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DIME

JULY



# MYSTERY

## MAGAZINE

### PREY FOR THE CREEPING DEATH

*LONG NOVEL OF BIZARRE MYSTERY*

by **RUSSELL GRAY**

**DONALD G. CORMACK'S**

*BAFFLING, BREATHLESS CRIME NOVELETTE*

### KING OF THE CORPSE TRADE





# You Cannot Know!

FOR the past few months the entire world has been enveloped in a great, sweeping tide of war fear, a tide that rises one week and seems on the verge of swamping us, to later recede and leave us in a state of puzzled unrest. The tide may have come and gone—or come to stay—when this issue reaches the stands. But there are those in this country who live in a state of perpetual fear, dwelling in the grim shadow of a menace more mystifying, more relentless, more frightfully fantastic than the threat of war. Paradoxically, those who dread most strongly, believed that they were entitled to a feeling of security—because they owned insurance.

We refer to the people who are possible victims of the huge insurance poisoning ring recently unearthed in Philadelphia. So far the police have made progress against this heinous band of killers, but the authorities are still a long, long way from stamping it out completely. What man or woman living within the known operating range of these human vultures can feel safe—so long as he is insured? America is the most insurance-conscious nation in the world. An average American does not consider that he has begun to meet his obligations to his loved ones until he has protected them against his own death. And now that very "protection" becomes a sinister liability!

It is not unusual for murder to be committed for insurance; there is hardly a police file in the country without at least one insurance killing. But never has such a highly organized, carefully planned ring been uncovered as the Philadelphia gang. Several members have been convicted; several of them have confessed just enough to reveal the shocking proportions of the giant set-up. Thirteen persons, many of them widows of poison victims, have already been accused of homi-

(Continued on page 3)

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AUGUST ISSUE ON SALE JULY 7th

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**10¢ DIME**  
**MYSTERY**  
**MAGAZINE**



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Volume Twenty

*July, 1939*

Number Four

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TWO LONG NOVELS OF WEIRD MYSTERY

- Prey for the Creeping Death**.....Russell Gray 5  
Ben Bryn tried to answer the old lady's last, desperate plea—but Death had arrived before him. And by then Ben knew that the dread, creeping plague was reaching out its black mantel of doom to snare him and the girl who had trusted him!
- The Nightmare Maker**.....Harry Somerville, Jr. 52  
With wild, maniac laughter bubbling from their lips, men and women went forth to kill and pillage, while the whole city cowered in terror of what was still to come! Only Michael Frost had the courage to gamble all that life meant to him in a daring struggle with the Master of Horror!

THREE STARTLING CRIME NOVELETTES

- Coffins for the Living**.....Stewart Sterling 38  
Rod Keeney, rookie patrolman, couldn't guess what a fantastic and incredible web of crime and murder he was entering when he followed the trail of the headless Chinese!
- They Die on Schedule!**.....Edith and Ejler Jacobson 76  
Nat Perry, whom the Underworld knew and feared as "The Bleeder," was able to avoid even a tiny scratch that meant certain death for him—but the man he was battling in the name of the law could slay at any distance, and his victims bore no mark or clue!
- King of the Corpse Trade**.....Donald G. Cormack 90  
Not even Thatch Morgan, ace detective, could think of any reason why those nameless corpses were stolen from their slabs in the City Morgue. But Thatch was to know the answer soon—when he occupied a cold, marble slab himself!

A BLOOD-CHILLING SHORT STORY

- Horror's Holiday Special**.....Wayne Robbins 27  
The ghastliness on that train made me laugh: the severed head; the kid's blood spilling; the mutilated bodies. . . . It meant nothing to me—I was bound for the nut-house anyway!

—AND—

- You Cannot Know!**.....The Editors 1  
Life insurance—or murder insurance?
- The World of Crime**.....A Department 107
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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION

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## You Cannot Know!

(Continued from page 1)

cide; yet little evidence has been forthcoming which points to the actual brains behind the organization. The persons who have been apprehended never *actually knew* the identity of the king-pins!

No one knows how the gang chooses its victims. Inasmuch as the band operates secretly, how could a husband or wife, who planned to murder the other, know whom to contact in order to purchase the deadly dose—the lethal beverage called “witches’ brew?” It would seem, therefore, that the killers pick the victim first, then “work on” the beneficiary. And in that supposition, lies the most sinister angle of all: The gang not only has the power to poison a human being picked as a victim, but it also has the insidious ability to *poison the mind* of the beneficiary!

By and large, the human being is weak, easily swayed by strong argument and the urge for wealth. But an “argument” designed to turn an ordinary person’s mind to murder must have been conceived by someone possessed of a wily brain and an advanced knowledge of psychology. This individual, it would seem, has been able to train subordinates to pass among the operators the deadly fruits of his mind and at the same time conceal his identity. He is the person who must be reached before the ranks of the dead swell further. *Who* is he? What is he?

Police believe that the ring may have been responsible for at least one hundred deaths. This is a staggering number for one gang to have murdered, and it is believed that in most every case some relative of the deceased administered the “witches’ brew,” the sale of which, incidentally, has swelled the bloody coffers of the master criminal. The “brew” sells for three hundred dollars per pint!

This is just one more example that bizarre crime, as featured in *Dime Mystery Magazine*; occasionally occurs in real life!

The Editor

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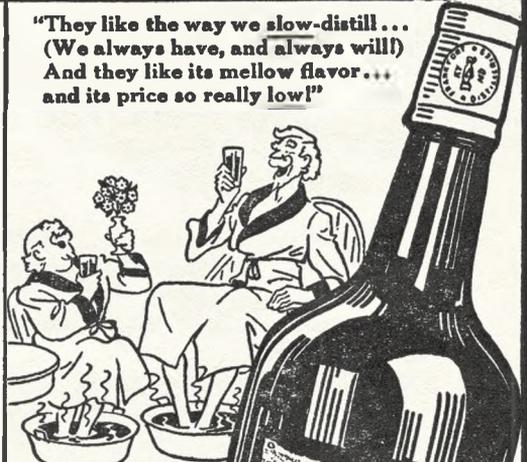
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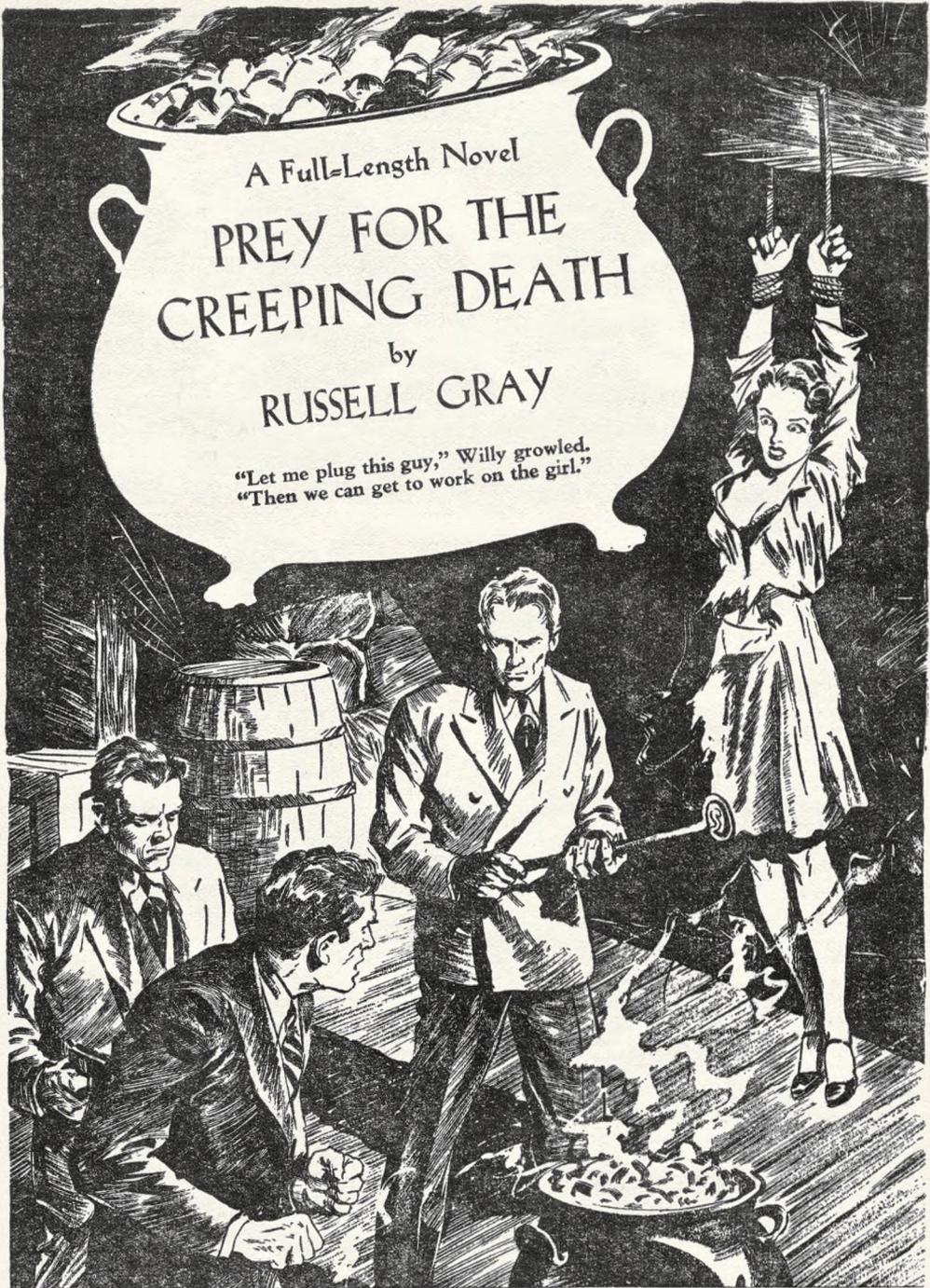
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A Full-Length Novel  
**PREY FOR THE  
CREEPING DEATH**

by  
**RUSSELL GRAY**

"Let me plug this guy," Willy growled.  
"Then we can get to work on the girl."

*Unless Ben Bryn could halt, somehow, the relentless and horrible march of that creeping plague, it was curtains for him—and for the girl who had trusted him!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Summons from the Dead

**B**EN BRYN read the note twice. The writing was scrawled, shaky; obviously the hand had been unsteady. Was it a hoax of some kind?

Perhaps a trap? His hand moved to the telephone on his desk, hovered above it for several moments, then he changed his mind. He scowled over the note again.

Dear Mr. Bryn:

In the name of heaven, come to me as soon as you have read this! I dare not go to see you and I dare not telephone you. I write this locked in my room with the windows bolted. I shall slip this letter under the door and Pauline, my maid, has been instructed to drop it into the mailbox.

You may not be able to save me from the horrible creeping death. I think that no power on earth can—now. I am burning up alive! But the worst of all is dying like this alone, without making an effort.

Hurry, Mr. Bryn! Heed what is probably the last plea of an old woman.

Desperately,

Marianne Carson

Ben Bryn stuck the letter in his pocket and went across the street to the office of the *Evening Advance*.

As he moved across the city room, men and women glanced up from their desks at his short, stocky figure. Some looked after him with curious eyes; others nodded to him. He stopped in front of a desk behind which an attractive brunette was hunched over a typewriter.

"Hello, Helen," he said.

Helen Forrest rose languidly and extended a slim hand. "I suppose it is foolish for my heart to do a handstand in the hope that you have come here to see me," she said in her liquid voice. "I'm not a woman to you. I'm simply society editor of the *Advance* and, as usual, you want information."

Ben Bryn's clear blue eyes twinkled. "I'm as susceptible as any man to beauty and charm."

She studied him between half-shut eyes. She was the willowy type and she knew that tall women made him uncomfortably conscious of his lack of height. He himself stood only five-feet-two, although the first impression of him was one of

great power. It was a correct impression, for his tremendous shoulders, his smoothly muscled biceps, his large hands possessed a strength of which the underworld whispered in awe. Yet there was nothing cumbersome about him. His shoulders tapered down to the slender hips and legs of an athlete.

For twenty years of his life those legs had been useless appendages as the result of infantile paralysis. His youth had consisted of pushing himself about on a wheeled platform and selling newspapers and shoelaces. That had placed strength in his shoulders and hands and iron in his soul; and when a series of exercises he had evolved had eventually developed his legs to normal, that strength and that iron had made him the most feared criminal investigator in the state.

"What can I do for you?" Helen Forrest asked with a weary sigh.

"Who and what is Marianne Carson?"

Her sleepy eyes opened all the way. "My dear man, she's beyond the range of your profession. She's a respectable dowager, very much society; has successfully married off two daughters and a son and now lives in solitary splendor in an ancient mansion attended by a maid and a cook."

"Nothing shady in her past? No ugly gossip?"

"Not a whisper. And now that she's over seventy, she wouldn't care if there were."

"Thanks," Ben Bryn said. He was frowning as he walked out.

**H**E took a taxi to the address on the letterhead. As he was going up the walk of the neat colonial house, he saw the black crêpe on the front door, and it gave him an ugly start. Marianne Carson had written of the "creeping death" and here, not an hour after the delivery of her letter, the symbol of death was on her door.

A pretty girl in a trim maid's uniform came to the door. Her eyes were swollen with weeping.

"I'd like to see Marianne Carson," Bryn said.

"She—she's dead," the maid stammered.

Bryn nodded. "Are you Pauline?"

Her head jerked up, and suddenly she looked frightened. "Yes. Why?"

"I'm Ben Bryn. You mailed a letter addressed to me last night."

At the mention of his name the fear left her. "Come in." When he was in the hallway, she said: "For two days Mrs. Carson had been acting strangely. She locked herself in her room, even kept the windows shut in spite of the warm weather. She refused to come out for meals. She would open the door only wide enough for me to slip the tray through, then she'd quickly slam it. Last night, about eleven, she called me on the extension phone and said that in five minutes she'd slide a letter through under her door for me to mail. It wasn't more than thirty minutes later that the fire started. The poor thing! It's such a horrible way to die!"

"The fire?" Bryn said.

"She always insisted on smoking in bed. I guess she went to sleep with a cigarette in her hand. Cook and I had gone to bed when we heard her scream. We rushed to her room and found smoke coming through the cracks of the door. We tried to get in, but the door was locked. Cook rushed downstairs for an axe and I nearly went crazy standing out there listening to Mrs. Carson's frightful screams sinking lower and lower. And all the time I heard flames crackling.

"Finally cook came back and chopped an opening through the door. The bed was a mass of flames and the poor thing was still on the bed. Just then Mr. Powys came and we managed to put out the fire with pails of water from the bathroom,

but it was too late to save Mrs. Carson. She—"

"Who's Mr. Powys?" Bryn interrupted.

"Lace Powys, Mrs. Carson's brother."

"I thought Mrs. Carson lived alone."

"She did, but Mr. Powys dropped in."

"You said it was around midnight?"

The maid shot him a quick look. "I guess it is odd, now that I think of it. He very seldom comes here."

Bryn said: "I'd like to see the body."

"Upstairs in the second room to your right." The maid shuddered. "If you don't mind, I don't like going up there again."

**B**RYN ascended the stairs. The first door he came to was nothing but a splintered frame on hinges. Obviously this had been Marianne Carson's room. A glance was enough to show him the havoc the fire had wrought. The room smelled acridly of burned feathers.

The door to the second room was closed. He pushed the door inward and the first thing he saw was the long hump covered by a sheet on the bed. He strode in, pulled the sheet down. The pit of his stomach went abruptly hollow.

The face was not recognizable. There was no hair on the head. And the rest of the body was a blackened horror.

"Who the hell are you?" a voice behind him demanded.

Bryn turned leisurely. He saw a lanky man of about fifty-five glowering at him through horn-rimmed glasses.

"Lace Powys?" Bryn asked.

"That's right. Who gave you permission to come in here?"

"I'm a private investigator," Bryn said quietly. "Mrs. Carson hired me yesterday by letter. She was in fear of her life. Evidently that fear was justified.

"She died as the result of an unfortunate accident," Powsy snapped. "Clearly she's no longer your client. Good day."

**B**RYN replaced the sheet. "I'm not sure of that," he said. "She was burning up alive when she wrote me, but it wasn't from the fire in the bed. That came later. For some days she had been burning up slowly in some hideous fashion; that's why she had hidden herself. And she had locked herself in her room because she was afraid something like this would happen. Her bed was put on fire to hide the signs of what was done to her."

"You're crazy!" Bowys barked. "My sister was locked in her room. Nobody could get in there."

"Maybe," Bryn said.

He brushed past Powys and went down the stairs. Powys ran after him, demanding: "What do you intend to do now?"

"Gather some necessary information. Then I'll be back."

Powys' blustering manner changed suddenly. He seemed to shrivel before Bryn's eyes until he was only a very frightened and very helpless old man.

"No!" Powys whined. "For God's sake, don't come back here!"

Bryn fixed him with his steady blue eyes. "Why not?"

