he stood in the dense blackness of the hall, something bumped him! It was Vivian—who was furtively moving forward, trying to see into the front parlor.

Her unexpected collision with Larry so startled her that she gripped him convulsively, and her scream rang through the silent house. It took a second for Larry to cast her off. He heard the rushing footsteps of the men in the front room; the masked man's hoarse oath.

Larry's gun covered them as they appeared. "Stand where you are!" he said evenly. "I've got you!"

But with a gasp of terror, Vivian reeled against him and struck at his hand. Involuntarily his finger squeezed the trigger; the shot stabbed flame across the dark hallway and the bullet thudded into the ceiling. Larry was leaping, staggering forward, with the hysterical girl wilting at his feet, clutching at his legs.

Then in the darkness something whizzed, struck his head and he fell. It was the last thing he remembered for a long time.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Strangled Voice

SOME hours before all this had happened to Larry, I had left the frightened Spence locked in his suite. From his hotel I went to the Livingston's home, up on Riverside Drive. His widow was there; and after some argument with the servants, I got to see her for a moment—an elderly woman, terrified and prostrated by her husband's death. She was able to tell me what I wanted to know; Livingston had been taking some medicine for a minor ailment.

There's a thrill in digging up what seems a hot trail at your first crack. Mrs. Livingston was sure that none of her husband's medicine was in the house. He carried it in his pocket, she told me—good-sized white capsules which he took with water at stated intervals.

"At what times, Mrs. Livingston?" I demanded. "At—say about half past five in the afternoon, for instance?"

"Why, yes," she responded. "It does seem to me that he took one just after he got home, at about that time yesterday."

If Livingston had had any of that medicine left in his pocket at the time of his death, to me it seemed highly problematic that any of it could have been found. I didn't want to chase that angle of it. But certainly it seemed reasonable to assume that at five-thirty today, Livingston had taken what he thought was one of his regular capsules—and that one had been lethal.

Its gelatine might conceivably take five minutes or so to dissolve in his stomach—five minutes during which he had walked down Broadway toward our office. So much seemed clear.

He had walked to his death, unsuspecting that in his stomach was a murderous little bomb of some weirdly powerful explosive. I'm no expert chemist; but I

could see that the thing was certainly possible. Possible? God, how could I doubt it, with memory so vivid of his gruesome shattered body?

Mrs. Livingston gave me the name of their physician; he had prescribed the capsules just five days ago.

I had never heard of this Dr. Robert Marsh, but his residence-office was only a few blocks away. I walked there. And as I went down the broad, placid side street, turning off from the Drive, I saw a man emerge from one of the high-stooped, brown-stone houses down the block. He was a big man in what seemed a long black raincoat. He headed on foot, away from me, hurrying toward West End Avenue.

I would have thought nothing of him, except that when I located the numbers, I found it was Dr. Marsh's home from which he had so hastily emerged. By then, though, he was out of sight.

The elderly, distinguished-looking doctor himself, answered my ring. He was, I later learned, alone in the house.

"I'm Timothy Dugan," I said. "Working on the Livingston murder case."

"Oh, yes," he nodded. He led me into his big front reception room. The door to his adjoining office stood open.

This damnable thing had already shown that it could strike without the least possible warning, but still I was wholly unprepared, for in the midst of the doctor's greeting sentences, there was a stumbling of his words, a sort of vague startled terror that leaped suddenly to his face.

I think I heard a queer hissing rumble; there may have been a little smoke emerging from his mouth and nostrils as his jaw dropped open with that one flash of wondering terror.

At the muffled roar, I had instinctively recoiled, partly behind a big glass-fronted bookcase—which I have no doubt saved my life. In the dimness of the spacious room, I'll swear there was a sizzling burst of molten light mingled with the detona-

tion, as the body of Dr. Marsh burst outward.

The glass front of the bookcase was smashed with a crash, and everything in the room seemed to rock. But I was unhurt—almost unsplattered, as I afterward found—sheltered by the bookcase.

What was left of Dr. Marsh lay on the rug before me; it was still a man's body, but the middle of it was a horrible, gory welter!

I didn't stop to look at it. As I jumped up, sickened, shaking, dizzily confused, I found myself staggering into the adjoining office. On the desk, one of the doctor's little prescription blanks was lying. I snatched it. The street outside was in commotion now; certainly I had no wish to get embroiled in the turmoil.

On a run I went through the house, chancing that I'd bump into servants; went out the back door, across the yard and into another street, with a getaway as neat as though I had been the escaping murderer himself.

That man in the black raincoat hadn't been gone more than five minutes. I dashed through to West End Avenue and hurried up it a block or two. But there was no sign of him. It would be hopeless trying to find him now.

Disappointed, I drew Dr. Marsh's prescription blank from my pocket. There was no writing on it; but at the bottom was printed the name and address of a druggist—Peter Allwin, on Amsterdam Avenue quite near here.

Had Livingston sent his prescription there to be filled? It seemed a reasonable chance; and the drug store was only a few blocks away. . . .

"Yes, I filled it," Allwin said readily.

HE WAS a musty, dusty old fellow in a faded black alpaca coat; sort of an old-time apothecary. And his little shop was the same. When I told him who I was and what I wanted, he went into a fit of trembling.

The police hadn't been here, he said; but I have no doubt he had been expecting them any minute. As soon as I told him my business, he closed and locked his front door, and led me to the back of the shop.

"I'll help you in any way I can. Will I get arrested?" he gasped. "I heard about Mr. Livingston, of course. I—I did fill a prescription for him five days ago—I can't deny it. But I swear, Mr. Dugan—that medicine was harmless. It was exactly what Dr. Marsh called for."

"You filled the prescription personally?" I asked him.

"Yes, Mr. Dugan, I did. Look, here it is." He produced the original from a sticker file on his littered old desk. "Look, they're all simple chemicals," he added earnestly. "Just a tonic, blood-builder, and a mild sedative. There couldn't have been any error—I always check everything. I never let Fred fill anything."

He didn't have any of Livingston's medicine, but he showed me some big, empty gelatine moulds. "See, Mr. Dugan, this is the type I used—they totalled fifteen grains each."

It was a sizable circular disc—quite a husky thing to swallow, but easily possible.

"Will I get arrested?" the old fellow tremulously demanded.

"Not by me," I assured him.

The back of that shop was a weird place—a couple of littered flat-top desks with dim hooded lights on them; endless lines of big bottles on shelves, and a heavy chemical smell over everything. And believe it or not, as I stood there with that trembling old druggist, I found myself holding my breath, watching his face, edging away from him, as though any minute he, too, might burst into bloody shards.

"Fred?" I asked. "Who's Fred?"

"My assistant—Fred Mooney. He's a good boy. He's sick today—he didn't come to work at all."

It was evidently Fred's desk across the room. A young man's jacket was lying

near it; and on its flat top was a litter of chemical bottles, measuring glasses, tiny apothecary scales, an open reference book, and a volume of the American *Pharmacopia*.

I poked at the desk, holding my flash on it. "You say this Fred Mooney never fills your prescriptions?" I asked.

"No. He's my store clerk, and delivery man. But he putters a lot here in his spare time," the old man said. "He's an ambitious young fellow—always experimenting with chemicals. Sometimes he comes here alone at night. I let him do what he likes. Give youth a chance—"

A chance for murder, I thought grimly.

The reference book was open to the word *thermite*. "What's thermite?" I demanded of Allwin.

The druggist didn't know. It wasn't anything listed in the *Pharmacopia*. I read a portion of the article. It was a trade name for a mixture of aluminum in fine grains, with an oxide of a chemically weaker metal. When ignited, the aluminum combines violently with the oxygen of the oxide, generating a very sudden, enormous heat . . .

A very sudden, enormous heat! I read further . . . "Such a heat would greatly intensify an explosive force . . ."

"Here are some crystals," I murmured. "This fellow Mooney was either sloppy, or else in a lot of stress and hurry."

THE crystals were on the desk top, where the blotter had got pushed partly over them. They were yellow.

The trembling Allwin was getting my drift now. I didn't know what the yellow crystals were, but he identified them.

"Picric acid! Produced by a combination of carbolic and sulphuric acids when nitric acid is slowly added to the mixture."

Now what indeed, would picric acid crystals be doing in a drugstore? You can use them as a dye—a test for cotton fabrics. They'll stain your fingers yellow,

as nicotine does. In themselves, not explosive, they are widely used as a basic, vital ingredient of the most deadly high explosives known to chemical science!

"Where does this experimenting lad of yours live?" I demanded of the druggist. "An ambitious fellow? I'll say he is!"

The druggist gave me the address. Fred Mooney lived in a boarding house over in Brooklyn. It had no phone. I figured then that if the fellow went home, we'd nab him during the night. On the shelf over Mooney's desk was Allwin's bottle of sodium sticks . . .

The thing was shaping in my mind, as though now I were concocting those weird and deadly little things . . . A big gelatine capsule, dissolving in the watery liquid contents of the stomach—sodium that would ignite when it contacted the liquid. Thermite, for sudden, enormous heat—and picric acid in one of its diabolic explosive compounds! Enough to shatter a human body into a ghastly welter!

"Say nothing of this to anyone!" I warned Allwin. On impulse I was searching Mooney's jacket that lay here. In it was a letter from a girl—an affectionate letter making a date. It was signed, "Vivian."

Mooney's girl? And the motive, perhaps, for his desire for sudden riches. If he didn't show up at his boarding-house, this would be a lead to trace him. The letter was written on the stationery of Georges' Restaurant.

If I had only known then how closely my trail had connected with Larry's!

From the drugstore I beat it back to our office, hoping that by now Larry might be there. He wasn't. While I waited, I telephoned a friend, the night editor of one of the newspapers. He had already looked Dr. Robert Marsh up in his morgue, the newspaper's information file.

Dr. Marsh was a silent partner in the firm of Livingston and Spence! The doctor had wanted his business activities kept

secret—separate from his medical practice, so that Livingston and Spence had never mentioned it!

That supplied a clear connection in the murderous chain. Thomas, an employe, Livingston and Dr. Marsh, two of the partners, were already dead! But how in the devil did Georges Bedard fit into it? As I sat alone in our empty offices, at that minute all the triumph I had had over tracking Fred Mooney, suddenly oozed out of me. This ghastly thing was striking so unexpectedly

What the devil was keeping Larry? I had already heard from the night editor about the death of Georges Bedard—the turmoil in the restaurant, which now was closed for the night by the police.

I don't often get worried about Larry; but I was now. Being twins, maybe there's something psychic between us.

Then in the silence, my phone rang.

"Tim! You—Tim—" It was Larry's voice! Low, furtive, apprehensive.

"What is it, Larry?" I murmured tensely. "Where are you?"

His voice was all but gasping. I made out something about the fifth floor of an office building—a room with no ceiling over it Then there was a sizzling click over the wire—and only dead silence.

I rattled the receiver; then numbly I hung up. I knew I couldn't trace the call; most especially that one. Nobody ever accused me of being a timid fellow. But when anything goes wrong with Larry, it gets me. I knew now that something was desperately wrong. And I found myself shaking like a damned coward.

Where was he? I guess I must have crossed the room for I was staring out our windows, up Broadway to that partly constructed office building of Livingston and Spence—its lower five stories partly finished. Above them the gaunt, naked steel girders rose into the sky

CHAPTER FIVE

Murder Visits in Shadow

"**S**INK your teeth into it, Mooney. See if you can't twitch it loose."

On the dark, littered floor of a partly constructed room, Larry lay with his ankles roped, his wrists crossed and lashed behind him. Mooney, roped in the same way, lay against him; and nearby, in the litter of laths and plaster, the bound girl, Vivian Delaire, was an inert bundle.

In that fight in the deserted house, when Larry dropped, the masked villain had turned upon Mooney, undoubtedly thinking the youth had tried to trap him.

Larry, Vivian and Mooney were drugged with a hypodermic. With returning consciousness, it had been only a blur to Larry as they were brought here, tumbled into this room.

He didn't know who his adversary was. Mooney didn't either. The youth could only babble that he had concocted the lethal tablets, and sold them to this man who had never disclosed his identity—sold them so that he could get the money to marry Vivian. He didn't know they were to be used for murder. He had been terrified when he guessed that Livingston's death had been caused by them. He had phoned Vivian—and she had wormed out of him the address of the deserted house.

Well, maybe Mooney didn't know that he was making and selling a ghastly weapon, to be used for murder. He's dead now, and it isn't for me to judge him. If he didn't actually know, then he was a damn poor guesser—as well as a clever chemist and an inventive genius.

