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MARCH



STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES



**ANDREW MAGEE
AND THE
GRAY GHOST**

SPINE-TINGLING MYSTERY NOVEL

by **WAYNE ROGERS**

TWO NOVELETES OF WEIRD MENACE

**CORPSES IN
CHINATOWN**

by **WILLIAM HINES**

**SLAVES OF THE
DEATH SONG**

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

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STRANGE



DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

Volume Six

March, 1941

Number Two

A Feature-Length Novel of Bizarre Doom

ANDREW MAGEE AND THE GRAY GHOST.....Wayne Rogers 8

They were strong men, and brave—but what avail were courage and strength against an invisible madman who could roast them alive whenever and wherever he wished? Even Andrew Magee knew that he had to obey the Master's bidding—for already the fires of hell were spreading through his hand!

Four Novelettes of Baffling Mystery

THE CASE OF THE TALKING DEAD.....Emile C. Tepperman 32

Nick Valentine knew that he wasn't crazy, even if the cops thought he was. He *had* been talking to a dead man in his apartment; and the girl in the taxicab had said the same thing. And then Nick's 'cousin' came to him to prove that corpses who talk aren't always dead!

THE MASTER OF SUICIDES.....Wyatt Blassingame 50

Who was the beautiful, impossible creature who came out of nothingness to summon men and women to horrible death? Necessary Jones found the answer—but by then he was standing on the brink of hell, with a lynch-mad mob close at his heels!

SLAVES OF THE DEATH SONG.....Ralph Oppenheim 64

It was incredible that lovely young girls could be changed into human canaries, caged and golden-voiced. But Larry Farr could not doubt the evidence of his own eyes and ears—and he went berserk when he learned that Kay, his own lovely Kay, was next on the list of those who were to sing for one night . . . and die!

CORPSES IN CHINATOWN.....William Hines 84

Were there any who guessed that Stub Samson, peg-legged murderer, and Paul Van Cleve, dapper young D. A., were really one and the same person? When Paul saw the blood of an old Chinaman stain his office floor, he knew that one man possessed the secret—and that he and his friends were doomed to meet the cold-blooded killer who called himself The Crab!

— And —

CALENDAR OF CRIME.....A Department 4

A referee's job is not easy. . . .

ALL STORIES NEW



NO REPRINTS

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE APRIL 1st

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"THEN TO OUR HORROR, we found that we were lost! Visions of searching parties finding our bones, months afterward, flashed in my mind as we searched for the exit. The candles flickered out as the hours passed. Only the flashlight was left."



"AFTER SEVEN HOURS and a half of hideous searching, we came upon the exit to safety. We had found our way back to life again, thanks to our flashlight and its dependable 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries!"

(Signed) *W. B. Bolton*

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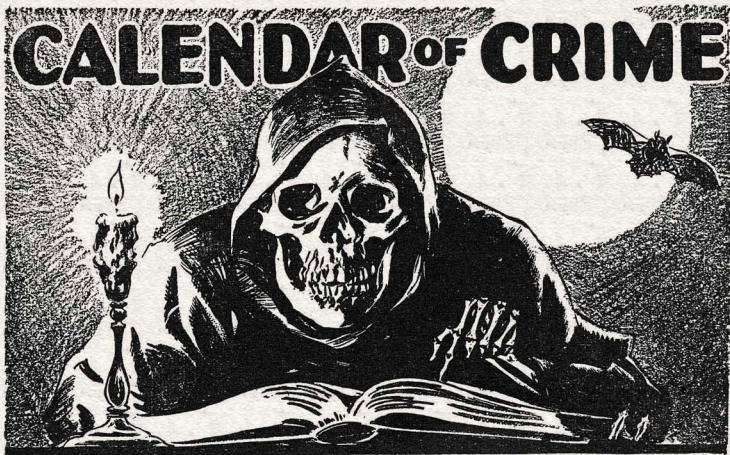


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CALENDAR of CRIME



WE WENT to the wrestling matches the other night. A couple of behemoths—either of them fully capable of playing the part of King Kong's son without make-up—were tossing each other around in the best traditions of the Grunt-and-Groan school. There was a lot of punishment exchanged that evening, but most of it was absorbed by the referee.

He was a mild-looking little man, with a face as expressionless as a fried egg, and we wondered what he was doing in such a rough environment. Because any time he bent down to tell the two boys not to get mad, he got an elbow in the ribs, or a kick in the teeth, and to us it looked anything but accidental. We decided the lot of a referee is not a happy one.

That is why we gasped with dismay this morning when we read Mr. Robert Riordan's letter. In the very first sentence he told us he wants us to settle an argument. Says Mr. Riordan:

"I would like you to settle an argument between me and my friend. I particularly enjoy fiction with bizarre elements and I don't give a darn about cold, logical explanations as long as the story gives me a kick. But my pal says he can't enjoy a story unless he thinks it's 100%

credible. He admits getting a lot of excitement out of drama in the stories, and says he enjoys the suspense and the mystery, but he claims the rest of the stuff doesn't go with him. How, he asks, can one enjoy anything that you know never was, never could be?"

Well, Mr. Riordan, remembering the little referee who tried to judge an argument, we would like to say that tastes vary, and let you and your friend fight this out alone (without the physical violence of the wrestling ring, we trust). On the other hand, we feel a certain responsibility toward helping you and your friend reach some sort of a peaceful settlement, so here goes. . . .

There are some skeptics, complete skeptics, but we've even seen some of them convinced. Your friend, however, does not seem to be one of these. He admits from the beginning that he enjoys reading the bizarre. His argument is that he can't take anything that never was, never could be. Well, we don't hold any brief for the impossible, either. But there are many well authenticated cases of strange doings that no amount of cold logic can explain. Television, aviation—mechanical things that a century ago would have been considered the babblings of a lunatic—are accepted, prosaic facts today. Is it not possible that some day in the future we will find natural explanations to those bizarre aspects of human life and conduct which the skeptics dismiss as "bunk", and the credulous accept as "supernatural"?

(Continued on page 5)

15 Minutes a Day!

Give me just this
and I'll prove I can make you
A NEW MAN!

I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them. Right now I'm even training hundreds of soldiers and sailors who KNOW they've got to get into shape FAST!

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Charles
Atlas

—actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "*Everlasting Health and Strength*"—and full details of your TRIAL OFFER.

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(Continued from page 4)

Consider the authenticated cases of African witch doctors who put an evil spell on a person—pricking a wax doll with needles—using *exuvia* (strands of hair, fingernail clippings, bits of cloth, etc. belonging to the intended victim, and the man dies, even though he may be miles away. Such instances are rare in the extreme, to be sure, but they have occurred, so ethnologists tell us.

Mental suggestion, the skeptic would say. The victim knew that he was hexed and he died of fear. Perhaps, and yet. . . .

Consider next that weird capacity possessed by Polynesians—the strange ability to will themselves to death when they have grown tired of living, and so controlling their physical functions that they can end them at will forever. Would it be surprising if one of those men suddenly learned the secret of starting those life processes going again . . . and thus returning to life after he had died? Impossible? Perhaps, but then so many things have been called impossible. The imaginative person considers the case, marvels at its startling probabilities, and thus experiences a mental excitement that the skeptic can not possibly enjoy.

And if these instances are too remote to serve as examples, we can return to our own country—to a famous university in the south that is studying thought-transmission and telepathy. There, students are picked at random from the campus and with a few weeks of training they learn to read almost unerringly cards held up to them on the other side of a screen.

But in quoting these bizarre instances of fact, we don't want you or your friend to think we're asking you to assume that *anything* is possible, even in this world of scientific wonders (some of which we would be better off without, such as incendiary bombs and torpedoes.) Yet bear in mind that well-worn but still serviceable adage that grows more true with each passing year—*truth is stranger than fiction*. We think your friend will admit that. Let's suppose he never happened to hear the famous yarn about the World War (Number One) observer who was tossed out of his cockpit when the pilot of the plane was forced to make a sudden violent

manouever. The pilot was surprised, to put it mildly, when seconds later he levelled out at some distance below and the observer plummeted directly into the cockpit he had left so unceremoniously—stunned but alive. Your friend, Mr. Riordon, might have said "baloney." So would anyone who didn't take Alice in Wonderland literally. But if he read the yarn in a fiction story, we're pretty sure he'd have gotten a "bang" out of it, even if it did sound like an author's dream. It so happens that this incredible story was true—verified by reliable witnesses.

A less-known story concerns Sir Cecil Rhodes, fabulous financier and builder of Britain's empire in Africa. As a penniless youth, stranded in an Australian seaport, he was loitering on the water-front. Some fishermen had captured a shark, had opened it's belly, and found a newspaper. They tossed it aside and young Rhodes strolled over and out of idle curiosity picked it up. It was a London paper. That was remarkable enough in itself. Apparently the shark had gobbled the newspaper somewhere off the shores of England, swum the thousands of miles to Australia—but the paper was "delivered" in days time less than it could have reached the port by boat. So Rhodes had advance news of market prices in London, and utilized the information to make himself a tidy sum that proved to be the nucleus of a great fortune.

There's a yarn that isn't verified, but neither has it been disproven.

So, Mr. Riordon, despite our noble resolve to remain neutral in this battle, it looks as though we've wound up by giving you the nod. But we hope we've succeeded in giving you some pointers you can pass on to your friend. We're not asking him to swallow the shark-newspaper-swallowing story—or any other story, even with a grain of salt. We're glad he enjoys our offerings, and hope he'll continue doing so—and naturally that goes for you too. But most of all, we hope we've helped a little in showing him that the bizarre, the so-called impossible—occurs in the Book of Life as well as in the actual printed page.

THE EDITORS.



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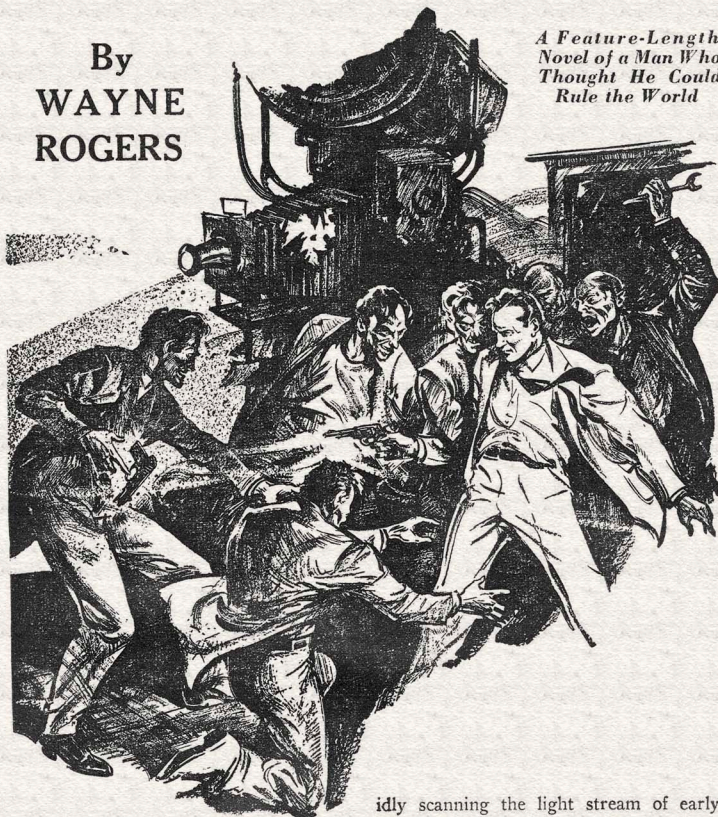
ANDREW MAGEE AND THE GRAY GHOST



When the peace and quiet of prosperous midtown New York were invaded by the Gray Ghost and his legions of ruthless killers, the police were helpless. Only Andy Magee held the clue which might bring him face to face with the mad criminal genius who could roast men alive wherever they might be!

By
WAYNE
ROGERS

*A Feature-Length
Novel of a Man Who
Thought He Could
Rule the World*



CHAPTER ONE

The Gray Ghost Comes

IT WAS Motorcycle Sergeant Louis Greiner who was the first to see the Grinning Ghost. It was he who coined the name the newspapers seized upon so readily and splashed into headlines.

Greiner was drawn up at the curb in front of Fidel's First Avenue service station when it happened. He was leaning back in the saddle and taking things easy,

idly scanning the light stream of early afternoon traffic as he listened to the station attendant's rumbling voice.

"It's nothin' but kids, I tell you, Sarge—nothin' but youngsters in their teens," Fidel pronounced emphatically. "They're pullin' all these robberies an' hold-ups. It's the war that's to blame; it's got them all stirred up, not knowin' whether they're comin' or goin', so they're cuttin' loose and runnin' wild. This crime wave—"

The words faded; his eyes widened as he stared down the avenue.

"Man, oh man—look at that fool come!" he marveled—but Greiner had al-

ready spun around and caught a glimpse of the car that was speeding northward with utter contempt for speed regulations.

Automatically he shoved away from the curb and throttled the Kelley-Henderson as he shot out into the street, but the oncoming sedan was abreast of him, was bulleting past before he could get up speed. Greiner's steely eyes glinted as he leaned forward and roared in pursuit. The fools were doing better than sixty. Drunk, probably—making a race-course out of a busy city street. He'd show them.

His speedometer climbed over sixty, over seventy, seventy-five. Now he was gaining, was creeping up. The sedan was less than half a block away, no more than a hundred feet. His siren shrilled—and at that instant the glass in the sedan's rear window dropped downward. Framed in the aperture was a face that astonished him—a face that sent a spasm of uncanny fear stabbing through him.

That face wasn't human. It was gray—a horrible, unearthly dark gray! It must be a mask, a maniacal, grinning mask—and yet the features were moving, were twisting and contorting terribly, like a gargoyle convulsed with demoniacal glee. Baleful, venom-brimming eyes glared from beneath a low-pulled felt hat—and then Greiner saw the tommy-gun barrel.

Too late! The black muzzle spurted orange-red flame, the deadly chatter drummed in his ears, and searing agony stabbed through his legs below the knees as the front tire blew out. The machine skidded crazily, pitched like a bucking bronco, and hurled him head-first against the rear of a heavy meat truck standing at the curb.

Blackness blotted out the afternoon sunshine; blackness that lifted only once when Greiner stirred to semi-consciousness in a hospital bed. His torn lips moved stiffly as his glassy eyes stared unseeing. Those around his bed bent closer.

"A ghost—a grinning ghost—he shot

me," he mumbled; and then Louis Greiner was dead.

JOHAN O'MARA was probably the second person to get a good look at the gray-faced killer. Two uniformed special policemen on guard outside Bondy & Holden's may have seen him also, but they died so swiftly, it is doubtful that they even knew what struck them. Certainly they had no chance to draw their guns before their bullet-riddled bodies dropped to the Fifth Avenue sidewalk.

O'Mara was stationed inside the sales room, on the edge of the crowd that surrounded the auctioneer's platform. Ordinarily he would not have been there, but the recent wave of lawlessness had made the fashionable jewelry firm uneasy. Besides engaging the usual special officers who customarily were on guard when a valuable gem collection was to be offered for sale, they had contacted the Magee Detective Agency for the services of a plain-clothes man.

Gray-haired O'Mara handled the assignment.

"Nineteen thousand and five hundred—nineteen thousand and five hundred—sold to Mr. Gregory Whittaker for nineteen thousand five hundred dollars!"

The monotonous chant of the auctioneer rang in O'Mara's ears as he gazed at the sparkling beauty of a diamond necklace that was going for more than six times the top yearly salary he had made on the police force—and suddenly he tensed, subconsciously alert to impending danger.

That sharp squeal was the sound of a car braking to a stop—a car that had been traveling far too speedily for decorous Fifth Avenue traffic. From the corner of his eye he glimpsed the dark brown sedan gliding to the curb right in front of the store, saw its doors swing open even before it came to a halt—and in the same split-second crimson death blasted from it.

Suddenly the auctioneer's voice was

stilled by the staccato crackle of tommy-gun shots, by the crash of glass as the outside windows shattered. Out of the car leaped three masked men who came charging across the sidewalk with drawn guns, and a fourth brought up the rear with the tommy-gun.

That much John O'Mara saw in a single, startled glance. Then he went for his gun, but before he had it clear of his hip the deluge was upon him. Terrified by the shots, the crowd stampeded, the customers and the auctioneer's staff as well. Tables were overturned, chairs knocked helter-skelter as they dived frantically for cover of any sort.

To stand against that panic-stricken tide was impossible. Someone crashed into O'Mara and knocked him off-balance. Before he could recover his stance another wild-eyed man hurtled full-tilt into him and bowled him off his feet. Gun in hand, he scrambled to his knees—and looked squarely into the jaws of death.

Bearing down upon him was an incredible creature with a horribly grinning face. A man with a face that was like dark gray rubber—like wet rubber, just lifted dripping from a tank! Not a white man—not a Negro—not a human!

For a fraction of a second O'Mara's gun-hand was palsied, and in that instant the tommy-gun blasted him. Leaden slugs drove into him with pile-driving force, flung him back on his haunches, slugs that seared him with white-hot agony. The gun dropped from his nerveless fingers and he slammed back against the floor—but the death he knew was claiming him was slow in coming.

Through half-closed eyes he saw the gray-faced specter crouching over him, the tommy-gun swinging in a wary arc as his men looted the showcases and the safe. Hideously the rubber-like features writhed and twisted—and then something wet splashed down into O'Mara's face. His glazing eyes widened, stared up at the

contorted countenance above him; and then the darkness closed in over him.

ANDREW MAGEE knew a liar when he saw one, but he knew when a man was scared, too. This fellow sitting beside his desk was both—and that didn't make sense. Edward Parker had come to him for protection, had come in terror of death—and yet he wasn't telling the truth. He was putting on an act even as he sat there sweating with fear.

No, it didn't make sense—especially when the same thing happened twice in a row. Yesterday it had been a woman who sat there begging for his help while she did her best to conceal the reason for the unmistakable terror that underlay her apprehension. Now it was Parker. . . .

Magee leaned forward. His deceptively mild blue eyes caught the other's restless gaze, held it with such intensity that Parker's nervously working fingers threatened to shred the edge of his blue jacket. He squirmed, and his face gleamed with perspiration.

"Now let me get this straight," Magee recapitulated. "You were at work in your cage an hour ago when this fellow telephoned you and demanded that you rob the bank?"

Parker's dark head bobbed in confirmation.

"Twenty-five thousand dollars he wants," he mumbled. "He said I had to have it for him today."

"And you have no idea who your caller can be?"

"None," Parker shook his head. "I never heard his voice before. It was low and kind of wheezy, but there was something about it that sent a shiver down my back. Something that made me know he wasn't bluffing."

"And then he threatened you?"

"He said if I didn't do what I was told he'd see to it that I burned for it before tonight. 'Like this,' he said, and then a

strange feeling came over me—as if I was burning up with fever—all over my body. He told me that he'd know if I went to the police or tried to get help and he'd settle with me quick. But I can't steal twenty-five thousand dollars. I'd be discovered sure. And if I don't he'll get me—I know it. That's why I came to you, Magee. I know your reputation; I know you can help me if anyone can. Get me out of this and I'll pay you, Magee—I'll pay you—”

Magee understood that burning fever all right; the fellow was consumed with terror. But there was something about his story that did not ring true, something that—

The telephone interrupted his probing speculation. He reached for it almost mechanically, lifted the receiver to his ear—and suddenly came tensely alert, galvanized by the voice that came to him over the wire. The voice of a nurse in the French Hospital.

“He just regained consciousness and he is asking for you,” she was saying. “I'm afraid there won't be much time to see him, Mr. Magee. Even if you hurry you may be too late.”

That was O'Mara she was talking about! Old John O'Mara who had been perfectly hale and hearty when he left the office a few hours ago. O'Mara—shot down and dying!

Magee dropped the instrument into its cradle and reached for his hat, and then he remembered the man sitting there beside his desk. Parker, trembling and sweating with fear. He thought swiftly.

“Look here, Parker, I have to leave you,” he announced. “That call was very important—”

“But—but if you leave me; if I go out of here—” the worried cashier quavered.

“You don't have to go out,” Magee settled that. “Stay right here until I get back. That door,” he pointed to the one between his outer and inner offices, “is steel-paneled. I'll lock it. Don't answer

if anyone tries to get in. My secretary will be away all afternoon. Nobody will disturb you, and you will be perfectly safe.”

Then Edward Parker went out of his thoughts and John O'Mara took full possession of them. Good old John. The years flashed through his mind as a taxicab sped him to what he knew was to be O'Mara's death-bed. Days when he and Walter Sprague had been the greenest of rookie cops; when veteran O'Mara had taken them under his wing and coached them through their flatfoot days until they were able to qualify for the detective force. The day when he turned in his badge and brought the Magee Detective Agency into being. The day when John O'Mara, retiring from the force, walked in and announced himself a new member of the staff. . . . and now old John was dying.

O'MARA was barely breathing when Magee stepped to his bedside, but his old eyes brightened with satisfaction.

“Who did it, John?” Magee begged, while he fought to down the lump in his throat. “Who was he?”

“Short fellow with a blue suit—and a gray face,” O'Mara whispered. “A gray face, Andy—dark gray—like a—like a rubber mask. He was the leader. He looked like he was grinning—but I saw his eyes. He was scared—scared out of his senses—so scared that the sweat was running off him in streams—so scared—”

The whisper faded, ended in a gasping death rattle, and John O'Mara was gone. For a long moment Andy Magee sat beside the bed and looked down at the relaxing face—and his square jaws tightened until the muscles stood out like whipcords. His fists clenched, and the hot blood pounded riotously in his veins as he got to his feet—to take the trail of a killer who was ridden by fear. . . .

Bondy & Holden's sales room was one place that trail had come to light. Magee knew that the police would be swarming

there, but O'Mara's connection with the robbery got him through the line that had been thrown around the store. Got him into the looted auction room, where Inspector Wenzel, of Homicide, was being badgered by a score of reporters.

"Crime wave—crime wave—all you fellows ever think of is a crime wave!" the inspector was growling. "You're like a bunch of parrots. As soon as you get a couple of stories you start shouting 'crime wave'."

"'A couple of stories', Inspector?" one of the newshawks caught him up quickly. "Seems to me this makes nearly a dozen first-class robberies in the past week, doesn't it? A dozen robberies and half as many murders—before what happened here."

"And how about the Ruggles and Dingelman disappearances?" another chimed in. "How about Anne Humphries? That's three kidnappings we know about—and I hear that maybe there are more."

"Kidnapings!" Wenzel roared. "Three people leave town for a few days, and so they're kidnaped!"

"How about the Kempster and Brown-ing suicides, Inspector—they didn't just leave town for a few days, did they?" That

was Colin Campbell, the *Globe's* columnist.

Wenzel's heavy-jowled, broad-featured face was brick-red. Wrathfully he turned away from his tormentors—and his eyes fell upon his pet abomination, Andy Magee. Magee, the subordinate who had refused to take his brow-beating, who had turned in his shield and then added insult to injury by replacing it with a private detective's badge.

"What are you doing in here, Magee?" he bellowed as he strode forward beligerently. "This is police business—murder."

"And one of the victims happened to be John O'Mara, who was working for me," Magee reminded him. "O'Mara just died."

"That's what comes of a flatfoot trying to play at being a detective," Wenzel snorted. "But we'll take care of that without you—or your gun. Get this, Magee—" he thrust his jaw into Magee's face—"I don't want any interference from you. And I don't want you starting any private war to square things for O'Mara. Start anything like that and I'll clap you in a cell—if you don't end up on a slab before I get to you. Now get out—and stay out!"

Magee got out, but as he started back to his office his brain was working at top

Private Notes from Mrs. M--'s Diary



3 Slept like a top all night. Ex-Lax worked fine this morning and didn't upset me a bit. Headache's all gone now and I feel bright as a lark.



1 Suffered all day with a terrible headache. Felt dull, tired and out of sorts. Remembered that I needed a laxative and decided my headache was due to that.



2 Took an Ex-Lax tablet before going to bed. It tasted swell—just like a piece of fine chocolate.

The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet *gentle*! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.

10¢ and 25¢



speed. Wenzel was on edge, that was apparent. Evidently the crime wave the newspapers had been shouting about was even more widespread than they knew. But was this latest outrage part of the same criminal campaign? It differed from the others in its reckless boldness.

From one of the reporters Magee had heard of Sergeant Greiner's crash with the Grinning Ghost, had gotten details of the murderous raid on Bondy & Holden's. But why should hold-up men attract attention by racing through the city before they had pulled their job? Why come sweeping up to the store like wild Indians when a surreptitious approach would have been so much more advisable?

They seemed to have been courting danger deliberately—and yet their leader was quaking with terror. . . .

The outer office was as he had left it when he stepped into it, but some sixth sense whispered a warning as he approached the inner door. Perhaps it was the utter stillness behind it. Perhaps—

Quickly he turned the key and swung the door inward—and stopped short, while horror tightened his scalp like a shrinking cap. There at his desk sat Edward Parker—or what was left of him! A horribly discolored mummy—a creature with a ghastly, dark gray face that leered in a hideous grin! In one hand that was no more than a shrunk, dark gray talon he clutched the telephone—a desiccated corpse telephoning from beyond the grave!

The Grinning Ghost!

Was this unholy horror John O'Mara's slayer?

CHAPTER TWO

Fiendish Fetters

MAGEE stared at that ghastly travesty of a face, at the blue suit, and O'Mara's voice rang in his ears. Diffidently he bent over the corpse and felt

the coat, the trousers. They were clammy, soaked with perspiration—with the sweat of consuming terror!

And yet this *had* to be Edward Parker. Nobody else could have gotten into the office. Some horrible, incomprehensible fate had overtaken him, but it was Parker. He would have papers, identification, to prove it.

Fighting down his aversion, Magee ran his hands through the dank pockets, but there was no wallet, no letters, no identification of any sort. More than that, the label had been cut out of his suit, the laundry marks been snipped from his linen. There was not a thing on him to prove that this ghastly creature was not the Grinning Ghost, for whom every cop in New York would soon be on the lookout!

The Grinning Ghost—planted there in his office!

Even as that ominous possibility flashed into his mind, Andrew Magee froze, tense, his ears straining. That noise! There was somebody at the outside door, slipping a key into the lock. The police—sent there to nab him in this hellish trap!

On tiptoes he sped across the outer office. Gun in hand, he flattened himself against the wall beside the door, waiting—but when it opened his arm dropped limply at his side. Instead of grim police faces, he stared into a lovely, delicate face, into deep blue eyes that were filled with concern.

Laura Sprague, his secretary and chief office factotum—and in many ways the most important third of the Magee Agency. He had forgotten all about her in the swift tragedies of the past hour.

"There's nothing wrong!" The wide eyes filled with relief. "I was afraid something had happened. I've been trying to get you on the phone more than half an hour, Andy. The line has been busy, busy, busy; but when I induced the operator to cut in she reported no conversation; said the receiver must have been left off. I

wanted to tell you about Boin. He came home in a taxi—bleeding so badly that the driver had to help him into the house.”

Boin . . . Boin . . . Boin, wounded and bleeding. . . . Then there *was* a connection between yesterday’s caller and today’s tragedies. . . .

That caller had been Gladys Boin. A small, dark-haired, intense-eyed woman. She had been a bundle of nerves, on the verge of hysteria, as she dropped into his chair and clasped the edge of his desk with white-knuckled hands. On the ragged edge of a breakdown, and yet she had fought it off so successfully that she had been able to sit there and tell him just what she wanted him to know—and no more.

“I need your help, Mr. Magee,” she had poured out her story. “It’s about my husband, Clement. He’s in trouble. He hasn’t told me, but I know that he is horribly frightened. I want you to stop him—to save him from himself before the police get him. He doesn’t mean to do wrong, Mr. Magee; it’s just that he’s trying so hard to get money for us—for Julie, my little daughter, and me. But you must stop him!”

“He has never made much money,” she took a resolute grip on herself. “He’s a broker’s clerk, and you know what the market is these days. But lately he has been spending far more than he earns. He has been going out nights to keep strange appointments—and I know that sometimes he isn’t at the office during the day. The other night I saw him slip a gun in his pocket, and last night he came home with the largest wad of bills I ever saw. I—I took these to pay you—to retain you.”

Out of her handbag she took five new twenty-dollar bills and nervously placed them on the desk.

MAGEE cross-examined her, but his questioning yielded nothing more—except the conviction that she was not tell-

ing him everything. She was deliberately covering up, and yet there was no doubting her terror.

It was that unmistakable fear that swayed him. He pushed the bills back, but against his better judgment he agreed to try to help her.

He had been ready last night when she called to tell him that her husband was going out; had been waiting across the street when Boin came out and hailed a cab. Cursing himself for a meddling fool who was sure to get his fingers burned, Magee followed.

Boin went to a midtown cafe; waited at the bar until he was joined by a second man and then by two others. Half an hour later they left, driving off in a light, covered truck. Magee trailed them to the West Side, to a deserted side street in the upper Twenties. The fur district—and the dark building they entered housed a fur storage warehouse.

Three of them entered. Boin remained outside, in the dark of the doorway; but he had no chance to give the alarm when a gun was jammed in his belly and he was yanked out into the street. Magee frisked him, grabbed him by the collar and held him a sniveling, cowering prisoner while he cut loose with the captured gun. Two bullets went into the truck’s tires, four more went up into the air to bring the cops swarming—and then he and Boin went away from there in a hurry.

Later, over a coffee-pot table, he had faced his captive.

“All right, Boin, let’s have it,” he demanded. “You know I ought to turn you in for this. I’m giving you a chance to talk. Who’s behind you? What’s it all about? Come clean.”

Clement Boin was like a cornered rat. Stark terror gleamed from his deep-set eyes, but he shook his head doggedly.

“There’s nobody—nobody but the three fellows I was with,” he insisted. “I met them at a bar a couple weeks ago. I needed

money bad—and they knew how to get it. So we teamed up. That's all there's to it. I swear it. I've been a fool, but I'll go straight—I swear it. Just give me a chance."

And that was all Magee had been able to get out of him.

"I don't believe you," he spat disgustedly, "but I'm going to see to it that you keep your promise. I'm going to keep an eye on you—and the first time you make a break I'll turn you in. Get that?"

Boin got it. He sniveled his gratitude and slunk away, and Magee wryly washed his hands of a distasteful job. That was the end of it, or so he thought—but promptly that morning he had learned his mistake. He had hardly reached his office when the telephone rang. It was Gladys Boin.

"I want you to drop the case I spoke to you about yesterday," she implored breathlessly. "I want you to forget that I engaged you—that I ever saw you. There is nothing that you can do for me—nothing but cause trouble if you try to interfere. Please, Mr. Magee!"

Her voice was so tense that it broke. Magee caught the sound of a strangled sob, and then the connection was broken. He was sitting staring at the instrument when Laura came in from the outer office.

"That woman is terrified," she diagnosed. "What's it about, Andy?"

Magee told her, and when he was finished Laura Sprague nodded her head with understanding—and decision.

"You're out of it, Andy, but I'm not," she told him firmly. "We can't drop out and let her down this way, no matter what she says. I'm going over there to keep an eye on her today—just in case."

And this was what "keeping an eye on" the Boins had produced. Clement Boin had been brought home bleeding and barely able to walk. Boin's misadventure—the Grinning Ghost's raid on Bondy and Holden's—that grinning corpse sitting in

his own desk chair— Somehow, Magee sensed, they were all part of the same diabolical pattern and the best lead at the moment was Clement Boin. . . .

JUST in time he barred Laura's way before she reached the inner office door. Briefly he told her what had happened and calmed her fears.

"I'll lock that thing in my closet—for the present," he outlined the plan that was taking form in his busily weaving brain. "I want you to stay here to see that nobody gets into my office. I'm going to have another talk with Boin—but first we'll check up on Edward Parker. See if you can get the Merchants Consolidated Bank for me."

Laura got the number, but that was all. Nobody at the Merchants Consolidated had ever heard of Edward Parker. He had never been connected with the bank in any capacity. He had been a fake, a deliberate plant, sent to Magee's office—and murdered there? But why? And how?

Those questions gnawed at Magee's brain as he taxied to Boin's Greenwich Village apartment. It was located in a cheap, six-story walk-up; on the fourth floor rear. At first it seemed there would be no answer when he knocked. Then he heard surreptitious sounds inside. The door opened cautiously, on a crack, and framed the haggard, red-eyed face of Gladys Boin. She smothered an exclamation and tried to close the door, but Magee's foot prevented that.