Powys caught his breath in a tortured sob. His tall frame shivered. Then he turned abruptly and strode away.

Bryn let himself out of the house and went reflectively down the walk. As he reached the edge of the walk, a man with great sloping shoulders and a bull neck stepped out from the tall hedges which surrounded the house. The man's right hand was sunk in his right topcoat pocket. Beyond him a sedan was parked at the curb. A man with a slouch hat pulled low over his forehead sat behind the wheel. The motor of the car was idling.

The big man said: "We don't like snooping. How about you stepping into that car and having a talk with me and my pal?" He pushed the barrel of his gun significantly against his pocket.

Bryn had his hands at his side. There wasn't a chance of him getting at his own gun. And no doubt the man in the car had a gun on his lap.

"I'm particular with whom I ride," Bryn said.

The big man came a step closer to Bryn. His right side was nearest Bryn. He muttered between his lips: "Okay by me if you want to get a belly-full of lead right here."

Bryn's fist drove up for a distance of twelve inches into the right forearm of the big man. A second later the big man's brain telegraphed his finger to pull the trigger, but by that time it was too late. The gunman's right arm and hand were useless. Bryn's blow had broken some of the small bones, had paralyzed the nerves.

The big man yelled stridently. Bryn jabbed up with his left, missed the jaw and laid open the left cheek, sending the big man in a heap against the hedge.

**T**HEN Bryn was diving around to the other side of the hedge as the gunman in the sedan opened fire. Bryn jerked out his .45 automatic and crawled to the break in the hedge. The big man had had enough strength left to run around to the other side of the car. The sedan was already in motion; the big man was clinging to the running-board on the farther side.

Bryn had time for two shots. The first splintered the windshield inches from the driver's head; the second missed completely. The sedan skidded around the corner and was gone.

Bryn stood up, brushing himself off. His knuckles tingled pleasantly. The man he had hit had been at least twelve inches taller and must have outweighed him by more than fifty pounds, but it hadn't done him much good. Bryn's fists had the pulverizing power of a rock crusher.

People were pouring out of the houses on the block and, not wanting to be both-

ered with questions, Bryn hurried up the street. Glancing around at the Carson house, he saw the face of Lace Powys at a second floor window.

When Ben Bryn reached his office, he found a girl pacing agitatedly before the door. He came up behind her, asked in his soft voice: "Looking for somebody?"

She spun, crouching a little, as if she were about to leap into instant flight. Stark terror glinted in the depths of her eyes.

Then she straightened up and gasped with relief. "You're Ben Bryn?"

"Right. You wish to see me?"

"Yes."

He unlocked the door and led her into his office, pulled one of the leather chairs from the wall for her. She was a remarkably pretty girl. Yet there was an unnatural pallor on her smooth cheeks and the pupils of her eyes were dilated.

She stood facing him, gripping the back of the chair, and there was a mute plea in her hazel eyes as they met his sympathetic blue ones.

"Mr. Bryn," she said, her voice catching, "I want you to save my life."

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Death Brand

**T**HE girl sank down in the chair, as if her limbs had suddenly lost all power to hold her up any longer. She buried her face in her hands and her shoulders heaved.

Ben Bryn placed a big hand gently on her arm. "Of course I'll do everything in my power to help you."

She turned a tear-stained face up to him. "It's not only that I'm afraid to die, or even the horrible way in which I'll die. It's the terrible strain, the suspense, the waiting."

"What makes you so sure you'll die?" Bryn asked.

"This," she said.

She stood up and started to unbutton the top of her dress. When she had the top buttons undone and started to slide the neck of the dress down over her shoulders, Bryn opened his mouth. He closed it again without saying anything, sat there watching her keenly.

Her naked shoulders were like polished marble. She pulled her dress down until the upper slopes of her firm, rounded breasts were bared. A jagged, brown, blistered splotch marred the curve of her right breast, extended narrow tentacles into the valley between her bosom.

"You've been burned!" Bryn exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "My dear girl, you should go to a doctor."

"No," she said dully. "Doctors can't help me. Perhaps you can. I don't know. I'm crazy with fear." She moved against him, clutching at his arm. "You have to help me, Mr. Bryn! You can't just let me die!"

"How did you get that burn?"

"I don't know. Two days ago I woke up and I found it on me. It was just a tiny spot at first. Then it started to grow."

Bryn said, "Some sort of fungus, perhaps. A close friend of mine is a skin specialist. I'll give you his name."

She stepped back. "I knew you wouldn't believe me. But you have to! Will you do me one favor? Come to my apartment with me?"

He had become convinced that the rash, or whatever it was, had caused her to have delusions of persecution. The pain might have temporarily unhinged her mind.

"I'm rather busy on a case at present," he told her. "If you'll go to see this doctor—"

**W**ITH a sob she turned away from him. Listlessly she buttoned her dress, then went toward the door. Her shoulders drooped hopelessly.

"Just a minute," Bryn said.

It had occurred to him that perhaps the attack on him outside the Carson house was tied up in some way with this girl's presence. Somebody wanted to kill him; he hadn't any idea why, except that it was connected with the death of Marianne Carson. Possibly this girl had been sent here to lead him into a trap. Looking at her, so sweet and distraught, he hated to admit her capable of anything like that, but he had had too much experience to trust in appearances. Sooner or later he would again come up against whoever wanted to kill him, and he had learned that the best defense was an offense.

"I've changed my mind," he said. "I'll go with you."

She brightened up perceptibly. Her figure straightened. For a moment he felt a qualm for suspecting that she might be a stooge for killers. Then he shrugged and walked out beside her.

For a while they sat in silence in the taxi. Then Bryn said: "Tell me about yourself."

"My name is Sibyl Day. You might have heard of my father, Norman Day, the tire manufacturer."

"Does he know about that burn and your visit to me?"

Sibyl Day shuddered. "He's dead. I returned home yesterday and found him murdered."

He stared at her. "Did you report it to the police?"

"I dare not."

"Suppose you tell me the rest."

"You won't believe me," she said wearily. "Not until you've seen what I'll show you, and even then. . ."

**H**E asked no more questions. Presently the taxi pulled up in front of an apartment house. The elevator took them up to the twelfth floor. Bryn loosened his gun in its holster as she unlocked the door. He flung the door open, brushed past her, strode in first. He went

through the foyer into the sumptuous living room of the duplex apartment. There wasn't a sign of anybody.

"No servants?" he asked.

"They were discharged. Now I'm living alone with—with—Come this way."

Warily he followed her, keeping his hand near his gun. She led him down a hall, then opened a door and stepped into a room. Bryn stopped dead in the doorway. Only a short time ago he had entered a bedroom in another house and had seen the same kind of a long hump on the bed covered with a sheet. He went to the bed and pulled the sheet down a little way.

The grey-haired man who lay there must have been dead for a couple of days. Even death had not relaxed the expression of unendurable pain. Bryn flicked the sheet all the way to the footboard and a gasp of horror escaped his lips.

From knee to neck, Norman Day's scrawny body was a mass of charred, blistered skin tissue. Like Marianne Carson—with one difference. Marianne Carson had obviously been burned by fire, whereas Norman Day's body looked precisely like that raw, blistered splotch on Sibyl's breast.

Ben Bryn covered the body with the sheet and turned to the girl. She stood against the wall, quivering, her hands crossed on her breasts.

He put an arm about her. "You poor girl," he said. Gently he led her out of the bedroom into the living room. He saw a decanter, poured stiff drinks for the girl and himself.

They sat side by side on the couch. He said: "I see what's on your mind. You think that a burn similar to yours started on your father's body and spread until it killed him."

"I *know* that's what happened," she told him hollowly. "I spent the week-end with a girl friend at Little Long Lake. Two days ago my chest started itching.

I paid no attention to it. When I awoke yesterday morning, the itching had turned to pain and I noticed the splotch on my skin. I thought it might be an infection of some kind and decided to see a doctor after I returned home.

"When I entered this apartment yesterday afternoon, I found that the servants were gone. I unpacked, took a shower, and after a while happened to wander into my father's room. He was on the bed, naked, evidently having torn his clothes off in his agony. He looked the way you have just seen him—horrible. I guess I must have fainted.

"The ringing of the telephone brought me to. I went to the extension phone in the room and picked it up. A ghostlike voice spoke at the other end of the wire. The voice warned me not to go to the police; not, in fact, to tell anybody about Dad's death; that I could remove his body for burial only if I could arrange it so that nobody but myself became aware of the fact that he was dead. The voice said that if I disobeyed in the slightest degree, the burn would spread over my body until I died as frightfully as Dad had. Then there was a click and I was alone with Dad's body."

There was a silence. Bryn's arm tightened about the girl's slim quaking body.

"A little later, I saw a letter on the dresser," she went on. "Here it is."

She opened her handbag and handed Bryn an ordinary sheet of typewriting paper on which was typed:

**Enclosed is the jar of salve. You are a greedy old man. Perhaps you delayed too long. In that case you will have to purchase a stronger salve from us at double the price.**

**Again we remind you not to inform a soul of your affliction. Your only hope lies in complete silence and application of the salves we send to you.**

**One other word of warning. If you are foolhardy enough to go to the police or any other source for aid, remember that**

**you have a daughter whom you love. You would not like to have her a victim of the creeping death!**

"The creeping death," Ben Bryn muttered to himself. That was what Marianne Carson had also called it in her frantic letter!

SIBYL said hoarsely: "After the voice spoke to me on the phone, I opened my dress and saw that the burn had spread still further. I went almost crazy with fear. The voice called again, told me that if I sent ten thousand dollars in cash to a certain post office box I would receive a salve that would cure me. I thought the salve hadn't helped Dad because he'd delayed too long. I rushed to my bank before it closed and withdrew the money. My mother left me an independent income. I sent the money by special delivery.

"Then all the rest of the day and last night I waited. It was a nightmare. I dared not go to anybody for help, because I was depending on that salve. Early in the morning the salve arrived by special delivery. I applied it to the burn, which had continued to spread during the night. The salve soothed the pain somewhat, but not enough, and after an hour or two I noticed that the burned area was larger. Frantic, I took the jar to a chemist and had its contents analyzed. The report was that the salve, for which I had paid ten thousand dollars, could have been bought in any ten-cent-store. The salve was nothing but cold cream!"

Ben Bryn's big hands opened and closed convulsively. His eyes turned into twin balls of blue ice.

"The fiends!" he muttered. "What I'd give to get my hands on them!"

The front door slammed open and feet hurried in the foyer. Instinctively Bryn pulled his arm from about Sibyl, but not before a young man appeared in the doorway. Bryn realized that that gesture must

have looked quite incriminating to the newcomer.

Sibyl said: "Why, Tom, what are you doing here?"

The young man advanced across the room, glowering at Bryn. He was built like a football guard.

"I might have known I couldn't trust you," he growled at Sibyl. "I tried to get you by phone all morning. I saw you leave your house and followed you here—and find you like this."

Sibyl rose to her feet. "Tom Meers, how dare you make such insinuations?"

"I have eyes," the young man snapped. "I had an absurd notion that you were a decent girl. Now I find you're no better than—"

"Just a second, friend," Bryn broke in. "I don't like your tone of voice and I don't like what you're saying."

"You don't, eh?" Meers whirled on Bryn. "Maybe you'll like this." He swung his fist down at Bryn's jaw.

Bryn side-stepped the blow, caught the bigger man's arm as it lashed past his face. He twisted Meers' arm behind his back, captured his other arm, then lifted him. A look of astonishment passed over his antagonist's face. He had known few men who could beat him in a fight, and this man was handling him almost as easily as he would a child.

Cursing, Meers started to struggle. Bryn carried him across the room, through the open front door and dumped him into the hallway. Meers lay panting on the floor, incredulity and hatred mingling in his eyes as he stared up at Bryn.

"Next time you'll talk civilly to a lady or you'll be hurt," Bryn said and slammed the door.

Sibyl Day stood in the living room, her breasts rising and falling, her hands clasped in front of her.

"Maybe I shouldn't have done that," Bryn said. "I should have given you a chance to explain. But I didn't want him

to start anything in here which would bring people. I'd rather nobody knew for a while what happened to your father."

"There's nothing to explain to him," Sibyl Day stated. "He's jealous and hot-tempered. I'm rather fond of him, but he can't get it into his head that I don't want to marry him."

Several minutes later they left the apartment. Tom Meers was gone.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The House of Murder

**B**RYN took Sibyl to his friend, Dr. Stanley Behren, a famous skin specialist. Impatiently he paced up and down the confines of the waiting room while Dr. Behren examined the girl. When at last they came out, Bryn hurried over to them, his eyes question marks.

"Nothing serious," Dr. Behren, a tall man with a Van Dyke, shrugged. "The young lady seems to have been burned by some caustic acid. Frankly, Ben, I can't understand her attitude. She refuses to tell me how the acid was spilled on her."

"But I did tell you," Sibyl protested. "No acid could possibly have been spilled on me."

"Never mind that," Bryn interposed. "Look, Stan, assuming that a drop of some sort of acid fell on her, would it gradually spread?"

"Certainly not," Dr. Behren stated.

"Have you any idea what the acid is?"

"No way of telling off-hand," Dr. Behren replied. "Some not-too-strong form of vitriol; something like that. What's it all about, Ben?"

"Tell you some other time," Bryn said, and taking Sibyl's arm, he led her outside to a waiting taxi.

Back in the cab, she started to claw at his arm again and her voice became high-pitched with mounting hysteria. "You see, even the doctor doesn't know. It'll spread and spread until I die!"

"Nonsense!" Bryn snapped. "If you want me to help you, you'll have to be sensible. Somebody put drops of the acid on you while you slept."

"But it spread, and even now it keeps on spreading," she argued. "Nobody has been near me for twenty-four hours." Her voice rose. "It's hopeless, I tell you. It's something hellish, a curse. I'm doomed."

"Cut it out!" Bryn's voice lashed out like a whip. She stared at him a moment, then subsided into a pathetic bundle deep in the seat.

He made his voice gentle. "Look here, Sibyl. You said you'd trust my judgment. Well, I'm taking you up to my apartment and I'm having watch kept over you day and night. Nobody and nothing will be able to get near you. I'm certain that the burn will not only stop spreading but go away entirely."

She nodded and leaned against him like a little girl coming for comfort to her father.

When they were in his three-room apartment, he made two phone calls. Within a half hour Billy Pierce and Dolly Dennis, whom he occasionally employed as his assistants, showed up. Pierce was a dapper little man with the fighting qualities of a gamecock. Dolly Dennis was big and buxum and red-headed, and could handle her fists and a gun better than most men.

"These are the instructions," Bryn said crisply. "Both of you are staying with Miss Day in this apartment day and night until further orders. You're sleeping and eating here, and at least one of you will always be awake and have a gun handy. Nobody comes near Miss Day; nobody sees her or even talks to her. And I'm locking up the liquor and you're not to buy any."

"What's the dope, Chief?" Billy Pierce asked. "A kidnap threat?"

"Worse than that," Bryn told him. "I haven't time to go into details now."

Sibyl Day went with him as far as the door. She put a small hand in his big paw and smiled wanly up at him.

"I feel better already," she said softly, "knowing that you're watching over me."

He squeezed her hand and went out.

Ben Bryn rang the doorbell of the Carson house without getting an answer. He went around the back of the house, found the back door also locked. But all the ground floor windows were wide open, so he lifted himself through one of them.

Noiselessly he walked through the dining room, then the drawing room. As he was about to step into the downstairs hall, he heard the whirr of a telephone dial. He leaned around the doorway, then stepped into the hall.

"Fancy meeting you here, Helen," he said.

**H**ELEN FORREST spun, her hand jerking behind her head with the handset phone as if she were about to throw it. Almost at once her fear-contorted features returned to normal and she smiled languidly.

"Playing bogymen now, Ben?" she drawled. "You almost scared me out of my skin. I was just about to call my paper."

"I suppose you saw Marianne Carson?"

Helen made a wry face. "Don't remind me of it. I might have taken it easier had I been prepared for the sight. I knew from your questions that I could find a story here. I came as soon as I could get away. Nobody answered my ring, so like a good newspaper woman I climbed through the window and looked around. Is it murder, Ben?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Why'd you be around if it wasn't?"

"Who would have the most to gain by her death?" he asked, evading an answer.

Helen Forrest shrugged. "I wouldn't know, except—well, everybody in her family is pretty well heeled except one

side. His mouth jerked open soundlessly as he saw Bryn's automatic pointing at him and realized that he couldn't get his own gun up in time.

But Bryn had other plans. You can't get information out of a dead man. So he brought up his left hand instead. His fist crashed into the big man's face with all the force of his great strength. He felt the jar of the impact all the way up to his shoulder. The big man went backward down the stairs.

At almost the same instant the roof seemed to fall down on the back of Bryn's head. He clawed the air for support, felt his legs buckle under him; then he was rolling down the stairs. Darkness blotted out his senses before he had reached the bottom.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Spreading Death

COLD water revived Ben Bryn. He opened his eyes and found himself looking up at the florid face of Lieutenant Hummel of Homicide. He started up to his feet. Hummel got an arm under his shoulders and helped him up.