Larry was desperate now as he lay in the litter with Mooney beside him and the still unconscious girl nearby. Their captor had departed; but he had warned Larry that he wasn't going far—only to the room underneath, where he was setting

a time-bomb. There was no use in Larry calling for help—if he did, their captor would come back and kill him at once. And nobody else would hear him, anyway.

The masked man in the black raincoat had chuckled. "There'll be a big explosion here pretty soon, Dugan. Sabotage! The construction job of Livingston and Spence wrecked again! This time it'll be pretty near wrecked for good—maybe they'll find parts of the bodies of you three."

Five minutes had passed. The desperate Larry had a vision that any instant now the floor would heave up in a muffled roar—if he'd live to hear it. And that would be all . . .

"Get your teeth into the rope, Mooney," he whispered. "Can't you loosen it?"

"No—can't seem to."

Then Mooney's teeth caught the right strand. The knot loosened a little.

"Hurry it! Good God—hurry it!" Larry panted. I guess you can feel a pretty desperate haste with a lighted bomb under you.

Then Larry's hands came loose.

"Good enough!" he murmured. He released Mooney, untied Mooney's hands and feet. The young fellow was starting to release Larry's ankles, when suddenly he stiffened.

"Good God—listen!" It was their captor coming back again!

THE room had no doors, windows nor ceiling—just the partly finished walls. By the reflected light of the sky overhead Larry had seen the wires of a temporary telephone installation low on the wall beside him. And there was a tiny lightning arrester here.

Mooney was crouched at Larry's ankles, trying to loosen the knots which were jammed. In Larry's pocket was the little telephone test set which we always carried. The man had searched him for his weapons, but he either had ignored or overlooked the set.

Swiftly now, Larry clipped it on to the binding posts of the lightning arrester, and called me. In another second he would have told me where he was—and I was only two or three blocks away. But in a panic, Mooney was gripping him.

"My God! Here he comes!" The terrified youth's convulsive grip jerked the clips from the binding posts, and the connection was broken.

Larry thought that Mooney had released his ankles; but the youth's fumbling hands hadn't been able to do it. The man's step sounded outside on the scaffolding. Larry had no time to do anything save drop the test set onto the littered floor when the bulky figure of the masked man loomed in the doorway. He had set his time-bomb, and come back for a last look.

What he saw was Mooney, wholly free, standing momentarily panic-stricken in the middle of the room. I will say that that young fellow's last acts were distinguished by courage, if not by good judgment, for he started first for Vivian, threw himself down as though with some vague idea of protecting or releasing her. Then he tried to scramble up and leap at the oncoming man.

A knife glinted. Mooney groaned and went down with a knife in his chest.

Larry was on his feet, with his ankles still tied. The masked man whirled on him, dodged his swinging fist and knocked him down. Larry saw a revolver; the man gripped the muzzle and the butt crashed on Larry's head. . . .

TO ME it was fairly obvious that Larry must be in that uncompleted office building. Maybe I should have stopped to pick up a couple of cops on Broadway. I never thought of it.

The gaunt, leprous-looking building stood a bit back from the street, its front façade boarded up. I dashed around to the side, and out onto the dark littered open space at the back. The watchman's

shanty was near the middle of it. I was desperate with haste, recalling the urgency and fear in Larry's voice. He was here, I had no doubt, imprisoned somewhere on this dark fifth story.

My automatic was in my hand. I'm not a bit sure but what I would have assaulted any watchman who accosted me, with the idea that he probably was in league with this diabolic criminal.

The watchman was in the shanty, but he was lying inert, with his throat slashed crimson. I went past with only a quick look and ducked into the back doorway of the building. The littered interior was weird with darkness and crazy, unexpected light-shafts from the city's sheen coming in through the open doorways and partly built walls, and the air was heavy with the smell of new cement. Ladders led upward, to the spaces overhead, where planks had been laid on naked girders. The fifth story, Larry had said . . .

I went up four of them. I tried not to make any noise; but I think now that I was heard. I had reached the top of a ladder at the fourth floor, with a stretch of open planking ahead of me that terminated in the gaunt doorway of a room. Did I actually see something move over there? I ducked down.

For a minute or so, crouching on the ladder-top, I waited. There was no sound save the blended roar of the city, and nothing to see but the eerie leprous structure around me. I decided I had been mistaken. I could see where, twenty or thirty feet away, another ladder slanted upward. There was a tier of finished walls up there, already partitioned into rooms, most of which were open to the sky. Was Larry imprisoned in one of them? Or had he, by now, been killed?

That thought turned me cold and I started hastily for the other ladder. Reflected light struck on me; loose planking wobbled and thumped under my tread. I had just passed the doorway to an un-

finished room when a reaching arm and hand with a knife stabbed at my neck!

I dodged and the knife grazed me. Then I was at grips with a big burly masked figure in a long dark raincoat. His left hand had seized my wrist so that I could not get the automatic muzzle on him.

As I said, I'm a small fellow, and the strength and weight of this burly antagonist jerked me through the doorway, into a room checkered with light and shade. On its littered floor I stumbled, went down, with that hulking body on top of me. I felt my outflung right hand hit something; it knocked the automatic away.

Above me, the eerie light showed the man's dark shoulders, his handkerchief-shrouded face with a cap pulled low. His left hand was gripping my throat and the knife was coming down, despite my frantic clutch on his wrist.

"Got you, Tim Dugan—it's the end of you now!" he panted.

CHAPTER SIX

Secret of the Masked Madman

I HOPE always, that when anybody says that to me, he's in error. But I had no strength to hold that descending knife, so abruptly I relaxed, went limp. And that action caught him unawares.

He lurched down; the jabbing knife barely missed my throat as I twisted side-wise from under it. And then my sudden upward heave caught him off balance, knocked him sprawling, so that I was able to squirm from under him.

He rose up with me, and though I slammed the knife from his hand with a blow of my fist, he caught me. With his big arms around me, I was pressed backward, and I fell again in the damned litter of the floor. Locked together, we rolled into the doorway of a big unfinished closet, filled with buckets of paint.

Again I was squirming underneath, with the man's bulk on me as his fists

pummeled my face. His cap had fallen off now; the knotted black handkerchief had dropped down around his throat. It was the partner of Henry Livingston—the burly J. J. Spence, who should have been barricaded, terrified, in his hotel rooms, but wasn't!

His fist crashed into my face. "So you know me—just before you die!"

I knew him all right, but I wasn't the one who died. Yet, in those seconds I thought he had me. My face was blood-splattered from his blows; my head was roaring; the vision of his heavy, leering face close over me went dim.

My arms were failing. I remember vaguely that I caught a bucket of paint and tried to heave it into his face. Then my flailing right hand struck against his knife, which was lying in the litter of that closet doorway. He didn't see it coming as I jabbed it up between his pummeling fists. It went into his chest.

If you've never stabbed into a man, let me tell you it's gruesome. For an instant I clung and shoved and twisted that knife-handle with his warm sticky blood spurting down on me. His pummeling stopped. He slumped. His head and chest, and the damned handle of the still-buried knife, pressed down on me.

"So you—did it?" he gasped. "Well—all right."

Blood gushed from his mouth and choked his words. He was twitching with a paroxysm; dying, I had no doubt. Frantically I squirmed under his two-hundred-pound bulk. That accursed littered closet was jammed with our threshing bodies so that I couldn't heave him off as he slumped, a dead weight upon me. I recall that vaguely I had seen his hand twitching at his mouth as he tried to swallow the blood that was choking him.

"Got me, Dugan," he faintly gasped. "I'm done for. Well—that's too bad . . ."

Even though he was dying, he could be ironical. For a moment my roaring senses

blurred; his pummeling blows had all but knocked me out. Then I was squirming again, heaving at his bloody bulk.

I was partially free; but suddenly he murmured, "No you don't, damn you!"

With his dying strength he lurched at an unhinged door that was balanced in the closet, knocked it so that it fell upon us and partly across the doorway.

"You won't get out," he gasped. Despite his blood-choked breath, I could not miss his irony. "The—explosion inside me will kill you . . . And I'm already dead, damn you, Dugan . . ."

And then I understood. He knew he was done for; and he had swallowed one of his diabolic capsule bombs. It was in his stomach now, its gelatine dissolving . . .

They say that an abnormal strength often comes to the dying. Spence had it now as his arms held me, his bulk slumped upon me with that heavy door on top of us, jamming us in the close confines of the closet.

God knows how I fought and squirmed to get disentangled. A minute, two minutes . . . It was an eternity of horror, with every thump of my pounding heart, every gasping bloody breath that Spence was drawing, seeming to mark that instant when I would hear that deadly hissing rumble, then the muffled roar as his body burst in my arms . . .

Somehow I heaved the door away and pantingly shoved Spence out into the room. Then I was aware that I had picked him up, staggering with him as he still clung to me. On the outer scaffolding I fell with his weight. His dying, convulsive grip still held; his blood-filled mouth still mumbled ironic curses as I tumbled him to the edge of the scaffolding. I heaved him, tore loose and clutched a scantling to save myself from going over.

He turned slowly, end over end, as he went down. Then I saw a puff of molten light, heard the muffled roar as, in midair,

his body burst into ghastly fragments!

I HAVE little to add to this record of the case of the exploding men. I found Larry just recovering consciousness; Vivian Delaire still inert in that upper room. The misguided young Mooney was dead. We found the time-bomb which Spence had set and removed it safely.

Spence's motive for his diabolical series of crimes is clear to us now, especially since the investigation into the financial affairs of the firm.

Spence's personal affairs were found to be very much entangled. He had been gambling heavily—some of it, we think, under the auspices of the sleek Georges Bedard. Spence had needed money badly, and for a year or two had been misappropriating the company funds, the falsified records of which now came to light. Dr. Marsh was the third partner. A letter was found in his effects, from Livingston to Marsh—a letter which indicated that the doctor and Livingston now were aware of Spence's embezzlement. Spence knew he was on the verge of exposure and jail. He had to silence his two partners.

To cover his trail, keep himself wholly free from suspicion, he came to us to protect him; to make it seem that he was an intended victim of sabotage.

The "threatening letters"—his implications against Georges Bedard in connection with the rival contracting firm—were all Spence's invention, of course. He doubtless had some grudge against the

handsome ex-gangster, probably in connection with their gambling relations. Sending Larry on that false trail—with Georges so soon to be removed from the scene—probably seemed clever to Spence. But what he didn't know was that young Mooney and Vivian Delaire were connected . . . So that the false trail turned out to be a very real one.

The exact details of how Spence tricked his victims into taking the lethal capsules will of course never be disclosed, but one may easily imagine them. The employe, Thomas, seems to have discovered Spence's falsified books; there is evidence that he was the source from which Livingston and Dr. Marsh learned it. So Thomas was the start of the murderous chain. Explosions that damaged the property would look like sabotage, but in reality, the insurance would amply cover it.

Based upon my evidence of what I found in Allwin's Drugstore, police chemists, working secretly, have produced some of the murderous little bombs. I evidently envisaged their construction with fair accuracy. White metallic sodium ignites, bursts into flame when it touches a liquid. That ignition created thermite, with instantaneous, enormous heat firing the explosive of a picric acid base. I understand that in the laboratory, many guinea pigs have been blown into unrecognizable fragments. A nice tribute to Mooney's inventive genius; and maybe it's an advancement of science.

But, Larry and me—we don't want any more of it!

THE END



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WEB-FOOTED DEATH DANCE

By PAUL ERNST



He fired at the thing, point blank, thought he had hit it.

CHAPTER ONE

Monster Loose!

DUSK was lengthening the mountain shadows as Malvern Early swung off the train at the Colorado mining town of Lead Bell. The shadows seemed about to engulf the town, like a great dragon gulping it down.

Early was not a superstitious man, but he had felt something like a chill touch his spine as he first saw the grim small valley in which the bleak little town was nestled. However, it was probably less the appearance of the town than the business which had brought him here, that gave him that eerie sense of chill.

A man killed in Lead Bell in a way which no man should die! A menace hanging over the village that was too much

for the local sheriff to cope with! Some fantastic monster loose in that small valley!

Early's hand had scarcely let go the rail of the car vestibule when the train started off again, like a thing fleeing blindly from danger. And then Early saw a small group of men coming up the platform toward him. Their faces were a little pale and more than a little agitated.

A big, broad-shouldered man with a wide-brimmed western hat held out his hand.

"You're Private Operative Malvern Early?"

"That's right," said Early.

"I'm Bill Sayre, manager of the Lead Bell Mines Corporation." He turned to the rest. "These are Arnold Johns, president of the company; Amos Bates, our sheriff; and Carl Lewis, mayor of Lead

What was this hellish carnival of murder, that overnight turned a quiet mining settlement into a town of ghastly terror—under the bone-breaking grip of a fiend from another world? . . . Even Malvern Early, the super-detective, was stumped—till he himself fell into the trap he'd baited for the killer!