"You!" she gasped. "I told you to let us alone. I told you to keep out of our affairs—and now you come *here!* You are the one who is responsible—you are the one who brought this upon us—"

She broke into sobs as she stepped backward into the half-dark foyer. Magee followed—and out of the gloom something came hurtling at him; something that leaped upon him and drove frantic but

ineffectual blows into his face. Magee was hurled back, but before he could be swept off his feet, he managed to free himself. Now he could see his attacker charging at him desperately. Carefully he gauged a blow and let it fly to the fellow's jaw. It did not go home perfectly, but it knocked Clement Boin off his feet—dropped him in a gasping, retching heap on the floor.

Magee bent over him quickly, picked him up and carried him into the living room, stretched him on a settee. The man was white as a corpse. He could barely lift his head, and now blood was running from the corners of his mouth. His shirt

if to herself. "He is a human blood-sucker—and I delivered us into his hands. I blamed you—but I did it myself."

Her haggard eyes were dull with grief and despair, with misery that even her bitter hatred could not leaven.

"It started a little over a year ago," she went on tonelessly. "Clem was in trouble. He had taken money from the office and lost it gambling. Nearly a thousand dollars. He had to replace it before he was discovered—or go to prison. We tried to get a loan, but they turned us down—and then I heard of Zolini. I went to him and begged him to help us. I had Julie with

Here's a straight tip. Read **MARCH OF THE HOMELESS CORPSES** in the March issue of **TERROR TALES**. The story is by Wayne Rogers, the author of the story you are now reading, and we can guarantee that it'll make the chills run up your spine!

and trousers were soaked with crimson from a wound in his side. He was dying, and he knew it.

"He doubled-crossed me—the murdering devil!" he panted. "He wiped me out because I failed him last night. This morning he phoned—gave me orders for another job—Marvin Richter, the banker's home. Something went wrong, deliberately. Nothing ever goes wrong with his jobs—unless he wants it to. They put me on a spot and let me have it, the dirty rats. It wasn't enough what he did to Julie—"

"Who is this 'he', Boin?" Magee urged, but he had to repeat the question several times before he was able to penetrate the dying man's consciousness.

"Zolini." The name came in a barely audible whisper, and it was the last syllable Clement Boin ever spoke.

Zolini. . . . Something about that name tugged at Magee's memory. It was familiar, and yet—

It was Gladys Boin who gave him the answer.

"Zolini, the pawnbroker," she spoke as

me. He looked at her and nodded his big head. He loaned us the money, and all the security he wanted was a photograph of Julie—a photograph he took with a big, specially built camera. I should have known there was something queer about that, but I didn't—I sold my baby to the devil!"

LIKE an automaton she rose and walked to a doorway at the end of the room. Magee followed her, stepped into a bedroom—and froze in his tracks, rooted to the floor with overwhelming horror.

There in a little bed lay the body of a child no more than four or five years old—a corpse with a shrunken, dark gray face that looked like shriveled rubber! With arms and legs that were like sticks that terminated in horrible taloned appendages!

"She started to turn that way this morning," the stricken mother told him. "Slowly at first. It seemed like a bad fever. We called a doctor and he gave her some medicine, but it did no good. And then he called—Zolini. He told us this was our punishment; Clem's for failing him last

night and mine for going to you. That was why I tried to stop you—and why Clem followed his orders today. But it was no use. He has no mercy. I had to sit here and watch her burning up—”

It was so still in that gruesome death room that the tread of feet in the hallway came to them plainly; yet Gladys Boin seemed not to hear. It was Magee who opened the door when knuckles pounded peremptorily on the panels; Magee who admitted Inspector Wenzel and half a dozen of his subordinates. With them was a taxi-driver and Colin Campbell, the *Globe* columnist.

Wenzel gaped in surprise. His jaw dropped open and then snapped shut grimly. His eyes gleamed with satisfaction as he shouldered Magee ahead of him and strode into the apartment, to where Boin's body lay.

“That's the feller I brought here,” the taxi driver identified excitedly. “That's the feller I told you about, Mr. Campbell. He was bleedin' like a stuck pig when he got into my cab.”

“How about this fellow?” the inspector nodded to Magee. “Did you see him, too?”

The hackie shook his head.

“Not him,” he mumbled. “I never seen him before. I—”

And then they saw the ghastly corpse on the little bed in the next room—and Andy Magee knew that it was touch and go for him.

“What do you know about this, Magee?” Wenzel whirled on him vindictively. “What are you doing here? I gave you fair warning—”

“I don't know any more about it than you do, Inspector,” Magee told him flatly. “Mrs. Boin has been receiving threatening phone calls. She engaged me to try to protect her family—but it seems I got here too late.”

Anxiously he glanced at the sobbing woman, and then he breathed a sigh of relief. Gladys Boin was nodding her head.

She corroborated him. Wenzel had no cause to hold him—at a time when he could not afford to be detained or investigated, no matter what happened. Beads of perspiration ringed his forehead as he hurried down the stairs in the wake of Colin Campbell, who was on his way to phone his paper the latest angle on the Grinning Ghost murder epidemic.

CHAPTER THREE

The Clutch of Hell

ZOLINI, the pawnbroker with the photography hobby, was no stranger to Andrew Magee. The gnome-like little man had seemed to him to be a harmless eccentric who was not over-anxious about his money, a semi-philanthropist who was willing to make loans that more conservative lenders refused. But now his idiosyncrasies took on a new, sinister aspect.

Now, if Gladys Boin was justified in her charges. . . .

Swiftly Magee reviewed what he knew about the man as a taxi bore him across town to the tiny hole-in-the-wall pawnshop on West Street.

It had started about a year ago when Walter Sprague, his old buddy and Laura's brother, had come to ask him to endorse his application for a loan. Sprague had quit the police force shortly after Magee and had opened a bar and grill. He needed additional capital and Magee readily gave his endorsement, but the loan was refused.

That had seemed strange. He had not been able to understand why the application had been rejected; surely Sprague's security was plenty good. . . . But a few days later Sprague had called up to tell him that everything was okay. The same night that his application had been refused, an employee of the loan company had telephoned him and given him the address of a pawnbroker who probably would let him

have the money. Sprague had gone there and had secured the loan without difficulty.

Andy Magee had remembered that some six months later, when he was in a bad spot for cash himself. He looked up the pawnbroker.

Zolini proved to be a misshapen little man whose twisted body appeared to be hunchbacked. He was bent forward at a grotesque angle that was made even more abnormal because one shoulder was considerably higher than the other. He had almost no neck, but his other physical shortcomings seemed to find compensation in a huge head.

That head was fascinating. The features were small and pinched—an inconsequential nose; a tiny, thin-lipped mouth; small, deep-set eyes that had practically no irises. His forehead was high and bulging, but his curious cranium was even more bulbous in the rear—a great bald egg that bore only a fringe of sparse, grayish hair around its edges.

Perched on a stool behind his battered counter, surrounded on every side by the dusty, junk-piled shelves and showcases that crammed his little shop, Zolini looked at first glance like a creature from another world—a fantastic Humpty-Dumpty.

Would he lend Andrew Magee, of the Magee Detective Agency, a thousand dollars? And why not? The huge head nodded. He knew Mr. Magee by reputation and had great admiration for his shooting skill.

"How about security? What do you require?" Magee wanted to know.

"That will be quite simple," Zolini assured him. "When I have enough confidence in a man to lend him my money I am not greatly concerned with security—but there is one thing I will ask you to do for me. I am something of a camera enthusiast, and I usually ask my customers to pose for me. In your case I would like to make a picture of your hand—your right hand—the hand that won the police

revolver championship for you, Mr. Magee."

Something about the way those piercing black eyes stared at his fingers gave Magee the creeps, but he ignored the feeling.

"Come back here and I will show you," Zolini invited as he hopped down from his stool and led the way into a room at the rear of the shop.

One end of that room was covered with a gray-white screen that sparkled as if ground mica had been mixed in the paint which coated it. At the other end was a complicated looking machine which must be the camera. That tube projecting from the center apparently contained the lens, but it looked more like a fantastic ray-projector or flame-thrower.

"This is an invention of my own," Zolini was saying, as he gazed proudly at the mechanism. "It is a three-dimension camera."

"Three-dimension?" Magee wondered. "I never heard of that."

"No, I have not attempted to make it public," Zolini smiled. "I am not yet ready for that. It is still far from perfect, but I am progressing—yes." The big head bobbed with satisfaction. "I am progressing very nicely. Soon I will amaze the world."

NOW Magee caught sight of dozens of curious photographs that hung on the wall behind him. Strange photographs that stood out like bas-reliefs. No, he admitted, the three-dimension camera certainly was not yet perfect. It produced amazing results, but the raised photographs looked like corpses rather than living people.

"If you will just stand over there in front of the screen and hold your arm out straight to one side," Zolini directed. "There—that is excellent."

As he spoke a beam of light a foot square shot out and centered on Magee's out-

stretched hand; a hot beam that was like the radiation from an electric heater. Then Zolini, on a platform behind the camera, pressed a lever and the mechanism began to hum. Magee felt a myriad of prickles in his hand and wrist; as if they had gone to sleep, only more severe. They were almost painful; yet he could not draw his arm out of that beam of light, could not even move his fingers.

The photograph took less than a minute. Then the humming stopped, the beam snapped off, and Zolini was thanking him effusively and bowing him out into the shop. . . .

That was nearly six months ago. Magee had almost forgotten about it, but now every detail of the strange visit came back to him vividly. Could there be any connection between that curious camera and these shrunk, burned out, dark gray corpses? Any connection between Zolini and the crime wave that was sweeping the city?

Such a supposition was fantastic, preposterous. The wild idea must have sprung from Gladys Boin's terrified imagination. Anyway, he would soon satisfy himself by a talk with the pawnbroker—but when he stepped out of the cab and scanned the front of the grimy little shop, he saw that the sign beneath the three rusty balls had recently been repainted. The name "Zolini" was gone, but it still was faintly visible beneath the "Feldman" that had replaced it.

Instead of the twisted little gnome, a tall, thin, blank-faced man of indeterminate middle-age stood behind the counter.

"Zolini?" he shrugged his shoulders in answer to Magee's question. "I don't know where he went. I bought him out six weeks ago. He moved his things. That's all I know."

"But his accounts—his loans—who is taking care of them?" Magee persisted.

Again those expressive shoulders hitched upward.

"If you want to redeem a pledge, let me have your ticket," the fellow offered. "I run the pawn business, that's all. Anything else—that's Zolini's business."

So Zolini had disappeared without even leaving an address for the debtors who might come to repay him. . . . Apparently he was not interested in being repaid—unless he intended to exact collection in his own way. . . . The way he had collected from the Boins?

The first inkling of nameless fear began to trickle down Andy Magee's spine like an icy current as he turned away from that musty shop. A feeling of captivity, of frustration, obsessed him. It was as if he were in a web, with the strands wrapping him more and more tightly. Not only he, but all those others who had been lured into Zolini's den and had become indebted to him.

That would include Walter Sprague—and Laura! All three of the Boins had been forced to pay a terrible price, so Laura would not escape if her brother was enmeshed!

Suddenly an enervating fear for the girl welled up within him—a fear that tightened clammy fingers around his heart as he remembered the hellish outrage that had been inflicted upon little Julie Boin. Laura must be protected against anything like that! Her brother must be warned, must be put on his guard against the first advance Zolini might make!

Magee glanced at his watch. There was still time to catch Sprague at home; he would not be leaving for his night's work for another hour. Now was the time to see him, when there was a chance to talk to him alone, without arousing Laura's suspicions. Without stopping to telephone, he took a cab and started for the apartment house.

WHEN he was still half a block away he saw his old-side-kick stepping into the building; but before he had paid off

the driver, Sprague was gone from the lobby. Magee followed him upstairs, rang the apartment bell and stood ready for the door to be opened—but there was not a sound from within. Puzzled, he rang again—without result.

That was strange. He was positive he had just seen Sprague go into the building. He had even had to wait for the automatic elevator to come down from this floor where Sprague had left it—and yet now there was no response. He tried holding his thumb on the button, tried rapping on the door, calling Sprague's name and identifying himself—but the result was still the same disturbing silence.

His nerves tingled with apprehension. What was going on behind that door? He had to know—and suddenly he knew how he could find out. The fire-escape he had climbed down from the roof to let Laura in one night when she had gone out without her keys!

Swiftly he made his way to the roof and started down the metal steps. Fortunately the Spragues' apartment was only two floors down. He reached it without incident, eased himself up beside the window that commanded a view of the living room—and stared inside with goggling eyes that threatened to bug out of his head.

Walter Sprague was there in the center of the room, standing beside his desk—and spread out on it were thousands of dollars in stacks of small-denomination bills! Bills he was taking out of a canvas sack. A payroll sack. Thousands of dollars in stolen money!

For an instant Magee was stupefied. Then he reached down and grasped the sides of the window, began to raise it as Sprague whirled to face him. Anger flooded Sprague's face as he recognized the intruder—anger and then stark fear. Swiftly he began to sweep the bills back into the bag.

"Walter!" Magee shouted desperately

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as he tugged at the stubborn window. "Wait a minute, Walter!"

With a sudden jerk the frame went up, and Magee leaped into the room—but before he could reach Sprague, the payroll bag came swinging at his head. The leather bottom caught him on the temple, dazed him, sent him staggering back against the wall; and before he could recover his balance Sprague dashed across the room and through the short foyer. Magee heard the apartment door slam behind him.

When he reached the hallway there was no sign of Sprague—except the descending elevator. Magee did not wait for the car to return. He sprinted down the stairs and raced across the lobby—only to see Sprague dive into a taxi that was already started down the street.

Another driver seemed to grasp the situation. He came gliding to the curb with his door half-open, but there was something too pat about that performance. Magee raced past him, to where another cab stood a hundred yards away. With an order to follow Sprague's machine, he leaped inside and dropped to the seat as the cab got under way.

But what was the matter with this driver? The stupid fool was already losing his quarry!

MAGEE banged on the front window, but the fellow paid no attention. He tried to open one of the doors, but it would not move; tried to lower one of the side windows, tried to drive his fist through it. There was no use; the windows were made of heavy, shatterproof glass, and they were tightly locked—so snugly that the cab was air-tight!

Air-tight—and it was being filled with gas! Magee felt his head swimming, his senses numbing. He gasped for breath, but he knew that his strength was ebbing, knew that he was losing consciousness.

Suddenly a voice spoke through the fog

that was closing in upon him. The voice of an announcer, speaking through the cab's radio.

"Coming close on the heels of two other spectacular hold-ups this afternoon, New York was stunned by a bizarre payroll robbery at the office of the Cooperative Insurance Company," the words rang in his ears. "More than fifty thousand dollars were seized. Most inexplicable was the fate that befell one of the policemen who attempted to interfere. His body was scorched, shriveled to a dark gray mummy, the effect, the authorities believe, of some sort of deadly ray projector—"

Another Grinning Ghost! The city seemed to be filled with the horrible corpses. They were spinning round and round Magee as the darkness closed in on him—and then they were there in front of him when the cloud lifted from his brain and he opened his eyes.

Half a dozen of them. Two of them had him by the arms, holding him upright as they marched him forward. But they were not corpses; their hands were unscorched and they gripped him firmly. They were men with some sort of hideous rubber masks covering their faces.

Magee saw that he was in a long, low-ceilinged room, an underground room from the musty dampness. His captors were leading him up a vaulted archway—where Zolini stood with more of those masked horrors. Zolini! For a moment Magee could not be sure. The little man seemed only a blob of white, only a huge head, floating weirdly in the dim light. But then he spoke, and all doubt vanished.

"It appears that you are a very ungrateful debtor, Mr. Magee," he giped. "You were glad to take my money, but you repay me by interfering with my affairs. I cannot permit that. You make it necessary for me to demand an installment on your loan."

"Payment isn't due, but you can have

it," Magee gritted. "You can have all of it—"

"But I do not want all," Zolini grinned at him. "I want only an installment. Some months ago, Humphrey Dixon employed you to protect him from certain lawless elements who were threatening him. You disposed of those elements very effectively. During the course of your employment you learned the location of Dixon's private safe—its combination, too, I believe. I want the contents of that safe, Magee. You will have until three o'clock tomorrow afternoon to secure them for me. After they are in your possession, go to your apartment and wait for directions how to dispose of them.

"If you attempt to disobey this order I will know it, Magee. If you fail me I will have to call in my loan—as I did with the man who visited you today."

Those penetrating black eyes were riveted significantly on Magee's right hand, and he could fairly feel his fingers scorching and shrinking under their scrutiny. Zolini left no doubt of the alternative he offered—within less than twenty-four hours he must follow the ugly devil's criminal bidding or helplessly watch himself become horribly maimed!

CHAPTER FOUR

Devil's Puppets

WHEN he awoke the next morning, Andy Magee sat up in bed and looked around him blankly. Wonderingly he asked himself whether what he had experienced had all been nothing more than a fantastic nightmare. Had he actually seen Zolini—or had he imagined that interview under the effects of the gas he had inhaled in the cab? He could vaguely remember finding himself aimlessly wandering the streets sometime late in the night, but he could not remember coming home or going to bed.

He had been taken somewhere in that cab, but where was a complete mystery. Both the going and the returning were blank spaces in his mind.

And what about Walter Sprague! Suddenly memory of that brief altercation in the Sprague apartment rushed back to him. Walter *was* enmeshed in this crime wave; there was no doubt about that. The realization was shocking, and for a moment it completely upset his scale of values.

If Walter was one of Zolini's puppets, wasn't it possible that Laura had been terrified into helping him? Wasn't it possible that *she* had opened the Agency office to whoever had stripped Edward Parker's clothes of all identification? Wasn't it possible that she had been forced to such lengths in order to save her brother from the fate Zolini seemed able to hold over the heads of his victims?

Only for a moment Andy Magee gave serious thought to such possibilities—and then he despised himself for his lack of faith. Quickly he dressed and started for his office, but at the first newsstand the crime wave rose to confront him in a dozen headlines. The morning papers were filled with news of the Grinning Ghost, the Bondy & Holden robbery, the Consolidated Insurance raid, the Boin double tragedy—and half a dozen other criminal exploits in which he could now spot unmistakably the Machiavellian hand—of whom? Zolini?

Those nightmare words rang in his ears as he read of hold-ups and embezzlements, of half a dozen disappearances reported to the police by distressed relatives. Behind each of them he could discern the grotesque shadow of Zolini wielding his mysterious, terrifying weapon.

But it was Colin Campbell who scored the day's journalistic scoop in the *Globe*—and almost jolted Magee out of his shoes.

"GRINNING GHOST'S CORPSE FOUND AT TELEPHONE," the black headline screamed. "*Hold-up Chief's Three Assailants Murdered as They Try to Flee Town.*"

Before he could run his eyes down the double-column feature story, Magee visualized that grinning corpse taken from the closet where he had left it and propped up at his telephone; visualized the police breaking into his office and finding it there—but this was another corpse Campbell was describing.

The corpse of Tony Marino, a small-time gang leader. Marino had been definitely identified as the leader of the Bondy & Holden hold-up crew, but when the police had raided his East Side flat, he had been beyond their vengeance. All that remained of the little gangster was a horrible, mummified corpse sprawled over a table with a telephone receiver still clutched to his dessicated ear!

His three assistants had fared little better. The corpse of one had been fished out of the East River. Another had been killed in a suspicious automobile smash-up in the Bronx, and the third had reached Jersey City before a gunshot blast cut him down outside the ferry-house.

All four had paid speedily for their crimes—but why? Magee asked himself that question again and again as he sat at his desk with the paper spread out in front of him.

If the gangster Marino had been acting under orders from Zolini, why was death his reward for the successful hold-up? If he was acting under orders from Zolini. . . .

But Marino was already burning up alive, was already turning into a dark gray mummy, when he led the raid on the Fifth Avenue jewelry store! That was why he was sweating so copiously; his flesh was being consumed even then! That was why O'Mara had read the stark terror in his eyes!

SUDDENLY Magee understood what had happened. Marino had attempted to defy Zolini. He had ignored the hold-up order—until he felt his doom creeping over him. Then, frantically, striving desperately to save every moment, he had tried to redeem himself by rushing up-town to obey. But he had been too late. When he got back to his flat the telephone contact he was praying for had never come. He had died there miserably—and his men, making off with the loot, had been cut down before they could reach safety.

Like an evil shadow the long arm of the murder-master reached over the city and snatched his victims at will. Marino and his hoodlums—the distracted Boins—the policeman who stepped into the Consolidated Insurance hold-up—they had been cut down wherever they might be. Even right there into Magee's own office the long finger of death had reached to wipe out a cringing victim who groveled at the telephone waiting for a word of reprieve!

Staggered by realization of the enormity of the monstrous criminal organization that was spreading its tentacles throughout the city, Andrew Magee felt the hair at the back of his neck rise. In that moment he knew that what he had experienced last night was no dream. He had been face to face with the diabolical fiend who directed this crime campaign.

Zolini, the pawnbroker. For years the grotesque devil had been scheming, laying his plans, snaring his victims—and now he was ready to carry out his promise. Now he would amaze the world!

But Zolini had disappeared. Magee knew there was no faintest hope that he could discover the underground room to which he had been taken. But how else could he hope to reach the fellow? How else? Step by step he reviewed everything he knew about him—and out of that recapitulation came a possible contact.

The loan company that had refused Walter Sprague's application! It was someone in that office who had steered Walter into the pawnbroker's clutches!

Laura might remember the name of that company.

She did. The Five Boroughs Loan, she supplied it readily—but Magee noticed that she watched him narrowly as she answered. She was worried, nervous, but it could not be because of her brother. Walter would have gone when she reached the apartment last night and would have been asleep when she left this morning. She could have no suspicion of his complicity in this devilish crime wave—and if only he could reach Zolini she need never know.

But he would have to work fast.

He went straight to the Five Boroughs Loan Company office. Herbert Rainey, the general manager, received him promptly. A red-haired, bushy-browed, high-cheekboned man of middle-age, he sat back in his chair and listened attentively as Magee outlined the purpose of his visit; but then he shook his head.

"I'm afraid I don't see how I can help you, Mr. Magee," he regretted. "I never heard of this Zolini, and certainly nobody connected with our organization ever was empowered to recommend him to any of our applicants. Such practise would be a cause for discharge. But"—he held open the door of his private office so that Magee

could see the scores of desks outside—"as you do not know the name of this informant, you can see how hopeless it would be to try to find him there."

"But perhaps if I could locate whoever it was that rejected Sprague's application," Magee tried, "he might be the man."

"That is equally hopeless," Rainey rejected. "We keep no record of declined applications. There would be no way of telling—"

It was no use trying to get anything more out of him, Magee realized. Rainey was polite but positive—and yet Magee had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being secretly laughed at. . . .

FOR several hours Magee combed the neighborhood of Zolini's shop, making inquiries about him, but nobody seemed to know where he had gone. Trying another tack, he canvassed the pawnbrokers in the vicinity of the West Street shop, but again he met with no success. Wherever he turned, he ran into a stone wall.

Discouraged and at a loss to know where to look next, he stepped into a bar and ordered a drink; stood staring absently at his reflection in the back-bar mirror while he pondered his problem. Zolini—Zolini—even the name began to sound unreal. The man had disappeared so completely it was as if he had never lived—but only last night he had stared



into Zolini's pinched face and heard his threatening voice.

Again that threat echoed in his ears, and Magee's eyes dropped to his watch. It was almost three o'clock—almost the deadline. Cynically he watched the minute hand creep toward the hour. If he could not find Zolini, at least Zolini would be equally hard put to it to locate him and carry out his bluffing threat.

Now the second hand was on its last trip around the circle. Three o'clock! Three o'clock—and nothing happened. With a snort of contempt Magee raised his glass and drained it—and then stopped, the empty glass still held to his lips.

His hand was beginning to burn! A thousand prickles were darting through it, prickles that turned into red-hot needles! Carefully he lowered it and flexed the muscles, but the agony was increasing. It was becoming so bad that his hand and wrist were covered with perspiration; sweat beads that formed rivulets and ran down his fingers.

His living flesh was being consumed by some hellish necromancy!

"Magee! Anybody here by the name of Andrew Magee?" the bartender shouted from the open door of the telephone booth. "Phone call for Magee."

Magee glanced up in surprise—and his eyes swiftly reviewed the few patrons at the bar. He had never been in that place before, knew nobody there—and yet he was wanted on the 'phone. That could have only one explanation—Zolini.

"So you thought I did not mean what I said, Magee," the pawnbroker's suave, slightly foreign sounding voice came over the wire the moment he picked up the receiver. "Perhaps now you realize your mistake. Ordinarily I do not countenance disobedience, but I will give you one more chance. I will know it promptly if your better judgment counsels you to change your mind and carry out my order—and

the destruction of your hand will cease. But unless you obey quickly it will be too late; I cannot restore what has been destroyed."

With a click the connection was severed. Zolini's voice was stilled, but the agony in Magee's hand was unabated. His fingers writhed, and stabbing pains shot up his arm to his shoulder. Human flesh could not long withstand that searing heat. In a few short minutes his hand would be doomed and he would be a life-long cripple.

Either that or he must become a felon—a housebreaker, a treacherous thief willing to betray his trust!

But what else could he do? It was hopeless to try to match his puny strength against this diabolical criminal organization. Zolini's men were all around him, watching him constantly. Yesterday the taxi drivers were waiting for him. Today he had been trailed even to this dismal dive. There was no telling where to look for them, no telling whom to trust, no telling who might be one of the hellish brotherhood.

GRIMLY he faced himself in the bar and made his decision. With a bitter grimace he turned and walked out into the street to hail a cab to take him to the residence of Humphrey Dixon—and before he had gone half a dozen blocks the hell that was raging in his hand subsided. . . .

What lay ahead of him would not be difficult. At this time of day, he knew, there would be only two or three servants in the Dixon home. James, the butler, the cook, and perhaps Phyllis, the maid. In the two weeks during which he had mounted guard over the crotchety old attorney, he had become thoroughly familiar with the household and its routine. Too familiar, he rued bitterly—and now old Dixon would have to pay for his unsuspecting confidences.

Slouched back on the cab seat, he went to work on his face with a pocket make-up kit. Only a superficial disguise would be necessary—a livid scar across one cheek that James would be certain to remember when he was called on to describe his assailant, a straggly bit of mustache and two dark eyebrow patches to cover his sandy ones. Then a tiny chloroform vial from his vest pocket, a handkerchief ready to be soaked with it—and he was set to step across the line and take his place with the criminal fraternity he had fought all his life. . . .

Several blocks from his destination he dismissed the eye-batting driver and went the rest of the way on foot. At a stationary store he picked up a portfolio and half a dozen magazines—and to James, the butler, it was simply another bothersome canvasser who rang the Dixon bell a few minutes later.

His haughty old face was bleak with disapproval when he opened the door, but before he could help himself the magazines were in his arms, were spilling over the floor, and he was pushed back as the fellow scrambled to pick them up. After that he was never quite clear what happened. He was swept off his feet and a chloroformed gag shut off his breath.

With James out of the way, it was an easy matter to stalk the cook and treat her in like fashion. Then Magee hurried to Dixon's library, to work the mechanism which moved a whole ceiling-high section of books out of place and uncovered the built-in wall safe. Yes, the combination of the old relic was still unchanged; it responded readily, and its contents were his for the taking.

"The contents" Zolini had demanded, and Magee obeyed him to the letter. Stocks, bonds, a package of bills, sheafs of documents—he stuffed them all into the portfolio and closed the safe. A few minutes later he was out on the street.

Hardly had he set foot in his apartment

with his loot when the telephone rang. Zolini was on the wire.

"Very good, my dear Magee," he complimented unctuously. "You have paid the installment on your debt quite satisfactorily. Now you will leave the portfolio in the closet in your inner office. It will be picked up tonight—and a substantial 'receipt' will be left there for you. I am very glad that you did not make it necessary for me to continue disciplining you. It would have been a pity to ruin such an excellent hand—especially as I have other plans for it.

"We are going places together, you and I, Magee," the suave voice rose in fanatical exultation. "You are too excellent a marksman to waste your life as a pinch-penny detective. I am going to make you my bodyguard—

"Listen," he broke off excitedly. "Here is news for you, Magee—the biggest news you have ever heard!"

Magee listened—and over the wire came the voice of a radio announcer:

"New York's Grand Central Station was thrown into a panic a little after four o'clock this afternoon when the hundreds of people on the main floor experienced a strange tingling sensation that penetrated all parts of their bodies. This was accompanied by a pronounced flush and in some instances by a momentary paralysis. It is thought the occurrence may have been caused by a poisoning of the air through improper functioning of the ventilating system, but the police are investigating a report that a motion picture camera crew were seen hurriedly leaving the balcony at this time."

Three-dimension motion pictures!

The significance of that announcement burst on Andrew Magee with stunning force. That was what Zolini had meant! The madman had perfected his hellish invention to the point where his diabolical camera could victimize hundreds—thousands—of people at a time.

CHAPTER FIVE

Paid in Full

THAT madman *must* be stopped—and the portfolio of loot was the way to reach him! Someone would come for it tonight, and that someone, Magee vowed, would lead the way back to Zolini!

As soon as he stepped into his office a feeling of apprehension gripped him. Laura was not there, and, contrary to their established custom, she had left no word to tell him where she had gone. Anxiously he picked up the 'phone and dialed her apartment number, but a man's voice answered—Walter's. Yet it was so strange, so dull and lifeless, that for a moment he hardly recognized it.

"No, Laura isn't here," he said listlessly. "I haven't heard from her since she left here this afternoon. Yeah, she was here about two-thirty or three."

Two-thirty or three. . . . What was Laura doing back at her apartment at that hour? Now Magee's mounting uneasiness became genuine alarm. Walter knew more about this than he was saying. Leaving the loot-laden portfolio with its grisly guardian in his closet, he hurried out.

This time there was no doubt that Walter was at home when he arrived. Magee heard the low rumble of his voice at the telephone, heard the instrument dropped back into its cradle, and then Sprague was at the door. Haggard and bloodshot-eyed, he looked like the wreck of the man Magee knew so well.

"That was Laura just now," he said spiritlessly, as he stepped back to let Magee enter. "She went to the Five Boroughs Loan Company after she left here—went to see Rainey. He turned down her loan application, but the dirty devils are working fast these days. Somebody buttonholed her before she got out of the place and sent her to Zolini."

"Sent her to Zolini?" Magee fairly shouted. "Where?"

"The same old address—West Street," Sprague groaned. "She's going in there now—'phoned me from the corner."

"But—but Zolini's not there," Magee groped for understanding.

"I know, I know," his former partner groaned. "Don't you think I've been there trying to find him myself? I even broke into the shop at night and searched the damn place from top to bottom trying to find another entrance, a trapdoor or something. There's nothing."

"I was afraid of this," he continued. "I knew it would happen if I didn't reach that devil first, but he licked me. I'm a rotten murderer, Andy. I betrayed dozens of good cops to him. I thought I was doing them a favor, helping them get cash when they needed it—but I was handing them over to a bloody murderer. Reuther, that cop who was killed yesterday at the Consolidated—I'm to blame for that. And now Laura, too. She knows there's something wrong—she's trying to help me—"

Suddenly he half-rose, and his old Police Special leaped into his hand; but Magee sprang in and knocked it down before he could raise it to his temple.

"That's not the way!" he rapped, as he pinned Sprague back on the couch. "Bumping yourself won't help her. Look here, Walt—there's something rotten in that loan company office—and I think you and I will look it over again."

IT WAS after six. Magee eyed his watch nervously as a cab sped them to the midtown business district. The loan company office might already be closed. He leaned forward and peered through the window as they approached the building—and he grabbed Sprague's arm.

"There he is—quick!"

Herbert Rainey was just coming out of the building, was crossing the sidewalk to where a uniformed chauffeur held a car

door open for him. He stepped in—and a moment later two uninvited guests popped in beside him. Before the chauffeur could make a move a revolver barrel jabbed against his spine six inches under his collarbone.

"Not a peep out of you," Walter Sprague gritted. "Drive carefully!"

At the same instant Magee's hand closed on Herbert Rainey's throat and slammed him against the back of the car.

"Now you're going to talk, Rainey," Magee told him grimly. "Now you're going to tell us all about Zolini—before you take us to him."

Mention of the pawnbroker's name acted like magic on the captive. He stopped his furious struggling, nodded his head and tried to speak. Magee loosened his throat grip—and suddenly Rainey tore himself free as his hand streaked toward his hip. But he was not quick enough. Magee's gun barrel caught him on the side of the head, dropped him back in a heap on the seat.