"Take it easy, Ben," Hummel said. "You got an awful smack on the head and tumbling down those stairs didn't do you any good."

Bryn saw that he was at the foot of the attic stairs. There were uniformed cops and plainclothesmen in the hall and he heard voices in the attic above and the rooms below. Near his feet the big man he had knocked down the stairs lay in a crumpled heap. He hadn't any face left. There wasn't anything but bloody, jumbled features. This wasn't the first time Bryn had seen the damage his fist could do when he put all his strength behind it.

"Dead?" Bryn said to Hummel. "I'm sure my sock didn't kill him."

"Not quite," the lieutenant said, "though I'd rather be kicked in the face

by a mule any day than have you take a smack at me. What finished this guy was falling down the stairs. His neck is broken."

Bryn rubbed his bruised bones. He put his hands to the back of his head and felt dried blood. "Almost broke my neck too. How'd you get here?"

"Helen Forrest phoned. As soon as the guys who killed Powys scrambled, she—"

"Powys is dead?"

"Yeah. There were three of the killers. One of them is that chap there. Another one was waiting against the outside of the door and slammed his gun down on your head. Helen Forrest was coming out to see what was up and she saw it. Then the guy who knocked you out smacked her down with his fist and went into the room. By this time the third killer was coming up the stairs. The maid and the cook saw the rest. Powys was kneeling on the floor, pleading for his life. One of the killers just stepped up to him, put his gun against Powys' forehead, and let go. Then they beat it."

Bryn said: "Know who this guy I socked is?"

"No idea. You ruined his face, but we might dig something up on his prints. You'd think we could get some sort of description of the two other rats, but you know how frightened people are. We got three different and contradictory descriptions from the three women."

"They made no attempt to touch the women?"

Lieutenant Hummel shook his head. "Looks like they were only after Powys. I think the only reason they didn't finish you off when they passed your body was that they either thought you were dead or that they were in too much of a hurry. The screams and the shots could be heard for blocks." The lieutenant paused. "Well, Ben, what's it all about? There's still another corpse in the house, you know. It used to be old Mrs. Carson."

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"Come downstairs and I'll give you the dope," Bryn said wearily.

In the drawing room Pauline and the cook were recovering from a pretty bad case of hysteria, while a police stenographer was painstakingly writing down their disjointed statement.

"Where's Helen Forrest?" Bryn asked.

"I let her go to write the story for her paper," Hummel told him as he beckoned to the stenographer.

When Bryn and Hummel and the stenographer were seated at the long dining room table, Bryn started talking.

Twenty minutes later he was concluding: "They had drained all the money they could out of old Mrs. Carson. They knew, in common with a lot of other people, that she would leave her money to her brother. So the burn appeared on Powy's chest and started spreading and then they got in touch with him. They wanted the old lady out of the way now because that was the only way they could get the rest of her money through Powys, but they didn't want the police to know she'd been slowly murdered. They ordered Powys to go into her room and put her bed on fire.

"He did it because it would end her suffering sooner and because he would get her money and because he'd gone nearly crazy with fear. So he got into her room with a skeleton key, ignited the bed, then slipped out and pretended that he had just arrived.

"The killers didn't trust him. They knew his nerves would give way and he'd start talking under pressure. When they saw me slipping into the house, they came to put both of us out of the way."

**H**UMMEL put his small grey eyes on Bryn and for half a minute their steady gazes held. Then Hummel said: "You've always co-operated with the police, Ben, and we've given you breaks in the past. Why did you hold out on the

fact that Mrs. Carson had been murdered?"

"I didn't know it until a little while ago. I had no reason to believe that she hadn't really been burned as the result of an accident."

"Not even after the letter she sent you?"

"That was no proof."

Hummel sighed. "All right. Why didn't you tell us about Norman Day?"

"I didn't have a chance," Bryn said. Then he smiled wryly. "I better give it to you straight. I didn't want the cops to start messing around Sibyl Day. Not only is she on the verge of going to pieces, but I am certain that she'll be in danger if she is away from my protection for even a moment."

"Even if we take care of her?"

"Yes."

Hummel said: "You haven't much confidence in us, have you?"

"That's not it. I'm really scared of these fiends. Not for myself, but for Sibyl Day and their other victims, if any are left alive. I think I'm doing what's best for her. Look here, Lieutenant, I know you can find her if you want to. But I'd like you to release her as a material witness in my custody for a day or two."

Hummel shrugged. "It's not up to me, but I guess I can swing it. We've always found we can trust you."

Bryn went to the office of the *Evening Advance* and learned that Helen Forrest had already left. Nobody knew where she had gone. She had complained of what she thought was a skin rash on her chest! Bryn knew the dread significance of that. But why should the killers go after her? She had no money. The fact remained, however, that she was in danger of a hideous death.

He stopped off at her apartment, found that she wasn't in. Then he went to police headquarters and told Lieutenant Hummel that he feared that Helen Forrest had

become another victim of the fiends. Hummel growled, "Why didn't you tell me at the Carson house?" and sent out an alarm for her.

Bryn spent the next few hours at police headquarters and in the district attorney's office, giving all the information he could, in addition pulling strings to have Sibyl Day placed in his custody. Several times he telephoned his apartment. He learned to his satisfaction that the burn on her chest had ceased to spread.

So far so good. But most of the job was still undone. With the fiends at large, Sibyl's life continued in danger, as did his own life and the lives of whatever other victims there might be in the city unknown to himself and the police.

And Helen Forrest had not yet been located. There was a city-wide search for her now.

It was about ten o'clock at night when Bryn let himself into his apartment. Billy Pierce was standing alongside the door, gun leveled at Bryn.

Pierce grinned and returned the gun to his holster. Good boy, Pierce. Took no chances.

"How is she?" Bryn said.

"Quite some pain, but it's not spreading any more, like I told you over the phone. Dolly's in the bedroom with her, sleeping with her. The way Dolly sleeps, a mouse couldn't walk across the room without her hearing."

**L**IGHTLY Bryn pushed the door of the bedroom open. A dim nightlight was burning. He moved lightly toward the bed on which Sibyl and Dolly were sleeping. Because of the heat of the night, Sibyl had pushed the blanket down to her waist. He stared down at her, at her face calm now in sleep and very lovely. The low bodice of her nightgown showed the ugly blotch on the upper curves of her young breasts.

Poor thing, Bryn said to himself. Then

he thought of those others, of her father and Marianne Carson and Lace Powys. What mental and physical agonies they must have suffered before death had at last released them! A hard, cold core formed in the pit of his stomach.

He noticed that Dolly's eyes were open, that one of her hands was under her pillow where she no doubt kept her gun. Dolly was smiling up at him.

"Okay," Bryn whispered. "You can sleep tight. Billy and I will be in the other room all night."

Bryn stretched out on the daybed in the living room and slept soundly until two-thirty when Billy Pierce awoke him. Then Pierce slept and Bryn sat deep in an armchair, every sense alert.

The night passed uneventfully. At seven o'clock Bryn went into the kitchen to brew coffee. He was leaning against the stove, moodily watching the coffee percolating, when Sibyl Day's screams shrilled out.

Bryn slammed out of the kitchen, reached the bedroom door at the same time as Billy Pierce. Both men had their guns out. Bryn pushed the door inward. Only Sibyl and Dolly Dennis were in the bedroom and both girls were rolling on the bed, apparently struggling.

Bryn picked Dolly off the smaller girl and dropped her on the floor. Sibyl was writhing on the bed, clawing at her nightgown, and her mouth was open in an endless scream. He pinned her arms down, and shook her.

Dolly had risen to her feet; her ample bosom heaved under her pajamas. "Her screams woke me up," Dolly panted. "She looked like she was tearing herself apart, so I tried to stop her. She fought like a wildcat."

Sibyl's screams had turned to whimpers. She subsided, breathing heavily.

"It's spread!" she moaned. "Oh, God, I knew nothing could save me!"

Bryn had been modestly averting his

eyes from her exposed breasts. Now he looked down at her and his blood ran cold. The blistered blotch had spread until it covered all of her breasts and extended ragged fingers down to her waist.

"Holy Gee!" Billy Pierce exclaimed. He strode to the window, turned with wide eyes, and said: "It's five stories to the street and nothing but straight wall—and it's two stories to the roof. Only a spider could climb up here."

"It's impossible," Bryn muttered. "Dr. Behren told me that that burn didn't conceivably spread. Nobody could have gotten into this room except—" Automatically his gaze rested on Dolly Dennis.

"What are you looking like that at me for, Chief!" Dolly cried. "You don't think I—"

"I don't know," Bryn said slowly. "By this time I don't even trust myself."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Killers' Trap

**T**HE telephone whirred. Bryn went wearily into the living room and picked up the handset. In the bedroom Sibyl was moaning, not so much from the pain as from the maddening conviction that she was doomed to hideous death and that nothing anybody could do would save her.

"Hello?" Bryn muttered into the mouthpiece.

A voice spoke at the other end of the wire, but it wasn't words that it uttered. Bryn heard a choked mumbling.

"Hello?" he repeated impatiently.

Then out of the thin, gasping mumbling he distinguished a single word. "Ben," the voice said. And then again: "Ben . . . Ben . . ."

He tensed, pressing the phone against his ear. Another name came to him, thinly, as if from the grave. "Helen . . . Helen Forrest . . . Ben . . . save . . . ." The voice melted away.

"Helen!" he cried. "Where are you? What's happened to you?"

He heard her panting agonizingly. Then words came again, stronger, as if she had called on her last reserve of energy.

"Bungalow . . . Grove Road . . . I'm dying . . . Come quickly."

Ominous silence followed. Bryn cradled the phone, stood biting his lower lip in indecision. Sibyl's moans came out to him. Yet there was another girl who needed him even more.

"What is it, Chief?" Billy Pierce asked anxiously.

"You and Dolly stay here with Miss Day," Bryn snapped. "Do what you can to relieve the pain. And don't let anybody in."

He hopped a taxi and dangled a five dollar bill before the driver's eyes to encourage the breaking of traffic regulations. Last summer he had been out to Helen Forrest's summer bungalow several times. He'd forgotten about it. Fool not to have told the police to look for her there.

The cab reached the bungalow in forty minutes. Bryn raced up the walk, shoved open the front door.

**H**ELEN FORREST lay on the living room floor. She was nude and her body was twisted into a contorted heap. Near her lay the telephone. She was no longer smooth and white and lovely to look at, but a horror of raw, ugly, burned splotches.

"Helen!" Bryn exclaimed, dropping down to her side.

Her eyes opened. The pain faded from them, she forced a brave smile to her lips.

"Too late, Ben," she moaned. "I . . . I'm finished . . . It took an . . . eternity . . . to crawl to the phone."

He gathered her tortured body in his arms. "What happened to you, Helen?"

"The . . . itching grew worse . . . I went . . . to bed . . . I awoke at night

. . . burning up. . . . Nobody heard my screams. . . . Finally I . . . I crawled in here . . . called you"

"Why did you come here?" he asked.  
"I . . . he. . . ."

Her strength gave out. She kept moving her lips, but only indistinguishable sounds came out. Suddenly a tremor ran through her body and she was dead.

Gently Ben Bryn placed her on the couch. Hot rage choked him as he stood looking down at her.

All at once he stiffened. Although her torso was a horror of frightful burns, her face was unmarred. So were her legs and the lower parts of her thighs. The burns started in a semicircle just above her breasts!

**H**E WENT into the bedroom, saw the bed a chaos as the result of her agonized struggles. He saw tatters of silk on the bed and the floor, remnants of her nightgown which she had torn in her pain. Picking up one of the pieces of silk, he rubbed it against the back of his hand. He felt nothing. Then he applied the material to his tongue. With a grimace he pulled it away. His tongue burned.

He returned to the living room, picked up the phone, called his apartment number. He heard the buzz at the other end of the wire. Three, four, five times the buzz was repeated. He turned rigid, hardly breathing.

At last the operator said: "Sorry, your party doesn't answer."

"Are you sure?" he asked tensely.  
"Have you the right number?"

He hung up and called again. Once more there was no answer.

Then he was running out to the road. Madly he cursed three passing drivers who refused to stop for him. Then a small truck picked him up. As soon as the truck came to an empty taxi, he transferred.

After what seemed an eternity, he burst into his apartment. Billy Pierce was seat-

ed at the desk talking into the phone.  
"Where is she?" Bryn yelled. "What happened?"

Pierce dropped the phone on its cradle and turned a white face toward Bryn. "God, Chief, I've been trying to locate you all over. They're gone, both Dolly and Miss Day. I came back and the apartment was empty."

"You fool!" Bryn raged. "Why did you leave them alone?"

"All I did was go down to buy some lotion for her burns," Pierce exclaimed in aggrieved tones. "I wasn't gone more than ten minutes."

Bryn strove to get control of himself. "Sorry, Billy. I know that it wasn't your fault."

Bryn went to the bedroom door and looked in. Pierce came up behind him.

"No sign of any struggle," he said. "It beats me how they got in here without Dolly being ready for them; even then, they'd have had a hell of a job taking her. . . . Say, do you think, after all, Dolly's in with 'em? I don't believe it, but—"

"No," Bryn said dully. "Dolly's all right. Come on, Billy."

They questioned the elevator operator but he had not seen either Dolly or Sibyl.

"I see how they did it," Bryn said as he and Billy stood in front of the apartment house. "They got into the apartment, put guns on Sibyl and Dolly, made Sibyl dress, took the girls down the stairs to the basement and then out the back door around the side of the block where they had a car waiting."

"Yeah, but how'd they get through the locked door with Dolly in there with a gun?" Billy Pierce puzzled.

"I have an idea how that happened," Bryn said. "You go to headquarters and tell Lieutenant Hummel everything you know. Tell him also that Helen Forrest was murdered in her bungalow."

"Jeez!" Pierce exclaimed. "And where are you going, Chief?"

"To get the killer," Bryn said in a voice so quiet that it belied the fury within him.

The day before at headquarters Bryn had learned that Pauline, the former Carson maid, was staying temporarily at her parents' home, and he had automatically jotted down the address.

He took a taxi to the tenement house. There were no names under the doorbells. He had to inquire at several apartments on the ground floor before he learned that Pauline's parents lived on the fourth floor, rear.

He went up slowly, cautiously, stopping on each landing to peer up and down the dimly lighted stairs and to listen for any suspicious sound. It was this caution which saved his life. Out of the shadows on the third floor landing a shape detached itself. A voice said: "This is as far as you go, shamus." Bryn saw the gun in the man's hand.

**B**RYN hadn't time to go for his own gun. He left his feet as soon as the gunman had started talking. His broad body skimmed over the floor; his wide shoulders struck the man's hips an instant after the gun blasted. The gunman hadn't had a chance to bring his gun down far enough, and the slug smacked into the wall three feet above the floor. The gunman crashed down heavily on his back with the wind knocked out of him.

In a moment Bryn had kicked the gun from the man who had tried to shoot him down. He heard steps pounding up from the floor below. Lifting the stunned killer in his arms, he looked down over the railing. A man was running up with drawn gun. Bryn raised the gunman in his arms, held him over his head and hurled the body down at the man who was coming up. The hurtling body struck the other, and both went tumbling down the stairs in a jumble of arms and legs.

Then Bryn was rounding the staircase,

his own gun in his hand, cold fury raging within him. They must have followed him here from his own apartment. While he had been inquiring below as to where Pauline lived, one must have come up here while the other remained below, planning to trap him between them. It was plain that they did not want him to get to Pauline.

As he flew down the stairs, the gunmen were untangling themselves. One of them shot wildly up at him, and then Bryn's gun barked. The one who had shot stumbled backward, but kept his gun pointed up at Bryn, striving desperately for strength for a second shot. Bryn's gun belched another slug and the wounded man fell forward on his face.

Meanwhile the second gunman, the one Bryn had thrown down the stairs, had fled. He was already out of sight around the curve of the staircase. Bryn pounded after him. Between the second and first floors Bryn caught sight of him, but by that time tenants had begun to pour out of their apartments and Bryn couldn't risk a shot for fear of hitting one of them.

The gunman slammed out through the front door and into the street. When Bryn himself reached the street, the gunman was out of sight. He might have run into the next house or dived into a waiting car.

Bryn holstered his gun and went up the stairs. Tenants shrank away from him. He flashed his badge, said, "Get a cop," and continued upward. On the second floor landing he passed the body of the man he had shot. Dead, all right. He went up to the fourth floor and saw Pauline among the excited group huddled at the head of the stairs.

"Oh, it's Ben Bryn, the detective," she said with relief.

He took her arm lightly. "Where's your flat?" She nodded toward an open door in the rear and he led her in there, shutting the door behind him.

**P**AULINE said: "Mr. Bryn, I didn't have a chance to thank you yesterday for saving my life. Can you imagine, it was that horrid Lace Powys who burned poor Mrs. Carson! I always said—"

"Look, Pauline," Bryn broke in, "you can thank me by telling me what laundry the Carson household used."