Bell and its most prominent business man."

Early nodded to the group, and turned back to Sayre. There was quietly controlled horror in the mine manager's face.

"You couldn't have come at a more appropriate moment, Early," Sayre said. Downright terror peered nakedly for an instant from his wide-spaced grey eyes.

"You mean . . ." Early began.

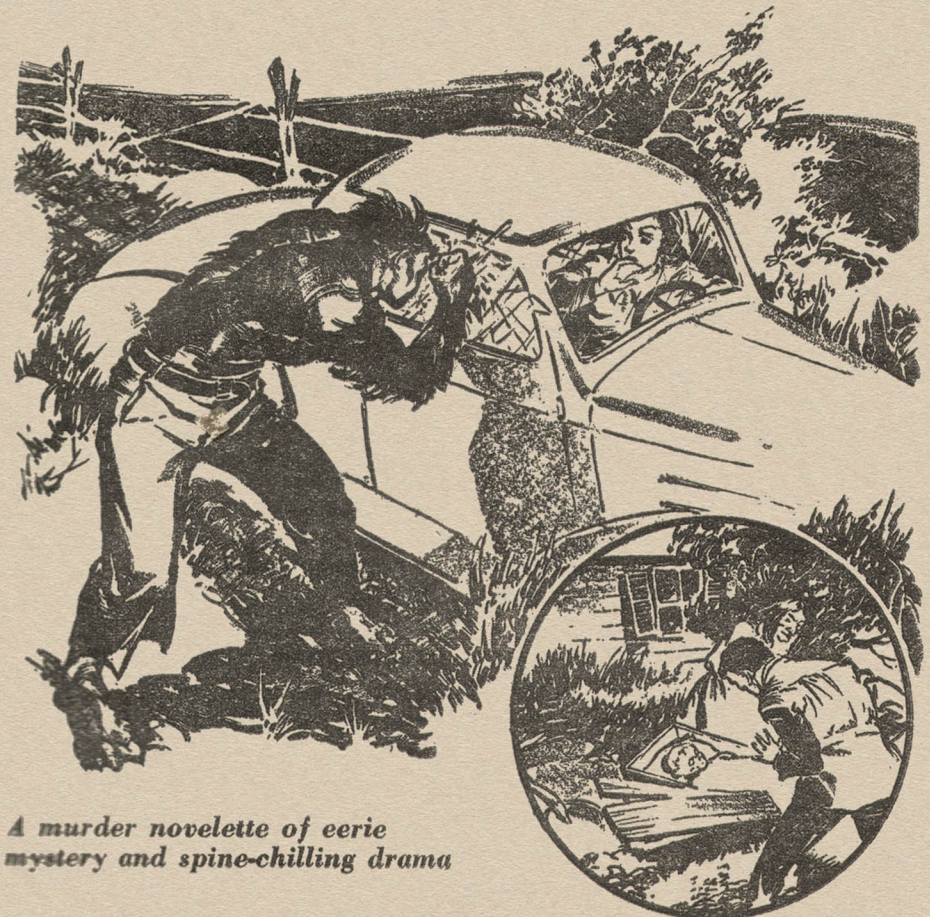
"There has just been another murder in Lead Bell," the sheriff said. He was a tall gaunt man with faded blue eyes, in shirt sleeves though the fall evening was

cold. His thumbs were hooked in his suspenders.

"Exactly like the one Mr. Sayre called you here about," said Carl Lewis, a pudgy man of fifty with a face the color of lard. He moved a little, and his light brown shoes squeaked.

"We found the body about two hours ago," added the sheriff. "Remembering that you were due here on the evening train, we left it untouched."

Early nodded. In his brain stirred phrases of the all-too-brief letter from William Sayre that had brought him to



A murder novelette of eerie mystery and spine-chilling drama

Lead Bell. A mining engineer had been strangled—but strangled, it would seem, by a giant with strength enough almost to tear his head from his shoulders.

He had been strangled, furthermore, by something that seemed to have *webbed hands!*

“I THINK we’d better take Detective Early to the Smith house at once,” said Arnold Johns crisply. Early looked at him. Johns was dressed a la New York, with a dark grey suit and a derby.

“Let’s go,” Early said grimly. “But you say we’re going to the ‘Smith house?’ Wasn’t Smith the name in your letter, Sayre?”

“Yes,” replied Sayre, picking up Early’s rather heavy suitcase in a big left hand and carrying it as though it weighed no more than a bag of peanuts. “It was Steve Smith who was killed three days ago. This second one is Elizabeth Smith, his sister.”

They got in Sayre’s big open car and rolled away from the station. They went down the main street of the mining town. It was getting quite dark; the shadows had completely swallowed the town.

Along the one sidewalk, people stood wordless or talking in hushed tones. They stared curiously at the big car.

“Lot of men along here,” Early commented. “I thought you were working shifts in the mine.”

“We’re not working the mine at all,” said Arnold Johns, the president, in his crisp tone. “With this second murder, all the men came out of the mines, and they say they’re not going back. Every mother’s son of them. They’re afraid.”

“Don’t know’s I blame ‘em,” muttered Sheriff Bates. “Not after the tracks of that—that *thing* Andy Gleason found in Shaft Nine an hour ago.”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” snapped Johns, his florid face red and his plump shoulders moving irritably.

“Nonsense?” repeated Bates. “No

human killed Steve Smith. No human killed Elizabeth Smith, his sister. Some *thing* did it. And whatever the thing is, it hides down in the mine some place. The tracks prove it.”

“Tracks?” said Early.

“Prints of somethin’ like bare feet,” Bates replied. “But bigger’n ordinary feet, and sort of out of shape and not like human feet.”

“Bear tracks probably,” grunted Johns.

“You familiar with bear tracks, comin’ from the city as you do?” Bates asked mildly.

Johns subsided, at that. The touring car stopped. They were at the edge of town before a dingy five-room bungalow like a dozen others around. The men got out and filed up on the porch. A deputy was at the door.

They went in. Sayre, broad-shouldered and powerful, went first. Carl Lewis, Lead Bell’s pudgy mayor, trudged in squeaking shoes at Sayre’s heels. Impatiently, Johns, heavy-set and florid-faced, came after him. And Bates, tall and gaunt, followed Johns.

Early, who had stepped aside because he wanted another look at these men, went last. He was shorter than Bates and not so heavily muscled as Sayre; but the private detective had a lithe step and a swing to his body indicating fast action and excellent coordination. His eyes, very light grey, were like pale wells of speculation in his tanned face.

“Here’s the first thing to see,” the sheriff said to Early, as they got in the front hall of the bungalow.

Early had noticed that the men walking in ahead of him had moved around a spot just over the sill. He saw the reason now. They had avoided treading on a foot print there. At least it was the print of something *like* a foot. But again Early felt the odd little chill touch his spine as he stared at it.

Outlined faintly in mud on the bare floor

was a print six inches across and over a foot long. It was vaguely foot-shaped save that there were no separate marks of the toes.

"If a thing like a man, about seven feet tall, with webbed feet, had stepped here—he'd have made just that kind of a print," Lewis said in a hushed tone, mopping his lard-colored face with a clammy handkerchief.

"You talk like one of the superstitious miners," Johns snapped. "You'd better sing a different tune if you don't want Lead Bell mines to close and all your town business interests to become worthless overnight."

Lewis looked panicky and shut up like a clam. They all went on—to a back bedroom.

"I think," said Lewis, "I'll stay out in the hall."

SAYRE and Bates and Johns went into the bedroom with Early. At the door, Early paused a moment, shocked motionless at the sight before him. In all his experience with scenes of violence, he had never seen anything quite like this before. Then he went forward and bent over a stark distorted body on the bed.

Elizabeth Smith had been a pretty girl in her early twenties, with soft brown hair and a lovely form. But there was little of beauty left now. She had been in her nightgown when death struck her. But she had fought so wildly to escape whatever had attacked her that the gown was torn to shreds, exposing her nude form almost completely. Bruises marred the soft whiteness. But it was the head and throat that appalled the eye.

Elizabeth Smith lay on her back. But her face was ground into the pillow beneath her head. On her white throat, which had been so twisted that her head was turned clear around, were purple marks—the marks of two huge hands.

"Webbed hands made those marks,"

said Bates, eyes sunken deep into his gaunt face, thumbs hooked mechanically in his suspenders.

Early said nothing. He looked around the room.

Nothing apparently had been touched. The room was in order—save for the distorted corpse on the bed. It seemed as though the killer had stolen straight into the house, done his job of murder, and then stolen out again.

"How long had she been dead when she was found?" Early asked.

"According to the coroner," said Sayre, "she was killed early this morning, about dawn."

Sayre's thick hand rested urgently for a moment on the private detective's shoulder.

"You've got to clear this up," he said. "I've handled men in many countries. I know the temper of mobs. The miners here won't go back to work till the thing that did this, and that made tracks in Shaft Nine like the one you saw in the hall, is caught."

"They'd better go back to work," Johns said sourly, "or we'll simply close down and move away. We're working toward the end of the lead deposits anyway."

"I'll clear it up," Early promised somberly. "The thing that did *that* simply can't be allowed to stay loose!"

His speculative pale grey eyes went over the body of the dead girl again, with the marks of webbed hands on its throat and its head turned completely around on its shoulders.

CHAPTER TWO

The Grave on the Hill

EARLY padded with his lithe tread up the walk of another bungalow and pressed the bell over the name, Doctor Philip Johnson.

The house was a quarter of a mile from

the Smith house. He had walked here, after a word from Sayre advising him to. He had passed houses with shades drawn—had passed only three people in the whole quarter mile. For it was dark now; and no one ventured abroad in Lead Bell after dark. They were all afraid of the death that had overtaken Steven and Elizabeth Smith.

The doctor's door opened, and a girl confronted Early. She was copper-haired, with deep blue eyes and a face that was sensitive and charming rather than literally beautiful.

"Is Doctor Johnson in?" said Early.

"Yes. Won't you come in?" The girl smiled. "I am his daughter, Margot Johnson. You are a patient?"

She looked rather doubtfully at his healthy tan.

"No, I wanted to see your father on something else—"

"About the murders," she nodded, face paling. "I know. Others have been here too. He is in his study, there."

Early went into the room indicated. Doctor Johnson rose from behind a flat-topped desk cluttered with bottles and old letters. He was a small bird-like man with quick brown eyes.

"The thing with the webbed hands," he said musingly, after Early had introduced himself and told why he had come. "Yes, I can tell you the story that has the whole town scared to death. And I can tell it a little more accurately, because at its start I was present."

He stared out into the night through his study window, and Early saw his small but strong hands whiten.

"Not quite twenty-three years ago," he said, "I was called to the shack of a miner late one night. There was a child being born. I didn't know the woman. She was new in Lead Bell—as I was myself. The mine had just been opened. She was a big brawny peasant who spoke broken English. Her husband had been killed in the mine

and she lived alone, selling vegetables from a garden behind her house for a living. I delivered the child—if you want to call it a child. . . ."

Early saw his hands clench. Then his quick brown eyes swerved from the window to the private detective's face. He went on quietly:

"Every now and then, Early, something goes wrong with the pre-natal formation of the human embryo. We don't yet know what—or why. Something went wrong in this case. The creature born to that woman was something that seemed to have come straight from the first of time, when the world was a tropical jungle filled with monsters moving through steamy mist.

"It was very big—thirteen pounds or more. It had a chest that was tremendous at birth, and a misshapen head that gave you the creeps to look at. There was a vestige of a caudal appendage. And the little hands and feet were inhuman, and webbed. I didn't expect the little monstrosity to live an hour. Usually such things die almost at once. But this one didn't. That is, it didn't for four years. Then it was supposed to have died."

"Supposed to have died?" Early repeated.

Johnson explained. "I urged the woman to send the child to an institution, for it was plain to be seen it would always be an idiot. She insisted on keeping it and rearing it. Then the town authorities began to make trouble for her. So she announced one day that it had died. But just before that, she had enlarged her shack to the extent of putting a cellar under it. The sheriff searched the cellar and house, found no trace of the child in it, and the woman's story of the thing's death was accepted."

"Even though she hadn't a body to show for it?" said Early.

"She said the child had fallen down the Devil's Pothole, an apparently bottomless pit in the hill behind her shack."

THERE was silence in the room. Early broke it after a moment. "Now?" he said.

"Now," said Doctor Johnson, "it looks as if perhaps the creature lived all these years, perhaps kept and fed by the woman in a cave nearby, perhaps kept for twenty years in her own basement. What that thing looks like now is beyond the imagination to picture. But whatever it is, it would seem to have broken loose, and now hides in Shaft Nine. At any rate, that's what the people of Lead Bell believe."