"Damnation—he's out like a light!" Magee swore softly as he bent over the limp figure.

But desperation gave him inspiration. Rainey was temporarily beyond questioning—but he still could be used against Zolini!

"I'm changing places with him and paying Zolini's establishment a visit," he outlined to Sprague. "Maybe Rainey will have more luck reaching the old devil than Magee. All right, Walt, now get your pal back here," he directed, when the transfer of clothing had been made and Herbert Rainey was securely gagged and trussed up in the bottom of the car. "He's next."

Ten minutes later the sedan drew up on a side street around the corner from the Zolini pawnshop. Out of it stepped a man who would have passed for Herbert Rainey or his double, and at a discreet distance behind him came Walter Sprague.

Recognition and surprise leaped into the blank-faced pawnshop-keeper's eyes as he looked up and beheld his visitor.

"Zolini? But I have no orders, Mr. Rainey," he protested when Magee demanded to be taken to his boss. "You know that nobody can see him unless—"

And then he stopped protesting abruptly. His eyes widened, and his expressionless face went a shade paler as he stared into the muzzle of a revolver.

"Come out from behind that counter," a voice that was nothing like Herbert Rainey's commanded grimly. "Now open your safe!"

With the cold barrel of the revolver grinding into his neck, the quaking fellow bent over the dials.

"Inside," Magee commanded, when the massive doors were opened. "Go ahead—open up; we're going down."

The trembling hand reached up to what appeared to be a safe-deposit box high on one of the walls, twisted the knob, and a section of the steel floor slid back noiselessly. Beneath it was a stairway that led down to a dimly lighted tunnel.

Magee's heart leaped. He had gambled that the big safe had to be the hidden way out of the shop, and he had won! Somewhere down there Zolini had his den—where Laura had been baited . . .

IN HIS excitement he had momentarily forgotten about Feldman, the pawnshop man, but the fellow was quick to take advantage of that brief lapse. He darted back, and the steel safe doors clanged shut. But that only spurred Magee on. Cautiously he descended the stairs and found himself in a long, narrow, passageway. It led on interminably, a dank, slimy walled passageway that smelled of the sea, of wharves. It terminated at another ladder, and he came up beneath what he recognized as a dock.

A tunnel under West Street to the docks . . . So that was the secret of

Zolini's pawnshop. In the long distant past it had probably been a grog shop, a crimp's den, where sailors were drugged and shanghaied onto waiting vessels.

The walk beneath the dock led to a doorway at one side, to a tarpaulin-covered opening in the deck of a vessel that was tied up at the dock. A Hudson River boat that was shut up for the season. Magee stepped into it warily, walked down a companionway—and came out into a large salon that had been converted into a satanical workshop.

Zolini's laboratory!

At a glance Magee saw the hundreds of "photographs" that lined the walls, saw the strange-looking cameras—and saw the misshapen pawnshop keeper as he bobbed out from behind another elaborate apparatus that occupied the center of the room. An apparatus that whined and hummed and threw a blinding beam light into a deep shadow-frame a few feet distant.

Zolini's dark eyes mirrored surprise, and his glance darted to the shadow-frame; but even though he seemed to have been taken unaware he was ready for the emergency. The moment Magee stepped into that room he was leaped upon and borne down, overwhelmed and disarmed by hideously masked men.

With the breath knocked out of him he was dragged to his feet—and got a glimpse into that shadow-frame. There, bathed in the blinding light, was a three-dimension portrait of Herbert Rainey.

"Very strange—very strange," Zolini mumbled as he examined the machine.

Then he turned and came over to Magee, peered closely into his face—and reached out to tear off the red brows, to dig his fingers into the putty-built, high cheekbones.

"So that is why the oven did not work!" he chortled. "What a joke on Rainey! My periscope revealed you the moment you entered the safe, and I started to work on you for daring to

force your way in here. You fooled me, Magee—but we can easily fix that."

As he spoke he took a footstool and climbed up against the wall, to lift down the photograph of Magee's hand. For a moment he stared at it, and then seemed to change his mind. From another part of the wall he unfastened another photo—and Magee caught a glimpse of Laura's tight-lipped, defiant face!

Deliberately he placed both photographs in the shadow-frame and ordered Laura to be brought to him. Between two masked guards she was led into the room and held so that Magee could watch her every expression—and Zolini switched on the blinding light.

"You are a very stubborn man, Magee," he chided. "Perhaps I am foolish to bother with you, but I can use a man of your determination—after I have made you understand who is master. What chance have you against me, Magee?"

The machine was humming hellishly, and a thousand needles were stabbing into Magee's hand, kindling an inferno in his flesh. He was suffering the torments of the damned—but Laura was undergoing an even worse ordeal, was enduring that agony in every part of her body! Her face was a pitifully twisted mask of suffering . . .

AT LAST the inhuman devil seemed to be satisfied. He stopped the machine and reached into it—and took out the photograph of Magee's hand. And once more the blinding light resumed its terrible work!

"We can't take too many chances with that hand of yours, Magee," he grinned. "You know now what she is suffering because of your disobedience—and what she will endure every time you try to cross me. Remember that, Magee."

Suddenly the salon echoed with gunthunder. Shot after shot! Two of the masked men rolled off him—and then he

was free of the others; hurling them out of his way—just as Walter Sprague, charging in from the doorway, was brought down by a savage rush.

The revolver dropped from his hand. For a moment it lay there on the floor—and then Magee had it, clutching it in his still agonized fingers. Desperately he aimed it, not a Zolini but at that devilish electric oven contraption.

Straight into it he shot. The machine sputtered and smoked, and a blinding sheet of flame burst from it. With a howl of terror the masked men dived for the doors, but Magee paid no attention to them. He was already halfway across the room, speeding after Zolini.

There Magee overhauled him and seized him, only to find that he had grasped a raging maniac. Zolini fought with amazing strength. Desperately they battled across the deck—and plunged overboard locked together.

Down, down, into the cold, dark water. Magee thought his lungs must burst in that fearful struggle, but at last he was able to fight free of Zolini's dead weight. At last he battled his way up to the surface, filled his lungs with air—just as Laura came running out on deck.

Her terrified scream knifed into his ears, and then was echoed by the roar of a gun. There was a riot of sound above him. Shouts and shots, racing feet.

The police! He saw them swarming onto the boat, heard Inspector Wenzel howling orders, and came face to face with Colin Campbell when he finally found a dangling rope and dragged himself up on the dock.

For a while the police were too busy for explanations. There were a dozen or more of Zolini's masked henchmen to be rounded up, and a score of kidnap victims to be liberated; Colin Campbell braved the flames recklessly. When he came back his face was blistered and his hair was singed, but he was grinning broadly.

"Seems like it was a lucky thing I stuck to your trail after you paid Humphrey Dixon a visit this afternoon, eh, Magee?" he grinned—and he deliberately broke into little pieces the prize for which he had plunged into the inferno. A three-dimension photograph mold of himself! "Yes," he admitted softly, "he had me under his thumb, too. I was his decoy, forced to lead the cops and the reporters to whatever he wanted bathed with publicity. But thank God, that's over!"

Andy Magee fervently echoed that thanks half an hour later when he led the way to Herbert Rainey's car and found the loan company man's body scorched to a horrible, dark gray mummy! The contorted face leered up at them in a hideous grin—as if Rainey knew how fatally Zolini's last mistake had boomeranged.

THE END

NO! NO!



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MARK

THE CASE OF THE TALKING DEAD

A novelette of bizarre mystery

By EMILE C. TEPPERMAN



At least if he was crazy, Nick Valentine reflected, he wasn't the only one, for the girl in the taxi-cab told him that she too had talked to a dead man! And then she opened her handbag—and Nick knew that if anyone ever talked to him again, the chances were a million to one that they would be talking to a dead man!

CHAPTER ONE

The Talking Corpse

NICK VALENTINE was whistling—badly off key—as he stepped out of the self-service elevator and made for his apartment. He stopped in front of his door, and fished the key-ring out of his fob pocket. In so doing, he happened to look down at the floor, and he suddenly became taut and wary.

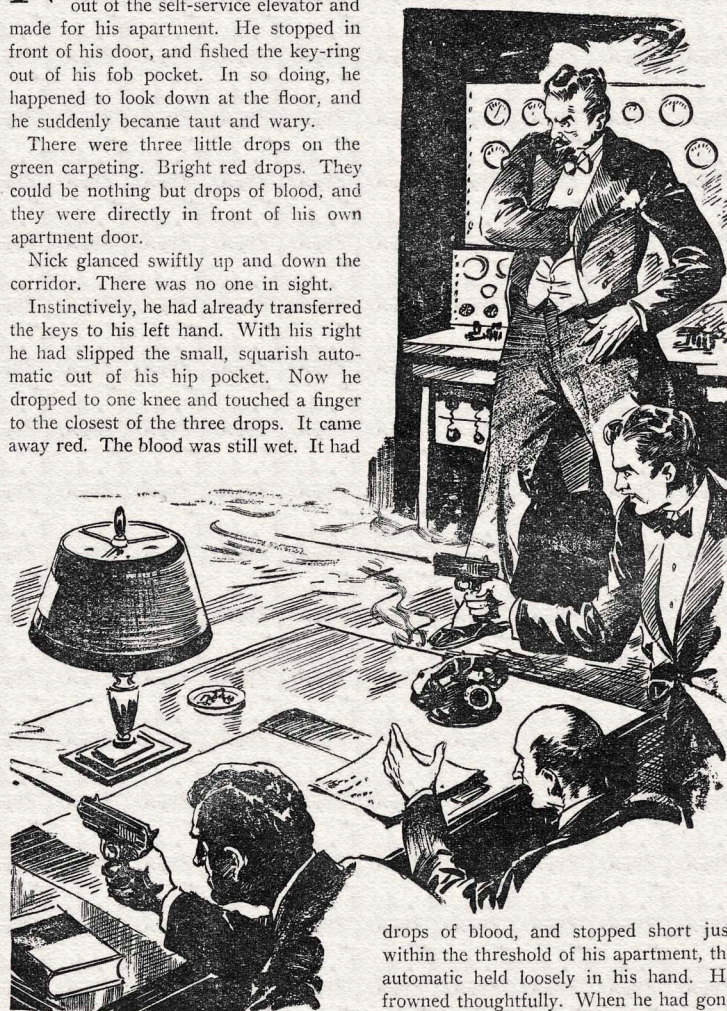
There were three little drops on the green carpeting. Bright red drops. They could be nothing but drops of blood, and they were directly in front of his own apartment door.

Nick glanced swiftly up and down the corridor. There was no one in sight.

Instinctively, he had already transferred the keys to his left hand. With his right he had slipped the small, squarish automatic out of his hip pocket. Now he dropped to one knee and touched a finger to the closest of the three drops. It came away red. The blood was still wet. It had

not yet coagulated, nor had it been entirely absorbed by the carpet nap.

Nick reached over and inserted one of the keys in the lock, turned it, and pushed the door open. He stepped over the three



drops of blood, and stopped short just within the threshold of his apartment, the automatic held loosely in his hand. He frowned thoughtfully. When he had gone

out, an hour ago, he had left the lights on. Now they were off. The small foyer, and the library beyond, were in darkness, except for a shaft of light filtering in from the hallway.

By that shadowy illumination, Nick was able to discern the vague outline of a man seated in the armchair at the far window of the library, facing him. All he could see was a dim white blob of a face, and the man's hands, resting on the arms of the chair.

Apparently, the man was not armed, but Nick took no chances. He kept the automatic trained on him, and reached over to the wall switch. He clicked it, but no light came on. The shrouding darkness still prevailed in the library.

At the same moment, the visitor in the chair spoke.

"Please come in, Mr. Valentine. You must forgive me, but it was I who removed the fuse. I prefer to speak with you in darkness."

NICK realized that he was a perfect target standing in the doorway with the light from the corridor behind him. He reached over swiftly and slammed the door shut, cutting off the last bit of light from the hall. It was still possible to see a little, however, for a sliver of moonlight trickled in through the slats of the Venetian blind. Nick could see that the man in the archair had not moved.

"An excellent strategic move," the man applauded. "However, a trifle slow; if I had wanted to shoot you. But I am not armed. My name is Mangin. Frederick Mangin."

Nick Valentine barely repressed an exclamation of surprise.

Mangin chuckled. "I see you've heard my name. I daresay you've heard it recently—within the hour?"

Nick pursed his lips. "Yes," he said. "I've heard it—within the hour."

"Shall I tell you where you heard it?

It was mentioned at the office of the American Press Service, where you were closeted with Roger Bronson. Bronson is the head of the A. P. Service, and your chief. You, Mr. Valentine, are the ace investigator for that newspaper syndicate. You were called back from Miami for that interview. And you were assigned the job of locating a certain millionaire who has been missing for nine days. The missing millionaire is myself!"

"That's right," said Nick Valentine. "That's just exactly right. But how could you know? That interview was pretty damned secret."

Frederick Mangin laughed. "You are going to be much more surprised in a few minutes, my dear Mr. Valentine. But first—let me ask you something. Did you notice those three drops of blood outside your door?"

"Yes. I noticed them."

"Excellent. Before long, your activities may become undesirable to certain parties. At that time, you will find three more drops of blood. They will be a warning to you, Mr. Valentine. When you see them again, take my advice, and leave New York."

Nick's eyes had become more accustomed to the dark, but he was still unable to see very much of Frederick Mangin, except that he was making no suspicious moves. Stealthily, Nick had extracted a fountain pen flashlight from his vest pocket, and he now held it ready in his left hand.

"Look here, Mr. Mangin," he said, "I don't know what you're talking about. You've been missing for nine days, and now you turn up in my apartment. Why do you insist on talking in the dark—"

"Wait," said Mangin. "And please don't turn that flashlight on—yet. I have a message for you. You may be able to solve the mystery of my disappearance by going to the Candia Club. Remember that—the Candia Club."

Nick frowned. "Why the hell should I go to the Candia Club? Why can't *you* solve the mystery for me?"

Mr. Mangin made no reply.

Nick's eyes never left his blurred, shadowy figure for an instant.

"What kind of game is this, Mangin?" he demanded.

Still, Mangin did not speak.

With a sudden chill of apprehension, Nick Valentine snapped the flashlight switch. He flashed the thin beam squarely in Mangin's face. And he uttered a low, sharp oath.

Frederick Mangin was sitting erect in the armchair. But the reason he was sitting like that was because a long knife, which had been driven clean through his throat, virtually pinned him to the back of the chair. His dead body was held erect only by that knife-blade.

For a long minute, Nick Valentine stood utterly still, listening for noises in the apartment, and trying to convince himself that the conversation he had just had was not an hallucination. He was prepared to swear that Frederick Mangin had not been killed in his presence, for he had watched the man from the moment he entered the apartment, and he would surely have seen the knife strike his throat, or the hand of the killer, or the jerk of the victim's body. But Mangin had not moved. Therefore, Mangin must have been dead all the time. *Therefore*—Nick felt a little dizzy at the thought—*he had been carrying on a conversation with a dead man!*

ONLY one other explanation came to Nick's mind, there must be someone else in the apartment who had done the talking.

He swung the beam of the flashlight away from the gruesome face of the dead Frederick Mangin, and sent it darting into every corner of the room, following it with the muzzle of his automatic. The

two walls at the right and left were lined with bookcases from top to bottom. He covered those walls with the light, then turned it into the foyer in which he stood. The little end-table, with the mirror over it, was in its usual place, as was the telephone which rested on it. There was no body in the foyer.

Carefully, Nick stepped into the library, immediately putting his back to the wall. He turned the flashlight on the desk with its typewriter, on the other easy chair, in front of the bookcase on the right-hand wall, and on the couch near the fireplace. Then he swung the beam around to the left, where the door to the bedroom was located. The door was closed.

Nick stood there thoughtfully. Then he went over to the body of Frederick Mangin. He touched the dead man's face. It was still warm. He could not be dead very long. There was a broad splotch of scarlet on the white front of his dress shirt, where the blood from his throat had spurted. There were flecks of blood on his Tuxedo jacket, and on the legs of his trousers. His eyes were staring glassily, straight ahead. He must have been that way all the time that Nick was carrying on the conversation with him.

There was no sound in the room except for Nick Valentine's breathing. He stalked slowly toward the bedroom door, then suddenly flung it wide open, lancing the beam of his flashlight through the doorway. It took him only a moment to make sure there was no one in there.

Nick returned to the library. He crossed to the foyer, and pushed open the kitchen door. He had left this for the last, because he was sure that the voice which had spoken to him had come from the library. The examination of the kitchen was short, and yielded the same results as the other rooms. Beyond question, there was no one else in the apartment.

Nick Valentine rubbed his eyes with the back of his gun-hand.

"I'll be damned!" he muttered to himself.

ON A SUDDEN hunch, he opened the corridor door, and peered out, to make sure those three drops of blood were still there. They were.

He shook his head groggily, and closed the door. Then he picked up the telephone, and dialled the private number of Roger Bronson, his chief at the A. P.

"Boss," he said, "I've found Frederick Mangin."

He could distinctly hear Bronson's swift intake of breath at the other end. "You've found him? Already? By God, Nick, I always knew you were good. But this beats everything! Imagine—cracking a case thirty minutes after getting on the job! Nick, you're a wizard—"

"Wait a minute, Boss," Nick Valentine said ruefully. "Wait till you hear the rest of it—"

"You bet I want to hear the rest of it. Have you got Mangin there?"

"Yes, but—"

"Where are you calling from?"

"My own apartment—"

"You brought him up there, eh? That's using the old bean! Keep him in private till I can get my reporters and cameramen over. This will scoop the U. P. down into a ten-foot hole—"

"Hold everything, Boss," Nick Valentine pleaded. "*Will* you please first listen to me—"

"No, no—don't waste time now. I'm shooting a gang of the boys over—"

"*Mangin is dead!*" Nick fairly shouted into the phone.

Bronson kept on talking for a second, till Nick's words registered. Then he exclaimed excitedly, "What's that? What's that you say? He's—*dead?*"

"Dead. Stabbed in the throat."

"He was killed in your apartment?"

"Yes."

"Who killed him?"

"How should I know? I found him dead."

"Then—" Bronson's voice cooled off perceptibly— "then you haven't solved anything?"

"That's what I was trying to tell you, but you wouldn't give me a chance."

"Have you got any kind of clue?"

"Yes. It's a kind of clue. Mangin warned me to be on the lookout for three drops of blood. And he tipped me off to go to—"

"Wait a minute, Nick, wait a minute!" Bronson interrupted pleadingly. "Let me get this straight. You say Mangin talked before he died?"

"Hell, no. He was dead when I got here. But—"

"*Then how the hell could he talk to you?*" Bronson fairly shrieked.

"That," Nick Valentine said angrily, "is something for you to figure out in your spare time!"

And he hung up.

CHAPTER TWO

A Case of Forgetting

NICK VALENTINE had gone with the A. P. five years ago, giving up a lucrative private detective agency job. His duties were solely investigative, and he worked only when there was a big case to crack. Otherwise, he lived like a gentleman of leisure. When a really big mystery came up, Nick Valentine did the sleuthing, but he never wrote a newspaper story. He solved the case, and then turned it over to the A. P. reporters.

In this instance, they had brought him all the way back from a vacation in Florida, and he had been sore because he had thought they didn't really need him. But now, after holding that conversation with the dead man, he was ready to concede that there was something to the case, after all.

He left the body of Frederick Mangin just as it sat, and went out of the apartment, closing the door carefully and making sure that it was locked. He stepped over the three drops of blood, and went down the corridor to the elevator, and pushed the button.

Horace, the colored elevator operator, showed all his teeth in a grin.

"You didn't stay upstairs long, Mister Valentine. Gawn back to Florida?"

"Not yet, Horace," Nick said abruptly as the cage slid downward. He took his apartment key off the ring, and handed it to Horace. "You know Mr. Bronson, my boss? He's been here several times before."

"I know him, Mister Valentine."

"Well, I think he'll be showing up pretty soon. Give him this key, and tell him to go up and make himself at home. He may be a little hot under the collar. If he is, tell him he'll find a fresh bottle of Scotch in the kitchen."

Horace nodded, and brought the elevator to a stop at the main floor. Nick went out, and crossed the lobby to the street, nodding to Luther, the colored doorman, on the way.

A taxicab with the flag up came cruising slowly past, and Nick hailed it. He climbed in, saying, "Go across the Park, then down Broadway to Fifty-fourth. I want the Candia Club—"

He stopped talking, suddenly aware that there was someone else in the cab with him.

She was sitting as inconspicuously as possible, far over in the corner, wrapped in a dark fur coat. The collar was turned up, so that only her eyes and the bridge of her nose showed. The cab got going, and swung out of Fifth Avenue into the transverse tunnel across the Park.

Nick said, "What the hell—"

"Please forgive me," the girl exclaimed, lowering the collar of her coat to reveal a thin dark face which was beautiful in a

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strange and mystic sort of way. Her lips were full, her mouth small. Her eyes, deep and dark, studied him appraisingly as she hurried on.

"Please forgive me. I bribed the driver not to lower his flag, and to try to pick you up when you came out. I was afraid—" she threw a hurried glance out through the rear window, then brought her eyes back to meet his—"afraid they're following me. But I had to talk to you!"

"H'm!" Nick frowned. "Well, go ahead and talk."

She hesitated, fumbling with the clasp of her handbag.

"I don't know just how to begin—"

Nick grinned tightly. "That's a good beginning," he said, as his glance dropped down to her fur coat, which had fallen open while she fiddled with the handbag, revealing a flashing glimpse of white, bare skin, above a black silk nightgown. She was wearing nothing but that nightgown under the fur coat.

She flushed under his gaze, and wrapped the coat tight around herself. "I—I had no time to dress. I came out as soon as I awoke from the dream."

"Dream?" he asked incredulously.

She nodded. "I woke up from the dream only a few minutes ago. I dreamed that you were talking with a dead man—"

"What!" Nick reached over and gripped her arm so tightly that she winced. "*Say that again!*"

SHE DIDN'T try to remove his arm.

Her great dark eyes seemed to grow larger, deeper, as she spoke. "I saw you clearly in the dream. I even saw the house, and the street. I saw you go upstairs, and see three drops of blood on the carpet. Then I saw you go in with a gun in your hand, and the dead man was seated facing you, and he warned you about the three drops of blood, and told you to go to the Candia Club!"

Nick swore under his breath. If the

girl was lying, she was doing a beautiful piece of acting. If she was telling the truth—well, he didn't want to think about that.

"Listen," he said. "Have you got a name?"

Her eyes became vague, her whole bearing suddenly uncertain. "Yes, of course, I'm sure I have. But I can't think of it at the moment." Her forehead wrinkled in a futile effort of concentration. "For the life of me, I can't think of my name!"

"You mean you've lost your memory?"

She nodded, still fumbling at the handbag. "Ever since last night, when I talked with the—the dead man!"

Nick still had hold of her arm. Now he let her go, and took a deep breath.

"Now, wait," he said slowly. "Are you telling me that you talked with a dead man last night?"

"Yes. I came home, and it was dark, and that man was sitting in an armchair."

"Was it the same man who was sitting in *my* chair?"

"I don't know. It never got light enough for me to see his face clearly. He talked, and spoke of the three drops of blood, and the Candia Club. And then, while he was still talking, I came closer and saw the—the knife in his throat, and realized that he was dead. I—I turned and ran out of the house."

"I see," Nick said, very low, forcing himself to be patient. "And what did you do next?"

"I ran and ran. I really didn't know where I was. Then I found myself in front of a hotel, and went in and paid for a room for the night. I bought this nightgown, and some things from the shop in the hotel lobby, and I got undressed and lay down on the bed. I must have slept all through the day, till I had that dream about you, and woke up. I hurried out to catch you. I did it without thinking. Somehow, I *knew* I must talk to you.

Nick was watching her with narrowed eyes.

"Didn't it occur to you to get in touch with the police?"

She lowered her eyes and stared down at her lap, as if trying to think. "There was some reason—why I couldn't go to the police. I can't remember it now. If I could only remember who I am, I'd probably recall the reason—"

"So for all you know," Nick asked, "that dead man who talked with you may still be sitting in your room?"

She looked at him miserably. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Sure, sure," he told her. "Sure I believe you. There's nothing strange about your story. *Nothing much.*"

SHE SLUMPED back in the corner. "I knew you don't believe me. And I thought you'd help me—"

"How could I help you?"

"I—I don't know. I feel there's something terribly evil all around me. I feel as if it's enveloping me. I don't know what to do. I must go to the Candia Club, but I'm afraid to go, alone—and with no clothes."

"H'm," said Nick. He reached over to her lap, and took the handbag. "Let's look in here. Maybe there's a clue as to who you are."

She let him have the bag, and he opened it.

As he did so, there was a *snap* inside the bag, followed by the sound of breaking glass. Immediately, a strange, sweet odor assailed his nostrils, seeming to fill the interior of the cab. That odor seemed to clutch at his brain like an octopus. He felt that in another moment it would have him under.

Any other man might have remained quiescent for that extra instant, allowing the strange gas to finish its work, but Nick had lived too long with a keen sense of danger at his elbow. When he was on

a case he was always poised to ward off attack. He reacted without thinking.

He flung the bag from him, and at the same time reached over and yanked at the door handle on his right. It flew open, and with the last of his rapidly failing strength, he pushed himself out into nothingness. He saw the flying gutter come up to meet him with a rush, heard the girl's scream from somewhere a great distance behind, and then he struck.

He managed to break the fall with his arms over his head, but even at that it knocked him groggy. He knew that he must have hit with a tremendous thud. If he hadn't broken any bones, he had bruised them pretty badly. But he felt little pain, for the anaesthetic effects of that gas were already at work upon him. Something was whirling around inside his brain as he lay there in the gutter. He got a single glimpse of his cab, speeding away, with the white face of the girl drifting away from the window to fall back into the interior. And then he must have lost consciousness for the moment, for the next thing he remembered was the astringent smell of ammonia, and a white-coated interne bending over him, and a sea of faces looking down on him from the crowd that had gathered around.

A blue-coated policeman and a plain-clothes detective were at his side, and the patrolman said, "Here he comes. He's conscious."

The interne removed the sponge from his nose, and said, "His bones must be made of rubber. It's a miracle none of them broke when he took that fall out of the cab."

The detective waved the interne back, and bent over him.

"What happened to you, buddy?"

It was a moment before Nick Valentine answered. Then he said, a puzzled frown on his brows: "I don't know." He sat up. "Who am I? Why am I here?"

For a minute, the detective looked at

him queerly. Then he swallowed hard and turned to the patrolman.

"My Gawd, Clancy," he whispered. "The guy has lost his memory!"

CHAPTER THREE

Whirling Eyes of Madness

THE PRIVATE office at Headquarters of Inspector Coleman, Chief of Homicide, was playing to capacity business, and there was standing-room only for late comers. Inspector Coleman was there, chewing a cigar behind his desk. Doctor Hinsley, the Medical Examiner was there, together with Doctor Martindale, head psychiatrist for the Police Department. Also present were Captain Fletcher and Lieutenant Levine, of the Homicide Detail, as well as big, florid-faced Roger Bronson, Chief of the A. P. Service.

The main attraction was Nick Valentine.

Nick was seated in a straight-backed chair, with his hands folded in his lap. The outstanding characteristic about him was the expression of utter vacancy in his eyes.

Doctor Martindale, the psychiatrist, was bending over him, and talking low. "Now listen to me carefully, my friend. If you multiply twenty-two by one-half, what is the result?"

"Eleven!" Nick replied promptly.

Martindale was sweating a little, but he smiled encouragement. "Exactly! Now if you multiply the number of your house my one-half, what is the result?"

The sweating psychiatrist, as well as everybody else, leaned forward tensely to listen to the answer.

Nick beamed, started to say something, and then frowned. "I'm sorry," he said. "You'll have to tell me the number of my house."

Doctor Martindale sighed. Everybody else sighed. The psychiatrist spread his

hands in a gesture of resignation, turning to the Medical Examiner.

"There you are, Hinsley," he said. "It's a typical case of partial amnesia, where certain groups of ideas or events are screened from memory, though others stand out clearly."

Inspector Coleman sputtered an oath. He ground his cigar viciously into the glass top of his desk, and got up.

"Dammit, he's *got* to remember!"

Coleman came around the desk, and stood in front of Nick, shaking a thick finger in his face.

"Look here! You're Nick Valentine! Nick Valentine! You work for the A. P. You're Nick Valentine!"

Nick smiled vaguely. "That's a nice name. Why am I here?"

Coleman closed his eyes for a moment, as if he were in agony. Then he opened them and waved his finger once more.

"There's a dead man in your apartment, Valentine. Remember? You stabbed him in the throat. Frederick Mangin. Remember?"

Nick looked interested. "Why did I stab him?"

Coleman threw up his hands in disgust, and flung away. "We'll hold him for the Grand Jury!" he growled. "He killed Mangin. That was a cock-and-bull story, about finding him in the chair, and talking to the dead man. I've seen cases like this before—where the murderer conveniently loses his memory after killing someone!"

"Nonsense!" Roger Bronson broke in. "Nick had no reason to kill Mangin. When he phoned me, he was as sane as you or I—"

"Sure, sure!" Coleman interrupted sarcastically. "So sane that he gave you a line about having a conversation with a dead man!"

The inspector took Bronson aside, and talked to him in whispers, energetically, for several minutes, turning every once in a while to point at Nick. Bronson argued

with him emphatically, finally raising his voice. "It's ridiculous, Coleman. He couldn't have done the other thing. He was in Florida. Let *me* try him. Maybe I can awaken a spark of memory."

He came over and stood in front of Nick's chair. "Look at me, Nick," he pleaded. "Don't you remember me? You work for me. You're my ace investigator. I pay your salary."

Nick blinked his eyes, and obediently looked up at Bronson. His forehead puckered. "I seem to have some recollection . . . something is stirring . . . if I could only grasp it!" He looked around

have apoplexy when I tipped you the wink behind the doctor's back." He took out a cigarette and lit it.

Bronson heaved himself up on the edge of the desk, and leaned forward eagerly.

"Let's talk fast before they start getting impatient out there. Give us the low-down on this, Nicky!"

"First," said Nick, allowing smoke to trickle luxuriously through his nostrils, "tell me one thing—have there been any other murders like Mangin's?"

Roger Bronson nodded. "Yesterday, Arnold Dixon, the chemical magnate, was found with a knife in his throat, at the

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the room, petulantly. "If there only weren't so many people in here—"

Bronson seized on the suggestion avidly. He turned around and waved his hands. "Get out, everybody! Leave me alone with him! Maybe we'll crack it!"

Doctor Martindale nodded. "A good suggestion. The presence of so many people is always confusing in this type of case."

BRONSON kept waving his hands, not giving anyone a chance to argue, until everyone was out of the room. Then he twisted the catch, locking the door, and heaved a sigh. He turned around and grinned at Nick Valentine.

"Well, Nick," he said, "we got rid of them at last. And I don't think they suspect a thing!"

Nick grinned back at him. "I didn't think Coleman would fall for it. It's pretty hard to pull the wool over *his* eyes. And I was afraid for a minute you'd

home of his niece, Ellen Dixon. He had been missing for nine days, too. The niece has also disappeared now. The police have kept the whole thing secret, because the news may cause trouble. The Dixon Chemical Works have accepted a huge war order from the United States Government under the Defense Plan."

"Ah!" said Nick. "Then she wasn't lying altogether!"

"Who wasn't lying?"

"The girl in the taxicab."

"The cab you fell out of?"

"I didn't fall out of it. I jumped. There was a girl in that cab, who had also talked to a dead man."

Bronson groaned. "Are you going to start *that* again?"

Nick sighed. "You don't believe me?" he asked, in much the same tone that the girl had used. "Well, listen to this story—but promise you won't interrupt."

Bronson kept silence while Nick sketched swiftly what the girl had told

him. When he finished, he saw incredulity give way to a look of dawning horror in his boss's eyes.

"Good Lord, Nick! If this is true, then there's a terrible force that we don't understand, working against us. How can the dead possibly speak? How can that girl have dreamed an actual event that was taking place right then?"

Nick Valentine nodded slowly. "That's why I pretended amnesia when they picked me up from the street. I figured that gas was planted in the girl's bag for the purpose of destroying my memory, just as the girl's had been destroyed. So I pretended to fall in with the idea."

Bronson was making notes in shorthand. His eyes were gleaming. "This story will burn up the wires, Nick. Did you know that Frederick Mangin owns the largest synthetic dye factory in the east?"