"Laundry? Gee, what's that got to do with what's been going on? You detectives ask the craziest questions."

"Don't you want to tell me?"

"Sure. The Sunbrite Hand Laundry."

"What's the address?"

"Somewhere on Monarch Road, I think. Glad to help you out, Mr. Bryn, but I don't see—"

"Have you been giving your laundry to them for a long time?"

"Only a couple of weeks."

"Why did you change to that laundry?"

She didn't look at him. "Well, I—"

"That's all right, Pauline," Bryn said. "I'm not going to arrest you because you got a rake-off from the driver. That's how he got the Carson order, by giving you—well, let's call it a commission?"

Pauline faced him defiantly. "Well, everybody does it."

"Sure," he said. "Thanks for the information."

She looked after him with a puzzled expression as he left, wondering at the queer methods of detectives.

As he had expected, the name of the Sunbrite Hand Laundry was not listed in the telephone directory. He flagged a taxi and told the driver to roll slowly along Monarch Road. It wasn't until they were almost in the suburbs and the houses started to thin out that he found what he was looking for.

It was an unpainted frame building flanked on either side by empty lots. A badly lettered sign over the front door said: SUNBRITE HAND LAUNDRY. Bryn got out of the taxi, paid off the driver.

The door was locked. Bryn peered through the dirty store window. All the equipment of a hand laundry was in there—counters and bins and ironing boards. The building consisted only of a store. He could see every inch of it from the front window.

The place looked absolutely empty, but he wasn't quite satisfied. The door was locked only by a Yale lock fastened to two iron staples, one imbedded in the door and one in the frame. He hooked his powerful fingers through the lock and pulled. Slowly the staples came out. He dropped the staples and the lock to the ground and turned the knob.

Behind a bin he saw wooden steps leading downward. As he peered down into the uncertain light below, he heard a vague, muffled moan. Stiffening, his hand went to his gun.

He didn't quite reach it. Hard steel dug into his back. He knew at once that somebody had been crouching behind the counter, that at the slightest motion on his part he would die instantly.

Bryn twisted his head and looked into the handsome face of Tom Meers, the young man he had thrown out of Sibyl Day's apartment.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *The Burning of Hell*

**T**OM MEERS called down the steps: "We have company, Willy. I told you Bryn would come here and come alone. He's not the kind to work too closely with the police."

A short, slim man came up the steps—one of the two who had tried to trap Bryn in the tenement house. He stopped two steps below Bryn, grinned wolfishly, and leveled his gun at Bryn's heart.

"Get away from behind him, Tom," the man named Willy said. "My slug might go right through him."

"Not yet," Meers said. "I have a better

idea." He reached over Bryn's shoulder and extratced his automatic. "Go down, shamus," he ordered. "I have two guns on you and Willy has one, so don't try anything."

Bryn went down the steps. Willy moved backward in front of him, Meers descended right behind him. Bryn found himself in a small, dimly lit cellar.

He lurched forward, swearing harshly, at the sight of Sibyl Day's slim figure dangling by her wrists from a beam in the ceiling. A filthy rag was in her mouth. She stared at him with horror-widened eyes.

"Hold it!" Meers barked, and Bryn pulled himself up short. His immediate death would not help her and evidently Meers and his friends did not intend to kill him at once.

Near Sibyl's feet he noticed a burning charcoal brazier in which irons glowed white-hot. The cellar was divided in two by a thick plank wall. Wood and shavings were piled knee-deep on the floor.

With an effort Ben Bryn kept his voice calm as he said: "I figured it was you or somebody like you, Meers. Only somebody that Sibyl knew well and trusted could have taken her out of my apartment. You and your thugs took the fire stairs up to my apartment so as not to be seen. You rang and told Dolly Dennis who you were and, probably, that you had an urgent message for Sibyl. After a consultation with Sibyl, Dolly let you in. Sibyl had no reason not to trust you. She didn't love you, but regarded you as a close friend. Once inside the apartment, you pulled a gun on Dolly and let in your pals who were waiting outside. The rest was easy."

"That's not so brilliant," Meers commented.

"All right, here's the rest of it," Bryn said.

He was talking to gain time. Realizing now how foolhardy he had been not to

have left a message with the police as to where he was going, he could only hope desperately that Pauline would think of telling the police that he had asked for the whereabouts of the Sunbrite Hand Laundry. The chances were, however, that it wouldn't occur to her to mention it.

Bryn told Meers: "I don't suppose this laundry did much business; it was concerned only with getting the business of a certain few people. This was easily accomplished by bribing the maids. Not being a chemist, I'm not yet sure what you, or whoever of your gang ran the laundry, put on the undergarments. Probably something like sulphur trioxide, which can easily be rubbed on the garment.

"Sulphur trioxid forms sulphuric acid when united with water. In this case, when united with perspiration. The weather has been hot. By limiting the area on which you spread the stuff, you could more or less limit the burn. For instance, rub it only on the bodice of a nightgown or a chemise and a slight acid burn appears. Spread more of it on the next garment the victim wears and the burn spreads.

"Diabolically clever, save for one flaw. You could sell the tortured victim a salve at an enormous price, but you couldn't sell any salve that would immediately cure the burn. And you couldn't prevent the victim from wearing other undergarments which had been treated in your laundry. Otherwise you might have been able to extort even more money from them."

Tom Meers shrugged. "That knowledge isn't going to do you much good now."

**W**HIMPERS tore through Sibyl Day's gag as her slender form swung from the ceiling. Bryn's eyes shifted frantically about the room. No chance for a break with those guns pointed unwaveringly at him. Would the police come?

He said: "What I can't understand is why you killed Helen Forrest. She wasn't rich enough to be an extortion victim."

Meers scowled darkly. "She forced me to. Nobody knew that she was my mistress. I was growing tired of her, wanted to get rid of her, but I hadn't planned to kill her. Then yesterday morning while she was rummaging through my coat for cigarettes, she found the ten thousand dollars in cash Norman Day had sent me for the salve. She knew I hadn't much money and kept asking embarrassing questions about where all that cash had come from. Then when you started digging up some of the details, I was afraid she'd become suspicious of me. She was a friend of yours and might talk to you. I hustled her away from her office yesterday, took her out to her bungalow, said I had to hurry away on business and that I would probably return later that night. Needless to say, I didn't. The nightgown she wore took care of her."

"And now you're about to kill another girl you cared for," Bryn said through tight lips. "My God, man, haven't you a spark of humanity left?"

"Sibyl never returned my affection. Now she'll make me rich"

Bryn eyed the charcoal brazier. Why was Meers heating those irons? He looked at Sibyl swinging there and his scalp

tightened. Was it worth taking a chance against those two armed men? The odds were suicidal and there was still hope that the police might come in time.

**W**ILLY had been shifting uneasily on his feet. "What's the idea of wasting time?" he growled. "Maybe the cops will find this place. Let me plug this guy and then we can get to work on the girl."

"You're right, we've been wasting time," Meers agreed. "Though I'm sure Bryn is so damned conceited he decided he could handle us without ringing the police in. Shooting's too good for him. Remember he killed George and Tim."

Meers jabbed one of the two guns in his hands into Bryn's back. Willy unlocked the heavy plank door to the other cellar room.

"Okay, Bryn, in there," Meers ordered.

Bryn hesitated. Then he stepped forward and went into the other room. The door slammed shut behind him. Almost buried in the shaving strewn on the floor lay Dolly Dennis. She was tied and gagged.

Meer's mocking voice came through the planks. "Let's see you break out of there, Bryn. Even if you manage it, all you'll accomplish is to walk into our guns. As a matter of fact, I'm being kind to you. I'm saving you the sight of what will go



on in this room. You saw the burning brazier in the other room and the hot irons in it. They're used for persuasion. Willy you can make a mummy obey orders with hot irons. The idea is to persuade Sibyl to make out a will in my favor. Later it can be witnessed by reputable citizens who are not too reputable to do certain things for substantial bribes, and the same will be true of a rather respected lawyer.

"Sibyl, I made sure to find out, has no living relatives. She not only has a considerable sum of money in her own name, but a great deal more which was left to her by her father.

"Of course it will be necessary for Sibyl to die after that, along with you and Dolly Dennis. As soon as Sibyl writes out the will, gallons of kerosene spread over this shack will make it into a tinderbox. Naturally your deaths will be blamed on the gang that killed Norman Day and Mrs. Carson and Lace Powys, but it won't matter, because nobody but you suspects me of being linked with the gang. As for the will, that will arouse little or no suspicion, for it is known that Sibyl and I were very close friends and she had nobody else to leave her fortune to. I have let it get about that Sibyl and I planned to be married in the near future."

**B**RYN felt a vast emptiness inside of him. He and Sibyl and Dolly would die like trapped rats in the fire. The police, if they came at all, would probably arrive too late.

In the other room there was the sound of ripping fabric and harsh male laughter. Dolly Dennis stared up at Bryn with a fear-contorted face. Through the wall came thin, mewling sounds as Sibyl's gag forced her screams of agony back down her throat. Her torture had begun.

Glancing frantically about, Bryn's eyes fell on the single high, grime-covered window through which light trickled. He

went to it quickly, released the window from the hook which locked it and swung it up.

The opening was barred.

Of course! They wouldn't have placed him in this room with an unbarred window. But bars were to imprison ordinary men. Often he had given a demonstration of his strength before friends by twisting iron bars. He tugged, moved the bar slightly in its cement casing, but all the power of his mighty muscles couldn't pull it out.

It was one thing bending an iron bar when it was free and he had plenty of leverage. It was ten times more difficult pulling out a bar firmly incased in concrete and when he had to reach above his head to grip it. Desperately he looked about for something to stand on. The little room was absolutely bare.

**S**IBYL'S moans continued in the other room. Bryn's blood turned to ice as he visualized what the poor girl must be suffering.

He strode over to Dolly Dennis, ripped the gag from her mouth, set to work untying her bonds. She smiled courageously up at him.

"Guess I got it coming to me for letting that Meers guy in," she said. "But I'm sorry I got you in this mess, Chief. Looks like we've reached the end."

"Not by a damned sight," he stated between his teeth.

As he was pulling the last of the ropes off her, he heard Meers' exclaim triumphantly; "Good! She'll write out the will now. Take her down, Willy."

Only a couple of minutes left at the very most!

Bryn said to Dolly: "If you got down on your hands and knees under that window, could you hold up my weight? I need leverage to get at those bars."

"I'll try, Chief."

He took off his shoes, mounted on her

back, holding part of his weight up by grasping the bars. But when he pulled back on one of the bars, her back sagged under him and she went down on her stomach.

"Guess I wasn't set," Dolly apologized, panting. "Try again."

Again he stood on her back, and this time he exerted every ounce of muscle. Once more Dolly gave way under him; the bar, however, was now definitely loose in its casing. The next attempt sent him sprawling heavily on his back, but his fingers were around the bar which he had torn out.

Meers' voice chortled: "Everything's set. Dump her on the floor, Willy. Spill the kerosene all over the place and upstairs in the bins. When you're ready to drop a match upstairs, call down to me and I'll light the shavings here. I want the place to go up in flames all at once like tinderbox."

Bryn was attacking the second bar. Sweat soaked his underwear and poured from his face. Beneath his feet Dolly was moaning:

"We can't get out in time! Oh, God, we'll roast alive!"

**T**WO attempts removed the second bar. But at least two more bars had to be pulled out before Dolly's buxom body and his own broad shoulders could squeeze through.

He worked at those bars like mad. Dolly beneath him was taking terrific punishment, but no further sound came from her. Time after time he tumbled off her back.

And then, just as the fourth bar came free, he heard Willy's voice in the store above: "It's all set up here. I'm dropping the match."

Quickly Bryn pushed Dolly through the window. For breathless seconds she was stuck in the frame, then with a mighty effort squeezed through. He lifted himself

with a silent prayer that his shoulders would make it. He got one shoulder through, couldn't quite pull out the other. Dolly had her hands about his chin, sobbing as she tugged at him. He could already hear the cackling of the flames—or was it his imagination? And Sibyl was lying in those kerosene-drenched shavings!

**M**OMENTARILY he paused to catch his breath. Then he again fell to squirming, wriggling, trying to contract his bulk. Somehow his second shoulder tore through. It was a matter of seconds to pull the rest of his body through the opening.

He started running as soon as he was on his feet. The window opened to the rear of the building. As he raced around to the front of the store, Willy was just coming out of the door. He saw Bryn a second before Bryn's fist broke his jaw. Willy went down abruptly and lay still. Bryn hurdled his form and dashed into the store.

Tom Meers was coming up the steps. His mouth fell open stupidly when he saw Bryn and he took a single step downward, at the same time diving in his pocket for his gun. The flames below threw an eerie light on his big body and hate-distorted face.

Bryn simply threw himself at Meers. The two men went down together, landing in the flames. Bryn bounced to his feet, saw Meers rising and still trying to claw for his gun. Bryn dove in, sinking his left fist into Meers' midriff. Meers grunted hollowly and his legs collapsed under him. Flames licked at him.

The cellar room was already an inferno. That dry timber and shavings soaked in kerosene had taken only seconds to blaze furiously. And lying almost in the midst of the flames was the white, writhing body, tied and gagged, of Sibyl Day.

**S**WINGING her up in his arms, he mounted the steps which were already on fire. Flames met him at the head of the stairs. A matter of only a few steps through the hungry flames, and then he was out in the fresh air.

Arms took Sibyl Day from him. Dazed, he looked at Lieutenant Hummel's florid face and at Billy Pierce standing at Dolly Dennis' side, and at a crowd of uniformed and plainclothes police.

A single agonized shriek rose above the roar of the fire.

Bryn whirled and headed back for the store. Hummel and Pierce hurled themselves at Bryn at the same moment.

"It's death to go back in there," Hummel rasped.

"But Tom Meers is down there!" Bryn cried. "My God, you can't let any human being die like that!"

Hummel said between his teeth: "That's the fate he planned for the three of you. Dolly Dennis told us in a couple of words what it was all about. He'd burn anyway in the chair. And it's too late to save him. You'd never come out alive."

Ben Bryn allowed Hummel and Pierce to lead him away. He realized that parts of his jacket and trousers were smoldering, that his hands were beginning to blister.

Billy Pierce was saying enthusiastically: "Even if we hadn't come, Chief, you

could have handled it all right by yourself. I'd been talking to Hummel when the call came in that you'd just rubbed out another killer. That Carson maid is a dope. She didn't tell us what you'd come to see her about till Hummel started questioning her. But, hell, Chief, you didn't need us. You're a one-man police department by yourself. . . . What do you say, Lieutenant?"

"That's putting it just about right," Hummel grinned.

Ben Bryn moved over to where Sibyl Day sat in a police car. She was covered up to her neck in policemen's coats. A police chauffeur was about to drive her to a hospital.

"I don't want to ask you how you feel," Bryn said. "Poor kid, what you must have suffered. I'm sorry I couldn't get to you sooner." Bryn patted her hand and looked down at her wan little face.

She smiled wanly in spite of the pain that must have wracked her body. She leaned forward and placed her lips against his mouth and her small, soft hand moved tenderly over his face. She sank back and the car started to move.

Ben Bryn stared after the car with an utterly bewildered expression on his face. Little by little a broad, happy grin appeared on his face. Behind him Dolly Dennis and Billy Pierce and the cops were snickering, but Ben Bryn didn't care.

THE END

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# Horror's Holiday Special

by WAYNE ROBBINS



*It was a horrible train ride—they were taking me to the insane asylum. Maybe that's why everything struck me so funny: the severed head on the platter; the warmth of the kid's blood as it gushed on me; and those other corpses . . . all those staring corpses. . . .*



Finally it came . . . just the type of scream I imagined.

**T**HE click, click, click of the wheels and the swaying of the car were not getting on my nerves so badly now. I began taking an interest in the other passengers on the train besides our own party.

I became engrossed in a little drama diagonally across the aisle. A lean brown waiter had entered carrying a covered tray in that dexterous fashion which bespeaks a true serving man. He approached the beautiful girl who apparently preferred

being served in the chair car, and adjusted the little collapsible table in front of her.

A spotless cloth came into the brown hand, flicking here, darting there at imaginary specks upon the polished board. Now the little wisp of linen cover; now the tray on it, just so—ah, now the table implements. All the while the girl was watching, half disdainfully, half detached. Finally the brown hand reached ceremoniously for the dome-like cover, its polished surface reflecting a smiling umber face. At last it was off.

It seemed as if I sat there minutes, waiting for her to scream. I thought she never would. The head lying there on her platter seemed to be gazing quizzically up at her, as if it too were waiting. Finally it came, a long eery thread of sound choked away back in her throat. Just the type of scream I had imagined. It rose higher and louder near the end, as if she had decided she could do a little better.

It was so still in there for a minute that I wanted to laugh, and then I realized that I was. She stood up and knocked the tray over. The head hit the floor with a crunch and rolled toward the waiter's feet. He hadn't moved, but his color was a little different, and his teeth were showing in a grimace of stark horror. It bumped against one of his feet as it rolled by and he still couldn't move; he did lift the blood-spattered foot, though, as if it had been burned.