"And you?" said Early quietly.

Doctor Johnson shrugged. "I . . . don't know."

Early thanked him and went out of the study. Margot Johnson was there at the front door. Her hand went to his arm.

"You are Detective Early, the man they sent for from the city, aren't you?" she said. Her voice was low, intense.

"Yes."

"Do you think you can clear this mystery up?"

"I can hardly answer that yet."

"It was a stupid question, wasn't it?" She smiled a little, without humor. Then she said: "Steve and Elizabeth Smith were close friends of mine. I think their deaths hit me more than anyone else in Lead Bell. I'd like to help you in your work if I can."

"Thank you," said Early, and started on. But her hand remained on his arm.

"I mean it. In a practical way," she said, deep blue eyes squarely on his grey ones. "For example, what are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to have a talk with the peasant woman your father told me about," Early said.

She nodded. "I thought probably that would come next. I'll drive you to her place."

"Oh, no!" Early said quickly. "There's no reason for you to take that risk. I'll appreciate the loan of your car, but—"

"I'll drive you," said the girl quietly.

"The danger—"

"Elizabeth was killed in her home, in her own room. I think a person is as safe out of doors as at home, in Lead Bell. You could never find the woman's place alone. I'll drive you."

Early was silent a moment. Then he nodded. "All right. But take a gun, if you can handle one."

They drove through the little town over which hovered monstrous death, to the hill directly in back. The girl sent her coupe up this, along a road little more than a lane, past tumbledown houses that had never known paint.

Near the top of the hill she stopped. Early saw a house more rickety than the others, with a terraced acre or two of garden behind it. A flickering light showed through one of the front windows.

"I'll stay out here," said Margot in a low tone.

"You can't do that!" Early stared at her face, pale in the dashlight. "You can't stay out here alone!"

"I'd rather not . . . face that woman," Margot murmured.

"Damn it," said Early, "if I'd known you wouldn't come into her house with me, I wouldn't have let you come along. The risk of sitting out here alone in the dark—"

"I'll hold the gun in my lap and keep close guard."

EARLY went to the door, biting his lip. He knocked. A face from hell suddenly confronted him as the door was opened. He saw a yellowed wrinkled countenance, like a skull covered with old parchment. Wild reddish eyes peered from under a mat of greying hair that half-hung over the whole face. A livid scar ran from one corner of a long withered mouth up to an equally withered ear . . . Early could understand why Margot Johnson preferred to remain in the car.

"You are Mrs. Sinkweisz?" he said.

She stared at him, and then cackled with brainless laughter. He started at the sound, and then stood still, cursing his nerves. Without answer, she stepped aside for him to come in, as acknowledgment that she was the person he sought.

The room was more like a cave than a room. There was a cracked fireplace, sole source of heat. There were greasy dishes and pots all around it. A broken-backed wooden chair stood near the fireplace, in which a few embers glowed though the night was warm.

"I am a detective," Early said. "I came to ask you about your son."

"Wass daughter," the hag cackled. "Not boy."

Early checked a shiver. The fact that the thing described by Doctor Johnson and feared by Lead Bell was a girl somehow made its horror all the worse.

"Your daughter, then," Early said steadily. "Where is she now, Mrs. Sinkweisz?"

"Iss dead," said the hag, with her brainless laughter rattling out.

"We won't hurt her. We want to take care of her—as she needs."

"Iss dead. Many men come here. I tell all the same. Iss dead. None believe. You go. You want to make trouble, like the rest. You go!"

Early was a good practical psychologist. He saw power in the withered line of the jaw, and shrewd stubbornness in the glaring eyes of this face from hell.

"No, I didn't come to make trouble," he said soothingly. "There will be no trouble at all. Believe me."

"All come for trouble," muttered the hag.

But she stopped uncertainly, staring into Early's light-colored eyes. Finally she nodded, wisps of greasy hair moving.

"I tell you. Maybe *you* don't come for trouble. And if I tell, maybe the others don't come any more. Iss dead."

Early bit down a harsh retort. And the hag was keen enough to see the anger in his eyes.

"But true! Iss dead. I *show* you. Come."

She walked, bent over like a crone, out the back door of the room, with Early following. They went through a bare small rear room and out into the night. The hag caught up a battered tin lantern and a worn spade.

"I show you. Then no more trouble."

She went only a few yards from the house, into the first terrace of her vegetable garden. Then she started to dig. And Early had a weird picture etched in his brain. In the guttering light from the lantern, the bent hag spading up earth that was dark as though clotted with blood, now and then uttering that brainless, somehow terrifying cackle of laughter.

She didn't dig deep. Early heard her spade hit wood. Then a box came up. It was of rough plank, about four feet long and two thick.

"Open!" said the hag, handing him the spade.

With increasing reluctance, with increasing horror of he knew not what filling his veins, Early inserted the edge of the spade in the crack of the lid and pried. There was a shriek of rusty nails like the small wail of a dying child. And then, as the lid came off, he shrank back, shaking and with sweat starting out on his face.

"Iss dead one year," cackled the hag, staring calmly at the contents of that dreadful box.

EARLY was breathing again, though with difficulty. He saw, not very definitely, a small form about three and a half feet long, like a child of five or six. And that was all that could be determined, such was the state of the corpse.

He turned away, angry, unsteady.

"You're trying to lie to me! This isn't

what I came here for. That child—whoever it is . . . I want the truth. Where is the monstrous thing that—”

“Iss my daughter,” said the hag, shaking her head, peering up at him from under greying straggly hair. “My only one.”

Early started to say something, then stopped. He was stopped by a queer gasping sound coming in the still night from the front of the house. Then there was a scream—a long, awful cry—and Early was leaping around the house toward the road.

Margot Johnson was out there—alone!

The backwash of the headlights outlined the bulk of the little coupe faintly against the blackness of the sky. It also outlined a dark shadow beside the coupe.

Early had his gun out. He fired at the thing, point blank, thought he had hit it. But it did not fall. It swerved suddenly, leaped into some brush and was gone down some path it knew and could follow in the night, but which Early could not possibly trace.

He went to the car, with the memory of that great bulk, scuttling off like a monster crab, engraved in his brain.

Margot had taken the precaution to lock herself into the car. Both coupe doors were still closed, but the creature had smashed one of the glass panes. The dash-light faintly illuminated the inside. Early could see Margot lying along the seat, her face dreadfully white.

He reached in through the break in the glass and opened the door. She moaned as his hand touched her, then jerked wildly erect. But when she saw who it was, she leaned, shivering, against him.

“What was it, Miss Johnson?” he asked. “Did you get a good look at it?”

She shook her head. “All I saw . . . was a big bulky shape. Like a gorilla. It wrenched at the door, then broke the glass. And then you came and it ran.”

“I’ll take you home,” said Early. “Here, I’ll drive.”

He slid under the wheel, backed the car around and started down the hill. The car jerked suddenly under his tense hand as he remembered the eerie scene behind the hag’s shack The child’s body!

Whose was it?

The coupe turned onto the main road, a quarter of a mile or so from the shack. Early saw two cars ahead, with their lights focussed on something in the road. Men from the cars were gathered around it.

Early stepped on the accelerator. In this direction the thing he had shot at had run!

He jumped from the car as he got to the place. The men stared at him, silent, white-faced. He got one glimpse of the thing they were gathered around. . . .

“Don’t get out!” he said hoarsely to Margot, who was opening the coupe door on her side. “Stay in that car!”

He didn’t want her—or any woman—to see that thing: An elderly man, gaunt, dressed shabbily, who lay on his stomach in the roadway, but whose head was so turned on his shoulders that his face looked straight up into the sky.

CHAPTER THREE

Webbed Death at Middy

“I BELIEVE Steve Smith may have seen that thing, that *creature*, in Shaft Nine just before he was killed, four days ago.”

It was Margot who spoke. Early was at Doctor Johnson’s house, in the study, with the morning sun streaming in through the windows. The doctor was there, bird-like, small, quick in his movements, looking from Margot to Early.

“I happened to see him,” the girl went on, “as he came back from the mines that night. He passed me on the street. He just said hello to me and went on. He seemed very excited, as if he had discovered something but didn’t think I or any-

one else should know of it. So I believe he either saw the thing, or its tracks, in Shaft Nine. But he didn't have a chance to report on it, because right after that he was killed."

"Perhaps the thing followed him home from Shaft Nine," said Doctor Johnson, moistening his lips. "Then, having gone once to the Smith house, the creature returned again—and got Elizabeth."

"It may have been that way," nodded Early, staring out at the bright morning. "But there was one person he had time to tell. That was his sister. He was killed in his home, so he saw her before he died."

"Probably he did tell her."

"No," said Early, "I don't think so. If he had, she'd have mentioned that fact later, after his death. And she didn't say a word of her brother's having seen any such thing."

"It may be," suggested the doctor, "that he didn't want even his sister to know of the fantastic danger so near the town, until he had reported to the sheriff and a posse of men had gone after the thing."

"Probably that's the way it was," Early agreed. "Which reminds me—I want to see the sheriff this morning."

Early got up. The doctor went to the door of the study with him. In the hall, out of sight of Margot, he inclined his head toward the rear in a signal for the detective to walk that way with him.

Early did so. Johnson stopped at the back door.

"I found this when I got up this morning," he said. "It must have been done between the time you brought her back last night and my rising at seven o'clock."

Early stared at the door. There was a crack on each side of the lock, as though someone—or some thing—had caught hold of the knob and pulled, with unbelievable strength. And on the back porch floor were muddy prints that might have been made by huge webbed feet.

"What shall I do?" said Johnson, moist-

ening his lips again. "It looks as though that thing is after my girl."

"Put extra bolts on the doors," said Early. "Keep all the windows locked. Sleep with a shotgun beside you."

He went to the sheriff's office. And though it was now broad daylight, he felt the terror of the town as clearly as he had in darkness last night. Men and women were in little groups talking over the murder of the elderly man last night. Martin, was the man's name. He was a trapper in the hills. The fact that the monster had managed to steal up unheard and unseen on *him*, used as he was to stalking woods creatures, whitened men's faces even more.

SHERIFF BATES was in his office with Lewis, the mayor, and Sayre, the mines manager, when Early got there. The sheriff was leaning back in his chair, eyes narrowed in thought. The men greeted Early and looked at him expectantly.

"Nothing new to report," Early answered the look. "I came here to see if anything's turned up."

The three shook their heads almost as one man. Lewis mopped at his pudgy face, which was still lard-colored. He was the most frightened looking man in Lead Bell, Early reflected.

"All these things seem to revolve around Shaft Nine," Early said. "A giant footprint is seen down there. Steve Smith is killed shortly after leaving there—"

"I didn't know that," Sayre said.

"Yes. I just got it from Miss Johnson. Smith had just come home from Shaft Nine when he was killed. She thought he acted excited. It looks now as if he, too, had seen one of those unbelievable tracks—or perhaps the thing that made the tracks. But anyway, Shaft Nine seems to be the focal point in these murders. I assume you searched through the shaft right away, Sheriff?"

Bates nodded. "The minute there was the report of the muddy track. I went to

the end of it myself, with two of my best deputies. They—er—didn't care to go all the way, so I looked over the last few yards myself."

"You saw nothing?"

"Not one dang thing," replied Bates, thumbs in suspender straps. "The foot-print that had been there before. That was all. When I came out, I had the mouth of the shaft blocked so nothing could get in or out."

"You're sure it's blocked?"

"Very sure," said Bates. "Six of us rolled a rock over that opening. Only an elephant could move it away. Nothing's been in or out of Shaft Nine since."

Sayre's wide-spaced grey eyes were on him thoughtfully. "There might be another opening into that shaft," he mused. "The hills are honeycombed with caves, and with natural runs as well as tunnels."

"I didn't see a crack big enough for a rat to get through," said Bates.

"I seem to remember signs of fresh digging in there some days ago," said Sayre. "Near the end of the shaft, I think it was."

"I saw that. I think it was a little cave-in. The old bracing's shot in the tunnel." Bates shook his head. "But the shaft has been sealed since we rolled that rock in place. Whatever has been hiding there can't get back. It's out in the open, anyhow. And men are fanning through the hills night and day. We'll get it."

"I certainly hope so," exclaimed Mayor Lewis, dabbing at his forehead.

EARLY looked at his hands as he put the next question. "Sheriff, have any children disappeared in this vicinity in the last eighteen months?"

"Children?" said Bates, puzzled. "Why, no. What makes you ask that?"

"You'd know if there'd been any?"

"Of course."

"How about families in the country around this little valley?"

"I'd know about that, too. My jurisdiction covers quite a stretch of land. But no kid's turned up missing since little Billy White got lost in the woods and starved eight years ago."