"Ah!" said Nick. "I wonder how many other key men like Mangin and Dixon have disappeared recently—but whose relatives have *not* notified the police! That girl, Bronson, was Ellen Dixon. I'm sure of it now!"

"Nick," said Bronson, "this is too big for us to play with. We'll have to take Coleman into our confidence!"

Nick nodded, and Bronson went to the door. He stuck his head out among the crowd waiting in the corridor, and motioned for the Homicide Inspector to come in.

Quickly, they gave him the story, from beginning to end.

COLEMAN got more and more excited as Nick went on. At last he burst out, "God, this is worse than I thought! We've already gotten two more alarms in the Missing Persons, for men in the same position as Dixon and Mangin. They're Frank Sheppard, of the Sheppard Chemical Corporation, and Andrew Garth, of International Chemicals. We've kept it

secret, of course, but the news has leaked out here and there. There's a fifth chemical manufacturer, named Peter Simpson, down in the Commissioner's office right now. He wants us to lock him up for protection."

"Well," said Nick Valentine, "it looks like I go to the Candia Club!"

Coleman nodded reluctantly. "I don't like it, Valentine. Whoever is behind this business, *wants* you to go to the Candia Club. It'll just be playing into his hands. But I guess it's the only thing for you to do. We'll give out that you're still suffering from amnesia, and that we're releasing you in Bronson's custody, for treatment. I'll post men around the Candia Club—"

He was interrupted by the ringing of the inter-office telephone. He scooped it up, and listened for a moment, a queer look coming into his face.

"Hold it a minute," he said into the instrument. He covered the phone with his hand, and said to Nick, "Have you got a cousin by the name of Arthur Valentine?"

Nick shook his head. "No."

"Well," said Coleman, "he's here. Downstairs at the desk. He says he heard of your suffering from amnesia, and that it's an old family ailment, and he knows how to handle it. He thinks if he sees you alone for five minutes, he may be able to restore your memory!"

"Ah!" said Nick. "This is a break. Let him in!"

"Alone with you?" Bronson asked doubtfully. "Suppose their idea was to knock you off? Suppose he's here to finish the job?"

Nick smiled, and showed him the automatic, which he had in his coat pocket now.

Bronson was still doubtful. "Suppose he has some kind of gas that will overpower you?"

"I'll have to take that chance."

"I could arrest him," Coleman offered tentatively. "We could take the bird downstairs and sweat him—"

"And suppose he doesn't talk?" Nick objected. "They still have Frank Shepard and Andrew Garth in their hands. And I'm sure they have Ellen Dixon. That taxi driver must have been one of their agents. He probably took her away after I jumped out of the cab."

Coleman and Bronson exchanged glances. The inspector nodded. "I guess you're right, Valentine. We have to play it their way. I'll go down and bring the guy up."

He went out, leaving Nick and Bronson alone. Nick had a faraway look in his eyes. "If only I hadn't heard that dead man talk," he said, "I'd feel lots better about the whole thing. This way, it gives me the creeps!"

Bronson kept making notes. "Don't let this 'cousin' of yours knock you off, Nicky. I'm depending on you to break the greatest scoop of the decade."

A moment later, the door opened and Coleman re-entered, escorting a man of about forty-five, with a high forehead, and deep-set eyes that seemed to be charged with some sort of static, high-powered electricity.

"Ah!" said the visitor, letting his eyes rest on Nick. "My poor cousin! A terrible thing—terrible."

Coleman led the man to Nick's chair. "This is your cousin, Mr. Arthur Valentine. Do you know him?"

Nick looked up at the visitor. "Hello," he said blankly.

The 'cousin' sighed. "I see. Poor Nicky has been afflicted, just like our Uncle Tobias, and like my grandfather." He turned to Bronson and Coleman. "If you gentlemen will leave me alone with him for a few minutes—I'd appreciate it very much—"

"Sure, sure," said Coleman. "If you need us, just raise your voice." Then he

added significantly, "We'll be waiting right outside the door!"

"Thank you, thank you," said Cousin Valentine. He waited till they both left the room. Then he locked the door on the inside and turned to face Nick. His big, deep-set eyes seemed to have become larger. His whole face became grim and intent as he moved closer to Nick's chair, until he was standing over him.

"Look at me, Nick Valentine!" he ordered in a deep bass voice.

NICK looked up. The man was twirling a silver pencil at the level of Nick's eyes. There was a big round knob at the top of the pencil. It was whirling around steadily, monotonously.

The man's voice came in slow, lugubrious fashion. "You're thinking the things I want you to think now, Nick," the man said. "You don't remember anything of the past, but you remember what you saw in your apartment tonight, don't you?"

Nick allowed his eyelids to droop as if he were heavy with sleep.

"Yes," he replied. "Yes, I remember."

"You remember what the dead man told you?"

"Yes."

"Repeat it!"

"He told me to beware of the three drops of blood. He told me to go to the Candia Club."

"Good. You will obey him, Nick. You will go to the Candia Club. And you will wait there until a certain person shows you three drops of blood."

The pencil kept twirling, and the huge eyes of the hypnotist were growing larger and larger, so that Nick felt a terrible sort of fascination. He felt as if the man in front of him were dragging his very soul out of his body with those great and terrible eyes. He realized that if he had been a little weaker, if that gas in the cab had had another moment to work on him,

he'd have fallen immediately under the influence of this powerful will. Even now, he was afraid that if he didn't exert every ounce of will-power, he'd succumb to the strange force.

The voice went on, droningly. "Remember what I tell you, Nick. Wait at the Candia Club for the person who will show you three drops of blood. Then—you will obey that person. *You will do whatever that person orders!*"

Nick felt himself unconsciously repeating the instructions, mumbling them to himself. He clenched his hands. He mustn't let himself go—

"*Do you remember what you must do?*"

Nick nodded, almost automatically. "Yes, I remember. I must go to the Candia Club. I must wait for the person who will show me three drops of blood. Then I must do whatever that person orders—whatever that person orders."

As he repeated those instructions, Nick felt himself about to lose possession of his initiative and his will. That twirling pencil before his eyes had him twirling around with it, like a man caught in a whirlpool.

Suddenly, the silver pencil stopped whirling. The eyes of the hypnotist seemed to recede, to grow smaller. Nick felt as if a great weight were being removed from his brain. The man smiled thinly, and slipped the silver pencil in his pocket.

"I shall go now. See that clock on the desk? Watch it. Five minutes after I am gone, you will remember who you are. You will recover your memory. But you will still obey my orders. You will have no recollection of my visit, but you will know that there is something you must do. Understand?"

"Yes," Nick whispered. "I understand."

The man smiled, and backed to the door. Then he turned swiftly and went out.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Room Below

IT WAS A LITTLE after eleven, and the Candia Club was a-boom and a-glitter. But underneath the surface, Nick thought he detected sharp-edged tension.

He himself was no exception. For, as he sat picking at a two-dollar-and-fifty-cent lobster, he was not sure that he would be altogether immune to the hypnotic commands which had been laid upon him by his bogus cousin. He had been in a weakened condition from the gas, and the man's hypnotic power had been tremendous. Nick couldn't be certain that he would be able to resist the orders of the person who would show him the three drops of blood.

The whole pattern of this series of crimes was strange and unintelligible to him. Four men in the chemical business had disappeared. Two of them had been stabbed to death, and had talked after their death. Two others were still missing, and might turn up dead at any time. He began to think it had been a mistake to allow himself to be interviewed alone by that hypnotist. Coleman had put two detectives on the man's trail after he left headquarters, but Nick had little faith that they would turn anything up.

Wat Farrago, the proprietor of the Candia Club, was seated at one of the tables, with two women and another man. Nick had seen them when he came in, but Farrago had not looked in his direction. Now, Farrago met his glance, and waved. Nick waved back. Farrago did not seem particularly interested in him. The two women at his table were both gorgeously beautiful, dressed in daring fashion. The man was tall and dark, with the slim hips of a professional dancer.

Looking around at some of the other tables, Nick noted with a small degree of reassurance, that a small group of plain-

clothes men in evening clothes were seated not far away. At another table near by, Roger Bronson and Inspector Coleman were sipping cocktails and talking to a third man. That third man was Peter Simpson, the chemical manufacturer who had asked to be locked up for protection. Coleman had brought him along on the chance that he might be able to contribute some special bit of information in regard to the chemical industry set-up which would help solve the case.

Nick finished his lobster, and ordered a demi-tasse. He was growing impatient. An hour had passed already, and nothing had happened.

Suddenly, he became tense in his chair. The lights on the stage had gone out, to be replaced by a single spotlight, focussed on the center of the curtain. The master of ceremonies announced through the mike at one end of the stage, "Ladies and gentlemen, we will now be privileged to witness the premiere appearance in

New York of the celebrated Mexican clairvoyant, Pablo Miniver!"

The curtain parted at the middle, and Pablo Miniver stepped out on the stage. He was wearing evening clothes. His face was now adorned by a small waxed moustache, and a Van Dyke beard. Also it was subtly different from the way it had looked at headquarters. But Nick Valentine wasn't fooled. He recognized those eyes at once. The man who called himself Pablo Miniver was his bogus cousin.

Somehow, Pablo Miniver's eyes seemed to swing around unerringly, and focus themselves upon Nick Valentine.

FOR A SECOND, Nick felt as if a ponderous mountain were pressing down upon his brain. Then the weight was removed as Miniver's gaze slid away. He did not smile or bow, but began to speak at once, in a deep and sonorous voice which carried to every part of the great dining room without the aid of the

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microphone. At once the idle chatter in the room was stilled.

"My friends," he said, "there are strange things upon the face of the earth, which the mind of man is too small to comprehend. What you do not understand, you do not believe. What you fear, you scoff at. Let me prove tonight that the impossible is possible!"

A hush fell over the dining room.

Pablo Miniver stretched out a hand and pointed straight at Peter Simpson, the chemical manufacturer. Simpson was sitting between Bronson and Coleman. He pushed back his chair a little as Miniver's finger focussed upon him, but did not get up. His face was strained and tight.

"You," said Pablo Miniver. "I can read what is in your mind. *You are afraid to die!*"

Before Simpson could move, Miniver swung his pointing finger away from him, turned it in another direction, toward a table in a corner, where a girl sat alone, wrapped in a fur coat. Following that pointing finger, Nick Valentine gasped. He had not seen her there when he entered, and he had not seen her come in through the main entrance. She must have come through one of the side doors, from the interior of the building. It was the girl of the taxicab, the one he guessed was Ellen Dixon. Her face was white and colorless, and she seemed to shrink from the pointing finger of the man on the stage.

Pablo Miniver smiled thinly. "You! You are one of those who can testify that there are things beyond the comprehension of the mind of man. For you have talked with the dead!" He paused for a second, then snapped, "Speak! Is it true?"

Ellen Dixon was shivering. She closed her eyes, and nodded.

"It's true!" she said in such a small voice that it would not have been heard

except for the sudden deep silence which had descended upon the place.

Pablo Miniver bowed, and turned away from the girl.

Nick thought it was going to be his turn next. Instead, the man on the stage raised his hand, and snapped his fingers.

Immediately, every light in the place went out.

Nick Valentine sprang to his feet and rushed toward the table at which Ellen Dixon was sitting. In order to get there he had to cross the whole dining room. But before he was halfway there, the lights went on again, with blinding suddenness.

He stopped in his tracks, in the center of the milling throng. His first glance was for the table at which Ellen had been sitting. She was no longer there.

Above the shouting and the screaming of the women, he heard Inspector Coleman's voice raised in fervent, violent obscenity. He turned and looked in that direction. Coleman and Bronson were standing beside their chairs. But Peter Simpson's chair was empty. The chemical manufacturer had disappeared!

"By God!" Coleman shouted. "He's gone—right under our noses!"

Nick pushed over to where Coleman was standing, waving his arms and shouting orders.

"Take it easy, Inspector," he said out of the side of his mouth. "You won't find Simpson here any more. Leave this to me. I think my cue is coming up!"

HE KEPT going right past Coleman, without stopping, for he noticed that one of the women at Wat Farrago's table was threading her way through the crowd toward him. He pretended not to notice her until she took him by the arm.

"I'm Lola," she said. "Were you waiting—for this?"

She held out her left hand for him to see. Upon her index finger there were

three little pin-pricks, each with a tiny bubble of blood.

"You know what they mean?"

"Yes. I know. I must do what you order."

"Good. Come with me. Just take hold of my hand—and don't let go!"

He took her hand. She nodded, and raised her left hand in the air, in a sort of signal. At once, all the lights went out once more.

Through the milling, shouting crowd she led him unerringly by the hand. By his sense of direction he knew that they were moving toward the table at which she had sat with Wat Farrago. They passed that table, and she pulled back one of the heavy drapes from the wall. Nick heard rather saw her open a door behind the drapes. She pushed him through, and whispered, "Go down the stairs. Feel your way carefully."

And then she closed the door behind him.

Nick felt his way down six steps, and came to a landing. As soon as he reached it, a door opened at his right. Light streamed out, framing the figure of Pablo Miniver.

"Come!" ordered the hypnotist, fixing deep-set eyes upon him. He began to back up, down a lighted corridor.

Nick followed him, feeling once more the fascination of those powerful eyes.

They stepped into a low chamber, and some one shut the door behind them.

Miniver smiled gauntly, and waved a hand. "Wait!" he ordered, and turned.

Nick looked around the room. His pulse raced as he noted the occupants.

Two men were seated in armchairs, motionless as if in a trance. He recognized them from pictures which had been shown him at headquarters. They were the two missing chemical magnates, Frank Sheppard and Andrew Garth. From their appearance Nick judged them to be in a hypnotic trance.

Ellen Dixon was standing in a corner, her face white and her slender body trembling. The fur coat was coming open, revealing the black silk nightgown beneath, but she seemed to be unaware of it. Wat Farrago and two other men were standing by the desk, with guns in their hands. Seated at the desk was Peter Simpson, the chemical manufacturer who had disappeared from upstairs a few moments ago. He was writing laboriously with a scratchy pen, and sweating profusely.

NICK craned his neck and saw that Simpson was filling the sheet with figures—apparently a formula of some kind. No one spoke while Nick's wrist watch ticked away three full minutes. At last, Simpson threw down the pen and said, "There it is, you devil. That's what you want!"

He thrust the sheet of closely written figures into Pablo Miniver's hand.

"Thank you so much!" The hypnotist smiled. "It was so unfortunate that all my hypnotic powers could not induce these other gentlemen to part with the formula."

"They didn't know it," Simpson growled. "We're all making the same explosive, but I'm the inventor of the formula. I supplied their factories with the proper quantities of chemicals, ready to mix."

"Then all our efforts were wasted with Dixon and Mangin, as well as with these two." Miniver nodded toward Sheppard and Garth."

Simpson glared at him. "You've made me a traitor to my country. You've made me give up the formula of our aerial torpedo explosive!"

Miniver smiled. "When my country takes over your country, you shall be properly rewarded."

Simpson laughed nervously. "How are you going to get it out of here? The

police have a cordon around the place. They'll search every man and woman before they let them out."

"You forget, my dear Simpson, that we have with us a person who enjoys the confidence of the police!"

Miniver turned to face Nick Valentine. "You understand that you must do exactly as I order?"

"Yes," Nick replied. "I understand."

"I will give you this paper," Miniver went on. "You will take it to the address I shall tell you. The police, of course, will not search you when you leave."

"No, they won't search me," Nick said.

Pablo Miniver was continuing. "This place is mined. If anything should go wrong—for instance, if the police should raid us—we would press a button which would send the whole place up in shreds. Miss Ellen Dixon, whom you have met, Valentine, will remain here until you return."

Nick nodded, trying to make his eyes as blank as possible.

He glanced across at Ellen Dixon, and saw that she was staring at him with all her might. Her lips formed words: "*Don't mind me!*"

Nick smiled. She was a brave little kid. But the country's safety came first.

Pablo Miniver had gone to a far corner of the room. He pressed a button, and a panel in the wall slid back, revealing a recess in which was set a compact sending and receiving set. Miniver bent over the keys, saying over his shoulder, "Of course, we must be absolutely thorough, Farrago. Before letting this formula get out of our possession, I will transmit it to our Foreign Office."

He flipped over a switch and spoke into the microphone.

"I'M calling DNB. PM calling DNB."

There was a long pause, and then a voice over the transmitter: "'Allo, PM. DNB answering PM. Go ahead."

Nick's muscles tensed. He hadn't ex-

pected this. He must act now. It would be too late to wait until they sent him out with the formula.

He put his hand in his pocket and took out the automatic.

"Gentlemen," he said, "let's go off the air!"

PABLO MINIVER stopped in the middle of a word, and whirled around. Wat Farrago and his two gunmen began to shoot almost as soon as Nick's gun came out. Nick stood with his back to the wall, the automatic stretched out at arm's length, and pumped shot after shot at Farrago and the others. A bullet nicked his shoulder, another ripped his trouser leg. The thunder of the shots was deafening in the low-ceilinged room. Grimly, Nick kept on shooting. He got Farrago in the forehead, and one of the other gunmen in the shoulder. The third man went down when Nick shot him through the heart.

He swung the gun to bear on Pablo Miniver. The hypnotist had yanked a heavy Luger pistol out of a shoulder holster, and was raising it. Nick grinned thinly, and pulled the trigger of the automatic. There was only a *click*.

Miniver smiled wolfishly. "So you fooled me, eh, my good Nick Valentine. Well, it seems that we must all die. You first."

"Go ahead," said Nick. "If you can die for that country of yours, I can certainly die for mine. Only I wish you'd tell me one thing—how did you make those dead men talk?"

Miniver's eyes were glowing. "It was a work of art, my friend. A masterpiece of ventriloquism. Observe!"

His lips parted a fraction of an inch, and he raised his head. His lips did not move now, but his Adam's apple went up and down. And marvelously, the dead body of Wat Farrago seemed to be talking in Farrago's own voice. "*Heil Hitler!*" it said.

"You see, my friend," Miniver explained, "I was on the ledge, outside your window. I threw my voice inside the room. It was a simple matter to have myself lowered by a rope from the roof!"

"Excellent," said Nick. "You're a genius, Mr. Miniver. Too bad you had to fail."

"Too bad, yes, but others will follow. And now, good-by!"

He sighted along the Luger, with his finger curled around the trigger.

Nick fell into a crouch, and hurled himself forward. He would never have had a chance, however, if it hadn't been for Ellen Dixon. She came out of her corner like a little meteor, and hit Pablo Miniver with everything she had. He went reeling sideways, and the Luger exploded away over at an angle. Instead of hitting Nick, the slug thudded into the chest of Peter Simpson, just above the heart.

But nobody noticed him, for Nick had reached Miniver now, and the two of them were locked in a deadly struggle. Nick had hold of the hypnotist's gun-hand, and kept pounding hard rights into the man's heart. Miniver didn't try to block them. He kept struggling to free his gun, and at the same time he gouged at Nick's eyes with the splayed fingers of his left hand.

Nick grinned, and quit punching. This

kind of fighting was his meat. He gripped Miniver's gun-wrist in both hands, pivoted on his toes so that his back was to the hypnotist, and then heaved forward with a sudden yank.

Miniver uttered a shout, and went sailing over Nick's shoulder, to land with a thud against the desk. He dropped to the floor and lay still.

Nick Valentine brushed his coat off, and looked at Ellen Dixon. She was white, and swaying on her feet, and her fur coat was flapping wide open. Nick stepped over, gently wrapped the coat around her, and let her rest her head on his shoulder.

There was a sudden avalanche of blows upon the door, and the voice of Inspector Coleman shouted, "Break it down! Break it down, quick!"

Nick led Ellen Dixon over, and opened the door. He faced Coleman, Bronson, and a group of detectives, grinning.

They all crowded around him, but he pushed them aside, and led Ellen Dixon across the room.

"Just a minute," he said. "I've got to go on the air."

He stooped over the sending set, and put his mouth to the microphone. "Calling DNB!" he said. "Nick Valentine calling DNB. PM has signed off for good. You'll have to work out your own formulae. *Heil America!*"

THE END



THE MASTER OF SUICIDES

CHAPTER ONE

Girls Who Die

By WYATT
BLASSINGAME

THE ODOR of Spring was in the air. The breeze was warm and sweet and to the west a young moon drifted earthward. Tommy Edwards was taking the short-cut home, his mother's groceries piled high in his arms. He



A novelette of a madness which seemed bent on luring a whole town into self-destruction!

Necessary Jones didn't like to hurry, but he ran like hell now with the roar of the lynch-mad crowd close at his heels, and ahead of him—the beautiful, impossible creature who appeared out of nothingness and lured men and women to certain, ghastly destruction!



Two bounds hurled him beyond the glare of the headlight, as bullets whipped past him, kicked up the dirt under his feet. . . .

walked as slowly as he could because there were tomorrow's lessons to be learned, and Tommy didn't care for studying.

The path wound up Old Brinkley Hill and along the side of the abandoned marble quarry. It wasn't really a path at

all, just a way across back lots, wooded hills, that some of the kids knew about. Not one person a month came this way after dark. To the right was the abandoned marble quarry, a sheer rock cliff more than sixty feet high with jagged boulders at the bottom. To the left, at the top of the hill, was the house where Miss Mary Hendricks, the schoolteacher, lived. Tommy didn't care for studying, but he liked Miss Hendricks. She was, he thought, about the prettiest person he had ever seen.

He was high enough now to see over the brink of the hill and onto the little level stretch of ground between Miss Hendricks' house and the cliff edge. Blackjack and sassafras bushes grew here and at first Tommy thought it was some trick of moonlight and shadow. Then he knew it wasn't. It was Mary Hendricks.

She was running in quick dancing steps through the shadow-dappled moonlight.

Tommy could never be certain whether he heard anything or not. Perhaps it was a voice calling Miss Hendricks' name; perhaps it was only the breeze in the sassafras bushes. But all at once she stopped her quick dancing run. For a second or two she stood there. Then she turned and looked back toward the cliff.

Tommy had seen Miss Hendricks dance at the school shows; she taught dancing. But he had never seen a dance like this. She raised both clenched hands before her face and began to walk slowly, stiffly, toward the cliff's edge. Tommy thought suddenly of a picture he had seen once of a sleepwalker, moving stiff-legged, rigid, eyes open but unseeing.

One, two, three steps she went toward the edge of the quarry, her hands clenched in front of her. She was almost to the quarry's edge—and all at once Tommy knew! She was going to walk right off the edge and be killed on the rocks below!

He screamed. He didn't know what he was saying, just shouting Miss Hendricks' name, screaming, "Don't! Don't!" Then his voice broke on a thin shriek.

Miss Hendricks did not seem to hear. She took two more steps. At the very edge of the quarry she paused for an instant that was hours long. She was staring out into space, holding out her hands toward empty moonlight.

Then she stepped over the quarry's edge and vanished. Tommy heard the faint, dull crunch of her body on the rocks far below.

Tommy was never certain just what happened after that. Perhaps it was some trick of his shocked, incredulous eyes. But it seemed to him that a little patch of moonlight swam eerily in space and gathered and thickened into a kind of flowing mist. A monstrous misshapen, hideous thing. And above was a single dark, huge eye that stared balefully at him.

The eye seemed to swim and come nearer, getting bigger and bigger the way things sometimes do in the picture show.

Tommy screamed and was racing down the hill toward town as fast he could run. And all his mother's groceries were scattered behind him and he didn't even know he had dropped them.

IN HIS Birmingham office, Necessary Jones sat with his feet on his desk-top, his chair tilted far back, and his paper propped in front of him. He was a pink-checked, affable looking young man. At first glance he appeared somewhat fat, but if you looked closer you saw that he wasn't. It was because he was so completely relaxed and at ease and lazy-looking that he gave the appearance of being plumpish. But under his pink skin, his body was firm and hard. His favorite expression was, "If I'm not working, I might as well be resting." That was how he'd got the name of Necessary Jones. He did

everything necessary to solve a case, and nothing more.

The office door opened and Hank Johnson, Jones' thin, nervous, redhaired partner, came in. Without looking up from his paper, Jones said, "This is the damndest case I ever heard of. Within two miles of this town of Appdale, three girls and a man have committed a special brand of suicide within the last ten days. One walked into an abandoned marble quarry, one walked into the river and was carried over some falls, and the other girl and the man — separately, not together — walked off cliffs near the town."

"That's mountainous country up there," Hank Johnson said. "There are cliffs all around the town."

"But can the population hold out?" Jones asked.

Johnson whirled on him, a gaunt man who was always excited. "A hell of a joke. All those young girls. Good, decent people—what the papers say."

"That's the strange part of it," Jones said. "Young, decent girls. Good looking. And they've been jumping off cliffs. A little kid saw one of them, and a couple of men saw another. There's wild talk about a monster, a thing made of moonlight and shadow, that the girls see and run after. Then this thing floats out over the cliff's edge, and they fall."

"Nuts!" Johnson flung himself into a chair. "Gossip's always nuts. Remember that Wykoff case? Buzzards circle over the body for a couple of hours and the rumor gets out the town's being bombed. About as much truth in this. Phooey!"

"Maybe." Necessary slid deeper down into his chair until he was resting on the middle of his spine. "But the man that walked off a cliff—he was found immediately. He was horribly mangled, but not quite dead. He had been engaged to one of the dead girls and he talked about her calling him over the cliff."

"Delirious. Dying. Didn't know what

he was saying." Hank Johnson never spoke in complete sentences."

"Maybe," Jones said again. He began to fold a paper. "But it interests me. Because if the man was engaged to her, no kind of mask or make-up would fool him. And there is no doubt that she was dead. No wonder the town's getting excited. They've put up a thousand dollars reward."

"Reward, hell!" Johnson flung nervously out of his chair. "Women. That's it. Nothing gets your feet off that desk but a woman. All right! What you waiting for? Going, let's be going!"

"Okay." But Jones was still looking at the paper. It carried pictures of the three girls who had died. They were all about the same age, and all pretty. The Hendricks girl who had taught dancing in the Appdale schools had been beautiful. She had been engaged. She had had everything in the world to live for. Yet something had lured her through the white moonlight. Now her body was a pulped, horrible thing that the undertakers had put away quickly. And a few nights later the man she had been engaged to had walked over a cliff's edge and had died saying her name, swearing he had seen her.

CHAPTER TWO

The Cool Touch of Death

"THE good thing about pretending to be traveling salesman," Necessary Jones had said, "is that a salesman can go anywhere and butt into anybody's business, and it's taken for granted."

"And it gives you," Hank Johnson replied disgustedly, "a chance to sit on your dead-end and gossip while I do all the actual work."

"You've got no more sense than to like to work," Jones had said. "But go careful in this town. Rumor is the sheriff

had that thousand dollar reward posted and means to collect himself. Rumor says he has a very light trigger-finger where a thousand dollars are concerned."

So now Jones was sitting comfortably in the Appdale Drug Store, his sample case of Everlovely Toilet Soap on the floor beside him, gossiping with Pete Smither, the owner of the drugstore.

Smither was a small, unhappy looking man with a few strands of brownish hair plastered to his skull. "This trouble never woulda happened," he was saying, "if old John Gant hadn'ta died. Old John was the only man ever kept this town straight. He was the biggest man in the county." Mr. Smither looked more unhappy than ever. "Rich, but he wasn't stuck-up."

"What'd Mr. Gant die of?" Jones asked conversationally.

"Lack of breath," the druggist said. "Been porely for four-five years. Wasn't really well since the time his daughter got drowned on a picnic three years ago. Same picnic that Jane McDougal fell off a cliff and got killed. May been just as well she drowned. She was a wild one. A little cracked, maybe. Everybody knew it but old John Gant. Everybody loved him too much to tell him. But Mary Gant—wasn't ever found and old John sort of grieved hisself sick from then on. 'Bout six months past now, he just give up breathing and died."

The drug store door banged and Hank Johnson came in fast. He slowed his pace immediately and tried to look unconcerned, which was impossible for the redhead. He sat down with Jones and the druggist and Jones said, "What's the alarm, Hank? You look like you'd sold a couple of cases of Everlovely."

"I sold a few bars," Hank Johnson said. He tried to look calm until finally Mr. Smither left to wait on a customer. Then Hank leaned toward Necessary Jones.

"While you've been sitting here resting yourself," he said, "I've been working. I've talked with the kid Tommy Edwards, and I've located Sam Morgan and Dave Parkinson, the two men who saw the second suicide." His lean face was drawn with excitement. "There's something crazy about this thing. Something inhuman."

He glared at Necessary. "But I knew you wouldn't want to get out of your chair, so I've arranged for Morgan and Parkinson to come here. I thought maybe you could trouble yourself to talk to them."

"No trouble," Jones said.

"I told them I had made a bet with you there were actual witnesses, and wanted them to prove it for me. But I had to give old Parkinson a dollar's worth of soap before he'd promise to come—and Lord knows he looks like he needs it."

"He's one of the wealthiest men in these parts," Jones said, "and one of the most unpopular. He's foreclosed a few mortgages and loaned a little money at terrific rates, and has the first dime he ever made. He wouldn't waste money on a thing like soap."

"How do you know?" Johnson demanded.

"Just talk I hear while sitting around a drug store. Now Sam Morgan, your other witness, is a nice young fellow who's only been in Appdale for a couple of months. He was sent to the mountains for his health."

"He looks healthy enough," Hank Johnson said. And added, "Here, he comes now."

SAM MORGAN was a big, blond man with a rather handsome but hard face. He smiled and said, "Hello, Mr. Johnson. Is this the gentleman you had the bet with?"

"If you call him a gentlemen," Hank Johnson said.

A few minutes later Dave Parkinson, the miser, joined them. He slouched into his chair, a gaunt, unshaven man in dirty overhauls. "All right," he said, "I ain't got much time to waste. It's getting dark outside and I got to get home. I seen Nell Jenkins walk off the cliff—and that's all I seen."

"You mean you didn't see any monster, any such figure as the papers write about?"

The gaunt man hesitated. His eyes were shifty and refused to meet Jones. He said finally, "A lot of brush was between me and Nell Jenkins. I didn't see her none too clear. And I—I didn't see nothin' else."

Morgan put his big hands on the table. He looked at them for a moment, then his eyes came up squarely to Jones'. "Mr. Parkinson was coming up the hill," he said. "From that angle he couldn't see well. I was coming down the hill."

"You had a clearer view?"

"Yes." Something like fear showed in his blue eyes for a moment. "It sounds crazy to tell it. I've tried not to believe what I saw. I've tried to claim it was because of the moonlight and the mist. I saw her before she started walking off the cliff. She went half running, her arms out in front of her, straight off the cliff."

"And this monster?" Jones asked.

Sam Morgan rubbed a hand across his eyes. "Just as she went off the cliff I saw—something. I don't know what it was. Moonmist maybe. I keep telling myself that. It was floating out in space beyond the cliff's edge. A big shadowy hideous thing with something like a single eye above it. And then it changed. I keep trying to tell myself it was some reflection of the girl who had fallen. I don't know how such a thing could happen, but it must have happened—because I thought I saw a woman floating there in the air, with her arms out toward me, calling me." The man was breathing

hard now, gripping the edge of the table. "She was calling me and I—I started toward her. I couldn't help myself. She seemed more beautiful than any human being could be."

"And then—?"

"A cloud went over the moon. It was dark for a few seconds. I turned and ran like hell." Again his eyes met Jones! "That sounds like a cowardly thing to do, but I did it. And, well, I'm alive and Harry Flack, the fellow who was engaged to Mary Hendricks, isn't alive. I didn't see him, but persons who did say he died mumbling something about seeing Mary, dead."

Jones said, "Well, Hank, I guess you win the bet. I'll go up to the room and get money to pay off."

THE hotel was directly above the drug store. Jones went rapidly up the stairs. There was an idea half formed in his mind and he wanted to check on it. He was thinking about this when he pushed open his hotel door and stepped over the sill into semi-darkness. He started to swing the door closed behind him.

It was then the thing fell soft and cold and slimy upon his face and neck.

A scream rose in his throat and choked there. His hands pawed wildly, clutching at the thing which writhed about his neck. There was a hissing sound before his face. His fingers closed on something which twisted like a cold rubber hose. It broke free of his grip. In the same instant he knew what it was.

A snake.

The snake's fangs struck against his cheek. White-hot flame seemed to fill his head. He cried out hoarsely. Then he had torn the snake from him and flung it away into the darkness. His hands pawed on the hotel wall; the light came on. He went stumbling across the room toward the telephone. But his mind was already

fighting with the knowledge: *If a really poisonous snake strikes about the head, there is little or no hope for life.*

To Jones' right a voice said, "Don't bother with the telephone, young man. There ain't no need."