The head went a way down the aisle and then started back as the ground under us shifted. The girl hadn't fainted; she had just slumped back in her seat, making soft moanings as her huge eyes followed the head, which kept making a little erratic jump every time it had to roll over the nose.

The waiter still had the tray cover in his hand, and as the head approached him he suddenly swooped down and covered it. He looked up helplessly at the rest of us, as if he had a lion by the tail.

Then I felt a sharp slap on my cheek. "Sorry, Vance," I mumbled. I wondered if I had been laughing that way all the time. I hated doings things like that.

"Keep hold, old man. Think about other things until it's over."

Connie's arm was tight about my neck where she had thrown it when it first had happened, and her other hand was digging hard into my arm. I had to reach up and loosen her arm to keep from choking. "Oh, God," she said, "how awful. What will it do to poor Steve. . ."

"I'm all right, Connie," I said. "You watch yourself. No sight for a girl."

"Keep his mind off it, Connie," I heard Vance whisper. "It might be the last straw. What rotten luck! If we can just get him to the sanatorium."

**A** HASTILY summoned conductor had arrived, and a babble of voices was attempting to convince him that such a thing really could be. He couldn't quite believe it, even with the evidence right before him.

"It's murder," he finally whispered, not so astonished at how strangely it had been committed as at the fact that it could happen at all on his train. At last they got the horrible thing away, and I tried to turn my thoughts in other directions, because it wasn't very pleasant. I kept thinking how they'd get the word up ahead. I guessed they'd write a message and have a station agent catch it on the fly, and then telegraph ahead.

That alone would take quite a while; but also we were high in the Rockies where stations were practically non-existent, and the first town of any size was hundreds of slow, twisting miles ahead. It would be a matter of hours, at least.

Doctor Nichols had left his seat ahead of us to take care of the sobbing girl. Then he came back and gave me a sedative; it looked like a larger dose than he usually gave me.

I felt calmer and began thinking of other things. The little boy behind me still jangled on my nerves, with his whining complaints. The big woman must be his mother—I kept wishing she'd spank him. But she only reached down and petted his tow head and made little crooning sounds to quiet his pettishness. They had a monstrous comforter tucked around the both of them. I thought how nice it would be to burrow deep into that comforter and sleep and sleep.

It seemed that all I wanted to do since my breakdown was sleep. It was so nice to forget the screaming of my nerves once in a while. Here I was starting to think about business again, and I wasn't supposed to. They kept telling me that.

That was what had brought it on. The books wouldn't seem to balance, and business was becoming worse and worse. People didn't want novelties and trick gew-gaws anymore, so the dealers wouldn't stock them, and so where did that leave the importers? I thought about it day and night until my brain felt as if it were on fire, and I had to reach several times for an object before I could get hold of it. So Vance forced me to take a rest and called in Doc Nichols, and Connie came to nurse me through. Connie was my fiancée, and I think I would have died without her soothing hands on my forehead.

Vance said he could run the business and for me to stay the hell away and get better. Things did seem to pick up too. He'd come around every afternoon and cheered me up with accounts of the day and the sales he had made.

"See, Steve," he would say, "I can run things alone for awhile. You keep away, and rest up. Then you can run things when I crack up. Now look," he would say, "just look at today. . ."

But that didn't help to get rid of my feeling of defeat and personal frustration. Maybe he was a good business man, but

I wasn't. I didn't feel as if I was going to make much of a husband for Connie. My nerves just wouldn't quit screaming, so finally the doc had made his decision. They had better take me to a sanatorium.

"There's a nice quiet place in Colorado that specializes in—his type of case." I knew what he meant. "The trip is only a matter of two and a half days; I'll go along, to be on the safe side. . ."

I HAD my eyes closed awhile when footsteps approached from up the car. I kept my eyes shut and the conductor started questioning people about the murder. He came over and began talking to Vance and Connie in a loud voice.

Connie said: "Sh-h-h, we don't want to wake him."

There was a trace of a pause during which he probably eyed me. "I want to question everybody. 'Smatter, is he sick?"

"Yes, a little."

"Okay, I don't suppose a sick man could have done anything like that, anyway. Too hard a job hiding the body the way we found it. It was chucked into the linen closet. The body, all except the head and hands, that is; there weren't any hands, either. . . Well, when he wakes up I'll ask him what he saw."

"The light-haired man kept *laughing*, conductor." The voice came from behind, and I guessed it was the woman with the comforter.

The conductor said, "Laughing?" in a flat voice. I was sorry I had. But the thing hadn't struck me as horrible, only interesting.

"Yes. Such poor taste and—"

Vance interrupted. "I assure you it didn't mean anything. Pretty bad shock, you know, in his condition."

The official voice was suddenly suspicious. "What d'you mean, in his condition? What's wrong with this guy, anyway?"

I felt Connie's body stiffen beside me,

and I knew she was holding her breath. Old Doc Nichols interrupted and just made it worse. "I'm a medical man, conductor, and I'll guarantee he's harmless."

Connie gasped.

The conductor said, "M-m-m-m. Harmless, is he? But a screwball, huh? But this little joke was all perfectly sane, wasn't it? Quite the normal thing, serving up heads on platters."

"You put things very crudely," Vance said. "And anyway, you haven't any official right to accuse any one. Don't forget there're libel laws."

"Well just the same, you watch him damn close until we get the law on this train." I heard him start off and Vance arose and went with him, arguing. After awhile he came back and whispered across to Connie.

I heard Connie whisper low, "Are you awake, Steve dear?" I made no sign and then they left the seat and moved off toward the rear. After they had time to get out of the car I looked around. There weren't nearly so many in it as before. They were all asking to be moved to other cars, as the train wasn't very full. The mother and little boy were still back there, and he was still whining. Whining too much for a kid his age. Doc was ahead of me drowsing, and a couple of elderly ladies sat a few seats back. Two or three men moved continually between their seats and the men's lounge on increasingly unsteady feet. The girl must have stayed either because she was tough, or wanted to pretend so.

I walked back toward the rear. The boy leered at me and I glared at him and he burrowed deeper into the comforter.

I went through the sleeper car where we had slept the night before and there were not many in there either. The next was the observation car. I listened at the back door and could just barely hear what Vance and Connie were saying out on the platform.

"Oh, no,"—it was Connie's voice—"I won't even think about it; it's ridiculous. Not my poor Steve."

"Of course not. But we better be careful not to say anything more than we have. If he'd only brace up and *act* normal."

"But he can't, Vance. He's so sick."

I peered through the little glass in the door and saw that they were standing very close. Be careful, Vance, I thought. Then I saw his arm slip around her comfortingly. *Damn you, Vance.* . . . I listened again.

Connie said: "Hadn't we better go back? He might wake up."

Vance laughed. "Oh, no. Doc gave him enough dope to put an elephant to sleep." I thought: *Not if the elephant didn't swallow it.*

He was saying: "Remember, Connie, how I feel. Remember there is still me, and if things don't go so well—"

"I know how it is, Vance, but I still hope, you know. There's no reason for not hoping, is there? And I couldn't love any one as I do Steve."

*Good girl,* I thought, and went back to the car.

**T**HE PRETTY girl was back by Towhead asking his mother if they had seen anything of her powder box. Oh, no; of course he wouldn't have taken it, but maybe it rolled off the seat, and they might have seen where it went; that was all. . . .

I wandered around awhile and got a drink. I went in the men's lounge to smoke, but couldn't quite decide what I should do so I just went back to my seat and sat quietly waiting. I fumbled in my suitcase for a handkerchief because my forehead was sweaty, and then I came onto the hands. Again I felt like laughing; but I didn't. I looked around to see if any one was looking and then pulled them out. Big blue veins stood out against their whiteness. The wrists weren't pretty.

Hell, I had to get rid of them. I stuffed them into my pockets until I could decide what to do.

Connie came back. Then the two men moved off toward the lounge probably for another drink. I heard Vance talking to the woman and boy and they were all smiling. I had just caught his words, "That's quite all right," and then we all heard the scream, a man's course, lumpy scream. "Oh my God!" the voice started saying over and over, and some one in the car began swearing low and steady. I think it was Vance.

I knew that they had found it up there. Connie stood up with one hand at her throat and moved dazedly out into the aisle. She and the other girl drew together as if for comfort, and then the taller girl pulled Connie down into the seat beside her. Vance ran by heading for the lounge. I followed him. As I entered the little curtained doorway I started to put my hands in my pockets to seem as calm as possible but drew them out immediately when I felt those other cold hands.

Everybody was in there by now, or just about. The conductor had come from nowhere and was between Vance and Doctor Nichols. They were all breathing hard.

The man's head was still that same way. It occurred to me that I would bet he'd like another drink right then.

"The window was forced open," the conductor was explaining, not to the others, but to himself. "Forced open. And the body shoved out and the head held inside with the neck across the sill."

That was the way it was, all right. The window was weather-stripped with brass strips, and it had banged down so hard on the neck that the head and body were all but separated. The window seemed to be almost clear down. The skin was tight all over the man's head because of the pull of the window. It was all bright and shiny and bluish purple, like the skin

over a boil. The eyes were open and the lips were pulled back in a kind of unfriendly grin.

The train was still moving, of course, but the fools decided they had to get him out of there right away. Since he was dead it wouldn't have made any difference to him if they had delayed a minute while the train was stopped. But they all took hold of the window and I knew what would happen. I was already leaving because I knew I had better hide somewhere, but I saw the head come loose in their hands, while the body, which had been held that way by the pressure of the window, would already be far back along the track. It would be hard to find in the dark.

I didn't wait any longer. I went back past the two girls and the two older women who hardly noticed me, since they were either hiding their eyes or keeping them fastened ahead in morbid expectation.

No one was noticing me as I came down by the woman and little boy. They were both sound asleep in spite of the commotion, and I thought that with reasonable caution I wouldn't awaken them. I stepped past their feet and crouched down on the floor. With the comforter covering me all over, and with my body pressed tight to the seat, and with my head in the seat beside the little boy I felt well hidden.

My head was paining me and whirling around and around. It had been quite a while since they had given me any medicine, and although my thoughts were clearer, they were far more hellish and fearful. I missed the soothing stupor of the drugs. I hoped Connie wouldn't get hurt in this mess, but Vance, damn him. . . .

**S**OON ENOUGH I heard them shouting and knew that they were beginning the hunt. Vance came down the aisle shouting my name. Then the others came

by, all jabbering. I could feel the train slowing and stopping. I heard footsteps along the aisle again, and after a minute the woman and comforter fidgeted a bit, as if she were disturbed by the cessation of the train's swaying movement.

Then the conductor and Vance and probably some others came along and paused right by us. They were silent just a minute and the only sound was the rhythmic snoring of the woman.

"I wonder—he couldn't be down there, could he?" the conductor speculated. Vance assured him not.

"That's crazy; how could he get down there without waking the woman and kid? Let 'em sleep."

I thought, *Damn him, he knows I'm here; he wants to torture me.*

The woman was really sleeping, all right, but the kid was worse than that. I was terribly uncomfortable, with my muscles all cramped, and fearing to breathe even, let alone scream or laugh or something that I felt like doing. I had to keep my head perfectly still on the seat even though the kid's hot blood was running all over everything. It was hot and suffocating under the blanket, like an incubator, and I wanted to retch.

"Yeah," the conductor said, "he couldn't be there." And they moved on up the car. I felt that I couldn't stand it any longer, so I slipped my head out and got to my knees and watched them. Meantime the kid's head had slipped down away from his neck and landed sort of messy on the comforter. There wasn't much I could do, but I didn't like to leave it that way, so as best I could I straightened it in the sleeping woman's lap. Then I took those white, dead hands out of my pockets and threw them up ahead.

They thumped against the front wall of the car, and while all eyes were riveted on them in surprise and shock I slipped back a few steps into the ladies' rest room and locked the door. I knew they'd find

me, but I would at least have a few minutes of peace and calm to collect my thoughts and decide what I should do next.

I heard them when they found the new horror. There was no mistaking the chorus of groans and curses and gagging sounds. In no time at all they were pounding on the door and shouting for me to come out.

"Leave me in here," I yelled. "God, can't you just leave me alone awhile and let me think?"

They didn't answer but started breaking down the door.

"Please, please!" I begged. "Leave me locked in here. I can't hurt any one in here." The door was giving fast, and the only thing I could do was keep thinking: God, if I could only *think!* I didn't even bother to shout that I hadn't killed the kid.

The door gave then, and everybody began roughing me and hitting me. Vance kept hitting me in the face, and saying over and over: "Take it easy, old man, take it easy."

*Fine friend, I thought, how can I take it easy, with him and everybody hitting me? I ought to kill him. . . .*

"Vance," I shouted, "I'm going to kill you, do you hear me? You need it and I'm going to. . ."

As soon as they were tired they led me back into the aisle. I noticed that the woman was still sleeping, and her boy's head was still in her lap. It would have looked quite peaceful, except that there was no body with the head. His yellow hair looked like mine used to when I was his age.

The conductor was pushing me along ahead, so I couldn't be sure who the last one in the procession was. They shoved me in a seat and Vance piled on top as if the law of gravity might not apply in my case and I might go soaring off into space. How I hated that man; oh, how I hated

him. He was feeling my pockets, as if searching for weapons, and the others began calming the women and assuring them that I wouldn't get away again. The conductor said he would clear the car behind to keep me in.

Connie was staring at me now, and so was the other girl. I couldn't stand the look in their eyes. Even my own Connie was looking at me that way, but at least there was a trace of pity there, along with the loathing.

I looked up at Vance. "Vance," I said. "What?"

"You needn't think I won't," I said. "I'm going to kill you."

He held me tighter. "Shut up, you fool, do you hear? You're all through. You're crazy—hog-wild crazy."

"Crazy enough to figure out some way to kill you," I said.

Connie saw that we were arguing and came over and began stroking my forehead. It helped that unbearable aching. I heard her whisper: "Maybe it will soothe him. Poor Steve—oh, God, I can't bear it. Why don't I die? Vance, would it be wrong of me, to—die?"

"DARLING," he said, and I cursed him for saying it, "just keep hold somehow, and finally we'll be through all this, and some day it will all be in the remote past. We'll forget it all, darling—"

I knew he meant that they would forget it together, and I said, "You will at least, Vance, because I'm going to kill you just as sure as anything."

It was an up-to-date train, with a stewardess who had to be a nurse. She appeared just then carrying a thing of straps and canvas. When she came near I recognized it. Somewhere she had managed to rustle a straight-jacket.

"Let's just take him back this way," she said. "I think the conductor will have the next car back ready by this time."

She was a pretty little blonde. I looked

up at her and tried to grin. I suppose it was rather sickly, although it was meant to be disarming. "Don't I get to eat, or do I just quietly starve?" I had become very hungry since all the medicine had begun leaving my system. Even so, I would have welcomed some right then, to ease my paining and whirling head.

They brought me food, and while I ate every one stood around watching me. Doc Nichols was a small bewildered figure in the background. He kept telling any one who would listen that he just couldn't understand it. When I was finished eating they put me in the straight jacket and cinched it up until I groaned. Then we all formed that little procession again, with the conductor and Vance pushing me along and the nurse and Doc Nichols and the two men following. Only the women remained in the car, and it hurt me terribly to hear Connie's deep, heart-broken sobs.

*My, I thought, won't it ever end? Won't this mad, hysterical farce ever end?* And I nodded at the woman so they would notice her. Even though it made it look worse for me to be the first to tell them, I thought I had better, because she might still have been alive. The head and body had been removed while I ate—no doubt to help me enjoy my meal. Now her snores weren't coming any more. The comforter was high about her chin, and it was pinned there by the thickness of her own blood seeping through a little rent in it. "I didn't do it," I said.

The conductor looked at me as if I were Satan incarnate. "Can't we stop you? Can't we ever stop you, you devil?"

I repeated that I didn't do it, but he felt along my pockets, and then triumphantly pulled out the bloody knife. Nothing more was said then. They were beyond speech. They had tasted the dregs of horror.

They led me into the next car, the sleeper, and the conductor said they'd

put me right in bed and tie me. He asked what my number was and I said seven.

"He must have done it—that last—right when we led him by the first time," he said. "The devil."

He began shouting for the porter. Porters had been mighty scarce during all this, not that they could be blamed any.

"George!" he shouted. "Where the blazes is he?" Finally he gave up and decided to make up the bed himself. He brought sheets and pillows from the linen closet. He had to pull out the upper berth before he could make up the lower. He took hold and pulled and next he was down on the floor, lying there with George the porter right on top of him. George was dead. His face wore that same grin of stark horror. His throat was also grinning red-lipped where it was slashed.

They seemed to take this quite calmly. It was becoming the rule, rather than the exception. The conductor stood up and shoved the body out of the way and started to reach mechanically for the bed clothing. As a sort of after-thought he turned and gave me a half-hearted blow in the face.