"And you got his body?"

"Sure. It's all buried and decent."

Early was silent, thinking of the thing he had seen in the shallow grave.

"You say Doc Johnson's daughter told you of Steve's bein' in Shaft Nine just before he was slaughtered?" Sheriff Bates said, with a little frown. "Funny she didn't tell me, too. And earlier."

"I don't think she read any meaning into it before," Early replied. His pale grey eyes rested on Sayre. "I'd suggest rolling that rock away from the mouth of Shaft Nine and looking through it again—with you leading the party."

"It might be a good idea," Sayre said. "Want to go now?"

"Wait till afternoon," said Bates. "Some of my deputies will be in from the hills by then, and we ought to have a bunch of men. Just in case we *should* run across—" He didn't finish the sentence.

"You give me a ring at my office then, when you're ready," Sayre nodded. He went out, big, powerful, sober-faced.

"Think I'll get along to my own office," said Lewis, following on squeaky shoes.

Early stayed a moment longer with Bates, debating whether to tell the sheriff of the child's remains he had seen at the hag's house. He decided not to, lest Bates might split up his men, sending some to Mrs. Sinkweisz's place. The most urgent matter was the capture of the thing that killed with webbed hands.

"We'll probably get to Shaft Nine about four this afternoon," Bates said.

"I'll report in before then," Early said.

He went out and started toward the office of the mining corporation.

He walked slowly, trying to think things out; trying to make sanity out of the bizarre circumstances of these murders.

HIS WAY lay past the Johnsons' home. He saw the doctor come out of his door, little black bag in hand, and start toward his sedan in the driveway at the rear of the house. He walked back there.

"I was just going to try to find you," Johnson said, moving his small but strong hands in their quick way. "I wanted to speak to you about Margot. I have to go away."

He got in and stared out the lowered window of his car, eyes urgent on Early's.

"A call that takes me over the hills thirty-four miles," he explained, with anxiety in his face. "The roads are bad. And it's a childbirth. I may not get back till after midnight. Meanwhile—what about Margot?"

Early pursed his lips sympathetically.

"You saw what happened to our back door—how that thing tried to get in at her last night," Johnson went on. "She ought not to stay alone. Yet I don't know where in Lead Bell she'd be safe.

"Look in on her now and then till I get back, will you?" the doctor pleaded. "That's what I wanted to get in touch with you for—to ask you that." His mouth twisted in a strangely shy smile. "As you may have gathered from our difference in looks, I'm not her real father. I'm her mother's second husband. But no blood father could love a daughter more than I love Margot."

"Of course I'll keep an eye on her," said Early. "If I can," he added doubtfully to himself. It was a bad break, the doctor's call to a far cabin at just this time.

He went on, to the office of the mining corporation that was the sole reason and support of the town of Lead Bell.

The administration building was a small brick structure in a wide grassy plot of its own. The power house was just behind it, and between the two buildings there was a parking plot for the cars of employes. But there was only one car in the plot now. That was Sayre's big touring car.

Early started across the grass to the front entrance—and he saw it suddenly flash open to spew forth the form of a running man. The man started toward Sayre's car, then saw Early and ran up to him instead.

It was Johns, president of the corporation. He was trembling. His face was flid no longer; it was the color of wet ashes.

"Oh, my God!" he babbled. "Get Sheriff Bates. Get everybody. Oh, my God!"

"What's happened?" snapped Early, shaking him by the shoulders.

"It's Sayre," chattered Johns. "Up in his office. I've been here all along, and I didn't hear or see anything. But he's in his office—"

Early released Johns and ran into the building. He found his goal swiftly—a frosted glass door with the letters, "William H. Sayre, Manager." He opened the door.

Sayre lay, as Martin had, on his stomach. But his head, as the trapper's had been, was twisted on his throat so that he stared straight up. And on his throat were the purplish marks of steely fingers—*webbed* fingers.

CHAPTER FOUR

Monster in the Open

THE group gathered in the big general office half an hour later was the same group that had met Early the evening before at the train, with one exception. The absentee was Sayre, who lay in his own office dead.

There were Johns, with his face still pale and agitated; Bates, with his thumbs hooked mechanically under the straps of his suspenders; and Lewis, who had heard of the latest tragedy through Bates, and had come, he said, because he was afraid to stay in his office alone.

"We've got to find this beast!" he chattered, mopping at his pasty face.

"If we don't," said Johns, "and that pretty soon, the mines are through. The present miners won't work, and the deposits are too exhausted to make it worthwhile importing new laborers."

"We'll get the thing," said Bates, his blue eyes mollifying. "A critter as big as this with webbed hands and feet can't hide out too long, even here in the hills."

Early said nothing. The rest were seated. He was walking slowly up and down near the rear windows of the office, puffing at a cigarette.

"What I can't understand," shivered Johns, "is how that—that monster got at Sayre. Is it invisible? I was here every minute, only two offices from Sayre's. I didn't hear or see anything. All I knew was that I left him alive and all right, and went back to his office a few minutes later to find him like—that."

Early pointed out one of the rear windows. "The power plant backs into this building," he said. "That wall of the plant is blank. No one could see it climb into the window of Sayre's office, even though it's broad daylight."

Lewis gulped. "My office backs against a blank brick wall, too!" he said. "And my window is close enough to the ground to be reached. I'm not going back into it till we've caught this monstrosity!"

"Which *may* be fairly soon," Early said suddenly. He started toward the door. "I'm going to borrow Sayre's car, if none of you mind."

They all stared at him.

"What—what are you going to do?" said Johns.

"I'm going to Mrs. Sinkweisz's house first," replied Early. "Sheriff Bates blocked Shaft Nine, after finding it empty. That means the thing can't get back in there. So where else would it be apt to go? To the place lodged in its dim brain as home—its mother's place. After I've

hung around the woman's shack for awhile, I'm going back and have another talk with Margot, Doctor Johnson's daughter. The more I think of my last words with her, the more I believe she may have a key to the thing's hiding place—though she doesn't realize it herself."

"Think you'll need help at the Sinkweisz shack?" asked Bates, his gaunt hand touching the big revolver at his hip.

"I don't think so. The creature probably won't be moving around in the daylight. I merely want to see if there are hints that it's lurking near there."

Early waved and went out. He got into the big touring car and drove to the mountain lane leading up to the shack where he had seen the grisly small grave. But he didn't go all the way to the place.

Halfway up, there was a deserted house, half in ruins, with a tumbledown shed behind it. He ran the big car into the shed and managed to close the ruin of a door to hide it from the road. Then he returned to the village on foot.

THE home of Doctor Johnson was near this side. Early came out of thin woods and underbrush just behind it, and cut across lots to reach the back door. He saw no one on the way.

He tapped lightly at the back door. There was no answer.

"Margot—Miss Johnson," he called in a low tone.

There was still no answer. He didn't want to be seen there, so he tried the door. It was unlocked. He stepped in—to a house of eerie silence.

Frowning, he stood in the kitchen for a moment. The shade was drawn, leaving the room in yellow dimness.

"Margot!"

The call went through the house. Even a sleeping person should have heard it. But there was still no answer.

Early felt sweat come out on his neck. The girl might have disobeyed all dictates

of common sense and gone out—but somehow he didn't think so. He could *feel* that the silent house was not empty.

At last he thought he heard something: a sort of moan from the room next to the kitchen. He moved toward the hall leading to the front of the house. There was a swinging door into that next room, from which the low moan had seemed to come. He put his hand on the door, but did not open it. For another faint sound caught his ears, then. It came from upstairs. It was a faint squeak, thrice repeated, like the squeak of a bat—or shoes.

Early took out his gun and stole toward the steps leading up from the front of the hall. The light was poor. The shades were down in most of the rooms. The yellow dimness somehow made the faint moan and the squeaking seem more ghastly than they would have in black night!

Early started up the stairs. He kept far to one side, to avoid making a creak. And from upstairs came the faint bat-sound again—*squeak, squeak*—from the rear of the house.

Early got to the top of the stairs and crept down the second floor hall, pausing a moment to listen at each closed door. But now he heard nothing.

There were service stairs in the rear. He went down these, and to that swinging door again. This time he opened it, and a curse came from between his set teeth.

He *had* heard a moan. And it came from Margot Johnson. She had not gone out. She lay in the far corner of the dining room. Her lithe body was in a heap on the floor with most of her clothes ripped off. And on her throat were bruises—hideous purple bruises made by fingers that were not separated as normal fingers are, but had connecting webs between.

Margot was not dead. She moaned again in her unconsciousness even as Early stared. The webbed hands had been lifted from her throat by fear when he tapped

on the back door, just before the death clutch would have been delivered.

Early took one step toward her—and then heard the bat-squeak right behind him. In one flashing instant he realized that he had not looked behind the swing-door when he opened it. For one second he had let himself be drawn completely off guard by the sight of Margot.

He tried to turn—and felt a crushing weight on his back. And then there was no more coherent thought. There was only agonized horror—and smashing action.

HE DOUBLED forward in an effort to throw the burden down over his head. Dread hands had found his throat, and the forward movement almost broke his neck. So then he fell straight back on the thing. He heard a grunt and felt the death-grip relax.

He squirmed, got half loose from clutching arms, and kicked down hard. A sharp heavy breath told him that his heel had landed. He slithered to one side and got to his knees.

There was an instant's appalling vision of a rushing bulk topped by a sheet-white blank, out of which glared blazing eyes. Then the thing had crashed into him again and was groping for his throat.

Early brought his knee up hard, smashed again and again at the appalling face. The touch of it to his fingers was an agony. But he felt substance yield beneath his hammer blows.

The breath was gone from his body. Lights were bursting in his brain. He tottered forward, bearing the bulk with him, and both he and it fell over a chair.

It broke the hideous hold on his wind-pipe, and once more he pushed clear. Then he saw a glint near the door—his gun, dropped when the thing first attacked him. He dove at it, heard a maddened scream as the flying bulk tried to block him. But he got there first, and with no more com-

punctuation than if he were firing at a hawk or a weasel, he shot straight at the big figure looming over him.

The thing stopped, shuddered, like a gorilla with a slug in it. It tried to come on. And Early emptied his gun into it, one shot after another, with measured deliberation, sending the last slug squarely into the sheet-white blank of the face. . . .

The room was as still as the grave, after the shots. He dimly heard somebody panting for breath, and realized it was himself. Someone outside cried out, and he knew a neighbor had heard the shots and was on the way to investigate.

He tottered to where Margot lay, and put his arm under her shoulder. And her deep blue eyes opened.

"Thank God," he croaked, almost unable to talk after the pressure of those terrible fingers at his throat. "If you had died, I'd have been your murderer."

She stared at him bewilderedly, hands going to her bruised throat.

"I used you as bait," Early gasped. "I deliberately drew the killer here. But I meant to be here first—to wait for him."

Steps pounded in the hall.

"In here," Early called.

Four men and a woman came in, white-faced, trembling.

"Oh, my God!" said the woman, after a glance at Margot's throat. "The thing again! Get the sheriff—"

"Don't waste time trying that," said Early. "Sheriff Bates is lying over there, with dungarees on and a salt sack over his head. . . ."

EARLY, in Doctor Johnson's study, with Margot and the doctor staring at him, looked at a lump of ore which he kept turning in his fingers. To the uninitiated it told nothing. But to a mining man it told a great deal.

"Silver," said Early. "From Shaft Nine."

Margot's hand went to her bandaged

throat. Her eyes looked the questions she felt.

"Steve Smith discovered silver in disused Shaft Nine," Early went on. "It was important. The lead deposits were running out and the mining property was about to be declared valueless. This meant the property was now immensely valuable again. He intended to have a hasty dinner and then report to Sayre at his home. But he never made the report.

"Sheriff Bates had known of the silver for a long time. He had intended to lie low and bid in the property when the lead deposit was exhausted and he could get it cheap. He stole into Smith's house and killed him, silently, with his two hands. To avoid leaving prints, he had worn not gloves, but mittens, from his car. They left bruises that might have been made by webbed hands, so Bates remembered the stories about Mrs. Sinkweisz's monstrosity, and decided to follow out that line. With Smith dead, it was easy to twist the flaccid muscles of his neck so his head was left—as it was found.

"Bates got to thinking that maybe Steve's sister had been told about the silver. She might say something. She had to die, too. Such murder trails never end. There's always another risk to be eliminated. Bates feared you too, Margot, because you were the Smiths' closest friend. Maybe *you* knew too much.

"He followed you and me to Mrs. Sinkweisz's shack, tried to kill you, and was driven off when I appeared with a gun. He tried again that night, but couldn't get into your house without making too much noise. Meanwhile, he was surprised as he slunk down the road from the shack by Martin, the trapper, and had to kill him to keep from being captured.