Jones heard the voice, understood it without being surprised that a man should be here in his room. He just kept going for the phone. The voice said, "There ain't no need to phone, young man. That was just a blacksnake. Ain't poisonous enough to kill a rabbit, no less one of you city slickers."

Jones stopped then. He turned and looked at the man.

He was a big fat man who wore overalls and a blue shirt. He had a shotgun across his lap and the muzzle pointed straight at Jones' stomach. The fat man's finger was crooked tight across the trigger.

"At this here range," the fat man said, "buckshot would blow your stomach plumb loose from yore spine."

Jones' body felt slimy with cold sweat. He was still thinking about the snake, still trembling; one of the few things in the world that terrified him was a snake. Looking at the fat man in the chair Jones knew that this fellow would kill, if he needed to, without the slightest emotion—but it was still the snake that Jones feared.

"You mean that snake was just—wasn't poisonous?"

"Just a warning," the fat man said. "A warning to get out of town."

Jones put his hand to his face. Pain still blazed in it, and when he lowered his fingers there was a tiny bit of blood on their tips.

The fat man chuckled. "Not much worse'n a hornet," he said. "I thought you city detectives were supposed to be tough."

"Thought what?"

The fat man quit laughing. "I know

who you are, young man. I seen you in Birmingham once. But we don't want you up here. Tell yore redheaded friend that, and get out. Begone by morning. Because next time it won't be no harmless blacksnake you get greeted with."

"Are you the sheriff?"

"Nope. But I'm a friend of his'n. And what I say is—"

From somewhere outside came a long, slow, rising howl. The bay of a dog yowling at the moon? A madman crying into the night? It quivered on full, deep notes, and faded into silence.

The fat man stood up quickly, his stomach trembling when he moved. He had the shotgun pointed straight at Jones, his heavy-lidded eyes narrow. "I got to be going," he said. "But that don't mean it's safe for you to stay in town. I'll be back in an hour or so, and when I get back you and your redheaded friend had better be gone. You understand?"

"I understand," Jones said.

The fat man went out, slamming the door behind him.

For perhaps three seconds Necessary Jones did not move. He still felt weak in his stomach. When the fat man had stood up in answer to that dog's howl, or whatever the sound had been, Jones had felt sure he was going to shoot.

JONES moved fast now, and there was no appearance of softness about him. His face was set and hard. But he gave plenty of room to his bed, beneath which he had heard the slither of a cold body. Maybe the snake wasn't poisonous, but he wanted nothing else to do with it. He got a .38 revolver out of his bag, thrust it under his coat, and went down the hotel steps in a soft-footed but rapid trot.

The drug store was empty, except for Pete Smither, the unhappy looking druggist. Jones cursed under his breath and went quickly outside to where twilight

was dreaming in the village street. A block away a streetlight made a white puddle. An automobile passed. Jones stood there looking to right and left. Beyond the street light he saw a bulky shadow going in the opposite direction, saw it fade into the early darkness. Necessary Jones followed.

A block beyond the town's limit a path turned from the main road, going upward over low hills toward the higher mountains beyond. Jones got a glimpse of a man going over the top of the first hill. Somewhere, far off to the left, a train whistled mournfully. When he reached

Jones never quite knew what drew his eyes back to the black figure of the man and the dog.

The man was standing very stiff and straight with both clenched hands outstretched. For perhaps two seconds he stood that way, rigid, motionless. Then he began to move forward, straight toward the path of the onrushing train!

The headlight of the train burned fiercely down the tracks, gleamed on a silver thread above them—and beyond the tracks Jones saw the woman. She stood bathed in the full glow of the headlight, beautiful beyond belief. Her arms were

We're making no secret of the fact that the next issue of STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES hits a new high for stories of weird and thrilling mystery. Three long novels by three of the leading writers in the field—Wayne Rogers, Donald G. Cormack and R. S. Lerch—take stellar roles; and there are plenty of other stories by writers of top-rank! Don't miss this great issue!

the top of the hill Jones paused. To the east a full moon was just rising. The train whistled again, nearer now. Jones started down the gently sloping path. Half way down the path curved to the right, and after rounding this, Jones stopped.

In the narrow valley below, the moonlight flowed like amber water. Jones could see the black upright of telegraph poles, the thin spiderweb of lines above them, the dull gleam of the railroad tracks. And going toward the tracks was the figure of a man and a large dog.

With a howl the train rounded a curve and came racing downgrade. The great headlight lashed along the rails. Red sparks leaped upward from the engine and were hurled backward by the rushing wind.

The Southland Limited was racing toward the State Capitol at seventy miles an hour.

uplifted, beckoning. Her long hair hung loose about her shoulders. In the headlight it was the color of flame.

For one ageless moment, Jones stared. Then he was plunging down the path, running with all his strength. But the big man below (he could see by the train's light now that it was the fat man who had been in his room) would reach the tracks before Jones could overtake him. The dog was moving slowly beside him, looking from his master to the train, growling uncertainly.

The fat man reeled on toward the woman, his arms outstretched before him. Suddenly the train whistle screamed like a thing gone mad. The engineer was leaning from the cab window, shrieking, waving his arm. There was the high shriek of abruptly applied brakes. Too late.

The fat man stepped over the first rail, and paused. Then, like a man suddenly awakened, he seemed to realize where he was. He tried to leap forward, across

the track. But the train was on him now. Without even a cry he went down under the wheels. The dog had jumped backward just in time.

Jones kept running. The train was skidding along the tracks, coming to a halt. Hundreds of faces were peering from the windows. It was a long train and it stopped before it had completely passed the path-crossing, so that Jones had to race down the track a short distance to circle behind it. He called the dog as he ran, and after a moment the dog followed him.

He rounded the end of the train, still running. And then he stopped.

The woman had disappeared.

Jones had acted instinctively until now. And now he found that he was trembling. His breath was coming in deep gasps. A curious and terrible excitement filled him. Had he been running to save the fat man—or had he been running to reach the woman who had stood there like some goddess out of mythology come to life?

He shook the thought out of his mind. She was gone now, and she was responsible for the death of the fat man. Jones plunged into the brush after her. His long-barreled revolver was in his hand now and he whispered to the dog which had followed, "Find her, boy. Go find her."

CHAPTER THREE

Shoot on Sight

THE dog was confused. He growled and looked back to where he had last seen his master. He wanted to understand what had happened. But Jones caught him by the collar. He kept whispering, "Find her! Go get her, boy! Go get her!"

The dog started up the trail. Once he turned and went back a short way and moved off into the brush. And Jones

followed. The dog turned uphill again, into the path again. They went on slowly for half an hour.

With no warning the dog growled and jumped for some brush on the right of the path. Something thrashed crazily in the bushes. It screamed, and Necessary Jones, leaping after the dog, saw dark figures rolling on the ground.

"Hold, boy!" Jones cried. "Hold!" He caught the dog's collar with his right hand, pulled him back, the gun ready in his left hand. A man got up from the ground, clutching at his throat, whimpering, sobbing, crazy with terror.

Moonlight came through the leaves and touched on a gaunt, dirty, unshaven face. It was Dave Parkinson. "Keep him offa me!" Parkinson whimpered.

"Why did you kill his master?" Jones said.

"Kill—?" Parkinson's face was working, saliva drooling from the corner of his mouth. "I didn't kill old E. B.! I swear to God I didn't!"

"He was following you. Why?"

"I—I don't know . . . I wasn't sure he was after me. I . . ."

"Why?"

"He musta thought I killed Nell Jenkins and Mary Hendricks and the others. I know he figured I did. But I didn't."

"Why did he think you killed them?"

"Miss Hendricks borrowed money from me once and—"

"And now you'll get her property?"

"Yeah. But it ain't worth—"

"They are reopening some of the old mines in this section," Jones said. "That property is going to be worth a lot of money, a lot more money than you loaned on it."

Parkinson did not answer. His narrow, animal eyes glowed wet and evil.

"Halfway up this path you turned and went back part way," Jones said. "The dog trailed you."

"I thought somebody was following

me. I went back to that lodge so I could look down into the valley. I—I seen what happened to old E. B. Tinker.”

“What else did you see?”

Again that look of almost insane fear came into the man’s gaunt face. “I—seen the *thing*. The woman! And something white and floating too! And—” His mouth jerked wide open. His eyes bulged. “*Look! look there!*”

Jones whirled. There was the dark surrounding underbrush with moonlight on it—and nothing else. And he knew then he had been tricked by the oldest of gags. He tried to turn, to swing his gun back in line with Parkinson. There wasn’t time. The stick crashed down on his skull.

He heard, sounding far off, jagged, hysterical laughter.

Then the second blow landed.

IT IS surprising the speed with which news travels in a small town and how quickly a crowd can gather. The train tracks were half a mile outside Appdale, but the passengers were still assuring themselves they were unhurt when the citizens of the town began to arrive in droves. The engineer and fireman were still shuddering, sick from gathering the pieces of what had been E. B. Tinker.

“He walked right in front of the train!” the engineer kept saying. “Right in front of the train, with his hands out before him!”

A kind of low shudder ran through the crowd. Persons looked at one another and were afraid. They peered into the moonlit night and huddled together from some unseen and horrible menace.

Sam Morgan, the blond young man who had witnessed the second of this series of deaths, asked, “Did you see anything else? Anybody else?”

The engineer turned quickly. “That’s right! I had forgotten. A man came running out of the bush right over there

and ran away as fast as he could. I had a good look at him. A sort of chunky blond man. Nice looking. But he looked excited, or frightened—or something.”

“Maybe he looked insane,” Peter Smith—er, the druggist, said. “There’s something crazy about all this business.”

The crowd muttered and surged restlessly. They were trying not to believe in ghosts made of moonlight and a single horrible eye, in monsters that lured women, and ghostly women who lured men to their deaths. And the engineer did not speak of having seen a woman; he had been leaning from the right hand side of the engine, watching old E. B. Tinker and the other man who had come rushing down the hill. He had seen no one else. The crowd clutched at the idea of murder.

“That’s it. Somebody who’s gone mad.”

“Somebody who just likes to kill for the fun of killing.”

“But how . . . ?”

“I don’t know.”

“Mad men are smarter than anybody else. He dopes these folks, makes them go . . .”

“Hypnotism, maybe.”

The idea flowed through the crowd. The crowd wanted to believe. They had to believe in something tangible or go crazy with fear.

It was Sam Morgan who asked the engineer, “What did you say that man looked like, the one you saw?”

“A blond fellow, about your build, I’d say, but not quite as tall. He had on a gray suit.”

Sam Morgan looked at the persons around him. “That sounds like this fellow, Jones, the soap salesman.”

There was a moment’s silence, then voices came from the crowd.

“That’s right! Does sound like him.”

“Where is he now? If he didn’t run away, why isn’t he here?”

"You think he—he's the maniac—?"

"I remember now!" Pete Smither cried excitedly. "I saw him come through the store half an hour ago and start up this way. And E. B. had passed by just a few minutes before then!"

"Then he must have been following him," Sam Morgan said. "He must have caught him here, and killed him . . . I wondered why he and his friend were asking me all those questions this afternoon. They were mighty interested in what had happened."

"Then you think this Jones done all this?"

The sheriff was saying, trying to be calm, "Now take it easy, boys. We can't be sure of anything yet."

Nobody paid attention. Like low thunder the words ran through the crowd:

"He must be a madman, an escaped lunatic!"

"It was that salesman Jones!"

"He's killed them all!"

"He was seen this time. The engineer saw him."

"We got to find him! We got to find him quick or he'll kill everybody in town!"

"He won't kill me if I see him first. I'm going to shoot first and argue with him later."

"Somebody go for the bloodhounds. There's no telling who he'll kill next if we don't find him."

"Be careful. Shoot when you see him. He won't give any warning."

It was then that some one screamed: "Look! There he is! There he is!"

"Shoot! Somebody shoot quick!"

And the sheriff's voice crying, "No! Wait! Wait!"

He was too late. Sam Morgan had snatched a pistol from his pocket. He could see Necessary Jones not more than fifty feet away, clear in the beam of the engine's headlight. He fired three times, the pistol muzzle spouting red and yellow flame into the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jones Walks With Death

IT WAS five minutes after Parkinson's second blow before Necessary Jones regained consciousness. He was lying where he had fallen. Parkinson, the dog and Jones' gun were gone.

Jones sat up and groaned. His head felt like it housed a dozen dentist's drills and all of them were boring into his skull at once. He rubbed his hand over his head, and it came away blood-stained.

He cursed himself for twenty different kinds of a fool. "Let him take me with a gag like 'Look the other way!' Oh, Lord! If Hank ever hears of this, I'll have to leave the state."

He stood up and started back down the mountain path. From below him he could hear voices and when he came out into the little valley, he saw the train and the crowd around it.

He started across the railroad tracks, going through the full beam of the headlight. He heard a voice cry, "Look! There he is!"

Another voice cried, "Shoot! You damn fool—shoot!"

Then there was the roar of a gun. Jones saw the little points of light it made. The first bullet tore a hole through his coat, jerking him to one side. The second whined at his ear. And then Necessary Jones whirled and ran. There was nothing slow about him now. His body was steel spring and jagged lightning. Two bounds hurled him beyond the glare of the headlight.

There were cries behind him, men pounding after him, an occasional blast of a gun, but Necessary Jones kept going at full speed for more than a quarter-mile over rough country, and when he slowed to a dogtrot his pursuers were all far behind.

It was easy enough to understand what

had happened back there; someone had convinced the people of Appdale that he, Necessary Jones, was responsible for these recent, violent deaths.

Jones considered what to do next.

He wondered where Hank Johnson was. There wasn't any telling; Hank was always rushing about, running down a thousand clues, most of them worthless. But he was a good man in a tight spot. And right now Necessary was in a spot.

Far behind him he heard the baying of a dog and knew that somebody had already got hounds with which to follow him. He took a long breath. "Well," he said aloud, "this is one time it's necessary for me to move, and move fast."

At a steady trot he headed in a long half circle back toward Appdale. After half a mile, he could hear the dogs, off to the south, baying full-throated.

A mile above Appdale he came on Bent Elbow Creek and plunged into it, swam downstream for two hundred yards and crossed over.

It was a small cottage on the creek bank, just beyond the edge of town, to which he went. There was a dim light showing inside and he crept forward cautiously, stopping every few yards to listen. Small trees grew along the creek bank and Jones could hear the swift rush of the water as it raced toward the high falls a short distance downstream. He had seen those falls this afternoon, and he knew what would happen to a man who went into the stream at this point.

HE CROUCHED beneath a window and peeped inside. There didn't seem to be anybody inside, but he had little time to make certain. Dimly he could hear the dogs again.

Necessary Jones pushed open the window and crawled inside.

The house gave evidence that a man lived here alone, and that he was not a particularly good housekeeper. But in

a closet in a back room, carefully hidden he found a woman's clothes. And finally, he found the thing he was searching for.

He found it between the mattress and springs of the bed. A coil of wire not much thicker than a silken thread.

He knew he would probably need new ones, Jones thought. *He had to have extra wire. But he had his nerve to keep it here.*

Jones didn't touch the wire. He had his proof now, if he could just locate Hank Johnson and put it to use. With this, they could call in the State Troopers and prove their case, collect the reward.

Jones could hear the howl of the dogs. They were still far away but he had to hurry. He went swiftly out of the front door. And then it happened.

"Jones!" a voice called softly. "Jones!" He turned. His heart lurched.

She was standing near the river edge. Moonlight came through the tree leaves in a white column and touched upon her hair. Her arms were outstretched toward Jones. Her face was lifted to look at him, her lips parted.

"Jones!" she called softly.

He fought for control of himself. He forced calmness into his brain. He reached for his gun, forgetting he no longer had it.

Something hissed like a snake above his head. He tried to duck, flinging up an arm. He saw the thin faint gleam—and the lasso of fine wire settled around his neck, jerked taut.

Instinctively, he grabbed the wire with both hands. But the wire was so thin, so fine, he got no grip upon it. It still cut into his throat, pulling him irresistibly forward. Slowly, step by step, grasping the wire in front of him with both hands, he followed its pull—straight toward the girl and the river bank!

His head seemed to be swelling like a balloon, his eyes threatening to explode from their sockets. The roaring

in his ears was so loud it drowned out the rush of the creek and the rumble from the falls close below.

The girl had vanished now and Jones thought the thing he saw was some vision distorted by his swelling eyeballs. A shadowy, misty figure that seemed to float a few yards off to his right! And above this misty figure a single huge glaring eye! A gigantic cyclops of moonlight and shadow!

He tried to leap for the thing again and could not. The river was four steps away, three, two. He reeled toward it. The shots sounded miles away.

FOR seconds Jones could not realize what had happened. He was kneeling at the very bank of the river clawing at the wire which was loose around his neck now. His hands and neck were bleeding where the wire had cut.

Then Hank Johnson's voice was saying, "I should have let him haul you in the river. Might know you couldn't keep working on a job without chasing after women. Who was she?"

Jones stumbled to his feet, leaned against a tree.

"Where'd she go?"

"Down that way."

"She won't get far. But how'd you happen to get here? You can't tell me you figured out who was back of this, because you never figured out anything in your life."

"I should have let him drag you in the river," Hank Johnson said again. "And given him a medal for it. I was just checking on anything to do with this case. So I came here to ask Sam Morgan some more questions and . . ."

"Just stumbling around working blind," Jones said. But then, for one sentence there was complete seriousness in Jones' voice. He said, "I may kid you, Hank, but—well, thanks anyhow."

"You can do as much for me sometime. Let's take a look at this fellow."

The figure lay very still. It was shrouded in a long cape that was white on one side, black on the other. Over the head was a hood with a single eye-slit, and above this a brow had been painted. Jones pulled off the hood and looked down at the face of Sam Morgan.

"His health ran out on him," Necessary Jones said.

From upstream came the baying of dogs on this side the creek now. Jones said, "We better find the State Troopers before my health runs out."

"HE LET the wire run around a tree," Jones said, his feet propped on his desk, "and he had special gloves that he could grip the wire with. If the tree was right at the edge of a cliff or the river bank he could pull his victim over the cliff or the bank without having to stand so close to it himself."

"And so that ghost talk was just talk?" the lieutenant asked.

"Yes. Morgan wore a cape that was white on one side, black on the other, so that with just a flip of the cloth he could blend with either the white lime cliffs thereabouts or a black shadow. It was a frightened kid, little Tommy Edwards, who started the talk about an eye, some trick of the moonlight probably, on his hood with the eye slit in it, and that gave him the idea of making it look even more like an eye."

"But I still don't understand the motive," the lieutenant said.

"It goes back several years," Necessary Jones said, "and you have to know small town people to understand it. One of the best-liked men in Appdale several years back was named John Gant, but Gant's daughter, Mary Gant, was a bum. And a little insane, too, maybe. On a picnic on which several of the local girls had gone, Mary Gant killed one of the

girls, a girl named Jane McDougall, by pushing her over a cliff. Then Mary Gant herself jumped into the river. They all thought she drowned, but she didn't. When the other girls came back, they didn't tell the exact truth. They all knew and loved her father—he must have been a swell old gentleman from what everybody says—and they knew it would break his heart to know the truth about his daughter. They told everybody that both deaths had been accidents."

"And then Mary Gant came back after her father's death?" the lieutenant asked.

"Right. She had heard that property was becoming more valuable around Appdale, some of the old mines reopening. She stood to inherit a fortune from her father—but she couldn't come back as long as the four girls lived who knew that she was a murderess. So she and Sam Morgan—maybe her husband, maybe not—came here to kill those girls. Nobody knew Morgan and he could go about openly. But the girl had to keep hidden."

"They worked together?"

"Yes. They got three of the four girls before they were stopped, and two men. One of the men had been engaged to Mary Hendricks and he started investigating her death. He got too close on the trail and they had to kill him. The girl he saw just before he died was not Mary Hendricks, but Mary Gant. He tried to tell persons that, but he must have been too near death. All they could understand was 'Mary' and naturally they thought he was talking of the girl he had loved. The other man, the fat fellow, E. B. Tinker, was killed because Mary Gant believed one of the girls, his daughter, had told him the truth about that picnic years before."

"But why did they use such fantastic method?" the lieutenant asked.

"It was partly forced on them by circumstance. And it partly came from Mary

Gant's madness. They didn't want to kill in any of the more traditional ways, because they couldn't stand any searching inquiry as to motives. They had to instill a supernatural fear, or if plain murder were suspected, they had to make it look like the work of an insane person. That was right up Mary Gant's alley."

"How did you begin to suspect Morgan?"

Hank Johnson spoke for the first time. "Luck! Pure luck!"

"Brains," Necessary Jones said, grinning. "To begin with, I had an idea it was one of two men: Morgan or Parkinson. They saw one of the victims killed, they said; one of them was going up the hill, the other was coming down. That path has a cliff on one side and a wall on the other. If some one else had been there he couldn't possibly have got away without one of them seeing him. And I never put much faith in the ghost story; so when Morgan told it with so many details, I began to suspect him."

"Hooley!" Johnson said. "Everything that was learned, I learned it. All you did was stick your head in a noose."

Jones rubbed at his throat. "I did that all right. And after I knew how the murders were being committed too. I saw the wire gleam over the tracks in the trainlight and knew then what must be happening. And the dog trailed Parkinson and showed me he hadn't been close enough to that part of the track at any time to have pulled the wire. After that I was pretty sure of Morgan. But the Appdale citizens were pretty sure of me and I had to move fast."

"Too bad they didn't catch you," Hank Johnson said.

The police lieutenant was grinning. "You guys like one another, eh?"

"Not if you believe the way we talk," Jones said. "But we still keep working together."

THE END

SLAVES of the DEATH SONG

Was it some hellish modern form of alchemy—this transmutation of girls into human canaries, caged and golden-voiced? Larry Farr felt the clammy touch of madness when he heard black-cloaked Signor Ponelli babble Kay's name at the canary he held in his palm—but that was only the beginning of madness and terror to come. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Death's Yellow Wings

MY VERY first glimpse of him made me reach for my gun. He came barging through the frost-glass door which carried my gilt legend:

LAWRENCE FARR

Private Investigations

Walk Right In

He lurched towards the desk where I'd been sitting idle, waiting for Kay Prentiss to come and drag me to a belated lunch. He stood swaying before me. A drunk?

I clubbed at them blindly. . . .



A thrilling mystery novelette by RALPH OPPENHEIM

No drunk had eyes like that!

Rolling in hollow sockets, they glared from a face as ashen as something from a grave. He was big, yet his bigness somehow gave the impression of a husk, hollow inside. His clothes were rags, bizarre rags—the remnants of a full-dress suit, a wing collar awry, a stiff shirt-front crumpled like paper.

One pocket was intact. His right hand was in it, as his left reached back to close

up second floor office was virtually isolated.

Gray lips moved grotesquely. "Larry! It's Bascomb—George Bascomb!"

I stared at him with an unbelief instigated by my ears. For I could see certain familiar lines in that bruised ashen face. . . . I'd known George Bascomb pretty well. He moved in the social set to which Kay Prentiss, though she'd been left just a small income by depression-ruined folks,



the door. He walked slowly toward me.

I jumped to my feet, my Colt .45 out and leveled, knowing that though the big building was full of tenants, my own walk-

still belonged by right of pedigree, and from which she fished me many wealthy clients. This George Bascomb had been a former football star turned successful

broker—a big, virile specimen. Well, my visitor was the same size; his face now did seem some distorted version of Bascomb's, but . . .

Two days ago, at an afternoon shindig, I'd heard Bascomb's voice, booming in a deep, resonant bass. But the voice that issued from the big husk before me was a rich contralto—a *woman's voice*!

"Larry," it came again now, incredibly. "I've found her! I've found Evelyn!"

I put my gun away, feeling a different sort of chill than one of just danger. I knew that he was Bascomb, voice or no voice. Evelyn Weeks, a lovely little brunette deb, and one of Kay's closest friends, was George Bascomb's fiancée. And Evelyn had left home mysteriously a few days ago and had not been heard of since. Kay, worried, had asked me to investigate.

"I've found her, Larry! I've brought her here!"

Which proved he must be raving, for he hadn't brought anybody. I took his free arm, tried to guide him to a chair. "Here, I'll get you a drink, George!" Yes, and then I'd phone for an ambulance.

He flung off my hand. "I tell you I've brought Evelyn!" his incongruous contralto iterated. "Look! Look at her, Larry!"

That was when at last he brought his right hand from his pocket, slowly, as if lifting out something fragile. He opened the hand beneath my eyes, and I saw something yellow and—alive!

"See! *This is Evelyn!*" His voice was tense, almost hysterical.

I looked closer, and saw that it was a small canary. It fluttered faintly, unable, apparently, to do more.

I stared, speechless, as the big ragged man stroked the tremulous little bird with clumsy but tender fingers, moaning to it in his altered voice: "Evelyn . . . My girl, my poor darling!" I saw tears stream from his wild eyes. "I'll keep you safe,

dear, even though you're so tiny and helpless! I'll keep you close!"

Sudden guile crept into his anguished features. "I won't let you go to—" I couldn't catch the next contralto words. They sounded like "marry" and the word "go" or "gold." "I won't let you go in tonight, Evelyn—to sing gloriously and die!"

Sing gloriously? I recalled another party; Kay and other girls clustered around a piano in a song-fest, and Evelyn Weeks sounding pitiful with her little squeaky voice? She could scarcely sing a note.

I reached again for his arm now, and this time he yielded, placed the trembling canary on my desk-top as I led him to a chair.

THE sound of the door opening again made me spin on my heels. Another contralto voice came then, rich even in its exclamation: "Larry! What—?"

I looked, half-expecting to see another man-creature with a woman's voice—and I saw Kay Prentiss.

I wished she hadn't come just now, though just the sight of her—a pert curlicued hat on her auburn hair, and a neat tailored suit snug about the curves of her lovely figure—brought the usual heart-throbs. Her hazel eyes were wide as they looked uncomprehendingly at the pitiful husk which was George Bascomb.

But Bascomb's eyes jerked up. "Kay!" A new strange note sounded in that contralto. He lurched towards her.

I grabbed at him, but he was still a giant, and frenzy lent him strength. He straight-armed me so unexpectedly that I was sent reeling across the room, sprawling to the floor.

Kay's scream was part recognition now, part fear, as Bascomb leaped at her—as his two hands tightened like claws on her shoulders.

I felt as any man would, and though

I knew Bascomb was out of his mind, crazed, I think I'd have used my gun on him—but in the next instant I saw that Kay was somehow free. Free, yet crying out as with new horror! Then my eyes stared.

George Bascomb stood swaying. Hideous sounds came from his throat. Nothing was touching him—yet it was as if invisible vice-like hands were squeezing his neck to a pulp! Before our eyes, that big neck was shrinking. Shrinking, as blood drooled from the lips.

I saw Kay's hands fly to her horror-stricken eyes. I saw Bascomb's legs fold like accordions, as he fell heavily, with that neck still shriveling! But his eyes held a fleeting sanity now, and his bloody lips formed voiceless words: "Get fiend . . . Protect Kay . . ."

By that time I'd snatched the telephone from the handset. I knew whom to call now. Doctor Hugo Clavering was the town's biggest throat specialist, working with a private sanitarium. He was another acquaintance of Kay's.

I dialed his number, getting it from my easy, index file, all in seconds. My hurried demand brought the specialist on the wire. "Hello, Farr!" came his incisive voice. "What's the 'socialite Shamus' up to now . . .?"

"Clavering! Get an ambulance to my office!" Hurriedly I described Bascomb's symptoms. Even before I finished and heard Dr. Clavering's shocked: "Fantastic! I'll be right over myself! Better not touch him!" I saw Bascomb's body give a final convulsive shudder and go still, but I didn't tell Clavering not to come. I hung up quickly.

George Bascomb lay on his back. His eyes were glazing. His shriveled throat looked like a pipe-stem, a thin thread between his big body and his head, which lay in a pool of blood . . .

I saw Kay swaying as if fighting off a faint, went and caught her to me. As her

arms slid around my neck, I thought of Bascomb's dying warning to protect her; of Clavering's warning not to touch the body. Was it some plague then, some contagious disease? Or—

Kay's body went rigid in my embrace then. I followed her widening eyes to the frost-glass door, and my heart missed a full beat.

Out in the hall lights burned on this dim day. And now, momentarily, they threw a monstrous shadow against the frosted glass—a shadow as of a great bird, wings outspread!

I fairly flung Kay across the office and into the small ante-chamber that served as a washroom. Then I whirled to the door, drawing my gun even as that door swung open.

I CAUGHT the glint of brass buttons against spacious blue cloth, stared. Flaherty, the beat-cop, pounded in—alone. I was certain he couldn't have made that bird-like shadow!

"Sorry to bother ye, Mister Farr," the blue-coat advanced with one hand extended, holding something, "but it seems—*Holy Mother-r-r!*" He gaped at the body, and for a moment seemed about to go sick. I saw a small square of white flutter to the floor from his extended hand. "Dead, is he?" His eyes swung to me, going officious, hard. "Who is he?"

"A friend of mine, and I didn't kill him," I snapped testily. "I wish to God I knew what did!"

"His throat—*ughh!*" The big patrolman pulled himself together. "Say, now, that must be the same man—wait now!" He barged back to the open door, out into the hall, where I heard his oaths. He came back, and then stuck his head out of my office window. While he was doing all this, I casually retrieved the white square he had dropped, palmed it without looking at it—as he swung towards me again.

"Look now," he explained, troubled. "A queer bird comes to me on the street, says he's up to following this here man—claims he—well, it sounded like kidnagin'. He says with a dago accent: 'He stole my lovely.' So I come up with him, and now he's scrambled!" He searched through his blue pockets. "Seems he give me a card . . ."

"What'd he look like?" My blood was cold again. "A bird?"

He eyed me narrowly. "So you know the gentleman! 'Tis the very description of him, all hunched up in one of them black cloaks, with wild black hair that's never seen a comb, and sharp little black eyes! Where can I find him? It's worrying I am about him now!"

I told him I didn't know the man from Adam, which was true at that moment; but when his broad back turned as he called Homicide on my phone, I looked at the little white pasteboard:

Signor Pollini
Fine Canaries and other Birds
23 Vaughn Street

I looked on my desk, where all this time I'd assumed that half-dead canary still lay. But it wasn't there now. I scouted around the room, glanced into the anteroom where Kay was standing. That half-dead canary must have managed to fly out of the window. It seemed patent that Bascomb, in his mad condition, had stolen it from Signor Pollini. Nor would it have seemed altogether strange that an eccentric bird-seller should refer to his bird as a 'lovely'—*if Bascomb had not used similar terms, calling the bird Evelyn, and then—*

The telephone, which Flaherty had just finished using, jangled into my thoughts. Some quick hunch made me take a flying leap for it, before Flaherty's clumsy hands could get it. "Probably headquarters callin' back," he protested. He was wrong.

"Farr—this is Clavering!" The throat specialist's tones were fraught with horror. "I can't come after all! A ghastly thing! As I was leaving the house—I ran into a girl. Her throat—same thing you described, Farr! She's still alive, and I'm going to try to operate . . ."

My heart had turned to ice as I thought at once of Evelyn Weeks, in whose search Bascomb must have fallen afoul. Clavering had never met her, wouldn't know—I saw Flaherty's inquiring eye, made my voice casual: "All right, old man. Be seeing you soon." When I hung up I told Flaherty it was an old pal. Then, saying I'd see if my assistant could come out of the anteroom now, I went in there, closed and locked the door. By the time Flaherty smelled a rat and pounded on that door, I had Kay out the window and on the way down the fire-escape. She was game all right. She'd recovered her nerve, was following my lead without question. Signor Pollini's trail would have to wait. I wanted to get Kay to Clavering anyway, lest Bascomb's touch had contaminated her. And I might need her to identify—

We got away just in time. Sirens filled the fog behind us, and I saw the prowlers and cruisers braking in front of the building as our own cab sped away. The police would take care of what was left of poor Bascomb; had we tarried, we would have been held for questioning.

CHAPTER TWO

A Dead Bird Singing . . .

DR. HUGO CLAVERING'S sanitarium was a neat cream-brick building of three stories, on Poplar Street. A sour-faced reception nurse, her hair a tight black bun under her cap, admitted us to a luxurious, modernistic waiting room.

One other person was seated in the room—a woman, rather big and well-

shaped. Her hair and face were hidden by one of those wind-around hats and a veil. She didn't look up when we came in.

I turned to the far less inviting figure of the sour-faced nurse. "Take us right to Dr. Clavering!" I demanded. I'd told Kay as much as I could on the way down, and she was steeling herself now for the ordeal. "Hurry! No time to lose!"