Doc Nichols' protest wasn't too strong. "Have a heart, man. He's no more responsible for himself than you or I."

"Fine time to admit it, after all this. Why didn't you say so before, and we might have stopped him? For hours there he had the run of the train, even after the first one. What'll the cops say? What'll the line say? It'll cost me my job."

The two men left then, and also the conductor, who went to call a brakeman to watch me. I was in the berth with some light rope passed around my body and tied to the ironwork. The straight jacket held my arms crossed in front of me and drawn around behind so that my hands almost touched. It meant agony to struggle.

Doc Nichols began talking soothingly to me and tried to give me some medicine. "Listen, Doc," I said, "won't you please

give me something to help my head so I can think? I don't want to sleep. Please, Doc, if you ever had an ounce of pity for any one, help me. I've got to think." I knew my mind was going to go fast now, and soon I would be past thinking.

He nodded slowly, and reached down for a different bottle. While I was taking the pills they came in and took poor George away. They all left then, except the little nurse, and the brakeman, who sat stolidly on the foot of my berth. Right away a drowsy calm began settling over me and I knew that the Doc had double-crossed me.

I was almost asleep when Connie came in; she thought I was. She lowered her pale tear-stained face down close to mine and for a minute I thought she might kiss me. I hoped so, because I knew this was probably her good-by. She didn't, though, and I couldn't blame her. I opened my eyes and looked at her.

"Connie, will I have to stay in here alone tonight?"

"I don't know, Steve."

"Do you believe all these things, Connie? I suppose you can't help it."

"Shh-oh, I don't know what to believe, what to think. I don't want to think."

"I want to think," I said. "Oh, dearest, how I want to think! But I can't; they won't let me. That damned medicine is putting me to sleep again. Promise that you'll stay in here near me—promise—"

"I promise, Steve. Vance and I." I tried to protest, but everything went wonderfully blank and peaceful.

**W**HEN I awoke it was still dark. The windows were black oblongs, and only a feeble glow from tiny globes at either end lighted the sleeper. I felt things in the air, all kinds of things. I knew that now something was going to happen. This symphony of blood would not be complete without a crimson finale. I found myself thinking quite calmly and collectedly, and

I felt a wild surge of confidence and power. It was wonderful to have everything so clear before me. Connie's bunk was empty. I could see it across the aisle between the parted curtains. I remembered which one she had used the night before—how far away!

That was hers, there, and Vance's was further on down on the same side as mine so I couldn't see it. The nurse would probably be sleeping somewhere near. I couldn't see the Doc's berth, either, but the main thing was that Connie was gone. The brakeman was sleeping peacefully half bent over at the foot of my bed. I thought a silent apology to the man and then brought my feet up and down hard on his head. I hoped not too hard, as he slumped over and lay still. My arms were useless, but even so the light cotton cord trying me in wasn't very difficult. I sawed it back and forth until it was frayed and broke against the sharp metal of the berth.

Stealthily I came to my feet and crept toward the rear. It was very difficult to keep from losing my balance with the lurching of the train, without arms to steady me. I had to use my teeth on the rear door. It had a strong spring and I felt my teeth splintering on the knob before I could get it open enough to get one foot through it. The one to the observation car pushed inward and was less trouble.

It was utterly black inside there. Near the back I stumbled on something soft and yielding and nearly fell. Cautiously I moved to the rear door and listened.

Only the ghost of a pale sinister moon illuminated the train's rear platform, but the flashing twinkle of sparks dropped from the engine ahead helped some. I could see enough to start me cursing.

I made out a man's crouching figure. I was puzzled momentarily by the color of his hair. I could just barely see that it was blond. But I had no more time to

ponder as I caught the significance of his sinister actions. Clutched to him was a girlish figure, her clothing in shreds, and her head lolling back in pitiful inertness. Pitiful, and yet blessed that she had been spared at least consciousness during that frightful ordeal the conclusion of which I was witnessing.

A scream welled to my lips but issued in a whisper of loathing and utter despair. I was too late. As the scream tightened again in my throat an extra brilliant cinder flash reached into the ebon murk there on the deck and touched a shimmering highlight on tawny hair. This girl's hair was blonde—and Connie's was black!

My memory flew to a slight blonde girl, her trim figure clothed in crackling white. The little nurse, then, had been assigned a grim role in this nightmare drama. It didn't fit; it was all wrong. I felt my thoughts once more receding into hopeless jumble. Were the characters allowed to write their own lines, change their role, contrary to my own conception of the denouement, and contrary to that of the hell-spawned brain behind all this?

But I was listening again to the frightful beast sounds from beyond the door, and I tensed at a peculiarly familiar quality in the voice issuing from the dark. Somehow, somewhere, it was familiar. And then I staggered, for I realized it was my own; no, a mocking travesty of my own, more hideous, more starkly bestial than—pray God—mine ever was!

He was half risen from his profanation of that beautiful golden nakedness, and yet he lingered. My hunched shoulders and impotently shrugging arms were still fighting the losing battle with the grueling straight jacket, but my mind was clothed in despair. Why did he prolong it—when would it end?

Ring down the curtain. I was struck suddenly with the grim appropriateness of the metaphor to this scene. How like an actor, the fiend out there; an actor

without an audience, every lascivious movement part of a premeditated ritual. The falseness, lewd falseness of those final strokings of moon-limned breasts. Actor without audience.

With premonitory quickening of the pulse my eyes were suddenly groping in the shadows for that which I prayed I wouldn't find. And even then he was shoving the silent girl from his desecrating hands, and was moving—ah, God, to a point beyond my vision, and dragging forth another girl. A quick jerk tore the gag from her mouth, but his eager, dripping lips forced back the scream that must have risen there. Already he was tearing at her clothes, profaning her with digging, bruising hands, and her hair was black, black, black. It was Connie!

**T**HEY HAD said I was mad; if they could have seen me at that moment! But the straight jacket was fiendishly designed to withstand just such madness, and that moment's struggle left me exhausted, leaning against the wall for support, my eyes unwilling witnesses as the clothing left Connie's body in tattered strips. As her keening screams came faintly through the door I was gathering myself back a few paces to make a blind assault on the door, when I stopped. I had caught the dull flash of glass there beside me, and near the floor.

I realized it would be one of those cupboards saying, "For Emergency Only". Idiotically I thought: *This is an emergency.*

My shoulder hit the glass and it scattered tinkling inside. The frame was left with a sharp jagged edge, and crouching there I began forcing my back up and down along that punishing edge. If I might have faltered, the screams and gloating monosyllables which I could still hear from outside would have driven me on. But in a way the pain of the lacerating slashes was a relief to my brain.

Up and down, up and down—I finally felt the canvas give ever so slightly, but already I knew that my back was in gory ribbons. Blood was a river coursing along my spine and into my shoes. But one strap came loose, freeing an arm, and a frenzied burst freed the other. A few more merciless slashes, and a hunch of my shoulders tore the confining canvas loose across my back.

And still out there I heard the thing with my voice uttering its hideous endearments to the girl, and I saw his hands still wandering in revolting preliminaries.

He heard me as I came through the door, but I doubt if he could have stopped me if he had been ten men. I felt no limit to mad, exultant power as my fingers sank deep, deep into his throat.

Connie had struggled sobbing over beside the other girl, and I heard her words: "Thank heaven, Vance. . ."

"Connie, *Connie!*" I gasped, "*He* was Vance! I'm Steve!"

Then I knew I couldn't kill him; I must wring a confession from him to prove my own innocence.

Leaving his battered form I helped Connie to her feet, and held a lighted match to my face lest she forever have a lurking doubt as to who had been her attacker. With a moan of relief she was suddenly in my arms, crying out her gladness, and her shame at having ever doubted me.

Then she turned to the stirring figure of the little nurse, and I went inside to help the prone hulk I had stumbled against in the dark. It was a thankful conductor whom I released from bindings and strangling gag. Staggering up he found light switches, and turned to gasp with quick suspicion at me.

For explanation I was motioning him toward the rear door, when the sheepish brakeman appeared, goggle-eyed at the sudden reversal. The three of us went out and soon had the admission of guilt choked from Vance.

And then they led me away, back here, and after doctoring my back suggested that I sleep. But I can't; I'm afraid to, lest all these details slip my mind, which is at best none too strong yet, after the breakdown—slight as it no doubt was—and after all the vile, stupefying drugs that Vance Connors contrived to shove down my throat. I must write it all down clearly, for the officials when they come. And then sleep. . . .

VANCE'S scheme was succeeding, in all respects but one, for he saw that Connie was still loyal to me.

So he must plumb the final pits of baseness and blast that memory forever from her heart and eyes. By powdering his hair with the powder stolen from the girl up in the chair car he could pass as blond in the dark. I was the only light-haired man, so it would be perfect.

Connie was the one whom he must desecrate in my name; but the nurse, too, appealed to his perverted lust, and by her inclusion I was made that much more despicable in Connie's eyes. After it was over he needed only to brush powder from his hair and release me. Possibly he would have brought me back behind and pretended to catch me in the act. He would have been believed without question.

No doubt back home the business is in a fairly good shape; if not, it is due to Vance Connors' pilferings of company funds. At least with me out of the way the firm would be all his. And he wanted my girl, my Connie. My breakdown was just the chance he needed, and with the unsuspecting help of a gullible doctor he could put me away. But that wasn't enough!

If he could snap my mind completely it would be so much the better. But even without that I would never have been released. If I had attempted to prove sanity, there would have been waiting—the chair.

It is possible that the very drugs he used, palmed off as the doctor's own prescription, were the final salvation of my mind; perhaps the spell of inert mindlessness that they cast upon me, saved me.

Our business was novelties and tricks, sleight-of-hand trinkets; how easy for him, clever as he was at selling and demonstrating, to work his childish art on the grinning, trusting waiter, and leave that gory relic on his tray. And lest the waiter remember and become suspicious, he too must be silenced.

Once suspicion was cast in my direction, he could go freely about his bloody career, leaving himself with alibi, me without. I remembered too late that instant he paused beside the mother and son, when he must have given them the pills on the pretense of relieving their nerves, but which meant heavy sleep for unaccustomed users. The utter brutality of his machine-like timing as he crept in to butcher the little boy, with me even then crouching there! Later, at the end of the procession when I was first taken, a sudden undetected slash into the heart of the sleeping woman. Just a quick thrust. And then the knife was slipped into my pocket during the struggle. The drink-befuddled man in the lounge had been easily taken when caught in there alone, and he had added his outré note to the whole affair.

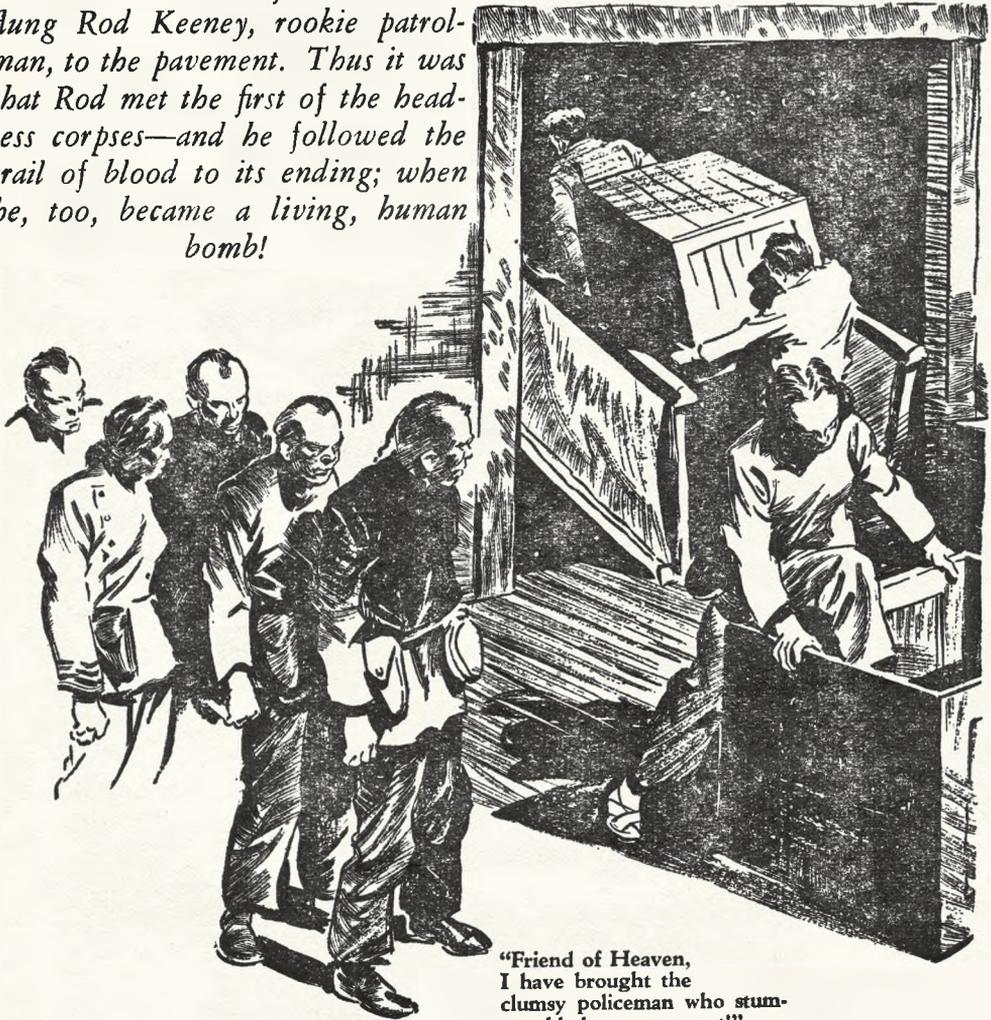
Vance's confession, before the doctor, proved that he himself was actually stark mad—a sadistic, scheming, insanely, clever killer. . . . As for me, my mind will always suffer with awful pictures of my plight during this wild ride, when I *knew* who was guilty, but could do nothing.

Ah, but now it's over, and at last I can let sleep steal upon me; blessed sleep. I know at last that I am sane, and innocent, as every one knows. And Connie, my own, is here in my arms, stroking my forehead as the wheels click, click, click in gentle lullaby.

# COFFINS FOR THE LIVING

*Brilliant orange flame blossomed around the head of the terrified Chinese and a terrific concussion flung Rod Keeney, rookie patrolman, to the pavement. Thus it was that Rod met the first of the headless corpses—and he followed the trail of blood to its ending; when he, too, became a living, human bomb!*

A Mystery Novelette by  
**STEWART STERLING**



"Friend of Heaven,  
I have brought the  
clumsy policeman who stum-  
bled on our secret!"

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Girl in Death's Oven

**A**LCIE BLAINE'S violet eyes widened apprehensively as she caressed the sleek barrel and smooth walnut butt of the heavy gun. "I hope you don't ever have to use this!" she exclaimed. She laid the gun gingerly beside her dinner-plate.

"Hope I don't, honey." The lanky, leather-skinned young man opposite, smiled grimly. "But I will, if I have to." He didn't say it with an air of bravado.

Alcie gazed at him thoughtfully; Rod Keeney wasn't what she'd call handsome, but long ago she had decided there was something more important than good looks in Rod's favor. Maybe it was the confident set of his lean jaw—or perhaps

No man may know the secrets of the Orient — for he who seeks to discover them, finds but the grave!

that frosty glint in his cool, grey eyes. It didn't matter; the only thing that mattered was that from now on, Rod's life was going to be one of continual danger. She sighed, poked a curious finger at the blued cylinder.

"Is it loaded?"

"It is that." Rod reached out for the

forty-five. "I'd better be putting it back where it belongs, too."

Alcie wrinkled her nose, becomingly. "Fraid I might shoot my great big policeman?"

"Well, it would be disconcerting if you should happen to get that idea." He let her see that he was admiring the figure so pleasantly set off by the fresh, white linen suit and the trim sailor hat. Suited her dark hair just right. "But any jury would let you go—a pure case of self-defense!"



A bland-faced yellow waiter interrupted their happy banter with eggs *foo young*, rice cakes and Canton wine. The *Lotus Leaf* boasted authentic Chinese cooking and lived up to its claims.

They were contentedly waiting for

lichee nuts and candied ginger, when Alcie saw the disturbance on Pell Street.

"What's the matter with that Chinaman, Rod? He's running around like a chicken with its head off."

**K**EENEY stood up to get a better view of the street below them. A yellow man in black silk trousers and a padded jacket of the same material, was running wildly through the narrow, crowded thoroughfare.

He ran from side to side, with jerky, erratic steps; his elbows held stiffly at his sides, forearms flapping with a curious wing-like motion. His eyes were rolling from side to side, and he was furiously smoking on a cigarette. He was making no outcry whatever, yet people scattered as before the onslaught of a mad dog.

Old men retreated hastily to the shelter of doorways. Women snatched up children and fled, screaming—even full grown men fell back in terror as the little man in the black silk costume zig-zagged his way through the heart of Chinatown.