"It all started to make sense to me this morning. And the sense was to the effect that there was too much of a pattern to the murders for a brainless monstrosity to have committed them.

"Steve was killed because he might know something about Shaft Nine. His sister was killed because he might have told her something. You were attacked, Margot, for the same reason. And then Sayre met death, and I knew. Sayre had just said something about having noticed fresh digging in Shaft Nine, when he and I and Lewis were in Bates' office. Bates insisted that the fresh earth was just a cave-in. But he knew I'd take the opinion of a mining man like Sayre.

"In the company offices, I realized that only two men besides myself had heard Sayre's remark. They were Mayor Lewis and Sheriff Bates. And everything pointed to Bates. He alone had 'searched' Shaft Nine to the end after the track had been found, and had discovered nothing. It was he who had blocked the shaft in such a way that the 'monster' couldn't get back in—but also in such a way that nobody else could get in, either.

"I set a little trap. I announced that I was going to a distant place—the Sinkweisz shack—and later would talk to you, indicating that you had grim knowledge in the affair. Then I stole here, as soon as I could hide Sayre's car. But quick as I was, Bates got here faster, burning to stop your mouth. He—almost did."

"So it was all a dreadful masquerade," said Margot.

"Yes. Growing out of the fact that Bates happened to have mittens instead of gloves in his car. Later he slipped on dungarees from his tool kit, and put a sack over his head, which gave him a shapeless

bulk in the night. Burlap sacking around his shoes made the misshapen footprints."

Doctor Johnson cleared his throat. "So the child born to Mrs. Sinkweisz didn't turn out as we thought."

"No," said Early. "It may have been born a monstrosity, but it didn't grow. It stayed small, a child's figure. When the woman showed me that small body, I should have realized at once that it really was the thing she had borne twenty-three years ago. But I didn't—till later."

"You spoke of hearing a squeak in the house as the killer crept ahead of you, like the squeak of shoes."

Early nodded. "That was really shrewd of Bates. He figured something *might* go wrong when he came here to kill Margot. If it did, witnesses afterward would only know that they had heard squeaky shoes—like Mayor Lewis's. So he put a finishing nail between layers of leather in his left heel to produce the squeak. It almost threw me off till I saw the size of the body under the dungarees."

There was a little silence. Then Margot said: "Lead Bell goes on, now, a silver town instead of a lead one. Your job is done. I suppose you're going right back to the city?"

Early grinned at her. "Not right away," he said. "It's beautiful here. . . . I think I'll stick around awhile."

"Pardon me," said Doctor Johnson, gazing solemnly from one to the other. "I must leave you two awhile. I have an important call. . . ."

They didn't even see him as he went out.

THE END

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Satan Fills the Morgue

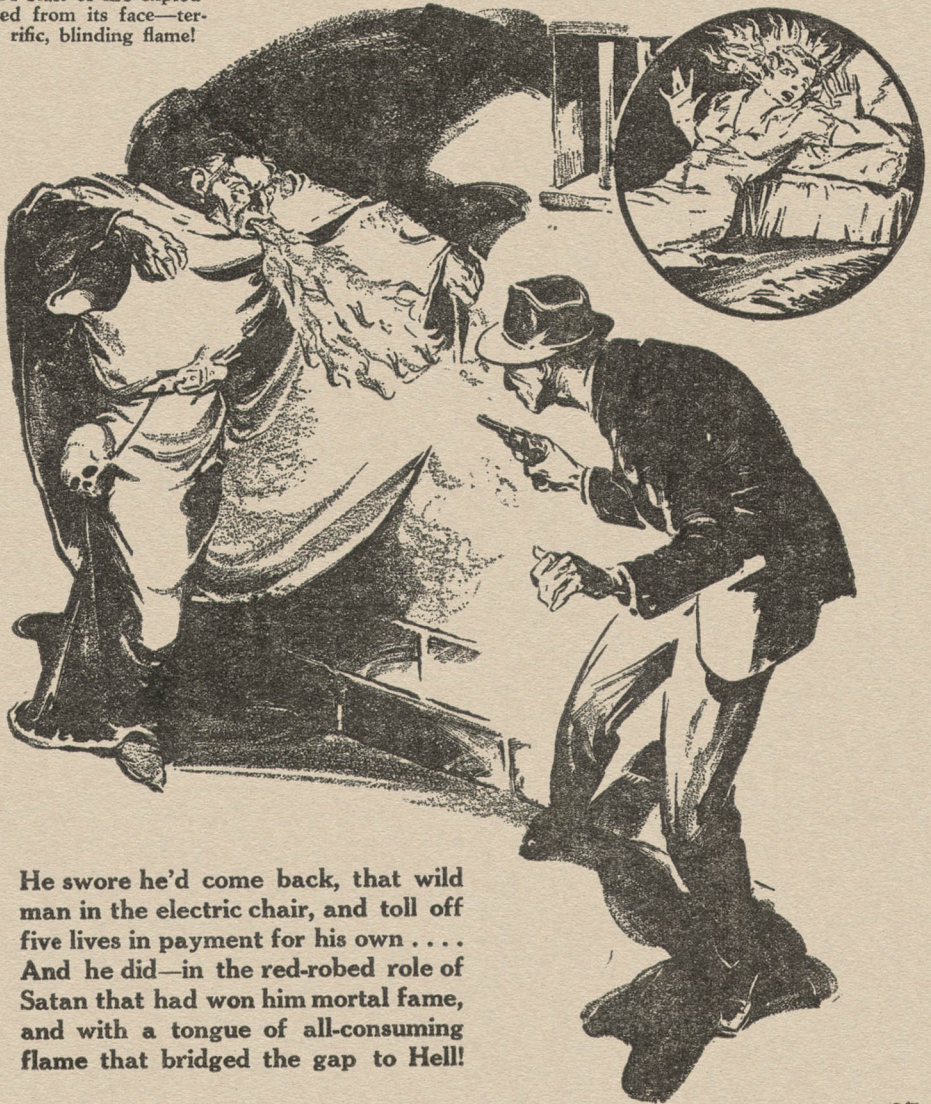
By EARL PIERCE, JR.

WE were seated in the warden's office, five minutes before Raphaelo Milo was scheduled to die in the chair. The last minute instructions were nearly over. Tense faces, swathed in thick cigarette smoke, lent to the office an air of suppressed excitement. The war-

den stood up stiffly and let his level gaze encompass the room.

"My last word is a warning," he said. "This is no ordinary execution. Nor is the man about to die an ordinary criminal. He may speak to you. He may even ask you questions. But on your honor as

A blast of fire exploded from its face—terrific, blinding flame!



He swore he'd come back, that wild man in the electric chair, and toll off five lives in payment for his own And he did—in the red-robed role of Satan that had won him mortal fame, and with a tongue of all-consuming flame that bridged the gap to Hell!

gentlemen you are bound to complete silence. Any commotion whatever is liable to start the prisoner raving. I want that firmly understood."

A grumbling assent came from the half dozen newspapermen about me. Then a female voice, nasally harsh, rose above the din. It was Mae Croft, a sob-sister on the city tabloid.

"What about us?" she asked. "Do the gentlemen's rules apply to the weaker sex?" There was unveiled sarcasm in her voice.

"I'm not worrying about you and Miss Branton," said Warden Lane gravely. "You'll both be out cold the moment Milo enters the death house. And now, if there are no more questions, you may go. Captain McCabe will lead the way."

The medley of scraping chairs and subdued voices filled the room. As the newshounds filed out behind the stocky P. K. I felt a hand fall across my arm.

"Miss Croft doesn't look like she'd faint," said Judith Branton, the only other woman present. "I suppose she's seen men die before?"

"More than likely," I muttered, taking her arm. "News people get to see hellish things in their time."

"And you?" There was an edge of anxiety in her voice.

I grinned, steering her toward the door. "An assistant D. A. gets his share of it. But executions are new to me. I prosecuted Raphaelo Milo in court, and I swore I'd see him die in the chair. Tonight I'm going to."

"I wish I'd never come," said Judith. "I think it's dreadful, watching a man die. Like—like vultures. I know I'll scream if he speaks to us."

"He won't," I said.

But in my own mind I wasn't sure. Raphaelo Milo was a peculiar personality, likely to do anything extraordinary. Those grandiose threats in court stood out in my mind with unpleasant forebod-

ing. He had sworn revenge on all who sent him to the chair. Perhaps it was plain madness. Then again that genius-accursed mind was unpredictable.

As we strode down the dimly lighted hall I stole a glance at the girl beside me. Young, blue-eyed, scarcely out of her teens, Judith Branton had been elected by her sociology class to witness an execution. Ironically, the man about to die was sentenced by Judith's own father, Judge Joseph Branton. It was bad business. She was too young for this sort of thing. I told her so. Now it was her pride that kept her among us. Foolish pride!

The state prison was silent about us. Silent not with sleep or desertion, but with tense expectancy. Three thousand hardened criminals were waiting for the death hour, waiting until the lights should dim and flicker tellingly. The guards moved stiffly, their faces drawn. Even the warden, walking behind with Dr. Vinelli, carried himself woodenly.

THE death house was a prison within a prison. On one side was a small cell block, reserved for condemned prisoners. On the other side was a mortuary. Half of the death house was reserved for witnesses. All but two seats were taken, and Judith and I slumped into them, our eyes riveted to the chair. The tomb-like silence was unbroken.

Mike Shay, crime reporter for the *Gazette*, was slumped down next to me, his lips twisted into scorn. Next to him was Mae Croft, the sob-sister. Her face was splotchy with make-up, hastily applied to conceal her paling skin. Behind were Killian of the *Times*, O'Grady of the *Tribune*, and half a dozen other newshounds lucky enough—or unlucky enough—to get passes. The room was otherwise empty, save for two guards, the executioner, and Dr. Vinelli, the psychiatrist. I wondered vaguely why he had come,

then decided it wasn't my business. Scientific errand, probably, I mused; and let it pass.

"Paul, I'm afraid," Judith Branton clutched my hand, her face turned pleadingly to mine. "Suppose he—"

She hadn't time to finish. An iron door clanged outside, then scuffing footsteps sounded in the corridor. Ten seconds passed, during which the *stuff-stuff* of a slit trouser leg slapped along the floor. The guards swung open the door. A chaplain entered, his lips droning a rite. Behind him was Raphaelo Milo, sandwiched between two guards.

The condemned man's wide flat forehead was darkly scowling, the heavy jaw thrust defiantly out. Black eyes swept the room, paused momentarily on the stiff-backed chair. Then Milo sucked in his breath and turned about to face his silent witnesses. His spatulate lips twisted into a smile, as if he, not ourselves, had come to watch a man squirm.

Warden Lane, just behind him, made a move to indicate the chair. But Milo swept him down with an eloquent wave of his hand.

"Not yet, dear warden," he mocked. "I've a last statement to make to the press."

The warden's face was grim. This is what he had feared. And yet he was powerless to interfere. A condemned man has the legal right to address his witnesses.

Milo turned his back upon the death chair with contemptuous disregard. An amused grin split his lips as he looked from one of us to another. The handsome large-boned face was grotesquely satanic.

"Raphaelo Milo never disappoints an audience," he said slowly. "And so I give you my last performance. It is my final will and testament!"

That haunting deep voice, which had thrilled so many in the Metropolitan Opera, came to a climactic stop. Raphaelo

Milo knew how to control his voice as if his lungs were consoles. He made you feel that it was a tangible force, emanating from him like electricity.

"Five people in this audience shall inherit my last possession," he went on imperiously. "That last possession is—death!"

Again the voice stopped, its vibrant echo filling the room. Milo turned deliberately to Dr. Pietro Vinelli and raised an accusing finger.

"You called me mad and defamed me in court," he intoned. "You invented lies and blasphemies. You tried to send me to an asylum for the insane. For this you are the first to inherit my revenge. You will not leave this prison alive."

Vinelli, his spade-shaped black beard thrust insolently forward, sadly shook his head. Brooding dark eyes were expressionless behind his glasses.

"Michael Shay!" Milo turned to the man beside me. "You were the first to suggest my wife was poisoned. You led the police examination and suggested that my wife's body be exhumed. For this meddling you are Number Two."

Mike Shay was motionless. His sulky green eyes were brimmed with contempt. He had seen men die before. He had been threatened before. Still, his curling lips were white.

"Mae Croft!" Milo's finger swept to the sob-sister. "You dug up scandal and unearthed misery. You wrote libelous rotten untruths. You fed your starving public with secrets which belong only to me. You are the third!"

Mae Croft clutched her throat with trembling hands. Not for an instant did her eyes waver from Milo's.