"One moment, Nurse! I was here before this couple!"

It sounded like a saw rasping across nails! If the nurse hadn't turned to her, I wouldn't have believed that voice had come from the veiled woman across the room. It was a harsh, grating voice, ruining at once the first impression of glamour.

"If Doctor Clavering sees any patients, you will be first, Miss Johnston." The nurse sounded like a prim old-maid teacher. "He's on the second floor now, on an emergency operation." Her next words were for me. "You will have to wait your turn, Mr.—"

But she was talking to air. I swung Kay right past her, to a flight of tiled stairs. On the second floor a blossomy, yet suffocating odor guided us. We came to a white door. The sour-faced nurse was panting up the stairs after us as I knocked, called low: "Doctor Clavering! It's Farr and Kay!"

"Come in!" Clavering's voice answered. "But careful—ethylene gas." That didn't register on me at the moment, though the blossomy, suffocating odor met us like a blow as we entered the white, clean operating room, with its gleaming instrument cases.

Two white-robed men stood over the operating table, where a sheet-covered form, the form of a young woman lay. A cone at the end of a long hose connected to upright tanks, was over her nose. Her mouth was pried wide open by a shiny metal clamp.

I recognized Dr. Hugo Clavering at once; he was the heavier-set man, and his

gloved, spatulate hands, which had performed many modern miracles in throat-surgery, were busy now, as he nodded at the other, tall figure administering the gas.

"Get masks for them, Paul! So they can come close and see if this is the same malady as that man. . . ."

I knew then that the tall fellow, who wore horn-rim glasses, was the Doctor's nephew, a young med student following in his uncle's footsteps. As Paul went out of the room for masks, Dr. Clavering, handling valves, spoke grimly: "Found this girl walking on Poplar Street, dazed, her throat shrinking. Her pulse is low; not much chance."

I craned my head. Above the bloody top of the sheet, I saw the girl's neck—horribly scrawny, shriveled and still shriveling! I thought of Evelyn Weeks' little white throat, turned and saw the graceful curve of my own Kay's—then Paul brought the masks. We put them on, and as Paul went to get new instruments from a case near the door, I guided Kay towards that table.

"I—I don't think—" Kay began, and then Dr. Clavering's voice cut in like a clap of thunder. "Down! *Look out!*"

His white-robed figure had leaped backwards; Paul had ducked at the instrument case—and sheer instinct made me drag Kay to the floor, my own body half rolling over hers to protect her.

There was a blinding flash of flame, as with a window-shattering explosion, *the girl on the table became a human, bursting bomb!*

NONE of us were hurt. Dr. Clavering had ripped off his mask, and his deep-lined face was gray. Paul, getting to his feet, had lost his mask and broken his glasses. Kay had fainted, and Dr. Clavering bent to rub her wrists. "The ethylene!" he was gasping. I realized then. I'd read about accidents happening, with the use of

this modern anesthetic. "Think static electricity made a spark—?" I demanded. For the slightest spark would set the highly inflammable stuff off.

"No!" Hugo Clavering cried. "It was no accident! I saw a flaming bit of rag—a torch, come in from the door!"

"That's true," Paul confirmed. "I saw it myself. The door was open."

I dashed out the door as Clavering was bringing Kay to moaning consciousness. Out in the hall I almost stumbled over another prone figure. It was the sour-faced nurse, just getting to her feet; she'd lost her cap and there was an ugly welt across her head. . . . "Someone hit me!" she was crying plaintively.

I guided her to her feet, then dashed downstairs to the first floor. The waiting room, I saw at once, was empty—that beautiful veiled woman with the raspy voice was gone. I even opened the street door and looked out, but there was nothing but fog. When I got upstairs again, the nurse said of course it hadn't been Miss Johnston who slugged her; why, Miss Johnston had been coming here for seven years with her chronic laryngitis—anyway it had been a man, she had seen a man's hand.

This time I couldn't get away before the police, whom Dr. Clavering had called at once, arrived. Inspector Daniels, weary-faced Homicide chief, eyed me suspiciously. "What's the idea of running out of your office, Farr? Is the Socialite Shamus so superior he can high-hat us at one killing to go to another?"

Dr. Clavering's influence soon cleared me, and when I finally got out and took a cab, alone, I made sure the cabby shook off any possible police tail. I didn't want the police around me for several reasons.

I hopped out of the cab in the heart of the ill-kempt poor Italian section, with its ever-present odors of garlic and wine. Turning down the meanest street of all, Vaughn Street, I came to number 23—the

address on that card of Signor Pollini. It was a dingy-fronted little store. Dusk was in the air as I reached the door. I found it locked, saw the placard:

BE BACK SOON. PROPRIETOR

There were cages in the window. A green parrot was in one, the rest held canaries.

I crossed the street, strolled along the opposite sidewalk, smoking a cigarette and waiting, watchfully. I still felt shaken. One reason I'd left Kay in Clavering's care was because, in addition to the shock she'd been through, I felt she'd be in danger if she stayed near me. When she'd come to my office, she'd been attacked; when we'd got to Clavering's—!

That girl on the table would have died anyway, without talking. And not only had Kay, as it had turned out, been sure it wasn't Evelyn Weeks; but the police, before I'd left, had rushed the girl's fingerprints to headquarters and they had proved her to be one Minna Barnes, who had been a frequent guest on the morning line-up.

Also, though Clavering had had time to examine the shrunk throat before the explosion, he would have remained baffled in any event; all he knew was that vital organs of the throat seemed actually to have been ripped out—causing surrounding tissues to collapse . . .

And then, why had the already doomed girl been turned into a human bomb? Well, that explosion had occurred at the moment Kay and I moved toward the table! It could only have been an attempt to get me out of the way, and that summed up to the fact that I must possess important evidence without knowing it, and that my hide was now none too safe.

Before leaving, I'd told Clavering confidentially all that Bascomb had said or done. The doctor couldn't explain that attack on Kay; but as to the canary stuff

—I was surprised to see his face grow thoughtful: "You know, Farr, I'm quite a hobbist on old legends; lycanthropy and all that. There are legends, which many still believe, about humans turning into birds. You know the popular blue-plate chinaware with the Chinese Willow design on it—the lovers turned into two doves." When Paul, his studious nephew, had scoffed, Clavering added: "Many medical facts of today were witchcraft and black magic a century or so ago!"

ABRUPTLY I jerked out of my thoughts, flicked away my cigarette, conscious once more of ill-kempt Vaughn Street—and of two figures moving in the mist across the street. I saw the man first.

He was hunched in a black cloak. His hair was a wild black mop. He looked like a huge, walking bird.

The girl beside him was taller than he was, yet he was leading her by the hand. She looked foreign, in cheap clothes unbecoming to her slim figure. Her hair was black, offsetting the daze whiteness of her face. She wasn't Evelyn Weeks.

Signor Pollini, as I assumed the cloaked man to be, opened his store with a key and led the girl in. No more than a second or two passed before I footed across the street and followed them into the store. A bell tinkled as I walked through the door.

The cloaked man was just thrusting a

bird-cage, in which I glimpsed the yellow of a canary, behind and below the counter.

There was no sign of the girl!

The store was filled with the twittering of the numerous other birds, most of them canaries, whose cages were openly displayed.

"What I can do for you, Mister?" Flaherty had been right about those eyes. They were sharp as pin-points.

"I'm thinking of buying a canary."

He promptly went into a sales talk, showing me birds. "These are fine Harz Mountain canaries. . . . These from your own South—"

My ears went alert as above his accents an the bird-twitterings I heard a single bird-voice singing. I was no expert on birds, but I'd never heard a canary sing like this!

The singing came from below the counter.

Curiosity made me turn impulsively to that counter; in one grab I had the cage from a lower shelf. The canary in it stopped singing as I lifted it. My heart tightened. That bird looked half-dead, yet—

Something sharp pricked my neck.

"Put down, Mister, that cage!"

I turned enough to see the gleaming stiletto Pollini held jabbed against my nape. His eyes said he knew how to use it. I put down the cage, and he let me turn—only to jab the blade against my vest.



The Killer Was a Gentleman

A Steve Midnight Novelette

By John K. Butler

One Corpse Too Many

A Novelette of the Dean

By Merle Constiner

Contact Man

A Novelette

By Roger Torrey

and short stories by Cornell Woolrich and O. B. Myers

**DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE**

"I have enough stealing my birds, see!"

I couldn't blame him in a way. It was his property; and he might, despite the strange happenings, be quite innocent.

"Look," I said. "I heard it singing. I'd like to buy it."

"Is no good," he said quickly.

"But the way it was singing—"

"Is sick. No good."

"What kind of bird is it?"

"Is North Star canary. Rare. No can get more . . . is sick." He lowered the knife. "I sell you fine Harz canary," he said.

He was obviously anxious to get rid of me. I had plenty of questions I wanted to ask, about Bascomb, about the girl I'd seen come in here—but I suppressed an impulse to flash my badge and get tough. I wouldn't believe anything a man with eyes like that said anyway. I shrugged, said I'd think it over and return.

Crossing the street again I could feel his eyes following me from the store-window. I casually entered a coffee-shop, where I could still command a view of the pet-shop. I had coffee and doughnuts which I didn't want. Then I found a telephone booth which still commanded a view of the shop, and I phoned Dr. Clavering.

He told me Kay was all right. Then he told me something else.

Earlier in the day, the police had fished a girl's body out of the river. Only now, down at the morgue, had they discovered that she hadn't drowned, but had died from a mysterious shrunk throat. She had been identified as Sally Keiths, a girl from a well-to-do family who thought she'd been out visiting friends. She must have died several days ago. My mind was fierce with the question: *How many others, perhaps*—and then I hung up hurriedly, for my eyes, still on that pet-shop, spotted a trim-uniformed man entering it.

A man from a very swank private messenger service, I realized. What would he be doing in that dingy store?

He came out in a moment—carrying a cloth-covered cage. I was pretty sure it was the sick canary Pollini wouldn't sell!

TAILING the messenger—he was no kid, but a grizzled old guy—was easy enough; he used the city bus-line, rode uptown. He got off at Nedley Drive, and I was still tailing him as he approached a square building where in the darkening fog a neon sign flashed:

CLUB MARIGOLD

Icy needles seemed to prick my spine. Bascomb's raving: 'marry' and 'go' or 'gold'—and now a sick canary was being delivered to a place called the Club Marigold! Not to the front entrance, which wasn't open yet for the night, but to a service door in the rear. I saw the messenger ring a bell—saw the door opened by a tall man in tails whose immaculate appearance was marred by a cast in one eye.

The man with the cast in his eye took the bird and paid the messenger who then scurried away. The door was closing, but just before it closed I heard two voices. One was the man's calling back: "It's the bird, Marigold!"

"Good! Hope this one doesn't die on us!"

That second voice was like a saw rasping across nails! No doubt about it—it was the voice of Miss Johnston, that veiled woman who had vanished from Dr. Clavering's waiting room!

The door closed. I walked to the front of the club, where a revolving door was locked by a chain. A huge placard caught my eye:

**TONIGHT!
COME AND HEAR ANOTHER
MASKED SINGER!
ANOTHER BEAUTIFUL GOLDEN
MASKED GIRL!
WHO IS SHE? THE WHOLE TOWN
WILL BE GUESSING!**

CHAPTER THREE

Horror Takes No Holiday

THE doorman looked like an ape, in a general's uniform. He gave each swank customer the hard eye as he helped them into the revolving door. I wasn't alone now. Dr. Hugo Clavering and Kay Prentiss were with me.

When we got inside the jammed club, the headwaiter who led us to the ring-side table Clavering had reserved, proved to be a tall man with a cast in one eye. I wondered if he was involved in this.

singer named Marigold had been one of its main attractions, with her famous song, *Fires of Love*. Repeal saw the club close, and Marigold dropped out of sight. But recently she had re-opened the club, all done over modern, and renamed after herself. She didn't sing any more; instead she had these masked girls, one each night. They were good; rumor said they were really famous stars, appearing incognito.

I'd also done some research on canaries. There was no such thing as a 'North Star' canary—nor any report of a canary that could sing almost human music!

Next month's issue of **STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES** features a new story by an old favorite. The story is **SONG OF THE FLAME**, and the writer is **R. S. Lerch**.

Tell your friends and let them enjoy it too!

We took our seats and ordered Old-fashioned. Clavering seemed less at home in full dress than in his white robes. Kay, in an emerald-green strapless gown that went well with her auburn hair, was looking at me tensely. I'd hated bringing her into this again, but I thought that I might need her. . . .

As for Clavering, I hadn't told him why I'd got him here either, though I'd asked him more questions about his patient, Miss Johnston. He had added little to what his nurse had told me: Miss Johnston had come to him seven years ago with laryngitis, had asked him if he could operate to restore her voice—which he'd said was impossible. He didn't even know her address; she came, paid her bills, and went away again.

But I'd done some inquiring in other quarters. From a newspaper pal, I'd learned that the address which was now the Club Marigold had been, in prohibition days, a hot speak called the *Oasis*. A

"Really, Farr," Dr. Clavering broke into my thoughts. "I can understand your wanting to get some relaxation—I even tried to get Paul to come away from his studies, too—but to bring us to a noisy, torrid place like this. It's—"

His voice trailed off, and he looked like a man seeing a ghost. Simultaneously a verbal ripple passed through the club: "Oh, you look divine!" . . . "How are you dear!" . . . "We're dying to hear tonight's singer!"

Swinging around in my chair, I saw the woman coming down past the tables, bowing acknowledgements to the guests. She wore a tight sequin gown that looked as if her Grecian figure had been poured into it. Her hair, visible now, wound in two braids around her head, was pure gold. Her face was good, too, even as it went surprised when her route brought her to our table. . . .

Clavering, jaw gaping, rose awkwardly to his feet; I rose too. It was the big

shapely woman who broke the silence, her surprised blue eyes wide. "Doctor Clavering!" again that raspy voice spoiled her attractiveness. "So you uncovered my incognito—found out I was Marigold!"

"I—" blurted Clavering.

But Marigold was perfectly at ease about it. To the envy of other guests, she drew a chair up to our table. To the displeasure of Kay, she drew it between Kay's chair and mine—for she had made the doctor introduce us, had said something about being sorry she'd been rude to us in Clavering's waiting room. She seemed ignorant of what had happened in the operating room, or of any intruder—she'd left because she didn't have time to wait. . . .

"You see, Doctor," her raspy voice included me, "I feel so ashamed of my voice, was hoping you could cure it—" She sighed.

Then a fanfare came from the band, the lights dimmed—and I felt my heart thudding against my ribs. The crowd had hushed.

A single spot funneled down to pick up a girl standing on the dais, facing us from no more than twelve feet away.

She wore a gown of yellow silk that gilded her perfect little figure in gold. She wore a gold domino mask. I decided that her long golden hair was a wig.

Strings strummed, and the masked girl sang. She didn't move! she looked like a big doll, only her lips moving. But her voice!

The full glory of it didn't show until, having run through some current songs, she went into a slower number:

Fires of love!

Burning, yearning fires.

Consuming my soul . . .

Turning my heart to flame. . . .

I saw the glitter of Marigold's rustling sequins in the semi-gloom, heard her raspy whisper: "It's almost as if I were

back in the Oasis days, singing my famous song!"

For a moment all my uncanny suspicions seemed baseless. Wasn't it logical for Marigold to hire a beautiful singer, put her in a golden wig, so she, Marigold, could experience once again the triumphs of her past?

And then Kay's lips were close to my ear. "Larry!" came her queer whisper. "If it weren't for that voice, that wig—"

"Yes, Kay?" The coldness was back on me. I hadn't seen anything familiar about that figure, but Kay had been a close friend of—

"Evelyn Weeks," her whisper came in quick negation, telling me what I knew, "could never sing like that!"

True. Yet seeming to mingle with that glorious voice were the contralto words George Bascomb had said to a canary: "*I won't let you go there tonight, Evelyn, to sing gloriously and die!*" And, despite my common sense, I thought of Pollini's sick but incredible-voiced canary being delivered here—of Clavering's talk of legends. . . .

I had to fight to control the impulse to leap up to that singer and rip off the domino mask.

SHE finished '*Fires of Love*' amid house-rocking applause, and began another song, I leaned close to Marigold.

"Who is she?" I demanded, trying to catch her off guard.

"The singer?" A wistful smile. "To me, Mr. Farr, she is the Marigold that used to be. That's how I wish my guests to know her."

No dice there. I tried another tack. Dropping my whisper low as if not wishing Kay to hear, I said this singer appealed to me, that I'd like to meet her. I hinted that it might be worth heavy dough to me. I hardly expected Marigold to assent—yet she said she thought it could be arranged. We'd go back to the dressing

rooms—the singer would soon be finished.

I felt it was safe to leave Kay with Clavering—since I'd be the one perhaps going into danger. I made an excuse about looking into a possible case for Marigold. Kay didn't approve—she'd seen our *tête-à-tête*. I flashed her a glance, but women will be women, and her hazel eyes had a green tint.

Marigold led me past the masked singing girl, through a small curtained door to a hall lined with dressing rooms. I realized that the door at its very end was the street door where the messenger had delivered that canary. I was wary, my hand ready to go to my shoulder-holstered gun.

We went into another larger room—actually a boudoir, fragrant with an exotic scent I'd noticed on Marigold herself. Saying we could wait here with the door open so we'd hear the singer coming back, Marigold seated me on a soft divan. She poured me a drink of golden liquor, apologized for not being able to drink herself. I sipped the sweetish stuff, put little into me, lest it be drugged.

She sat down beside me, and the sequins rustled close. Her voice, answering my question as to who the singer was, didn't sound so bad now, in its whisper: "Frankly, Mr. Farr, I don't know her name or the names of the others who sang here. An agent, mysterious man I've spoken to only on the phone, sends them to me; I pay them—and they go."

I wondered if the agent could be named Pollini; but he had only sent a canary—and I didn't see any sign of one now. Marigold's whisper checked my thoughts again. "You are a fickle man, Mr. Farr. You desert your pretty girl friend to meet a singer. I daresay if I were ten years younger myself. . . ." She took me in her arms, pressed her lips hotly against mine. I thrust her away. Through the open door, I could see part of a row of dressing rooms extending down the hall. The door

to one of these had opened. A girl in plain street clothes and a felt hat walked out of it and turned down the hall. I could just see her back, and the chestnut color of her hair. But the way she walked, like some mechanical doll—!

Clavering would take good care of Kay. I reached a decision, barged after the girl who even now was opening the street-door, going out. I heard Marigold calling me, her voice harsh and angry, but she wasn't going to stall me now! I'd already noticed that the singing had stopped, and this girl—

The headwaiter with the cast in his eye suddenly stood in my path. Marigold must have summoned him. One hand was in a pocket of his immaculate dress suit. "Sorry, sir, but you can't go out this way."

"I think I can!" and I explained how with a right hook that landed accurately. The headwaiter collapsed on his tails. No one else tried to stop me as I barged out into the night mist. Up the lonely street I heard the rhythmic automaton-like click of heels even before my running steps brought the girl into view again. She walked as one in a trance, looking neither right nor left, yet walking faster and faster, as if a spring inside her were accelerating. She was heading for Nedley Drive's bright lights. I had to run to overtake her. Falling into step beside her, I touched her arm: "Pardon me, Miss—"

I felt her arm shiver at my touch. She kept walking ahead, until I took a step which planted me squarely in her path. She halted and I saw her face in misty street lamplight.

"Hello, Evelyn," I said, feeling sick inside.

I was sure of it. The face was dead white in the gloom—the eyes themselves were dull, lusterless, but I didn't need Kay to tell me this girl was Evelyn Weeks, George Bascomb's fiancée!

"You know me, Evelyn! I'm Larry Farr!"

Her eyes remained dull as her lips moved. "Please let me pass." Ice seemed to clog my veins. She was Evelyn—but her voice was the masked singer's glorious contralto!

"I'll get you a cab, Evelyn, and—"

"Please let me pass."

Where was she going in her trance-like state? In the next instant the answer came—she wasn't going anywhere? I stood there frozen and helpless, for what could all my strength, or my gun, avail me against an invisible something that reached out of the mist for her lovely white throat and—

She didn't scream. Instead she clawed with her hands as if to fight off that invisible thing. But I saw the white neck shrinking, even as Bascomb's neck had shrunk—saw her coat-collar begin to yawn blackly inside, saw the blood drool from her lips. She fell suddenly. She lay on the pavement, her throat going thinner, stringier. It didn't last long. A shudder went through her, and she lay still. I remembered George Bascomb's prophecy that she would sing gloriously—and die!

I must have yelled, for people were coming from the nearby thoroughfare. A beat-cop was running, his whistle shrilling. At the same instant, as my eyes probed the mist as if looking for this invisible throat-ripper—I felt my heart somersault. Down the street at a hack-stand a shape that looked astonishingly like a monstrous bird was whisking into a cab—and the cab was pulling away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder at the Marigold

I LEFT that pitiful, shrunken-necked body of Evelyn Weeks. I got away from there before anyone could see or stop me . . . and the cabby I inspired with a five-dollar bill got me to Vaughn Street

in the very wake of Signor Pollini, so that I was right behind Pollini's cloaked figure when he let himself into his dark pet-shop and turned on lights inside.

Gun in hand, I pushed through the door, my horror-numbered senses scarcely hearing the tinkling bell.

Pollini didn't seem to hear it either; he didn't turn towards where I stood with my gun ready. He was hovering about his bird-cages. I caught his hawk-like profile, saw one eye, and it gleamed with stark madness. I heard his voice, a sort of croak now, and though it was speaking a foreign tongue, there was madness in it. He was talking to those birds! And now, in brief spasms, he lapsed into broken English:

"No, is cruel . . . my lovelies . . . so many die . . ." More foreign gibberish. Then: "You, my sweets, I fix your throats so nice—little knife in throat—to make you sing, to make you my North Star canaries—so beautiful singing. . . . But so many die from strain . . . throat all shrunked . . . Sally, Minna, Evelyn—dead, gone . . . *Dios!*"

For the first time in my life I felt I was going mad. He had spoken the names of the victims of that throat-shrinking doom! He had spoken their names, and I had seen him bring a girl in here who vanished, seen only a bird in a cage—and now he was habbling to these other canaries:

"But you, Alicia, Louise, Jean . . . Grace . . . you still live! You sing. Maybe you die not so soon. . . ." He fumbled with another cage, where I saw a listless little canary. "You—soon I fix your pretty throat too, Kay!"

"You devil!" I heard my own voice scream.

In a red haze, I saw him whirl, saw his stiletto flash out—as I was aiming my gun at him, my finger going tense on the trigger. "You lying devil! Kay's safe with my friend Clavering!" I was no

detective now: I was a guy thinking of his girl, and raving mad. "She's safe, you damned—!"

He looked at my gun, and he looked at me, and then his eyes weren't pin-points—they were large and surprised, as under his shaggy head his neck slowly began to shrivel. It shrank faster then, and the knife fell from his hand before he himself fell like some marionette from broken strings. I lowered my gun feeling this must all be a nightmare. I saw the life going out of Signor Pollini, saw one claw-like hand jerk—something glinting in it strangely. And then I heard the sound of a car outside; there came a shattering of plate glass, and for the second time I was flinging myself down—down past Pollini's neck-shrinking body to the rear of the store, even as my eardrums were nearly split by the terrific detonation! Plaster rained upon me. A broken rafter smashed on my head then and with rockets shooting into space before me, I went out.

The first thing I saw was an interne's white sleeve. But I wasn't in the hospital. I was out on the misty sidewalk on a stretcher. Police were crowding around, and turning my eyes I saw the shambles of broken glass and twisted framework which had been Pollini's pet-shop.

"He was lucky. The other one, and most everything else in the place, was blown to pieces," the interne was telling the weary-faced Inspector Daniels.

Daniels grunted. "That alien girl was lucky too; Pollini's been hiding her in a closet there ever since she slipped past the immigration authorities."

My mind struggled to absorb all this, telling me Pollini was being cleared, that the girl I'd seen go in with him was satisfactorily explained, and yet he had called those birds by names of girls that now were dead, and one bird.

My head throbbed, but that didn't prevent me from getting off that stretcher.

They tried to stop me. They wanted to send me to a hospital, and Daniels had a million questions . . . but I told them I wanted to go home. I got away.

In a drugstore two block down I squeezed into a phone-booth dialed Kay's home. The bell rang and rang. There was no answer. I knew Kay was a light sleeper. My fingers shook as I dialed Clavering's number.

Paul, his nephew, answered; evidently he was still up studying: "I'll wake Uncle Hugo immediately," he said. "I believe he was trying to get in touch with you, Mr. Farr."

THERE was little suggestion of sleep in Dr. Clavering's tone when he came on the phone. He told me that he had not taken Kay home. Kay had been peeved about my scene with Marigold. She had said she was going out of town for a few days, to some friends.

She'd left the club alone, to get a cab. Clavering had looked for me and found me gone. He'd stayed in the club until he'd heard there was another throat-shrinking murder close by, then—But I wasn't listening. I was raving at him for letting Kay get out of his care, and inwardly blaming myself. I should have kept Kay close. Now—yet Pollini had been innocent, it seemed; how could he have known that Kay—I struggled with my mind, trying to think straight. Something I was trying to remember. Something that had glittered in Pollini's hand. I knew then. *A little piece of sequin material!*

"Marigold!" I didn't even realize I was shouting it into the phone, with Clavering still on the wire. "Marigold — Pollini'd come from *her*! She must be the one—she lied about getting those girls from an agent—! I'm going back there and wring the bellish truth out of her!"

"Wait, Farr!" Clavering's stunned voiced came. "Don't do anything rash . . .

Look, I'll go with you! If there's reason to believe that this woman is mixed in this business, we'll call the police."

"Not until we find Kay!" I gritted. Any false move might endanger her if she was still—I was thinking of her lovely white throat, praying. For a glimmer of hair-truth was dawning on me. . . .

Less than fifteen minutes later, with the first hint of grey dawn in the air, I was outside the Club Marigold with Doctor Clavering, whose cab had arrived shortly after my own. His worried eyes took in my disheveled appearance: my evening clothes almost as mangled as Bascomb's had been, my hat lost, and a lump on my head.

The Club Marigold was closed. The neon sign was dark, the awning down, the ape-like doorman gone too. There was a steel chain on the revolving door. But I remembered Marigold's room—she probably lived in this place!

I didn't try to tamper with the strong steel chain on the revolving door. I took Clavering around to the service door. It was locked, but I was soon working with a bit of specially formed steel wire.

It took me just a few minutes to pick that lock. We went in. Marigold's room was wide-open and—empty! My hopes sank. To make sure she wasn't here we went into the club proper, into the depressing vacancy of the deserted night-club, with tables piled up, and band instruments lying on the dais. Nobody here, and we were about to leave when—

"Listen!" Clavering gripped my arm. "A sound seemed to come from below!"

I'd heard nothing, but just the same I had my gun in one hand and my flashlight in the other as we found stairs leading down to a cellar.

"Look out, Farr!" For the second time Clavering yelled a warning to me.

I felt a sudden draught, saw Clavering diving for cover, and in the next instant a shape darker than the gloom was leap-

ing at me before I had time to swing around my gun. As he came close there was just enough light for me to see that he was the burly, ape-like doorman. There was a sap in his big hand—it was swinging viciously for my skull!

I ducked. Air swished just to one side of me. He flung himself upon me then, and he had all the simean strength his appearance promised. I had dropped my gun! His arms fairly crushed me in a professional wrestling grip. . . . I called for help, but there was no sign that Clavering had heard. Weakened by what I'd been through, I knew I was no match for this giant.

Then I heard the scream. I didn't know where it came from; it sounded muffled—yet somehow I recognized it, with certainty.

Kay's voice—screaming in terror, and pain!

IT DID more in the way of reviving my strength than any elixir. The ape-man must have got a surprise when I freed my fists with one savage jerk and smashed my right one to his simean jaw. I hit him again as he was going down; I heard his head crack against the stone flagging, knew he'd stay out a long time.

I had my flashlight penciling the gloom again, found my gun, swept the beam around the cellar. But except for the prone ape-man and me, the cellar was empty! Clavering had gone. But Kay was somewhere near! I hadn't imagined that scream.

Another memory came then. This club had once been a prohibition joint. Such places had a hide-out for liquor. I scouted furiously around and finally located the panel door behind some piled boxes; a door painted like the stone wall, but really wood. It opened at my push.

The draught I'd felt before met me, also light, from electric bulbs in the ceiling of a catacomb-like corridor. I slipped

along the passage, gun in hand. Then I heard it again—Kay's voice! Moaning now . . .

It guided me like a sound-beacon. To a small alcove opening, through it, into a white room gleaming with surgical instruments and reeking with the odor of medicine—and blood.

My gun leveled as I took in the scene. I saw the operating table first, saw on it the form of Kay Prentiss! I saw why her voice was muffled—the gleaming metal clamp pried into her mouth! But there was no anesthetic equipment here! I saw this and also—

Standing over her, in this room so much like another operating room—standing and gripping a scalpel, was Doctor Hugo Clavering!

All that kept me from shooting him dead where he stood was my own utter unbelief that it could be him! I rasped something, and he whirled, eyes widening at my gun-muzzle.

"Farr, I—"

"So it's you!" I grated. "You lied about Kay leaving this club! You brought her here, then fixed yourself an alibi—and led me into this trap! You thought that big ape would finish me, came on back here to—damn you, *what have you been doing to Kay?*"

"Don't shoot, Farr!" He was shaking. He dropped the scalpel, advanced towards me, his extended hands a plea. "I can explain—listen—"

I smashed at him with my free fist. He sprawled to the floor, and I rushed to the table, started unstrapping Kay's moaning figure . . . I didn't even see the other three men come charging in. When I did see them, they were upon me. They were the three" bruisers who had hovered around the masked singer, Evelyn, upstairs. I fought them with all the strength I had left, got in several wallops, but it didn't help. They had my gun: one stunned me with a sap, the others hit

and kicked me as I fell barely conscious.

One had stout cord; I was bound as tight as a mummy. Then I was carried roughly out of the operating room, away from Kay and from Clavering, of whom I'd lost sight since he'd fallen from my blow.

Down the corridor again, and now a new sound reaching my ears . . . a glorious voice, raised in song:

"Fires of love!

Burning, yearning fires . . ."

CHAPTER FIVE

Sing a Song for Satan

BRIGHT lights dazzled me again. I was flung to the floor of a wide, square chamber. And with horror I was taking in the scene. For I might almost have been back in Pollini's pet shop, its size now grown gargantuan. The side of the room was lined with huge gilt cages—two of them covered with black clothes.

In each of the uncovered ones, some five of them, stood a girl—dull-eyed and listless!

And one girl, clad in a robe of flowing gold cloth, stood on a dais in the center of the chamber, singing *Fires of Love*.

Behind her stood the headwaiter with the cast in his eye. That cast gave him a satanic look now. He held a long, evil raw-hide whip.

My eyes wrenched to another part of the room then—to a golden baby-grand piano, where, her golden hair down to her shoulders now, her voluptuous figure clad in golden squins, Marigold sat and played an accompaniment.

The singing girl struck a sudden flat note. Marigold lifted her hands from the piano. Her head nodded, slowly.

The raw-hide whip in the headwaiter's hand crackled through the air, snaked viciously across the singing girl's back.

She moaned a little. The man stepped back. Marigold played the phrase over, and the girl sang it without a false note. When she had finished, she was led to one of the covered cages, thrust into it. The analogy was clear—you covered a canary when you didn't want it to sing.

Marigold rose from the piano and came striding to the spot where I struggled against my bonds. She looked down at me, her eyes blue ice. "So, Mr. Farr, you failed to find me attractive—because of my lost voice!" The rasp was like a tigress' hungry growl. "Well, when we are finished with your girl friend, you won't find her attractive either—though *her* voice will be most appealing. You will probably go mad before we even fix you—mad as your friend George Bascomb, mad as Pollini!"

She laughed harshly, and turned away. In the next instant, the same three thugs who had bound me were dragging in the figure of Kay—a dazed, moaning Kay.

One of the thugs spoke to Marigold. "The Doc! He's dead!"

Lord, had my fist in its fury killed Clavering? The man I still could not believe to be the fiend who—

"Did he finish his operation?" Marigold rasped.