"A lunatic," Rod murmured. "Guess I'd better go have a look-see. Maybe I can quiet him down, before anybody hurts him."

"Oh, Rod!" Alcie saw her visions of a pleasant evening go glimmering; tried to save them. "This isn't your precinct. There'll be other policemen to take care of that crazy man. Anyway, you're off duty."

Rod squeezed her shoulder, affectionately. "If you're going to be a cop's wife, honey, you'll have to learn that a patrolman is always on duty." He grabbed his hat. "You stay right here till I come back, pal."

He got to the sidewalk in a hurry. The man in the black silk outfit had nearly reached the corner of Mott Street. He ran slam-bang, head-on into a lamp-post—caromed off, against a parked delivery truck. He tottered out to the middle of

the street and stood, for a second, with his forearms extended stiffly at right angles from his side, his fingers widespreading and rigid.

Rod ran down the street. He had almost reached the mad little Chinaman when suddenly a burst of livid orange flame blossomed around the man's head like an infernal halo. There was a deafening concussion, and Rod was hurled to the pavement like a straw before the wind.

He recovered instantly; heard the tinkling of shattered glass—the horrified shrieks of the onlookers. He could trust his ears, though they were still ringing with the shock of the explosion—but he could scarcely believe his eyes. . . .

The madman's body lay before him, in a gruesome pool of crimson! But it had no head! Only the grisly stump of the neck, spouting forth a hideous fountain of blood!

The man had been instantly decapitated. Spattered bits of reddened hair; clots of dripping flesh on walls and store windows were all that remained to show that a human being had literally had his head blown off before Rod's eyes!

**F**ROM Doyers Street came the frantic shrilling of a police whistle; Rod knew that it would only be a matter of minutes before the narrow street was clogged with prowl cars and emergency trucks.

That delay, however slight, wouldn't mean anything to the headless horror in the street, but it might mean something to his murderer. For Rod had the conviction that this was no case of conspicuous suicide, such as Orientals sometimes commit to erase some shameful blot from their family honor.

The man had been scared out of his senses. He must have known what was going to happen to him and the realization had driven him mad.

Rod whirled and ran down Pell Street

in the direction from which the dead man had come. Out of which of the houses in this tangled warren, had the headless man emerged? Rod had no way of finding out, except through his own sharp wits and the training of the last three months as a rookie cop.

Every doorway sheltered a huddling crowd of terrified, yellow skinned Chinese—every door except one. The entrance to *The Golden Bamboo*. It struck him as peculiar that this one doorway should be so strangely vacant in a street packed with excited humanity. Also, he noticed that, as he approached that doorway, an increasing tension and fear seemed to be reflected on the faces of those usually phlegmatic Orientals.

Keeney had nothing more than this to go on—only a hunch. But it was a hunch he determined to follow.

He pushed open the door of *The Golden Bamboo* and went in.

There was a small, vacant lobby, from which a pair of swinging doors opened into a good-sized room filled with perhaps fifty Chinese smoking and playing cards. A fan-tan layout. The air was fetid with tobacco, heavy with the odor of crowded humans.

A few of the players looked up curiously, when Rod walked in, but immediately returned their attention to the cards and chips. Suspicion stirred in Rod's mind—deepened when a suave, plump Chinese with his hands tucked in the loose sleeves of his yellow silk robe, shuffled across the floor towards him.

"You wish to see?"

"Man who runs this joint," Rod answered, gruffly. "You the guy?"

The Oriental nodded. "I am Lin Fu Yan. You wish something?"

"Yeah." Rod's eyes swept the gambling room; none of the players seemed to be paying any particular attention to him—but an occasional swift glance out of the corner of sleepy, almond eyes, be-

trayed their concern. "Man came running out of this place a few minutes ago, a little fellow—"

Lin Fu Yan regarded him impassively.

"He had on black pajama pants; some sort of black jacket," Rod continued. "Who was with that man?"

Lin Fu Yan smiled blankly. "Many men in *Golden Bamboo*. Some come; some go. Who knows all of them?"

Rod grabbed Lin Fu Yan's arm: "Oh, it's going to be like that, huh? Just dumb up on me and stall around while somebody walks to the nearest exit! Well, let's play my way, for a few hands." He dragged the reluctant proprietor of the gambling den toward the back of the room, where dragon-embroidered gold draperies concealed the rear wall.

**B**EHIND them, the crackling chatter of Cantonese ceased, suddenly. Rod thrust Lin Fu Yan ahead of him, the Chinese resisting stubbornly.

"My place, private place," he cried shrilly. "Only for friend."

"That's all right," Rod held his badge out on the palm of his hand. "Police are your friend—if you're on the up-and-up." He got a grip on Lin Fu Yan's elbow; propelled the unwilling Oriental toward the gold curtain at a trot. "You have a funny way of treating your friends, Confucius—blowing their heads off!"

"No," the Chinese squealed, throwing himself flat on the floor as they reached the silken partition. "Not to go in there, please. My kitchen; nobody there. Please, no!"

"Come on!" In the brief time it took Rod to yank Lin Fu Yan to his feet and shove him forward, the rookie caught the rush of slipped feet behind the embroidered curtain, heard the slam of an iron door.

They burst through, into a small—even smokier—room. It was a kitchen, too. A big hotel range, a small steam table, drain

sinks and a table stacked high with dirty dishes. Several brilliantly colored silk robes were hanging on hooks against one wall. But no one in sight. And no other doors leading out. Not even a closet.

Yet there had been someone there, only seconds ago. Rod saw only one door which could have made that metallic crash. The door of the big stove.

He jerked it open. His jaw dropped in astonishment. Curled up in the oven, like a kitten in a berry-box, was a sloe-eyed, raven-haired Chinese girl. And she was stark naked!

## CHAPTER TWO

### Murder's House of Toys

**R**OD'S mind was in a whirl. There had been nothing in his course of instruction to prepare him for a situation like this. What the devil was a cop supposed to do when he found a nude dame in a kitchen stove?

But he had to do something, so he pulled her out; set her on her feet.

"Get some clothes on you," he snapped.

She took a heavy crimson robe from a hook, put it on timidly—watching him with the unwinking, unfathomable eyes of the East, and twittering away at Lin Fu Yan like a startled sparrow.

"What goes on, here?" Rod's gruffness didn't conceal his embarrassment. "Why were you hiding in that oven? What sort of a dive is this, anyway?"

The girl chattered anxiously; Lin Fu Yan interpreted:

"She Ko Lee San. She cook here. She getting ready to take bath. You come. She afraid you bad man. No place to run away. She get in stove." He hunched his shoulders, as if to add: "What of it?"

Rod was sore. "What the hell you think I am—a halfwit? Think I'd believe that wacky story? I don't know what you're getting away with in this hole in the wall, Lin Fu—but if this Ko Lee

San was mixed up in that murder out in the street—"

"No! No!" The fat Chinese sputtered almost incoherently. "No murder. Ko Lee hurt nobody. You make mistake, policeman."

Rod thought fast; there was something decidedly peculiar about *The Golden Bamboo*. What it might be—or how the man whose head had been blown off, figured in it—Rod couldn't fathom. But the premises would bear further investigation, no doubt of that.

Still, it wouldn't be smart to try to question all those fan-tan players in the main room—or to attempt a thorough search of the place, without reinforcements. Then, too, there was Alcie; she would be worried about him unless he showed up pretty soon. That butchered body in the street wasn't anything for a girl like Alcie to sit and look at. . . .

He said: "Listen, you two high-binders. I'm going out. Right away quick I come back. Get that? And you better be right here, too. Don't try to beat it. *Stay here!* Understand?"

The girl looked puzzled; Lin Fu Yan bobbed his head affirmatively. "We no go anywhere," he said calmly.

"Okay. Better not. There's a dead man to be accounted for, and I think you can tell me a whole lot about him."

Rod parted the silken curtains; scowled in surprise. The fan-tan room was deserted except for a solitary individual sitting stiffly at a corner table. This yellow man wore the same loose, black, silk trousers and padded black coolie coat which had costumed the victim of the ghastly explosion in the street!

**T**HE man watched him with glittering eyes, but made no move. He continued to smoke his long, thin cigarette—but kept his hands out of sight under the table.

"Up!" Rod jabbed a thumb upward, in

dumb show. "Put your hands up! Quick!"

The Oriental did not stir.

Rod went toward him with tight, short steps; walking on the balls of his feet, ready to fling himself aside at the first hostile move.

"Get those hands *up!*" Rod barked—and stopped dead in his tracks!

The man had smoked nearly the whole of his cigarette in the last thirty seconds! It wasn't a cigarette, Rod sensed with a sudden prickle of fear at his spine. It was a lighted fuse!

The man's hands were out of sight because they were roped to his thighs. He wasn't glaring at Rod, as the rookie had thought. He was staring with the fixed horror of a man about to die!

The ash of the thing which had been fuming so furiously dropped from the yellow man's mouth. His slanted eyes closed in an agony of apprehension. Rod could see his body grew rigid with fear.

The policeman dived flat on his face. Before he hit the floor, he saw the incandescent aura of orange flame which seemed to spring from the victim's shoulders like the infernal flowering of some exotic and poisonous blossom!

There was a detonation that made the floor tremble and sent a hail of plaster showering from the ceiling. Windows crashed; furniture splintered . . . and when Rod could force himself to look, there was but a raw and sickening carcass where a moment before there had been a living being!

Rod scrambled to his feet, stumbled over the wreckage of chairs and tables, to the door.

Outside, the street was in unbelievable pandemonium. A panic-stricken crowd was milling about; broad-shouldered, blue-coated men formed a solid cordon to prevent anyone from getting out of the district.

Rod called sharply to the sergeant from the emergency squad truck. "Here!

Inside! Another one! Blown all to hell and gone!"

He identified himself, explained briefly what had happened.

"Okay, Keeney," the sergeant said curtly. "Better let our boys go in there first. No telling what dangerous gases that explosion set off. You wait here."

*You wait here!* Wasn't that what Rod had told Alcie? And hearing the second blast, wouldn't she be scared silly?

Rod ran half a block down Pell Street, until he was opposite the green neon sign that proclaimed *The Lotus Leaf*.

There was no one in the window where Alcie and he had sat!

He raced across the street, took the stairs like a high-hurdler.

The booth in which they had dined was vacant. Alcie's small, blue-and-white cigarette case was still there, on the table. So was the check.

But Alcie wasn't!

**R**OD stalked to the cashier's desk.

Behind it stood a thin, wizened Chinese with a straggly white goatee. If he had been wearing ceremonial robes instead of a blue serge suit, he could have doubled for a mandarin in any Hollywood production.

"The girl who was here with me," Rod clipped. "Where'd she go?"

"So sorry." The venerable Chinese bowed stiffly. "Young lady go with other young man."

An icy finger of premonition touched the back of Rod's neck. "What other young man? What'd he look like? Which way'd they go?"

"Indeed sorry. Never saw other young man before. Not acquainted with his name. Head without hair; face with much hair. Cannot tell which way your friends depart. Will you pay check now?"

Rod paid. He tried to extract more information, but it was obvious the man really knew nothing more.

Rod had no illusions about the matter. His girl hadn't double-crossed him. She'd been deceived, probably, into believing that bald-head-beard-face was going to take her to Keeney. For no one had known where they intended to have dinner that night; they, themselves, had decided on the way down the East River Drive.

So the stranger who had played Pied Piper to Alcie feared Rod—was afraid he had guessed enough about *The Golden Bamboo* to make his presence hazardous to someone's safety.

That someone was the murderer who placed bombs in victim's mouths and lighted fuses between their lips; let them watch death creeping toward them along the sputtering train of powder!

And the only person Rod had questioned about the man whose head blew off in Pell Street, was the plump and placid Lin Fu Yan!

A bleak look came into Keeney's eyes as he considered what might be happening to Alcie at that very moment. It was just possible that the monster who employed this fiendish method of assassination merely wanted Alcie as a hostage to prevent Rod from interfering with his murder program. Or as bait, to get the rookie to walk into a trap.

Okay, he'd take the bait! With his eyes open!

He forced his way through the jibbering throng; got to the entrance of *The Golden Bamboo*. The sergeant barred his way.

"All closed up, Keeney," he growled.

"Did you get the guy who runs this joint, Sarge?"

The older officer shook his head. "Nope. Wasn't no one inside, at all."

"There must be, Sarge. This Lin Fu Yan I told you about—"

The sergeant put a friendly hand on the rookie's shoulder. "Look, lad. Lin Fu *was* here, maybe. He ain't here now.

And the Deputy Chief Inspector says no one is allowed inside the building. Don't worry about the old geezer. He can't get away. We'll pick him up, one of these days."

One of these days! In the meantime, what would happen to the dark-haired, merry-eyed girl?

"Lemme just take a gander through the joint, Sarge?"

"Orders is orders, Keeney. Place shut up. Boss he go home. All finish." The sergeant grinned. "Don't work up such a sweat, Keeney. These Chinatown killings are tough on muggs with sensitive stomachs, I know. But we'll get the punk who done 'em. Go on home. Grab a flock of sleep. And thank God you don't have to scrub up after one of these damned firecrackers."

**R**OD went away. There wasn't any use trying to explain his fears to a hard-boiled three-striper. He couldn't prove Alcie was in danger, anyway—though he knew it deep within himself.

He still had one slim lead left. The sergeant had stated that Lin Fu Yan wasn't in *The Golden Bamboo* when the Emergency boys crushed in.

Then there must be another—and probably a secret—exit from the building. Rod circled the block, came in toward Pell Street through a dark and stinking alleyway. The brick wall at the rear of the gambling den blocked his way; a solid mass of masonry with no openings of any sort. Lin Fu and Ko Lee San couldn't have escaped that way.

Suddenly, behind him, in the darkness, a door creaked. Rod crouched low behind an iron ash-barrel.

A wedge of light opened out, fanlike, into the alley. It threw into relief a grotesquely huge shadow which diminished rapidly in size as a man emerged from the lighted interior.

An unpleasantly familiar sing-song

voice intoned: "She sail at midnight. Yes. For Shanghai." Lin Fu cackled derisively. "Good trip. Oh, yes. One way ticket. Ah, ha, ha!"

There was an unintelligible assent from inside the house; the door closed, softly. The proprietor of *The Golden Bamboo* walked with short, choppy steps down the alley. Rod Keeney kept fifty feet behind him, moving noiselessly.

She was sailing at midnight for Shanghai! Who was "she"? Alcie—or a ship? Or, perhaps, both?

The main thing was to follow Lin Fu. It was clear that there was a secret exit from the fan-tan room, through this house which faced on the cross-street. But Rod couldn't be sure whether Alcie was in the house Lin Fu had just left—or in the place where he was heading. So the rookie shadowed him, silently.

Down Doyer Street the fat Oriental clop-clopped; Keeney close behind. Lin Fu swung right on a twisting cross street, passed under a street lamp—and vanished completely.

One second he was there, trotting along the sidewalk; the next he was gone. The street ahead was deserted.

Rod reconnoitered, cautiously; nearly fell headlong down a flight of narrow steps leading to a cavernous basement entrance. There was no guard railing to prevent the casual passer-by from plunging to the bottom of the stone stairs—nothing but an opening close beside the building and a sharp drop of six feet or so.

Lin Fu must have gone down those steps in a hurry. Rod squatted down to read the name on the door at the foot of the stairs:

**JIM CHIN**  
Importing Company, Ltd.  
**TOYS**

Queer sort of death-dealing toys, Lin Fu played with, Rod reflected. High ex-

plosive bombs small enough to go in a man's mouth, a waterproof fuse and . . . there go the pearly gates! That was all right. Rod had a blued-steel toy in his right hand, and that could belch forth sudden death, too—if need be.

He started to descend, stealthily.

A shadow moved vaguely in the corner of a doorway on the street level.

A crisp voice said: "Where you going, mister?"

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Smoke of the Headless Ones

**R**OD pivoted, gun leveled. The figure moved languidly into the light. A thick-necked, heavy-bodied man of forty, with iron-grey hair and a deeply tanned face. He held an automatic loosely at his side.

Rod spoke first: "Keeney, shield number nine-two-o-seven-one, Fifteenth Precinct. Who're you?"

The chunky man flipped up one corner of his vest. On the underside was a gold badge. Even in the half-light, Rod saw the big *U. S.*

"Chet Bowden, Treasury Department. Special Investigator, Narcotic Division. These premises are under surveillance, Keeney."

"I'll say they are. I've just trailed a man here who's wanted for questioning in those bomb murders tonight. Name of Lin Fu Yan."

"Yeah. I saw him go in."

"How about going in after him?"

The heavy-set man sniffed, dabbed a handkerchief at his nose, before he answered:

"Nobody goes in, except known members of this ring. Nobody at all goes out—until preparations for the raid are complete, copper. Don't worry. We'll get your man."

"When's this raid coming off?"

"I wouldn't be able to tell you that."

The man with the badge rubbed the back of his hand across his nose. "You better mosey along; we don't want to attract any attention just yet."