A cold sickness went through me as the prisoner turned from the sob-sister to Judith Branton. I felt her stiffen, her nails digging into my flesh. I wanted suddenly to cry out and stop this madness but my mouth was dry, voiceless.

"Judith Branton, your father sat on the bench and condemned me to death. He was afraid to come here and watch that sentence fulfilled. Instead he sent you, his own flesh and blood. Long will he curse that decision. Number Four!"

Judith's hand was like ice, stiff with paralysis. A stifling gasp welled in her throat, was choked down again.

"Paul Lacey!" My own name. I flinched as those absorbing black eyes bored into mine. "Brilliant young attorney! Future Senator!" The mocking baritone rose shrill. "For taking this case, and for your grandstand tactics in court, you are the last of my beneficiaries. The last, dear Counselor, so you can watch Judith Branton suffer and pass before you!"

SILENCE, magnified a thousand times by the abrupt cessation of the voice, fell down upon the room. Not a man moved, so tense was the atmosphere. Hardened reporters, veteran jailers, calloused physicians—all were in the heartless grip of Milo's diabolical personality. And then he began to laugh; almost silently, a mocking laugh echoed to the tune of *Faust*, his greatest role.

Warden Lane tightened his jaw, his eyes flashing a silent message to the guards. The men reached out and grabbed Milo's arms, threw him back into the chair. In a split second the straps were buckled, the electrode clamped over his head. The electrician made a final examination, then stepped back to the control box. His eyes rose waitingly to the warden.

Silence piled thicker and thicker until I felt it closing against my windpipe. God! Would they never get it over with? In another moment I would have cried out.

Warden Lane nodded his head. The electrician's hand flashed down. Once—twice—three times! Milo jerked in the chair, his bulging body hurled forward by the impact of the current. A cough of

exploded breath sounded beneath the black mask, then his lungs sucked back the air in frantic uncontrollable gasps. Again the current hit him, hurled him sideways against the straps. Shrill cackling sparks flew from the electrode, then a gray wisp of smoke rose in spirals from beneath the black mask. In another moment Raphaelo Milo fell sagging into the chair. His sentence had been fulfilled.

"God, let me out of here!" It was Mae Croft, her voice sharp with hysteria.

Warden Lane turned wrathfully. "Stay seated," he cried. "No one can leave this room until the doctor finishes his examination."

The prison medic, Dr. Owen, ripped open Milo's shirt and applied a stethoscope. One minute. . . Two. . . Three. He rose and nodded his head.

"Will you care to corroborate me, Dr. Vinelli?" He turned to the psychiatrist.

Vinelli stepped up with a frown. After a minute he looked up at Warden Lane.

"This man is dead," he announced drily.

"Get me to a phone!" It was the news-hounds' warwhoop, thrown from half a dozen voices.

Confusion broke out. Chairs were hurled aside as they made a frantic rush to the door. Among them, trembling and pale, was Mae Croft.

Warden Lane and the guards followed them out of the death house. The prison medic and Dr. Vinelli were carrying Milo's half-naked corpse into the mortuary. Judith, ill with nausea, averted her eyes, seeking mine.

"It's horrible," she murmured. "Paul, take me out of here."

I helped her to the door, my arm laced about her waist. Once in the cool night air of the yard she felt better. The death house reeked of burnt human flesh. It was sickening. Even the state electrician, his work done, had hastened to escape from that cloying stench that marked the suc-

cessful termination of his official task.

Judith and I were halfway across the yard when we heard footsteps behind us. Dr. Owen, the robust prison physician, was hot on our heels, his red face darkly scowling.

"A meddling bungler, that Vinelli," he muttered angrily. "He's removing Milo's brain. Turned the morgue into a damned laboratory."

Judith shuddered, tightening her grip on my arm. With a glance at Owen I cautioned him to silence. Any more of this was liable to prostrate the girl, whose nerves were at the breaking point.

We trudged along in silence toward the administration wing. Already the warden's office, three stories above us, resounded with clicking telephones and staccato conversation. The boys were trying to make the deadline with their story. Milo's mad threats would make seventy-two point headlines.

Just as we reached the door a man's screaming voice knifed out from the death house. It was Vinelli's voice, ragged with agony. I whirled, stared at the rectangles of light issuing from the mortuary. Two shadows, locked in combat, passed across the windows.

Without a word I raced back along the pathway, Judith and Owen at my heels. The death house was deserted. From behind the closed door of the mortuary came a sharp hissing, like the sound of escaping gas. I threw my shoulders against the heavy iron door, was thrown back. It was locked from inside.

"Vinelli!" I cried. "Vinelli, open the door!"

Silence ensued. Then footsteps, receding cautiously. I whirled around, faced Judith and the doctor.

"Something in there—" I muttered. "Doctor, have you a key to this door?"

Nervously Owen produced a key, inserted it in the lock. As the door swung open the penetrating fumes of broiled

flesh assailed our nostrils. Scientific apparatus was strewn about the floor. In one corner, sprawled on his back, lay a man's body. Judith, behind me, uttered a hoarse gasp.

"Dr. Vinelli!"

I felt my blood go cold as I stared into that face. The nose and eyes were gone. The rest of the face was melted into a viscous mass of blackened gore. White-hot fire had eaten into the very brain. A few charred wisps of beard were all that remained of the once scholarly countenance. . . . But there was no trace of Milo's body!

CLATTER of feet indicated the approach of the newspapermen. As I turned I saw Judith fall, and I threw out my arms to catch her. Mercifully she had fainted. At that moment hell broke loose. Warden Lane, Mike Shay and half a dozen others were pushing through the door.

With one glance the warden took in everything. He turned to me.

"Get Miss Branton to my office," he commanded. "Miss Croft is there. And for God's sake keep those women under control."

Leaving that room of horror, I carried Judith to the main office and laid her on the couch. Mae Croft, hugging a bottle of Scotch, sensed what had happened. She glared at me with unseeing eyes, trying to assemble her thoughts.

"Dr. Vinelli—" she breathed.

"Is dead," I snapped. "Pour a drink and make it snappy. Better still, give it to m—"

I didn't finish. A lifeless hush fell over the room, seemingly over the entire prison. I caught myself listening. From outside a voice was singing. It was a deep rich voice that rose and fell like a chant. I heard the familiar strain of Gounod's *Faust* as it could be sung by only one man—Raphaelo Milo!

Mae Croft's jaw dropped open and she tried to scream. But it was only a mangled cough that tore through her lips. Then, clutching her throat, she ran to the window that overlooked the yard.

"He's alive!" she shrieked. "Oh my God, he's alive!"

Hysteria went through her like the ague. Dropping the bottle of Scotch, she turned from the window and ran toward the door. But I was there before she could get out.

"Snap out of it," I cried. "Hysterics won't help. Faint if you want to, but for God's sake shut your mouth."

"But he's *alive!*" she screamed.

"You saw him die, yourself," I snapped. "Some maniac is loose. Killed Vinelli and stole Milo's corpse. Don't forget this is a state's prison. There are all kinds of madmen—"

The inter-prison telephone buzzed, cutting me off. Pushing the sob-sister into a chair, I went to the desk and lifted the receiver. Warden Lane's voice rasped metallically over the wire.

"That you, Lacey? Let me talk to Mike Shay."

"I thought Shay was down there with you?"

"He must be there!" Lane's voice was frantic. "He left here at least a minute ago. Said he was on his way to the office."

"Have you found Milo yet?"

"No." The voice clicked off.

Judith was coming out of it as I closed the connection. Dumbly she stared at me, her eyes trying to speak. Panic was visible in her features.

"Lock the door when I leave," I instructed. "Don't open it for anyone except the warden or me."

She nodded, trying to keep a quiver out of her words.

"I heard what the warden said," she muttered. "Mr. Shay has disappeared. That means—"

"Nonsense," I said. "Remember what I told you about the door."

I was halfway down the corridor when I heard Judith lock the door. It took a load off my mind—a load that was pressing maddeningly against my brain. But a thin wooden door was little barrier against the kind of madman. . . .

I shook myself, trying to clear my senses. A gnawing untranslatable fear was beginning to worm into my mind. Raphaelo Milo, executed murderer, was gone. He had threatened Dr. Vinelli, and now Vinelli was dead, his face eaten away by fire. Now Mike Shay had strangely vanished. . . . Milo said he would be next. *Milo* had said it—who was burned to death less than fifteen minutes ago. Was there some grim connection between Milo's blackened face and that of Vinelli's? . . . Death by fire!

THE stairs were deserted. A single light glowed weakly from above, casting my elongated shadow down the steps. Something lay huddled down there. A black mass, oddly man-shaped. Sucking back my breath I lunged down to its side. It was a man. Mike Shay!

I recognized him by his clothes and by the matted red hair. The face was gone. Only a raw mass of fire-blackened flesh remained. The nose was eaten down to the bone, leaving a nauseous cavity. The eyes were enlarged hollows. From the shattered hole of the mouth bulged a black blistered tongue, four times its natural size.

Voices sounded in the yard outside the door. I looked up to see Warden Lane enter at the head of a procession of grim-faced newspapermen. He stopped short, staring.

"Who—?"

"Mike Shay!" I snapped. "Have you found Milo yet?"

Lane shook his head, then tore his eyes from the inhuman thing at our feet. Con-

(Continued on page 105)

FANTASTIC BUT TRUE



HUMANS WITH HORNS



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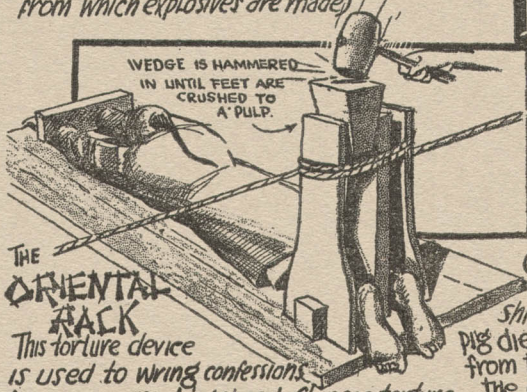
The lights in San Quentin Prison went out as usual and William Kogut was left in darkness to await his execution. Suddenly his fierce eyes lit up... he seized a deck of cards, tore them to bits, soaked them in water, and jammed the soggy stuff into a pipe. Then he pounded pieces of broom handles into either end, and held the device over a tiny candle. When the early dawn shot its first rays into the gloomy cells of San Quentin, the prison was rocked by a terrific explosion... All that remained of William Kogut was the blood splashed walls of his demolished cell...

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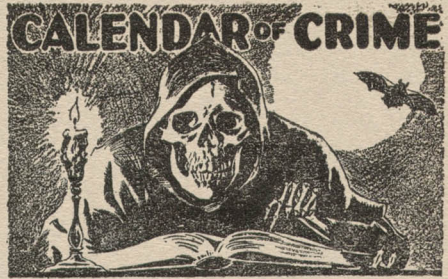
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And, in the metropolis which prides itself on a foolproof police force, the smartest sleuths of the Homicide Bureau were left without a clue. Without one hint as to how the invisible killer could have accomplished his hideous crimes, how could they stop him on his ghastly reign of terror? Must he be permitted to remain at large until that slashing hand of death had wiped out New York's entire Four Hundred?

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SATAN FILLS THE MORGUE

(Continued from page 102)

fronting the reporters, he issued an order. "Shay's murderer is still in the building. Lock that door. We'll make a systematic search."

As if to punctuate his words, a scream stabbed out from upstairs. Pitched with horror, it sounded as if a woman's face had suddenly been thrust into a brazier of white-hot charcoal. One thought seared through my senses. Mae Croft!

I lunged up the steps three at a time. As I reached the upper hall I heard that snake-like hissing. It came from further down the corridor. Abruptly it stopped. Light streamed through the broken door of the office.

Cold sickness clawed at my stomach as I stumbled ahead. A woman's body, face down, lay before the couch. I ran to her and threw her on her back. I jerked erect, ill with retching. Mae Croft, true to Milo's prediction, was number three.

"Look at her face," somebody mumbled from the door. "Great Heavens, look at her face!"

But there was no face to look at.

"Just like Vinelli and Shay," muttered O'Grady tonelessly. "That Branton dame is next."

"Where is she?" I cried. "I left her—"

A pistol shot exploded down the corridor. Then a woman's scream ripped out, followed by the nasal cursing of a man. As I leaped into the corridor I saw Judith running toward me. Behind her came Captain McCabe, the P. K. I caught Judith just as she fell, then lifted inquiring eyes to McCabe.

"I shot at him," he muttered as if to himself. "I couldn't have missed at that range. I couldn't have missed!"



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STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

(Continued from page 105)

"Missed whom?" I queried. "Speak, man!"