"Dunno. He was startin'—then he had to go home to fix up his alibi. He come back—well, there's blood inside her throat—"

"It might just be the first scratch; you can't tell by looking," Marigold rasped. "He does his work too neatly for that—thanks to Pollini's specimens." Her glaring blue eyes fixed on Kay, who stood as if in a trance. "But we'll soon find out if he operated! I won't use this one in the club, so we will make her sing in full power at once! If he operated, it will kill her. If not, then I shall perform the operation myself—I know how! It was I who decided it could be done almost the way Pollini did it . . . to his birds. I'll do it

to her detective friend too. Give them both beautiful voices, and death!"

Every muscle in my body strained against my bonds as that glimmer of truth I'd had now become full comprehension. I was seeing the set-up. Pollini had somehow found an operation he could perform on canaries, to give them a more glorious voice. And Marigold and her partner—Clavering, of all people in the world—were performing a similar operation on human beings, giving them singing voices! Using Pollini's birds as models. But like the birds, the women died from the strain of it: that throat-shrinking death must be the natural result—Yes, it made sense now. Even Clavering's doing it made sense. Who else but a skilled nose-and-throat man—but I still found it hard to believe!

Kay had been dragged to the dais. The headwaiter was behind her, with that whip! Marigold was moving to the piano: "You will sing, Kay Prentiss . . . I will tell you the words to sing." In a raspy voice she did so, playing the notes. "You must know that song—it is famous. I who can't sing it any more, but still pray that I can get my voice back!"

YES, it was getting clearer every moment. A singer, popular, beloved, gone mad with the loss of her voice. Experimenting in the hope of discovering a *safe* operation that could be performed on her. And meanwhile, using those doomed girls to crowd a night-club with customers . . .

I yelled out: "Kay! Don't sing! If you had that operation it will mean—!"

For an instant, as she stood there dazed, Kay's hazel eyes seemed to find me—flashed momentarily, but then the dazed dull look came back. Pain or shock had already turned her into a dazed pawn. Had the operation been performed? For I figured it was done cruelly, without anesthetics—so the pain would drive the

girls mad, and the whip and other brutal treatment turn them into obedient automatons. When Marigold was through with them, she could send them out on the streets, or to the river—to die!

I made fresh struggles against my bonds. One part of the cord, on my left wrist, was yielding just a little—even as Marigold struck a chord on the piano: "*Sing, Kay!*"

And to my horror, Kay obeyed! As she began to sing, I prayed her voice wouldn't be the artificial singing voice made by an operation. If it weren't, Marigold would carry out her threat to operate herself—but perhaps by that time, if I could only loosen these bonds more—

"Fires of love!

Burning, yearning fires.

Consuming my soul . . .

Turning my heart to flame. . . ."

Marigold's rasping shriek of triumph confirmed my own ears. That voice, that rich contralto voice, was as glorious as poor Evelyn's had been at the club! The operation must have been performed, and Kay was committing suicide, singing full-voiced! The only slim good it did her was to spare her from the headwaiter's whip!

Again I guess desperation lent me strength and cunning; for as I worked on the loose spot on my wrist cords, as Kay was getting half-way through that death-song, that swan-song, *I* was getting free! No one was watching me. All eyes, even those of the three thugs who stood nearest me, were on Kay.

I extricated myself from the loosened cords, got set, and then I made a flying, berserk leap. I caught the nearest thug with a rabbit punch that felled him like a tree, and as he fell I grabbed the automatic from his hand. I didn't try to fire the gun at the other two whirling thugs, but clubbed at them blindly. One went

down right away; the other I had to hit again.

Marigold leaped up from the piano. Kay had stopped singing. The headwaiter with the cast in his eye charged towards me flecking his whip. I aimed the gun and gave him a bullet in the leg that put him out of the running.

Marigold gave a rasping scream; I saw a little pearl-handled gun in her hand. I laughed like a maniac as I leaped at her and almost broke off her wrist wrenching the gun loose. I put my hands around her plump throat. "I'll show you what it's like to get your neck squeezed, you crazy hell-cat!"

I'd have strangled the life out of her, but at that instant the cellar resounded with the pound of footsteps—and into the den of cages swarmed bluecoats and detectives, led by Inspector Daniels and—

In my surprise I let go of Marigold; she sank to the floor gasping. I turned then to stare at Doctor Hugo Clavering, who, alive and healthy, had led in the belated rescue outfit!

I stared too at Kay, who was also alive and healthy, not in a daze at all now.

"Kay!" I leaped to catch her into my arms. "You—you sang!"

"You aren't very flattering, Larry," she smiled, wan but game. "But then I guess even though I've sung at parties—I never put my heart into it like tonight. My throat was really just scratched—though I *was* dazed by fright. I thought if I could really sing well, it would stall Marigold long enough for you to get free."

I swallowed in relief, and called myself a chump for not realizing her rich contralto was natural! But I wasn't altogether a chump. I swung to Dr. Hugo Clavering. "I really couldn't get myself to believe you were the throat-ripper, Doc, when I had time to think. I know who it was now; you killed him, didn't you?"

CLAVERING nodded slowly, the grim lines in his face making him look old and tired. Then he led us to a body in the operating room, in an alcove I hadn't seen.

Paul—Clavering's nephew—lay on the floor, a bloody wound in his chest. Even in death he still looked studious; his horn-rims were still on his eyes. He was the "Doc" the thug had said was dead. The gaps in the answers I already had were filled now, as Marigold's pawns squealed, and Marigold herself raved . . . For years she had begged Dr. Clavering in vain to try operating on her, and then recently she had worked on the nephew, got him under her spell.

She'd learned about Pollini's bird-operation when she went to buy a canary. Clavering explained how the syrinx, or voice-box of a bird is similar to a human larynx. Paul had simply done a similar operation on a human scale, enlarging or decreasing the glottis, scooping out the fatty tissues . . . The girls were picked by Marigold from her own night-club customers; she'd tell some girl she had talent and that she, Marigold, could make a singer out of her—if the girl put herself completely in Marigold's hands.

George Bascomb had followed Evelyn to the club when she left for that "trip." They'd had to take him too. Altering his voice was just Paul's idea of a joke; but they'd tried some extortion on him too. Told him Evelyn was a canary and he'd have to pay to have her fixed—and to make it good had transferred him blindfolded to Pollini's pet-shop where, in lieu of caged girls, he did see caged canaries—stole the one he thought to be Evelyn, got away.

Pollini, who'd been inveigled out of his shop by Marigold, his best customer, had come back in time to see Bascomb getting away—had followed, only to be frightened from my office by Bascomb's death.

They'd regarded Pollini as a harmless fool—but what he saw and heard enabled him to guess what was being done with his bird-operation, with the birds as models . . . They'd scooped out his throat then without bothering to alter his voice. When he got back to his shop, it was natural that in his madness he should confuse his birds with the women who had been treated similarly, call them by the names he'd heard . . . To make sure of him, Marigold had sent one of her thugs to hurl that pineapple.

As for the explosion in Clavering's operating room, of the human bomb, Paul had done that. He had known I had heard Bascomb's words—thought I might know too much. He'd called Marigold, and they'd planned a doomed victim, a jobless girl Paul himself had picked up and operated on, on the street so Hugo Clavering would find her. This got me to the sanitarium—and Paul, knocking out the nurse when he went to fetch masks, had then thrown the wick of his pocket lighter at the ethylene-filled girl.

Kay had really been peeved at me and decided to go out of town—though Marigold had made that scene mostly to stall me from getting to Evelyn. When Kay left the club she was grabbed—for they felt she knew too much too . . .

Meanwhile Hugo Clavering, ever since that explosion, had been struggling against suspicions—he'd glimpsed that flaming wick. Later, when he managed to get to Kay in this hellish cellar while I was fighting that ape-man—he'd found Paul, who'd been at home "studying" only to create an alibi, now here, about to use a scalpel on Kay's throat. Clavering had struggled with the nephew: in self-defense he had killed his own kin by turning and plunging the scalpel into Paul's heart—I'd found him just when he'd finished doing that. I don't think he regretted it; he had killed a beast.

TOPS IN CRIME

FICTION

**THIS GREAT MARCH ISSUE
WILL BE ON SALE JANUARY
17TH**

Cellini Smith is back!

ROBERT REEVES, author of *Dog Eat Dog*, has booked passage in *The Flying Hearse* for L. A.'s nonesuch private eye and planted him in the middle of the damndest murder mess you'll encounter in a year's reading. Haenigson, Cellini's personal blight on the P. D. is back to throw sand in the gear box and drink Cellini's whiskey—with or without invitation—plus an amazing assortment of characters, not the least

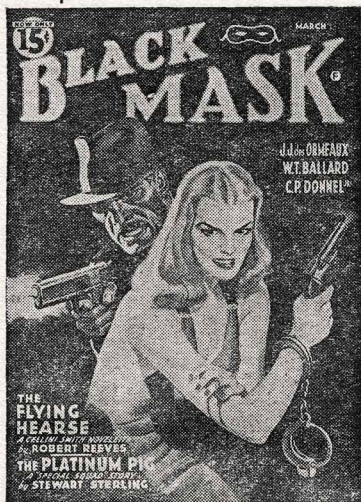
intriguing of which is Mrs. Bella Riddle—the elderly corpse in the case. There's a blonde named Margery, too—but Cellini didn't get to first base with her—and a hood called Tubby, and Mr. David Haring whose card said *Investments* but neglected to add what kind.

It's a novelette—complete in one issue—and REEVES at his best!

STEWART STERLING, who has contributed "Special Squad" stories on the Hockshop Detail and the Safe-and-Loft Squad of New York's police department, is back once more with another in this gripping series. The Emergency Squad is the detail he uses this time in *The Platinum Pig*, his finest thriller in this remarkable sequence of authentic stories of the greatest police department in the world.

We're glad to announce another old favorite will return in the March issue. J. J. des ORMEAUX, who has been absent from *Black Mask's* pages far too long, brings you *The Green and Ghastly Twig*. We had about lost hope, after years of reading crime fiction, to find a brand-new murder method—but this smashing novelette gave us the shot in the arm we needed—and it will you too. A terrific jolt is in store for you when you meet the corpse whose hair came out.

Then there's another Doc Rennie story by C. P. DONNEL, JR., shorts by W. T. BALLARD, J. LANE LINKLATER and many more.



CORPSES IN CHINATOWN

CHAPTER ONE

Death Walks In

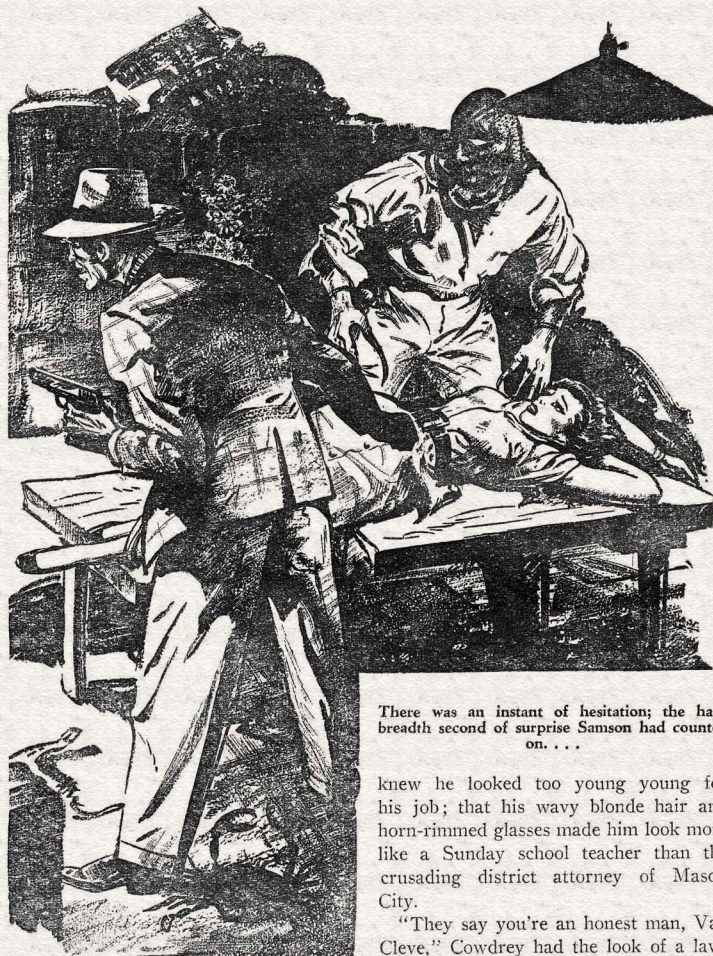
*A novelette of one man's crusade
against a crime-ring whose weird
powers seemed to come from
Satan himself!*

By WILLIAM HINES

PAUL VAN CLEVE looked down again at the card in his hand. *Joseph B. Cowdrey, Private Investigator.* He looked back up at the man who had presented it, a man who stood with his gloved hands flat on Van Cleve's desk-top, staring. Van Cleve grinned. He



On Quincy Street, Stub Samson, was a peg-legged bum, wanted by the police for murder; at City Hall, Paul Van Cleve was a polished gentleman and the smartest D. A., Mason City ever had. Were there any who suspected that both men were really one and the same? Paul knew there were—when the blood of an old Chinaman stained his office floor and a scurrying crab gave warning of wholesale death!



There was an instant of hesitation; the hair-breadth second of surprise Samson had counted on. . . .

knew he looked too young young for his job; that his wavy blonde hair and horn-rimmed glasses made him look more like a Sunday school teacher than the crusading district attorney of Mason City.

"They say you're an honest man, Van Cleve," Cowdrey had the look of a law-

yer with the witness for the opposition on the stand. "Then why is it that Chinatown is running as wide open as it ever did?"

On Van Cleve's side of the desk, Webb Wottles, chunky police lieutenant attached to the district attorney's office, jumped to his feet. "Listen, Mister!" His voice was red as his face. "I don't like the way you said that! Suppose you tell us who you are before you start throwing your weight around in the office of the best D. A. Mason City ever had!"

"Perhaps you didn't hear me the first time, Lieutenant." Cowdrey's tone was polite. Too polite, Van Cleve thought. "My name is Joseph Cowdrey, and I have been secretly employed for several months as an investigator for the Good Government League. In case your memory needs jogging, the Good Government League put the present administration into power, including Mr. Van Cleve. A few months ago this organization hired me to get them the facts. Before I give them those facts, there are a few questions I should like to have Mr. Van Cleve answer. And since there is an election coming up, I thought Mr. Van Cleve might be glad to listen to what I have to say."

Van Cleve smiled at his visitor. It was almost a friendly smile. "Don't you mean—*do* as you say, Mr. Cowdrey?"

"I can see you're as smart as they say, Van Cleve. You get the point."

"And that means—clean up Chinatown?"

Cowdrey nodded. "It means get rid of Too Fung. You're done a fair job of cleaning up this city, all except Chinatown. That's the sore spot. That's the one place you've made no attempt to touch!"

Wottles, explosive with rage, started to speak. But Van Cleve silenced him with a wave of his hand. "Too Fung lets lotteries run in his district," Van Cleve

said slowly. "And I think there's some fan-tan and a few dice games. But it's a pretty clean district. No trouble's ever come out of Chinatown . . ."

The sound of raised voices came from Van Cleve's outer office. A woman's voice said: "But you can't go in there! Mr. Van Cleve is in . . ." And then the woman stopped talking, and screamed.

The door from the outer office opened, and a little Chinaman stepped inside. He wore a derby hat and a cast-off Chesterfield coat several sizes too big for him. His lips and chin were red with blood that flowed in rivulets down each side of his Adam's apple. He stopped just inside the door, his legs buckling as if they could carry him no farther. His eyes sought Van Cleve, seemed to plead with him. Then, dramatically, and as if with his last ounce of strength, the Chinaman threw his coat open.

He wore trousers, but no shirt. And his upper torso was streaming with blood that ran from grooves cut vertically in his flesh, grooves such as might be made by the claws of a tiger. Behind him wound a bloody trail that led into the outer office, where a girl stood with her hand over her mouth, her eyes popping with horror.

The little yellow man weaved, toppled into the stream of his own blood, lay face down in the growing pool. His derby fell from his head, brim up.

Van Cleve, Wottles, and Cowdrey were all on their feet, and for some reason they stared not at the Chinese, but at the derby hat. It rocked gently on its curved crown, as was natural. What was not natural was that the speed of the rocking movement was increasing instead of decreasing. It was as if the derby possessed a volition of its own.

THE girl in the outer office screamed again as the hat rocked onto its brim, tilted toward her. The men around the

desk saw a claw reach out from behind the hat. The claw opened, closed, felt its way forward. Behind it came a crab as big as a man's hand. The crab scuttled sideways a short distance, surveying the scene suspiciously with its greedy, telescope eyes. It stopped at the edge of the bloody puddle beside the Chinaman's head, lifting its legs gingerly. It dipped a claw into the viscous blood, slid its mouth open, and began to feed.

Van Cleve's lips twitched, and sat down suddenly. He opened his mouth as if to speak, closed it again. Wottles and Cowdrey, too, stared at the crab, held

the office. "Don't touch a thing! I'll see if I can find out where this guy come from."

Frances picked up the telephone, dialed the right number the second time, put through the call.

"You were saying . . . no trouble's ever come out of Chinatown, Mr. Van Cleve?" Cowdrey grinned, but the edges of his mouth trembled a little.

Van Cleve didn't seem to hear him. He stood up, had a hard time finding the end of his cigarette with the flame of a silver lighter. "You'll excuse me, Mr. Cowdrey. All this has unnerved me a

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silent by the sudden horror.

Then Wottles found his voice. "How . . . how did he get in, Frances?" His Adam's apple bobbed as he circled the bloody corpse and the gorging crab on his way to the outer office.

"How do you think, Gumshoe?" She tried to sound flip, but the rouge showed in bright circles on her chalk-white cheeks. "In the door. He . . . he went right across the room to Mr. Van Cleve's office. I started to tell him Mr. Van Cleve was in conference, and then I saw . . . the blood."

"Call Homicide. Right now." Wottles' eyes were on the crimson trail of blood meandering across the brown linoleum floor. He followed it to the outer door.

F'goshsake, Webb!" Frances looked back at the crab, looked quickly away again. "Aren't you gonna do anything about . . . that crab?"

"Leave it for Homicide!" Wottles yelled back at her as he stepped out of

little." He picked his way past the corpse and the crab with steps that were almost mincing, started toward a private exit that led directly toward the hall. "I'm not feeling well, Frances," he called to the girl in the outer office. "You and Wottles and Mr. Cowdrey tell the homicide squad everything we know about this." He opened the door, paused. "And will you call Miss Plenover and tell her I'm frightfully sorry, but I won't be able to take her to the opera tonight? That I'm not . . . ah . . . feeling very well?"

"I can't believe it!" Cowdrey told the office girl a moment later. "So that's Paul Van Cleve, the daring prosecutor who has cleaned up Mason City! Paul Van Cleve, the scourge of the underworld; Why, he hasn't the guts to break up a game of rummy in an Old Ladies' Home!"

Frances pulled the gum out of her mouth, stuck it firmly beneath her desk.

"You listen to me, Mister. Sometimes it doesn't take guts. Sometimes it takes brains. That's what Paul Van Cleve's got. He knows more law than all the rest of the lawyers in this town, and don't you forget it!"

VAN CLEVE was hurrying down Grover street when the sporty roadster glided to a stop beside him. "Paul!" called the girl behind the wheel. She had to repeat it. "Paul!"

He turned his head toward her. She was sure he saw her, yet he took two or three steps more before he stopped, came slowly over to the edge of the walk. "Pat!" His eyes took her in in spite of himself. It was always hard for him to believe that she was as beautiful as she really was.

"I decided that you were going to take me to dinner. I was just going to pick you up at the office." Her eyes were warm and friendly and a little mocking. "I'm certainly glad to see that you're careful about stopping when strange girls yell at you."

He tried to echo her bantering tone in his laughter, but it sounded forced, even to him. "No dinner tonight, Pat. No opera, either, I'm . . . I'm feeling simply rotten. A bad headache . . ."

"You poor thing!" she chided. "Hop right in and I'll take you . . ."

"No," he said, really feeling utterly miserable. "Thanks. "But there are several places I have to stop and . . ."

"So you're standing me up? The old run-around." Her tone was still bantering, but a chill had crept into it. "Is it a brunette, Paul? Do you like them better?"

"No, Pat! I swear by all that's holy . . ."

"This has happened before, Paul." Her voice was suddenly all serious. "I think I know you, and then suddenly you become vague and mysterious. You'll tell

me what it is someday, won't you?" Her car suddenly shot away.

He stared after her only for a second, then hurried doggedly on down Grover street, crossed at Scranton, went over two blocks to Geary. A blind man with a hat full of pencils was standing in front of the decrepit office building in which Van Cleve still maintained the office he'd used while in private practice. He dropped a four-bit piece in the blind man's hat, wondering for a moment at the begger's being on such a poor corner, then went on up the stairs to the second floor.

He turned his key in the lock of the door marked PAUL VAN CLEVE, ATTORNEY AT LAW. Inside, he locked the door behind him. It was late afternoon, and dark in this stuffy little office with the drawn shades. But he did not turn on the light.

He stepped sure-footedly through the darkness to the side of the room. His fingers felt the surface of the knotty pine panels, and presently a panel slid aside, and he stepped through. He pulled the panel closed, made sure the light-proof blind was drawn, its edges taped as usual, before he turned on the light.

He stood in a small enclosure which once had been a lavatory, but which he had remodeled for his own uses. There was a chair, and opposite the chair a mirror. On one side of the mirror an under-arm holster of supple leather hung on a nail. From the holster protruded the black butt of a .44 revolver. On the other side of the mirror hung a suit of heavy under wear, a hickory shirt, a tattered mackinaw, and a pair of blue denim pants with one leg cut off at the knee. On the floor was a very dirty tennis shoe.

Van Cleve sat down opposite the mirror, pulled the horn-rimmed glasses from his nose, took off the double breasted dark blue business suit, hung it up. He slapped his right leg thoughtfully, and the

sound of the slap was tinny. Even in color it looked like a flesh-and-blood leg. It was a good leg, he thought. Particularly that trick knee. He'd never had a gam with as good a knee. Well, it ought to be good, for six hundred dollars. He was proud of that gam, proud of the fact that nobody suspected.

He loosened the straps that bound it just above the place where his knee would have been, put the aluminum leg in a cabinet at his left, took out a wooden peg leg, strapped it on. Then he changed the rest of his clothes, tucking the flap of the right trouser leg down around the stump, to cushion it a little. He rubbed perfumed hair dressing into his unruly, wavy hair until it was tight against his scalp, dark with grease. He strapped on the holster, checked the loading of the .44, and slipped on his mackinaw.

CHAPTER TWO

Beware the Crab

HE LOOKED into the mirror. He was no longer Paul Van Cleve, socially and politically prominent district attorney of Mason City. He was Stub Samson, a murderer wanted by the police, a hoodlum, denizen of Mason City's underworld.

He hated having to assume this role again, he told himself, hated the fact that a crab and a little Chinaman who'd been tortured to death had forced him once more to become Stub Samson. But in his heart he was glad. For the clothes of Stub Samson felt more natural to him than the clothes of Paul Van Cleve, and he knew that there was that within him which would always send him back to being Stub Samson now and again. For he had been Stub Samson long before chance and the years had disguised him as Paul Van Cleve.

He must have been born somewhere near Quincy street, for the sights and sounds of that thoroughfare were among his earliest recollections. His mother he remembered only dimly, for she had died before he was old enough to remember much. He had been 'adopted,' and had run away from the woman who beat him; lived off handouts from Quincy street tavern keepers, eaten out of their garbage pails, drained the dregs from their bottles. He had spent some months in a 'house of correction,' and had run away, back to Quincy street.

It was on Quincy street that he had lost his leg when he fell beneath the wheels of a street car while hooking a ride.

They had taken good care of him in the county hospital. He was eight years old, and it was then that they started to call him "Stub."

At eighteen he was tough even in the uncritical lexicon of Quincy street, and the cop on the beat looked forward to the day when society would rid itself of Stub Samson by putting him behind bars.

It happened one night when he was on his way from one bar to another. In the middle of the block, where the lights were dim, a big man caught up with the girl walking ahead of him, grabbed her arm. The girl tried to pull away, and the man pinned her arm in back of her, put a hand over her mouth. Samson tapped the man on the shoulder. "Listen, Mister." He said it softly, out of the corner of his mouth. "Leave her be."

"Keep outa this, you peg-legged son!" the big man snarled. And Stub Samson slipped on his brass knucks and belted him one.

It was later, when the police caught him, that Samson found out that the girl was Nancy Too Fung, daughter of the Lord of Chinatown, that the man was Gilhooley, a party payroller of some

prominence, and that Gilhooley had died from a fractured skull.

Through a miracle no greater than cutting steel bars with a hacksaw, Too Fung's men broke Samson out of jail. For months Too Fung kept Samson hidden in a secret room under Quincy street itself, tutoring him in all the education he had missed. Stub Samson learned quickly. Too Fung sent him to other cities, to special tutors, private schools, and then to college and law school. It was as Paul Van Cleve that Stub Samson came back to Mason City to practice law, and as Paul Van Cleve that he had been elected District Attorney.

This was not the first time that he had returned to Quincy street as Stub Samson. For he had found that in that role he could get information and accomplish ends that could not be gained officially. It was dangerous, for since there were those in the underworld who remembered him, there were those on the police force who remembered, too.

NOW he slipped a sheathed case knife into an inside pocket. That knife had gotten him out of many a tight spot, and might again. He turned off the light, pulled the masking tape away from the window casing, pulled up the shade and opened the window. He looked each way down the alley, to where the lights glowed in the murk. It was clear both ways. He climbed out onto the telephone post which jutted up beside the window, pulled the shade down, closed the window, and crawled down to the alley, keeping his body between the building and the post.

The rubber pad of his peg thumped softly on the cement as he hurried toward the street. The blind man who had stood at the entrance to the building worried him, and Stub Samson wondered if he still stood there. But there was no time to find out. If Samson were right, the death of the little Chinese in his office

meant that life or death for those he loved depended on how quickly he could get to Chinatown.

But at the mouth of the alley the blind man came suddenly out of nowhere to stand in his path. "Buy a pencil, Mister?" he whined. "Buy a pencil?"

Samson stifled an impulse to push the beggar out of his path. Probably the guy really was blind. Samson stepped aside, said: "Sorry."

The limousine was almost opposite the alley mouth before Samson saw it. It was coming fast. Samson threw himself flat, swept out the .44 in one movement, his ears tuned for the *rat-tat* of machine gun fire.

None came. The back door of the limousine flung open. Something came hurtling out, rolled to within a few feet of Samson, and the limousine was gone.

The blind man, too, was gone. Samson picked himself up. He was alone in the alley with the thing which came out of the car. He looked down at it.

The street lights faintly illumined a cadaver which, from the odor, had been a cadaver for several days. It still had the general shape of a human body—torso, legs, arms, head—but that was all. It had no skin, and yet it was not bloody. There was no more blood in it than in a piece of well-done pork. It was pock-marked with many hills and valleys, as if it were a contour map designed from human flesh by greedy mouths.

What had been the cadaver's mouth was now a dark hole set in the center of a mass of shapeless flesh. Samson felt cold creep down his spine as that shapeless flesh seemed to move. It was as if the corpse were about to speak . . . with lips that were no longer lips!

And then a tiny claw reached out from the aperture which had been a mouth. After the claw came a crab a little bigger than a silver dollar. The crab scuttled sideways across what had been a

cheek, lifted its pincers delicately, began to tear away morsels of flesh, carry them to its mouth.

Samson fought to keep his belly down. The gun was still in his hand. He couldn't help pulling the trigger any more than he could help taking his next breath. The crab was only four feet away when he shot. The crab went all to piecer.

The report of the gun filled the narrow alley like the sound of cannon. Stub Samson fled the sound, into the next alley, and the next, toward Quincy street and Chinatown. He was frightened. The "blind" man was a finger man. He had seen him go into the office building as Paul Van Cleve; he had seen him come out of the alley as Stub Samson. The "blind" man had fingered him not for death, but simply so that his employers could dump that horribly mutilated corpse at Stub Samson's feet.

Why? Why had they not killed him when they had the chance? Why had they sent Ho Wen, who had tutored Samson in the old days, and was more like a father than instructor, to die in Paul Van Cleve's office? Samson could not even guess at the answers. But one thing was obvious: Whoever was responsible for these deaths must either know or guess that Stub Samson and Paul Van Cleve were one and the same person! And whoever knew or even guessed at that held aces in this game of death.

THERE is a side entrance to the Shanghai Restaurant few people know about. The light over the door was broken long ago, and no one has ever seen any reason to replace it. Hugging the shadows, Samson came out of the alley toward this door, tapped softly three times with the flat of his hand.

The door slid open, and shut again in a split second. Stub Samson stood inside, shaking the hand of Chang Wat Duck.

"Velly glad see," nodded the Duck, tucking his arms back inside his long silk sleeves. "Much trouble. Need Stub Samson much. Glad see."

"What's the trouble, Chang?" Samson asked as he stumped up the steep stairs behind the Chinese.

"No talk." The Duck shook his head. "You make much talk bymeby with Too Fung." He rapped softly on a door at the head of the stairs, and the door swung open.

The ceiling of the room was sixteen feet high, and looked higher. The walls were hung with Chinese tapestries and pictures, and from the ceiling hung a carved jade lamp, faintly glowing. At the end of the room was a carved teak desk, and behind it sat Too Fung. The ceremonial robes and trappings of his fathers were not for Too Fung. He wore a double breasted business suit, and his jet black hair and smooth almond-colored skin belied his age.

The Lord of Chinatown looked up. His face held no expression at all, and there was no sign of recognition in his bright black eyes. "Who is this person you bring unannounced into my study?" Too Fung asked the Duck.

Samson and the Duck both stared. They knew that Samson was more than a son to the master of Chinatown. For a wild second Samson thought that this was not Too Fung, but a stranger masquerading as the venerable Chinese. Then the Duck broke into a torrent of Chinese. Too Fung held up a hand to silence him. He rose from his chair, stepped from behind the desk. The movement was made casually, and yet Samson sensed a purpose behind it.

"Enough!" said Too Fung. "Take the intruder away. Let him tell you his business in the usual way. Then, if I wish to see him, let him make an appointment.

It was too deep for Samson. He took a step toward the door. On the other

side of the room, Too Fung took a step to the side. And then Samson got it. *Too Fung was keeping himself between Samson and the red dragon-embroidered curtain that hung at the window.* Ever so slightly the curtain stirred, as if with a breath of wind. But there was no wind! Samson cursed softly to himself, leaped quickly to one side, so that Too Fung no longer stood between him and the curtain. As he leaped, he swept the .44 out of its holster.

"Come out from behind that curtain, you!" he said, and threw himself flat on the floor. The roar of the gun beat at his eardrums, and at his temple the cold feel of the air impacted by the bullet made him instinctively duck. It was that close. Then the sound of shots from his own gun blended into one continuous roar, and the gun was suddenly warm in his hand.

The dragons on the curtain leaped into a dance. The curtain bellied out, tore loose from the rod, collapsed. A man with a bloody head writhed there among the green dragons. A revolver skidded out across the floor from the tangle of man and curtain, and the man's hands clutched spasmodically at the cloth, like gobbling mouths. And then the hands stopped clutching, and the man was still.

CHAPTER THREE

Blind Alley

SAMSON pulled himself to his feet, reloaded his gun before he holstered it.

"A thousand thanks from your unworthy servant for saving me from this eavesdropping dog." Too Fung calmly returned to his chair behind the teakwood desk.

"It is you, oh Illustrious One, who have added to my indebtedness to your own honorable self by attempting to save me from this well laid trap." Samson grinned,

and then his face sobered. "Ho Wen died in my office," he explained. "I knew therefore that there was trouble here. How did this one come into your chambers?"

"M'to Chang, my youngest daughter, was gone from her room this morning," Too Fung said. "This man had news of her. He said she was held by one who calls himself the Crab. The police came to ask concerning Ho Wen. This one hid behind the curtain, saying that if I revealed him to the police, or mentioned M'to Chang's absence, then surely she would die the most horrible death."

"And so you pretended not to know me, in order to save me from the one behind the curtain." Samson's face was grave. "And in killing this skulking dog, I have unloosed the wrath of his master upon your daughter! What does he want of you? What does the death of Ho Wen mean?"

Too Fung shook his head.

There was the sound of hammering on the door, and a voice shouted: "Open up there. In the name of the law!" The panel of the door buckled in a little as a shoulder heaved against it.

The police had heard the shots!