McCabe stared blankly, his eyes traveling from me to the warden. His lips moved soundlessly, then his voice caught, "Raphaelo Milo! As God is my witness, it was Raphaelo Milo—and his mouth was breathing flames."

"Yes, yes!" Judith fought against panic. "It was Milo. And breathing fire like his very soul was aflame! He's alive, Paul—alive and laughing at us!"

"He's a devil," McCabe cried. "All wrapped in a red robe, his eyes glittering, his mouth hissing out flames two feet long. He's a devil, I tell you. Just like those roles he played on the stage—a damned, deathless devil!"

"Mephistopheles," breathed Warden Lane. "I've seen him do the opera a dozen times. He practically lived the part. Studied secret rites and satanism. Claimed he could withstand the fires of hell."

"And what is electricity but a form of fire?" said Dr. Owen, in a strained voice. "My God, is it possible—"

As his voice went dead I lifted my hand and grabbed McCabe by the collar. "You say you shot at him?" I asked.

"I couldn't have missed. I didn't miss! The bullet hit him clean between the eyes. But he only threw back his head and laughed. And that fire, hissing through his lips. . . ."

Even as McCabe talked a second voice came into the room. It came from outside, magnificently rich and flowing. Again it was *Faust*, mocking, satanic . . .

I AVERTED my attention with an effort and turned to Dr. Owen. "Are you certain Milo was dead?" My eyes were glued to his own, unwavering. "Certain enough to stake your reputation on it?"

"Yes! Milo was dead when I examined him. But now—" He shrugged his shoulders, his face glistening with sweat.

SATAN FILLS THE MORGUE

"Have you ever heard of actual revivification of the human corpse?"

"There are rumors. Medical history is studded with them." Owen swallowed, prying at his collar. "But this is different. I know Milo was dead. After all, twenty thousand volts of electricity. . ."

"About Dr. Vinelli," I put in. "Had he actually started the autopsy?"

"I don't think so. He had stripped Milo's body, and his dissecting instruments were all laid out. He was rolling up his sleeves when I left, but I don't think he had actually commenced dissection. Milo must have—have recovered only a moment after I left."

"Say that again."

Irritation twisted Owen's lips. "I said that Milo must have recovered only a moment after I left."

"No!" I grabbed Owen's shoulder. "You say he was rolling up his sleeves when you left?"

"Yes, and damned insolent about it. He flaunted a pair of rubber gloves in my face."

I released him, shifting my eyes to Warden Lane. "There's a homicidal maniac loose in this prison," I said. "We've got to get him before he gets another of us. As long as we stay here in a group he won't strike. We've got to bait him."

"But how?"

"Turn out all the lights in the yard and order your guards to keep to their posts on the wall. Then one man will go down there—alone. When the murderer sees that his opportunity is ready he'll come out of hiding. That's where we get him."

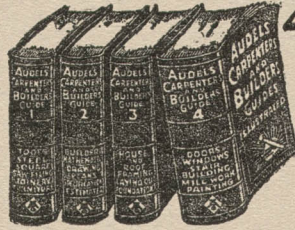
"Too risky." Lane shook his head. "Besides, how many would volunteer to go down there in that darkness?"

"That's my job. I started this case in court six months ago, and I'm not leaving this prison until I finish it."

"You saw what happened to Vinelli and Shay?"

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 107)

"It's the only way," I said. "Give me fifteen minutes down in the yard, then turn on the lights and comb it from end to end."

"And we'll find your body down there, with the face eaten off by fire." Lane's prophesy was without jest. "Remember, Milo threatened you as well as the others. He had more reason to kill you than either Vinelli or Shay. You haven't a chance."

I pointed at Judith Branton, unconscious on the couch. "Neither has she a chance if I don't get down into the yard. All I want is a gun and fifteen minutes on my own. After that, break out your guards—and do it in a hurry."

"It's no use," McCabe cried. "Bullets go through him like air. You can't kill him. He's beyond killing."

Ignoring McCabe's outburst, I slid an automatic into my pocket and glanced at my watch.

"Fifteen minutes," I repeated. "Then call for the guards."

Once in the yard I hugged the way, moving as noiselessly as possible toward the death house. The prison was pregnantly silent, seemingly deserted. The grimly encompassing walls were like battlements against the murky midnight sky, while all about me was Stygian blackness.

THE illuminated dial of my watch indicated that I had twelve minutes on my own. . . . Twelve minutes in which I must stop this mad slaughter—or be stopped myself. The death house loomed bleakly ahead. Wreaths of fog hung over it, hovered about the doorway. Yellow tentacles of it cloyed at the air, beckoning

I moved on, my lips compressed. This was no time to let my fears generate. Every ounce of strength would be needed for the job to come.

I circumvented the death house door, and made my way around to the other

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SATAN FILLS THE MORGUE

side. Exploring fingers touched glass, a windshield. It was Vinelli's private hearse, backed up to the loading platform. Bracing myself, I groped ahead until my feet touched the steps. Silently I made my way into the night-black mortuary.

Just inside I stopped. A scuffing sound reached my ears from close at hand. It seemed to come from outside.

Backing to the wall, I dug out a match, struck it. The first thing I saw was a faceless corpse stiffening in the corner. Bulging eyes reflected the matchlight. The grinning misshapen mouth was twisted with irony. My gaze went the full length of the body, then I blew out the match.

From behind me, on the platform, sounded the light fall of a human foot. . . .

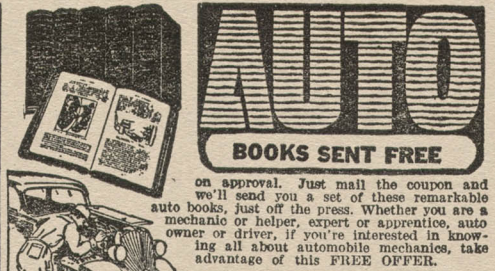
I steeled myself, expecting a blast of destroying flame to shoot into my back. But the first thing to reach my senses was a voice—Raphaelo Milo's voice humming a devil tune. Slowly my fist dropped to my automatic, and then I whirled.

The shadowy figure on the platform moved with blurred swiftness. As my gun shot harmlessly overhead, a blast of fire exploded from its face—terrific, blinding flame! It hurled me back into the room, blasted the gun out of my hand. Then the monster threw itself upon me, its mouth of fire stabbing full in my face.

We went down together, arms interlocked. My hands found the creature's neck and I dragged myself against it, hugging my face beside its own. White-hot flame seared past my ear, so close I felt my skin burn. I dared not let go lest that fire eat into my eyes.

There was bestial power in the monster's arms. Clawing fingers tore at my face, tried to drag me away. Over and over we rolled, until the excruciating pain forced me to relax. At that instant the flame hit my face with blinding force. I screamed, fists flying wildly. Through bloodshot eyes I saw the gloating yellow

(Continued on page 110)



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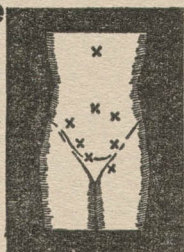
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STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

(Continued from page 109)

face. Then I covered my eyes with my arm and kicked out with a foot.

The blow met substance, sank into arterial flesh. Again I kicked, aiming at the throat. The creature's head fell back, its mouth spitting the flame harmlessly toward the ceiling. Panting, I struggled to my feet, reached for the light switch.

In the garish overhead glare I looked down. The figure lay on its back, chest rising and falling in convulsive spasms. Across the body lay a red robe. The face was a metal mask shaped to resemble the blunt features of Raphaelo Milo. From the metal pigs came flame, fed by a tank slung over the shoulders. I saw this when I pulled away the robe. It was an oxy-acetylene torch, with an adjustable stop-cock at the mouth of the tank. Twisting the valve, I cut off the flow of flame. I ripped the mask off. A bearded face glared up at me. It was Pietro Vinelli!

* * *

THE road stretched out white and smooth under the glare of my headlights. Judith, close to me in the single seat, slid her hand under my elbow. Taking the cue, I glanced sideways, grinning. "It's all over, honey," I said. "They'll keep Vinelli in Stonehurst until his trial, then he'll be brought back for the execution. Ironic justice, isn't it?"

She nodded slowly. "I still don't understand, Paul. How did you know?"

"I didn't at first," I admitted ruefully. "Like the rest of them, I had actually thought Milo had somehow cheated the chair. But Dr. Owen gave me the clue that started the brain to working. He said that Vinelli was rolling up his sleeves. But the corpse in the mortuary—supposed to be Vinelli—was fully dressed.

"The corpse in the mortuary told its own story. I didn't have time to examine it closely because the murderer was on the platform outside. But that one glance was enough to convince me that Vinelli had

SATAN FILLS THE MORGUE

destroyed Milo's face by fire and then dressed him in his own clothes. He stuck a few charred pieces of fake hair in the face to make it look like Vinelli's own corpse. His only mistake was forgetting to roll up Milo's sleeves.

"Vinelli had it figured out from the beginning. He surprised Shay at the foot of the stairs, killed him, then circled around the building to the other side. That's how he got into the office and attacked you and Mae Croft. He would have killed you outside if Captain McCabe hadn't come along. As for the bullet that McCabe fired, it glanced off the metal mask. But the impact was enough to knock back Vinelli's head. At the same time he forced a laugh to make McCabe think he hadn't felt it. You can bet your life he did feel it. There's a half-inch dent in the mask's temple."

"But the voice—" Judith began.

"A phonograph record, hidden in Vinelli's hearse. That, incidentally, is where he kept the torch and mask when he wasn't using them. Later, disguised as an orderly, he would have driven to freedom in that very hearse . . . and probably taken up an anonymous life in Italy!"

"But why? What motive did he have?"

"He confessed that before I left his cell. He and Milo had planned it right after the jury returned the death verdict. Milo faced certain death, but he was resolved to get vengeance on all who sent him to the chair. He publicly threatened Vinelli in order to throw off any suspicion that Vinelli was in with him.

"And it nearly worked, thanks to their family madness."

"Family madness?"

"Yes. Raphaelo Milo was a stage name. His real name was Vinelli. They were brothers."

THE END

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30x4.50-21	2.40	1.15	2.40	30x4.50-21	2.40	1.15	30x4.50-21	2.40	1.15
30x4.75-19	2.45	1.20	2.45	30x4.75-19	2.45	1.20	30x4.75-19	2.45	1.20
30x4.75-20	2.50	1.25	2.50	30x4.75-20	2.50	1.25	30x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
30x5.00-19	2.55	1.30	2.55	30x5.00-19	2.55	1.30	30x5.00-19	2.55	1.30
30x5.00-20	2.60	1.35	2.60	30x5.00-20	2.60	1.35	30x5.00-20	2.60	1.35
30x5.00-21	2.65	1.40	2.65	30x5.00-21	2.65	1.40	30x5.00-21	2.65	1.40
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30x7.50-15	3.05	1.65	3.05	30x7.50-15	3.05	1.65
30x8.00-15	3.10	1.70	3.10	30x8.00-15	3.10	1.70
30x8.50-15	3.15	1.75	3.15	30x8.50-15	3.15	1.75
30x9.00-15	3.20	1.80	3.20	30x9.00-15	3.20	1.80
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30x11.50-16	3.55	2.10	3.55	30x11.50-16	3.55	2.10
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30x13.00-16	3.70	2.25	3.70	30x13.00-16	3.70	2.25
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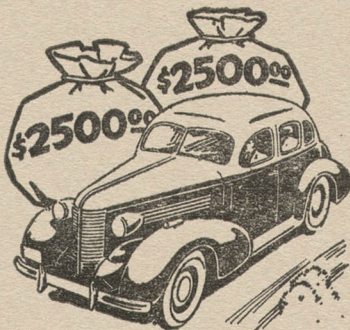
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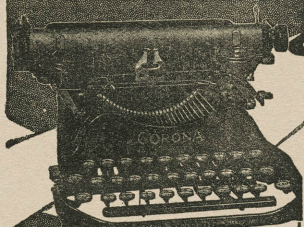
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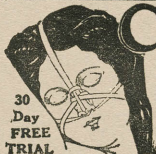
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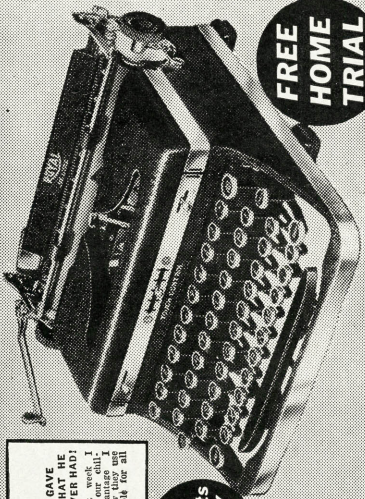
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