Samson stumped across the room to the opposite door, put his hand on the knob. And then it, too, resounded with the boom of a fist on the other side of the panel. He was trapped! Wildly, he looked back across the room, saw the door there bend inward again. Another second, and the police would be in the room, and Stub Samson would at least be in their hands.

It meant the end of Paul Van Cleve, the end of Stub Samson. But, more than that, it meant that he would be put away where he could give Too Fung no help in saving his daughter from whoever or whatever the Crab was.

Chang Wat Duck's hand went into his sleeve, came out with a long curved knife, and the Duck came to stand by Samson's side.

"No, Chang!" Samson whispered fiercely. "Not that way!"

The Duck swung the knife in a glittering arc, and smiled benignly at the door, which chattered with the tattoo of fists.

"Call him off, Too Fung!" Samson said desperately over his shoulder. "If you turn him loose on these cops, he may carve our way out of here, but you won't be safe this side of China."

"Come here, Chang," Too Fung sighed, and the Duck reluctantly thrust the knife back into his sleeve, folded his arms, went to stand beside Too Fung. But Samson saw that Too Fung's hand was beneath the desk top. His fingers, Samson knew, were on the buzzers which would bring tong men swarming in when the alarm was sounded. For Too Fung knew what it meant if Samson were captured, and Too Fung was a loyal friend. He would sacrifice everything if it were necessary to save Samson, and once Too Fung's hatchet men went for the police Too Fung was through.

Samson knew that there was no time to argue, and no use to argue if there were. His fate and Too Fung's hung on the next few seconds.

He waited till the door shivered again from the thrust of a shoulder, then he threw back the bolt on the door, jerked it open. Wottles, who was ramming once more at the door, was taken completely by surprise. He charged through the suddenly opened door, tried to hurdle Samson's out-thrust foot, missed, and hit on his chin. Just behind him was a cop in uniform, a gun in his fist. Samson's peg leg struck like a snake at the cop's gun wrist, connected, went on home to the cop's solar plexus. The cop grunted and folded up, and Samson leaped over him to the stairway. From the room behind he heard the crash of the other door being broken in, the thud of feet, the booming sound of voices.

He took the first flight of stairs in one

step, and lit with too much weight on the peg. It had been awhile since he'd worn that stump and he'd forgotten just how to handle it. He winced with the pain in his stump, took off for the next flight of stairs.

He misgauged it. The peg caught on a step half-way down. Samson went head-over-heels as a police .38 roared heavily and a bullet split air where his head had just been. Behind him the broken plaster patted on the treads as he kicked against the stairs like a swimmer making a turn, sailed headfirst out a door being held open for him by a grinning Chinese.

He kept his body low, his peg swinging in great circles from his hip, his good leg driving it along. Halfway down the alley he glanced half-fearfully ahead to his left, grinned as he saw that things were still as they were when he was a kid. They never had remembered to close the lid on that garbage box as the city ordinance provided. He dove for the box, trying to forget a night like this years ago when he had found it full of broken bottles.

He lit with a stifled grunt in the bottom of the almost-empty refuse box, and blessed the efficiency of the city's sanitation department. Boots hammered down the back steps of the Shanghai restaurant, pounded on down the alley past his hiding place. Police whistles shrilled, and a gun barked as some cop pulled a trigger just for the hell of it, as far as Samson could tell.

SAMSON waited, stifling the impulse to crawl out of the box as the noise of pursuit faded away. After a while came the sound he knew must come: The slow tread of feet approaching each other from each end of the alley. The sounds met just opposite his box, stopped there.

A voice said: "Any luck, Mac?"

A second voice answered: "Not a smell. That Samson must be a magician.

God, will the papers pan us for this! We catch Samson right on the kill, have him all bottled up, and then he gets away!"

Samson held his breath. If it had not been for the thin boards of the refuse box he could have reached out and touched the two policemen.

"That Chink must have him hid somewhere."

"Hell, we took the place apart. He ain't there."

"Maybe he got away through some underground passage."

"Underground passage!" The cop snorted. "You been readin' stuff. I tell you we took the place apart, and he ain't in there. And listen." The cop dropped his voice "I got it straight that Stub Samson is the Crab!"

"No!"

"Sure. Who else? You know what they found beside the body of the guy Samson plugged? A crab! Samson must of left it there, and it's the same trademark he left with the Chink he killed. He just didn't have time to carve this one up, that's all."

"And we let the dirty son get away!" In the murk over his head, Samson saw the flare of a match as the cop lit a cigarette. Samson hugged the bottom of the box. A match flare was all they needed to see him hidden there.

"I wouldn't like to be in the D. A.'s shoes right now!" The cop tossed the lighted match into the refuse box, and for an instant Samson's hiding place was lit as if by a star shell. The match went out as it spiraled to the bottom of the box. For a moment Samson couldn't believe that they hadn't seen him.

"Funny, nobody knows where the D. A. is. I was in the station when a call come in from this broad he's sweet on—you know, the mayor's daughter—saying that a messenger had delivered a florist's box to her. When she opened it, there was a bloody crab inside. We tried to get

Van Cleve, but couldn't raise him anywhere. His office said he'd gone home with . . . get this now . . . with nervous indigestion." The cop gave a nasty laugh.

The second cop spat into the box. "If this Van Cleve ever run into Stub Samson like we did tonight, he'd be drinking his bromos out of gallon crocks."

Both cops laughed as if that were the final word on Paul Van Cleve, and walked away from each other, back to their posts at the end of the alley.

Stub Samson, crouched in the box, clenched his fists. It was hard to restrain himself from jumping out of that box, and taking his chances on getting out of the alley. But there were only three ways to get out; through one of the alley entrances, or through Too Fung's restaurant. The police had all those exits blocked. The moment they saw him it was their guns against his. And Samson didn't want to kill a cop. He particularly didn't want to kill a cop who was simply trying to do his duty in trying to rid the town of a brutal murderer whose trademark was a living crab!

SAMSON smiled bitterly as he realized how completely he had been caught in the net of circumstances. Now the police had not only the old murder charge on which to crucify him, but not without cause they had credited him with these bestial murders which would shock the city!

And Pat had been threatened with one of the bloody crabs! Samson thought of her lovely body mutilated like that of Ho Wen, or the nameless thing which had been dumped in the alley, and he shuddered. As to the identity of the murderer or murderers he had no clue except the fact that they were striking closer and closer to him. And suddenly a portion of this pattern of murder assembled itself a little more clearly in his mind.

Ho Wen must have been brought to his office by the murderer. And that murderer must have *known* that Paul Van Cleve and Stub Samson were one and the same person! For the "blind" man in front of his office had obviously known. Why else would he have been waiting in the alley to act as finger man for the car? And the master mind behind this must also have known that the death of Ho Wen in Van Cleve's office would force him to assume the identity of Stub Samson so that he might visit Too Fung in Chinatown. The man behind the curtain might have been a dupe planted there by a master who knew that Stub Samson would kill him, who knew it so well that he had his dupe carry a crab in his pocket, a crab which would point to Stub Samson himself as the murderer of the others!

Thoughtfully, crouched there in the darkness, Samson caressed the butt of the gun in his holster. The details of this intricate plot were hazy, and altogether it was damned little to go on. The end of the little drama this murderer had arranged was probably to have come when the police captured Samson in Too Fung's room. Luck had been with him in escaping that trap.

Now they had threatened Pat. With every cop in town looking for Stub Samson, he could be of no help to either Too Fung or Pat in that role. The next move was to get back to his private office, back into the role of Paul Van Cleve so that he could fight for the girl he loved more than life itself.

He had to get back to Pat! Crouched there in the box, Samson chafed with impatience. The cops guarding the alley would be called off as soon as their superiors decided that the bird had flown. That decision must come in a few minutes now. Samson wondered how long he had been there. Minutes? It seemed like hours.

And then the voice of Webb Wottles

boomed from one end of the alley. "He didn't get away, McGovern! There's a net around this block even that greased eel couldn't slip through! It's dollars to a dog biscuit he's right here in this alley!"

"In this alley! Where?"

"Think, man, think! Why couldn't he have jumped into one of those trash boxes? You look there?"

"No. You told me to stay right here at the end of the alley."

"That's the trouble with this department! No initiative!" Wottles shouted. "Come on, let's comb him out!"

Down at the end of the alley, Samson saw a flashlight played into a trash box. Dimly, beyond it, he could make out the shadowy figures of many cops, that of Wottles in the van, shorter and wider than the rest. More cops were at the other end of the alley.

This was the showdown. Pat needed him as never before. He felt himself responsible for the threat against her life. And it could be only seconds now before the law would have him in a spot in which he could never help Pat!

Something brushed Samson's shoulder. The tautness within him released itself in a swing of his fist at the thing. It was soft to the touch of his knuckles, unresisting as his fist drove it away. Cautiously, curiously, his hand went out for it. It was a rope! From above some unseen benefactor had sent him this way of deliverance. He pulled down on it, harder and harder. It held! It would carry his weight!

For a second he wondered whether he could still go up a rope hand over hand, and then he was doing it, his good leg and his peg thrusting against the brick building, his arms and shoulders carrying most of his weight. He went up ten feet in about as many seconds. His hands touched the bottom rung of a fire escape. He pulled himself on up, rested with his good leg crooked around an iron rung. His breath whistled so loudly he thought the

police in the alley below must hear it. He cursed himself for getting so soft as he pulled the rope up after him.

THE police were almost at the box. He hung there like a giant spider, waiting, crossing his fingers against the chance that one of the dancing spotlight beams below would suddenly swing upward, pinning him there. To his left was a window, and for a moment Samson thought it might be a way of escape. He peered around the edge of the brick to see a cop staring out the window, Chang Wat Duck just leaving the room. Samson ducked back hurriedly. It was undoubtedly the Duck who, knowing his predicament, had managed to drop the rope down to him. But there was no hope of escape through the building. It was filled with cops.

CHAPTER FOUR

Claws of Death

THE feet of the police scraped the cement below. Their flashlights probed the box where he had been a few moments before. Samson's heart seemed to stop beating for an instant as he waited for the stab of light which would be followed so swiftly by the inevitable stab of lead.

And then Wottles' harsh voice sounded above the other sounds of the men below: "All right, boys! All right! This ain't the only trash box in the alley! Do you think six of you can see into that damn box better than one?"

The cops moved away. Stub hesitated. He could go on up the fire escape to the comparative safety of the roof. Or he could drop back down into the alley. The guard at one end of the alley had been pulled in by the search, and Stub was fairly sure no other guard had been posted there. It might be the longest chance, but it was the quickest one. He thought of Pat Plenover, and of what the body of Wen

Foo looked like. The rope burned his hands as he slid to the ground.

He went swiftly down the shadows of the alley, across the dimly-lit side street, following alleys and little-used thoroughfares, until he stood across the street from the building which housed his private office. A few feet away from the store entrance in which Samson stood a cab was parked, the driver reading a newspaper spread across the steering wheel. In front of the entrance to the office building a limousine stood. It looked suspiciously like the limousine from which the cadaver had been tossed. There was someone in the driver's seat, two or three dim figures behind him in the rear.

A roadster which had a familiar look pulled up behind the limousine. A girl stepped out onto the sidewalk, turned her head as if looking for someone. A man with a bulky package and a suitcase emerged from the dark entrance of the office building, spoke to the girl, then opened the back door of the limousine. The girl put one foot on the running board.

As she did so, she turned her face so that the flickering light from a neon sign fell full on it. It was Pat Plenover!

Samson's hand leaped from beneath his coat with the .44. But Pat stood squarely in the line of fire. Samson hesitated. And then Pat and the man with her were in the limousine, and the limousine was flashing away from the curb. . . .

Samson dropped the gun back into its holster. Too dangerous to try for a shot with Pat in the car. He leaped for the cab at the curb, jumped into the seat beside the driver, swept the newspaper from under his nose. "Follow that car!" he ordered. "And drive like hell!"

The driver looked at Samson, looked at the dirty mackinaw, the pale demin pants, the wooden leg, at the pale blue eyes burning at him from a dirty face.

Ahead the limousine was halfway down

(Continued on page 98)



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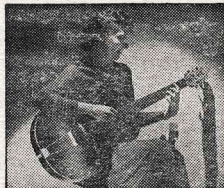
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STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

(Continued from page 96)

the block. Samson fished a ten dollar bill from his shirt pocket. He waved the bill in front of the driver's eyes.

The cab started with a jerk that almost threw Samson out of his seat. The limousine swung to the left. But the cab, in high now, was picking up speed. "Just keep it in sight," Samson ordered. "Don't get too close." His hand was on the butt of the gun and the butt was slippery with sweat.

Rubber shrieked on cement as the cab took the corner. The wrong way! The limousine had gone to the left. The cab driver had swung to the right.

"What the hell!" Samson yelled.

And then he felt something hard jab the back of his head. "Bring your hand out, Samson," a cold, hard voice demanded from the rear seat. "Without the gun. Now put both hands in sight and keep them there."

SLOWLY, Samson uncurled his fingers from the butt of the gun, pulled his hands into view. The cabby grinned as he pulled to the curb, stopped. Still grinning, he reached beneath Samson's coat, pulled out the gun.

"Check his other pockets, Joe," the voice ordered. "They say this guy is a rat."

The cab driver shook him down, found the case knife in an inside pocket. "Didn't I tell you he was a rat?" the voice from the rear inquired.

Samson sat with his hands stiff beside his shoulders, his eyes keen on every movement of the cab driver, watching for a break. But there could be no break with that gun muzzle hard against the back of his head! He cursed himself for not suspecting the cab had been planted there. It had been so convenient . . . *too* convenient!

He felt the muzzle leave the back of his head for a split second, and in the next

second felt it whip down sickeningly just behind his ear. His head lolled to one side. Desperately, he tried to hold on to consciousness as the cab driver tied his arms and legs, then hauled him out of the front seat, shoved him on the floor in back.

The man in back was wiping the blood and hair from the muzzle of the gun onto his shirt. He was a big man, swarthy and grizzled, with a scar that slanted from beneath his left eye across the hollow of a broken nose. Samson recognized him from the pictures on F. B. I. circulars.

Huddled there on the floor, Samson shook his head, trying to clear it of the terrible ache. He could feel the warm wetness of blood running down his cheek, taste the salt of it in his mouth. "Manny Funkhouser!" Samson exclaimed. "I think you'll find the cops tougher here than in Chicago, Manny."

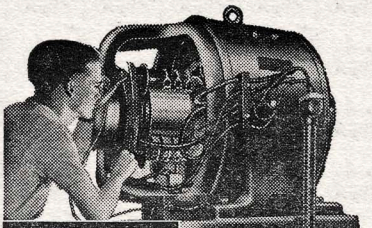
Manny kicked him in the face, kicked him again, and laughed. "You might find the cops sort of tough here yourself, Samson. Fact, I'm all in favor of dumping you on the steps of some precinct station, and letting the cops work you over. But the boss insists that you meet The Crab!"

Suddenly Samson understood something that he had wondered about. He could tell from the sound of traffic and frequent stops that they were going through midtown and he had wondered why they hadn't gagged him. Now he knew. They figured that he was even more anxious than they to avoid any contact with the police. The hell of it was, they were right!

"The girl . . . the girl who got into the limousine." No longer could Samson resist asking the question uppermost in his mind. "Where are they taking her?"

Manny looked at him curiously. "For a peg-legged gutter rat, you're damned interested in that girl, now ain't you? Well, I wouldn't be surprised but what you and her would meet The Crab together.

Traffic noises were not so frequent.



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STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

From the smell of salt in the air Samson knew that they were somewhere on the waterfront. The cab bounced a little as it went up an incline, and it grew suddenly darker. Walls echoed the hiss of tires on pavement, and Samson knew they were in a building.

Manny and the cab driver climbed out, slammed the door behind them. Samson lay on the floor of the cab, staring up toward its roof. It was too dark to see even that. The air had a damp, musty feel to it. Out of the darkness came a low mumble of men's voices, the occasional scrape of feet on the cement beside the car. Samson tugged at the bonds which held his wrists together, and the persistent ache in his head throbbed with fresh pain.

SOMEWHERE a dim light went on, and the blackness washed out to a dirty gray. The door at Samson's feet opened, framing Manny Funkhouser's hulking silhouette. One of Manny's hands circled Samson's good leg, dragged him out of the car. Samson held his head up stiffly, took the jolt to the floor on the back of his neck.

Manny dragged him across the floor, and through the gloom Samson could sense the shapes of men watching. Just ahead, a figure stooped to pull open a trap door. Manny pulled Samson to the brink of the opening.

"So long, tough guy," Manny chuckled. And there came a soft answering chuckle from those other shapes in the darkness.

Manny stepped across the opening, pulled Samson across it. For a second Samson hung there, suspended over the black maw beneath. And then Manny let go.

Samson couldn't break his fall with hands or feet. He lit on his side with a jolt that knocked the breath from his lungs, made his senses swim with pain. But he didn't pass out. Not quite. He

could hear the lap of waves not far away, and a soft hissing sound that made him instinctively shudder. He tried to pull himself into a sitting position, eyes straining to see through the darkness. He realized with a shock that he hadn't moved a muscle. He tried again, failed. The fall had paralyzed his body.

His ears sensed the sibilant movements of the things in the dungeon with him. Worst of all was the odor; worse than the stench of a stagnant backarm of sea. It was the odor of death, of death and corruption.

Something wet and clammy brushed his cheek. Shuddering, he tried to twist away from it, and couldn't. And then someone moaned. He almost welcomed that moan. There was another human being here!

And then he remembered Pat. He tried the word not knowing whether he could even speak aloud. "Pat!" He called her name into the darkness with a little prayer that it would not be she who answered; that she had met death more quickly and kindly than whatever it was which awaited them.

"Who . . . who is it?"

"Paul," he almost said, and then remembered. "Samson, lady," he told her. "Stub Samson."

"Oh!" she gasped. "The murderer!"

"That's wrong, Miss. I ain't no murderer. But I guess it don't make no difference now to either of us."

"They've got you too?" He could hear her teeth chatter. "You're not . . . one of them?"

"They got me too."

The stench of death was strong in his nostrils, and he knew that death was close for both of them. If he could only get to her side, tell her the whole story of who he was, tell her again that he loved her before death came. . . .

"Didn't . . . didn't you call me . . . Pat, Mr. Samson?"

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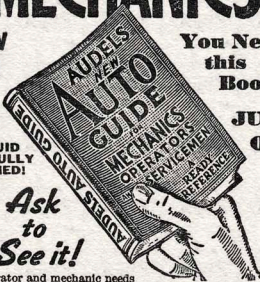
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STRANGE DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

The words of explanation were on the tip of his tongue. And then, in the ceiling above, a light bloomed. Pat lay bound hand and foot, her eyes on Samson. He saw the shudder of revulsion at the sight of him pass over her face, and the words died on his lips. It was better that she remember him as Paul Van Cleve. She must never know.

He forgot that his head and face were covered with blood. With the supersensitiveness of the cripple, he thought only that now she was seeing one-legged Stub Samson as he really was, and that the sight of his deformity disgusted her.

And then, as his eyes left hers, horror drove all other thoughts from his mind.

THE walls of the dungeon in which they found themselves were made of cement. Along the outer wall a stagnant backwash of the sea made a puddle which lay over a third of the dungeon's floor. Lying in the puddle, half-hidden by the water, were the dead bodies of men and women.

The soft hissing sound Samson had heard was the sound of the movements of swarms of giant crabs, feeding on those bodies! Hurrying as if their feast might momentarily be snatched away from them, the claws of the crabs ripped the flesh from the unresisting carcasses of the dead, stuffed it into their mouths.

A big crab made a sidelong dash toward Pat. Her face paled, and the skin of her throat stretched tight as a drum. "Don't!" she whimpered. "Don't . . . let it . . .!"

The crab hesitated, waved its claw angrily as if she had cheated it by not being dead, scuttled back to the body from which it had come. From what was left of it, Samson could tell that it had been the body of a woman. On the little finger of what was left of the woman's right hand was a ring with a square-cut emerald. Samson would have known that emerald

anywhere. It was the body of M'to Chang. Too Fung's youngest daughter.

From the south wall came the sound of an opening door. Through a doorway in the center of the wall opposite came Manny Funkhouser, the cab driver, and a third thug. They carried a rough wooden table which glistened darkly beneath the light overhead. None of them spoke as they set the table down, stepped back to stand against the wall, but their eyes watched the doorway in evil expectation.

Samson's eyes followed theirs to that open door. Beyond it lay only blackness, a blackness which held the answer to the horror that had been and was to be.

And then it stood there, embodied. There was a black hood, with two eye-holes which revealed the circular whiteness of the flesh around the eyes, and the dark eyes themselves. Below that was a white shirt, with sleeves rolled up over white, hairless arms, and a pair of light tweed pants.

Pat gasped: "Oh! Oh, dear God!"

Samson turned his head toward her. It hurt, but it turned! The paralysis was leaving him! "Add it all up, and what have you got?" he told her. "Just another thug in a mask."

The man in the doorway spoke. "Put her on the table, boys."

Funkhouser and the other two lifted the bound girl, laid her on the table. She tried to twist away from them, sobbing with effort as they strapped each arm and leg separately to the table.

"Now . . . my gloves," said the man in the doorway. He held his hands stiffly before him, like a surgeon about to don rubber gloves.

Funkhouser stepped in front of him, fitted something on to his hands, stepped away again. Samson saw that the hooded man had indeed been fitted with gloves, gloves the fingers of which terminated in glistening steel blades six inches long!

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He moved his fingers, and there was a faint rasping tinkle of steel on steel as blades met. He gestured with one metal claw toward the gorging crab. "Progress," he purred softly, "is nothing but man's improvement on nature."

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Wears a Peg Leg

SAMSON twisted his good left leg, stretched it out, out until it seemed as if the hip would leave its socket. He sweated with the pain, but thanked God he could move a little now! The eyes of Manny Funkhouser and his henchmen, avid with bloodlust, were on the man in the hood. And then Samson felt something give, and knew that his peg leg had slipped the noose which bound it to his left. A peg leg, he thought grimly to himself, was sometimes mighty handy. His bound hands still held him prisoner, but just getting those legs free was something.

The man with the claws stepped over to Pat, strapped so securely to the table. She screamed in utter terror as he hooked his fingers, thrust the dreadful talons slowly toward her face.

"Scream as much as you please, my dear," he chuckled.

Pat bit her lips until a bright drop of blood oozed from beneath her teeth, flowed like a vermilion tear down the white velvet of her chin. Once more the monster who stood over her reached for her with his murderous claws, then hesitated again. "I think Mr. Samson will enjoy this more if we present him with his little gift before we begin." All eyes were suddenly on Samson, and he lay very still. "Manny, will you bring it in?"

Manny, a wide grin on his face, stepped outside for a moment. When he returned, he carried a suitcase in one hand, and in

the other he carried . . . an aluminum leg!

There was no mistaking that leg. Samson knew it as well as he knew his own right hand. Hell, it was as much a part of him! It was his leg! It was his own beautiful gam with the lovely trick knee, the gam that had set him back six hundred dollars, and was worth every cent of it!

"What, Mr. Samson?" the masked man asked sarcastically. "No speech of appreciation for this lovely gift which will hide your deformity? But perhaps you do not entirely understand. In the suitcase is a suit of clothes, and a few other personal things which are . . . or were . . . the property of a prominent young lawyer in town. Perhaps you can guess his name. When we are through with Miss Plenover, and have left her body for the crabs to finish, you might think that we intend to treat you in a similar way. Have no fear, Mr. Samson! We are more subtle than that.

"We will leave you locked in this room with what is left of Miss Plenover, with the crabs, with this aluminum leg, and with the suitcase. Ah! I think you begin to see. Then we will call the police, and you may rest assured that we will see to it that you do not have time to escape before the police arrive. The police will find these elements I have mentioned: You, Stub Samson; these claws, which I anticipate no further use for; the body of Miss Plenover; the crabs; the suitcase; the aluminum leg. After the best minds of the police department have tussled with the problem presented by these rather interesting clues, I imagine they will arrive at a solution. And I think you need no prompting to know what solution."

Manny Funkhouser and his two henchmen laughed delightedly. And Stub Samson cursed them in a way that delighted them even further.

Remembering Pat, Stub glanced toward her. Did she realize what this

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30x4-26-20	2.50	1.15
31x5-25-21	2.50	1.15
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meant? Did she know now what these men knew: That he was Paul Van Cleve, and that he was going to be framed for the crimes these men had committed? That when the fact that Stub Samson and Paul Van Cleve were the same person was discovered that his word would be taken as worthless? That it meant the whole reform administration would be discredited, defeated in the coming election, and that corruption would once more rule the city?

But Pat's eyes, as they met his, held only fear and bewilderment. Once more the keen edged talons started toward her, and the eyes of the masked man's minions hung hungrily on every glint of the blades.

INSTANTS were precious. Samson bent his good leg back as far as it would go. Stretching, he could grab the heel of his shoe with the fingertips of his bound hands. A stout razor blade was buried in the heel of that shoe, put there long ago for just such a contingency as this. Sawing the cords with the edge of the blade, Samson didn't even feel the pain of his slashed wrists.

Pat screamed. Samson didn't look up. There was the chance that one of the criminals might glance his way, see what he was doing. But there was no time for circumspection. His hands were free! Squatted on his left hunker, Samson's right hand flashed to the tip of his leg, twisted it, and swept a stout sword from the hollow center of the leg!

"Look out!" yelled the thug at Funkhouser's left.

There was an instant of hesitation, the hairbreadth second of surprise Samson had counted on.

The cab driver's draw was first, his gun almost level as Samson's blade swept toward him in a shining arc. The tip of the sword caught the cab driver's gun hand at the knuckles. The gun dropped. Four fingers dropped, too. The cab driver was

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CORPSES IN CHINATOWN

screaming, his left hand cupped over his right to stem the spurting blood, as the second thug pulled the trigger. But the deadly tip of Samson's blade, swinging up from the cab driver's hand, had sliced across the second gunman's throat, just deep enough to catch the jugular. The report of the gun slapped deafeningly against the walls as the gunman fell, the bullet grooving the cement floor three inches from Samson's good foot.

Samson's first swing of the sword had carried him around in a complete pivot, to find Funkhouser facing him four feet away, the muzzle of his revolver centered between Samson's eyes. Samson rolled away from the shot as a boxer rolls away from a blow. Something stung his cheek as the report of the gun beat at his eardrums, and his lunge carried the biting steel into Funkhouser's belly.

It happened so quickly that the masked man still stood at the other side of the room, claws poised above Pat's body. Samson held the sword like a javelin, its tip aimed at the masked man's heart. "Don't move!" Samson growled. He was afraid to hurl the sword . . . afraid that it would not take the life of the masked man quickly enough to prevent his burying those steel talons deep in Pat!

"Don't move yourself!" the masked man said silkily. You're covered from behind! Drop that sword!"

"Look out!" Pat screamed. "Behind you! A gun!"

THERE wasn't time to think about it.

Samson flung the sword, whirled to face the new menace as he threw himself sideways to the floor. It spoiled Samson's aim. The sword went low and to one side, pierced the masked man's side just beneath the lowest rib, pinned him to the wall. The masked man screamed.

The thug whose fingers Smith had cut off lay on the floor, the bloody stumps of

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his right hand pressed hard against the filth of the floor. In his left hand was a revolver. The revolver swung with Samson's movement, centered on him again.

The gun boomed. For an instant Samson wondered why it didn't hurt, and then he saw the side of the gunman's head mushroom out like earth lifted by a charge of black powder. The gunman's hand was suddenly limp, and his unfired gun slipped to the floor.

Chang Wat Duck stood in the doorway, smoke drifting upward from the muzzle of his gun. The eyes of the Chinese filled with horror as they went slowly around the room.

Behind the Duck stood other Chinese, dressed in the long sleeved black shirts of the tong. Gravely they surveyed the room, filtered into it, as Samson untied the leather thongs that bound Pat to the table. She had fainted, but her pulse was strong and sure.

"I owe you more than I can repay in a

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thousand lifetimes," Samson told Chang Wat Duck.

"It is nothing," the Duck murmured, his arms folded as he surveyed the carnage. "I owe you instead a thousand pardons for stealing the honor of complete vengeance from your hand."

Stub Samson stood with his legs wide apart, his arms on his hips, and laughed. "Cut it out, Chang! You know darned well I'd be dead right now if you hadn't nailed that bird. How'd you get here?"

"I sent one of my men to follow you. He returned to tell me you had taken a cab to this address. We followed. There were men upstairs."

"You have trouble with them?"

The Duck smiled grimly. "I said there were men."

Samson stepped to the cringing, sobbing figure impaled by the sword. He jerked the taloned gloves from his fingers, pulled the hood from his head. It was Joseph Cowdrey!

Silently, the Chinese formed a tight semicircle around him. Samson pulled the sword from Cowdrey's side. "Barely nicked him!"

"M'to Chang?" the Duck asked.

Silently, Samson pointed to the emerald ring on the finger of one of the crab-eaten corpses. The eyes of the Chinese followed Samson's pointing finger. And then they began to tighten the half-circle they had made around Cowdrey. Cowdrey began to whimper. "Stop them!" he screamed. "For God's sake, Samson, make these yellow devils stop!"

The Duck looked at Samson. "I think you should take Miss Plenover and leave here," he said. "The Chinese have methods of dealing with dogs like this one. . . ."

Samson's eyes locked for a moment with Chang Wat Duck's. Then Samson looked at the mutilated bodies lying there in the filthy water of the sea, at the giant crabs. He looked back at the Duck and nodded.

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FREE BOOK

gives details

"In an hour I shall call the police," he said.

PAUL VAN CLEVE was in his office early the next morning. There was tape over his right cheek, more tape on the back of his head, and he moved a little stiffly, almost painfully, as he settled himself with the morning paper before him.

"MURDER RING SMASHED" declared the headlines spread over the front page above a picture of Pat Plenover. "MAYOR'S DAUGHTER ABDUCTED, SAVED BY WANTED MAN."

The rest of the story was almost a direct quotation from Pat Plenover. She told how she had been sent to a certain address because of a message which purported to be from her fiance, Paul Van Cleve; how she had been kidnapped; how Stub Samson had been thrown into the same dungeon with her, and a graphic description of his fight to save her life.

She told the reason for the wave of horrible murders as explained to her by this derelict who had rescued her: Joseph Cowdrey had worked his way into the inner council of the Good Government League in order to destroy it. Cowdrey was a criminal with important gangland connections in cities on the eastern seaboard. He intended to discredit the Good Government League with murders for which Chinatown would be apparently responsible. With the Good Government League out of power, he himself would be able to establish profitable vice dens. . . .

There were several puzzling details, the story continued, for Miss Plenover had fainted at the height of the battle between Samson and the criminals. In addition to the dead in the room in which Miss Plenover had been kept prisoner, the bodies of several men were found on the main floor. All of them had their throats cut, and while all of them carried guns, none of the guns had been fired.

"I aint"
"It's me!"
"He don't"
"You was?"
"Can't hardly"



What Are YOUR Mistakes in English?

They may offend others as much as these offend you

IF someone you met for the first time made the mistakes in English shown above, what would you think of him? Would he inspire your respect? Would you be inclined to make a friend of him? Would you care to introduce him to others as a close friend of yours?

These errors are easy for you to see. Perhaps, however, you make other mistakes which offend other people as much as these would offend you. How do you know that you do not mispronounce certain words? Are you always sure that the things you say and write are grammatically correct? To you they may seem correct, but others may know they are wrong.

Unfortunately, people will not correct you when you make mistakes; all they do is to make a mental reservation about you. "He is ignorant and uncultured," they think. So you really have no way of telling when your English offends others.

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In contrast to the other bodies, that of Cowdrey showed no marks except that of a stab wound in his side, which the coroner declared could not possibly have caused his death. And yet from the expression on his face he had died in agony.

Mention was made of the fact that Paul Van Cleve, District Attorney, had been injured in an automobile accident while on his way to the scene of the battle.

There was a knock on the office door, and Webb Wottles strutted in. "Well, Paul, we got 'em," he exulted.

"We?" "There was a twinkle in the eyes behind the horn rimmed glasses.

"Of course!" Wottles looked hurt. "Confidentially, Stub Samson has been working undercover for the department for some time."

"But how about the fight with him last night in the Shanghai restaurant, and the murder charge?"

"Just a smoke screen, Paul, a smoke screen. It led them right into the trap."

Van Cleve extended his hand. "Congratulations, then, Webb! I do resent the fact that you didn't let me in on it, but I suppose you had to preserve the utmost secrecy."

Wottles beamed as he took the extended hand. He was very happy. So was Paul Van Cleve.


THE END



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