Rod went. With a dull sense of futility in his heart. He seemed to be blocked at every step. This federal raid might not take place for hours—and by that time what would have happened to Alcie? What might be happening to her this very minute!

Rod couldn't wait, passively. He had to do something. Anything, as long as there was a chance it might save Alcie . . .

He searched along the narrow, crooked street, until he came to an empty loft building which had a fire escape on its front.

He glanced up and down the block. No one in sight.

The rookie jumped high in the air, caught the bottom ring, muscled his way up to the metal ladder. He got to the roof. Slowly, cautiously, he retraced his steps over the roofs until he stood on top of the building Lin Fu had entered by the basement. It was a three-story structure with a trapdoor in the center of the roof. He tried it. It was locked on the inside. He put his ear to it, listened.

He heard a sound like a revolver shot—but it didn't come from the interior of the building. It came from the street below. Rod ran to the low parapet, looked over.

Bowden was nowhere to be seen. A truck stood in front of Jim Chin's basement entrance. It had been a backfire, then. But what puzzled Rod was the fact that half a dozen Orientals were carrying big, wooden boxes out to the truck; then scurrying back into the basement.

Something must have happened to the federal man. He had said that absolutely no one was to be allowed out of the building until the raid. Yet here were a half dozen men carrying boxes out as freely as though no raid was expected.

**R**OD didn't want to waste time getting down to the street the way he came. He had to get inside, fast.

Sixty seconds with his jack-knife found the hook-an-eye catch that held the trapdoor shut; in another sixty he was going down a rickety, wooden stairway to the third floor.

The structure was filled with wooden shelving. He caught a hasty glimpse of rows of dolls, statuary, toy automobiles, painted wooden blocks . . . .

There was no one on the third floor. Except another dead man. Another headless torso. Only this one had white hands, wrists, neck. This bomb-killer didn't confine his lethal tricks to the yellow race, then! The man had been well dressed, that was all Rod could tell about him. He had been dead quite a while.

A sharp cry of terror rang out. A girl's voice. Rod raced down to the next floor.

If any harm had come to Alcie, he promised himself a session at close quarters with Lin Fu!

Faint light from below filtered up the staircase—but not enough to warn him of the wire stretched across the top step, ankle high! He tripped, plunged forward, went crashing down the stairs!

He got hold of the bannister, tried to stand up,—found his arms and legs enmeshed in the tenuous cords of a silken net. He struggled desperately to get his gun hand free from the entangling web, but another net was thrown over the first.

He strained against the yielding mesh until the veins stood out on his forehead—but it was of no use. He couldn't cope with the silken net . . . .

Small, scurrying figures emerged from the murk; pinioned his legs and arms securely; carried him down to the basement, dumped him unceremoniously on the cement floor.

A portly individual in a black skull-cap stood near the street door, supervising the loading of the truck. Rod recognized the

man as the owner of *The Golden Bamboo*.

"Ah, my friend, the policeman! You follow me here?"

"I'll follow you to hell if you've done anything to hurt that girl you kidnapped from the restaurant, Lin Fu."

The Oriental made his lips smile, but his eyes were expressionless: "No harm to girl, if you stay away. Now you have come . . ."

He rattled off brusque commands in Chinese. The yellow-faced guards picked Rod up, carried him to the basement door.

Lin Fu spoke softly: "You not make yell. Girl will die, minute you do!"

They carried him up to the street, across the sidewalk and slid him, feet first, into the rear of the truck.

They let his head bump roughly on the floor boards. Rod hardly noticed it.

Alcie was in the truck, beside him!

**L**IN FU jumped in beside them, holding a small, curved blade of steel conspicuously. There was no question what action the Chinese would take if an outcry should be made.

The canvass cover was pulled down at the rear of the truck, laced tightly. They jolted and jounced over car-tracks and cobbles for perhaps five minutes.

Rod whispered: "Are you all right, hon?"

"Terribly frightened. That's all, Rod. They haven't hurt me. That awful man—"

"Quiet!" Lin Fu hissed. Rod managed to roll close enough to grip her hand; that was all he could do. Now that he'd found her, would he be able to save her?

The truck executed a right turn, tilted forward at a sharp angle, came to a stop. They had come down a ramp into a building, Rod guessed.

He couldn't see anything except a loading platform and a long, gloomy room, when the canvas cover at the back of the truck was lifted.

Then out of the darkness came a squad of yellow men in black uniforms similar to those worn by the two victims of the fatal explosions. They picked up the rookie and the girl bodily, carried them down the long warehouse. They were placed on a soft blue rug.

An intensely bright light flashed on, directly overhead; its dazzling brilliance half-blinded Rod, but by squinting, his eyes gradually took in the amazing scene.

Along one side of the long room, stood a file of black uniformed Orientals. Some were men, some women. Each carried, fastened to his belt, a heavy automatic and a canteen.

At intervals, one of the file would step out from the rank, march briskly to a work-bench at which an overalled Chinese carpenter was busy, and squeeze into an empty packing case which seemed to Rod entirely too small to contain a human being.

After a brief period of squirming and wriggling, the carpenter would slap on a wooden cover, nail it deftly into place and signal two of the uniformed little men, who then carried the midget-sized coffin away.

Rod recognized the one who was being boxed up at the moment. A slender slip of a black-haired girl. *Ko Lee San!*

That was why she had been curled up in the oven of Lin Fu's stove; to see if she was small enough to go into one of those packing cases. She probably hadn't wanted to ruin her clothing inside the sooty oven, which would account for her nakedness when Rod discovered her.

But what diabolical scheme was this, anyway? Why were living men and women being nailed into these packing-case coffins—and where were they bound for?

**T**HE ship that was to sail at midnight! That must be the answer. This company of living corpses would be shipped

on board as freight—and, once at sea, what fiendish plan would be executed then?

Who was behind this incredible mummery? Not Lin Fu; he was standing before a blank white wall and speaking to someone Rod could not see.

"Friend of Heaven, I have brought the clumsy policeman who stumbled on our secret."

"Well done, Lin Fu." The voice from behind the wall was curiously rasping and unpleasant. It was that of a white man! Rod realized that the speaker could not be more than a few feet away; then he became aware that the white wall was not a wall, at all. It was a tightly drawn sheet of white gauze, which, with the brilliant illumination, prevented anyone on Rod's side of the screen from seeing who was on the other side. But the "Friend of Heaven" could see Rod well enough!

**A**NOTHER strange figure stepped under the spotlight and spoke to the white screen. He was also a white man, a middle-aged man of powerful build. His head was as bald as an onion and he had a thick, reddish beard which contrasted oddly with the fish-belly color of his skin.

"Friend of Heaven, I found the girl in the restaurant," he said, huskily, "and brought her here."

"Good work, Egghead. Now we'll show this inquisitive policeman what he wanted to know. He must learn that the curious seldom live very long. Show him the kwanti cigarette, Lin Fu."

"What of the girl, O Friend of Heaven?"

"I have a special plan for her." The voice of the mysterious Friend of Heaven sank to a low whisper: "She shall be placed in that last packing case. After the others have gone."

The bald-headed man chuckled softly.

"The one with the time bomb, Friend of Heaven?"

"Exactly. The ship will be fifty miles out before the hold blows up—and who can tell then what happened? There will be no one left to explain."

Lin Fu had stepped away from Rod for a moment, but now he returned with a huge dental clamp—the sort used to keep a patient's jaws apart. He also had a small metal container about the size of a wrist-watch, and a length of white fuse which looked much like a cigarette.

Lin Fu sat on Rod's head; Egghead brought his weight to bear on the rookie's lower jaw, until he was forced to open his mouth by sheer muscular strain.

The jaw clamp clipped in place; the metal explosive-case was placed on Rod's tongue, with the thick, waterproof fuse attached. The clamp was removed; his lips were forced back and a layer of plaster was smeared on the front of his teeth. In a few seconds, the cement had set so hard it was useless to try to open his jaws.

Alcie was whimpering hysterically; Rod couldn't even utter a sound in reply.

"Where shall he die, Friend of Heaven? In the house of toys?" Lin Fu asked, blandly.

"No. Take him out in the truck. Touch him off and let him run. By the time he blows up, you'll be five blocks away."

"Just as you say," growled the bald-headed man.

"Then come back and get another load over to the pier. We have but little time. They won't take freight after quarter to twelve."

Four of the men in black picked Rod up, carried him out. He caught the agonized look of despair in Alcie's eyes; heard her moan, "Goodbye, Rod. Goodbye—" He tried to signal with his eyes that she should keep her nerve—he was not ready to give up yet!

He was flung into the truck; Egghead got behind the wheel and they roared away.

For five minutes they turned and twisted until Rod lost all sense of direction, then the truck braked to a stop.

Egghead hauled him to the tail-board of the truck; took the cigarette out of his loose lips, and touched it to the end of the fuse in the rookie's mouth. Then he shoved Rod to the ground, ran to the driver's cab and threw the truck in gear.

The acrid fumes of burning powder sent a shock to Rod's brain; like the jolt of a high-tension wire . . . .

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Homicide Holiday

**H**E KNEW he had, at most, thirty seconds to live! Unless he could stop that sputtering fuse!

Grinding his face against the wall of a building wouldn't help; neither would getting the fuse into water. But pressure might do it.

There was a small delivery truck parked at the curb. He hobbled to it—taking care not to lose his balance, for it would take him precious seconds to regain his feet.

His hands were tied together in front of his body and tight ropes bound his upper arms to his sides, so that he could not touch the fuse. But if luck were with him, what freedom he had would be enough.

The truck door was unlocked. The window was down. The gods were being good to him at last!

He put his face close to the top of the door so the fuse could be caught between the uprising window and the frame of the door. Then he cranked the window lever, for his life!

It came up, with heart-breaking slowness. He prayed that the glass wouldn't jam and catch, an inch or so from the top. *It mustn't jam!*

There was no more than an inch of the smoking fuse left when the glass touched it. He cranked on, putting all

the strength of his muscular fingers into it.

The slender, white tube flattened under the pressure, spread thin. A single spark dropped to the ground outside the window. But the smoke ceased. The fuse was out!

He let the window down, after a few seconds; sat on the running-board to let the sweat run out of his eyes. Then he got to work. He pulled up the front seat of the truck, found a rusty kitchen knife. In another minute, his hands and legs were free.

Next, he had to get that bomb out of his mouth. He poked and chipped at the plaster cast set on his teeth until he broke it free—took the metal case out and put it in his pocket.

His wrist-watch said ten minutes past eleven. In less than an hour Alcie would be aboard an unknown vessel, boxed in her packing-case coffin, with a time-bomb as double assurance of her destination!

There wasn't any use in getting in touch with the local precinct, even if time permitted—which it didn't. Because this was strictly a one-man job.

The keys were in the light truck. More luck! Rod kicked the starter, got under way. Two blocks away he stopped for a morning paper.

In the shipping column, he found what he wanted. Sailings: *S. S. Monsoon*, N. Y. to Shanghai, 12 M. Pier 71-A.

**R**OD got behind the wheel, made it to Pier 71-A in nothing flat.

He drove right out onto the pier.

The big truck with the canvas cloth wasn't there. Rod thought of phoning in an alarm for it—he had memorized the license number when Egghead drove away, leaving him to blow up. But if one of the prowling cars should pick up the truck, Rod's last chance of getting back to that mysterious coffin-loading depot would be gone.

He had to wait.

He waited five minutes.

Then the truck rolled in. Right past Rod's little delivery wagon.

Rod didn't dare to delay while Egghead unloaded. As the boss stevedore came over with orders for placing the truck, the bald-headed man walked around to the rear of his truck to check over the packing cases.

Rod slid out of his seat; strolled to the big truck's cab, got in. He crouched in the seat, until Egghead started around for the front end. Then Rod climbed over the driver's seat, into the body of the truck, ducked down low.

Egghead got in, got the car in gear; pulled ahead slowly. Then he felt something cold and hard and round pressed back of his ear!

"Keep her moving," Rod said between clenched teeth. "Right around and out to the street. Or else!"

The Friend of Heaven's employee didn't argue. The truck circled, drove out onto the avenue.

"Stop her," ordered the rookie.

The truck stopped.

"Take out your gun and put it on the seat beside you, Egghead."

The bald-headed man obeyed without a word; Rod picked the automatic up, discarded his brass pipe.

"Now then, get back to that warehouse, double quick. And when you get there, don't get out. Call Lin Fu over to talk to you. If you don't—" The muzzle of the gun finished the warning.

**T**HE truck slanted down the ramp, rolled to a stop. The line of black-uniformed Orientals had disappeared; there was only a score of packing cases by the loading platform. Each one would contain its living corpse.

The carpenter was just nailing the cover on the last case. It was bigger than the others. Rod knew what would be inside it. Alcie was nowhere in sight!

Lin Fu saw the truck roll in; came trotting over beside the cab.

"What wrong, Egghead?"

"Plenty," Rod answered softly, for the driver. "Come right on up here, Lin Fu, unless you want to get blown apart where you stand. *Get moving!*"

The Oriental stood still for several seconds; then he started to climb on the step of the cab. Instead, he leaped nimbly aside, out of Rod's vision. A shot rang out. Wood splintered from the truck body above Rod's head.

"Back her!" Rod barked. "And tell your yellow pal to stop shooting unless you want to get killed!"

The truck went into reverse; the wheels cut right at Rod's order and the owner of *The Golden Bamboo* came into view.

Rod shot him twice; Lin Fu put his hands to the pit of his stomach and his palms covered both gaping wounds. The Chinese sank gently to his knees, laid his head to one side and pitched forward on his face.

"You!" Rod called, sharply. "By the packing-case. Stand aside! That's right. Now march over here with your hands up."

The carpenter came toward the truck, his little brown eyes showing whites all around, but giving no other sign of fear.

He was still twenty feet away when a leaden hailstorm cut him down. From beyond the white gauze screen came the deadly staccato of a sub-machine gun.

The heavy .45 calibre slugs rang on the hood and fenders; smashed the windshield and perforated the wooden sides of the truck. The second burst caught Egghead as he was throwing the truck into first; he slumped groaning, to the floorboards. The heavy vehicle rumbled on, straight for the gauze curtain.

Rod climbed back over the pile of cases, dropped off the tail-board and lay prone on the ground. The tattoo of bullets spat-tered on the concrete floor in front of him,

and beside him—but Rod held his fire.

The Friend of Heaven saw his danger—rattled a desperate burst at the powerful bulb which had, up to this time, served as protection for him.

He was too late. The truck lumbered on, tore the gauze screen aside as if it had been tissue paper . . . .

**R**OD saw a great, mahogany, flat-topped desk and a luxurious leather swivel chair; behind it the kneeling figure of a man.

The only target he had to shoot at was a shock of iron-grey hair. Rod steadied his hand, squeezed the trigger slowly.

The grey head straightened up; Rod saw the look of pained surprise; heard the clatter of the machinegun as it fell from the nerveless fingers.

“Inspector Chester Bowden—” Rod bit off the words, crisply—“*I don’t think!*”

The man who had halted him at the door of the Jim Chin building, sneered up at him. Blood was gushing from a jagged wound in the man’s neck; he must have known nothing could save him.

“You killed the real Treasury agent with one of those damned mouth-bombs—left his body there in Jim Chin’s place and took his badge to head off any investigation of that truck,” Rod charged. “I wondered about that when I saw you sniffing and rubbing your nose. You’re a drug-user yourself—just an ordinary punk of a sniffer.”

“Another half-hour,” the dying man said, harshly. “Just thirty more minutes, and I’d have been in the clear.”

“Yeah! Another half-hour and the *Monsoon* would have sailed; leaving you with all of the profits of your dope-running ring. Pretty clever, trying to get them out of the country by boxing them up and shipping them as freight.”

“They . . . they fell for it.” The wounded man clapped a hand to his neck,

—the blood squirted through his fingers. “They . . . they thought I was fixing it so they could take over the ship at sea, run it somewhere on the coast . . . get away. Ha!” He made a noise that was between a gurgle and a chuckle.

“Time-bomb,” the man on the floor cackled, insanely. “Blow . . . all . . . to . . . hell. Ship . . . sunk.” He sagged, fell flat on his back. A red bubble puffed out of his mouth, broke.

Rod felt his heart. It was still. The rookie ran to the work-bench, and ripped off the cover of the big packing case.

Alcie had been bound and gagged; doubled up and pressed down into the case until she was limp with fear and exhaustion. Rod laid her gently on the floor before he disconnected the wires that connected the alarm clock with a cigar-box at the bottom of the packing case.

Then he got her gag off.

“Rod,” she whimpered, “I thought . . . sure . . . you were . . .” She began to sob wildly.

“Now, now, hon—I’m all right and you’re all right.” He cut her bonds—started to move away.

She clutched his arm frantically.

“Don’t,” she implored. “Don’t leave me. Not for an instant, in this horrible place. If you do . . . I’ll simply die of fright.”

The rookie patted her shoulder.

“There, there—Mrs. Keeney-to-be. Don’t take it so hard. I’m just walkin’ back to that desk over there—”

“Don’t, please, Rod!”

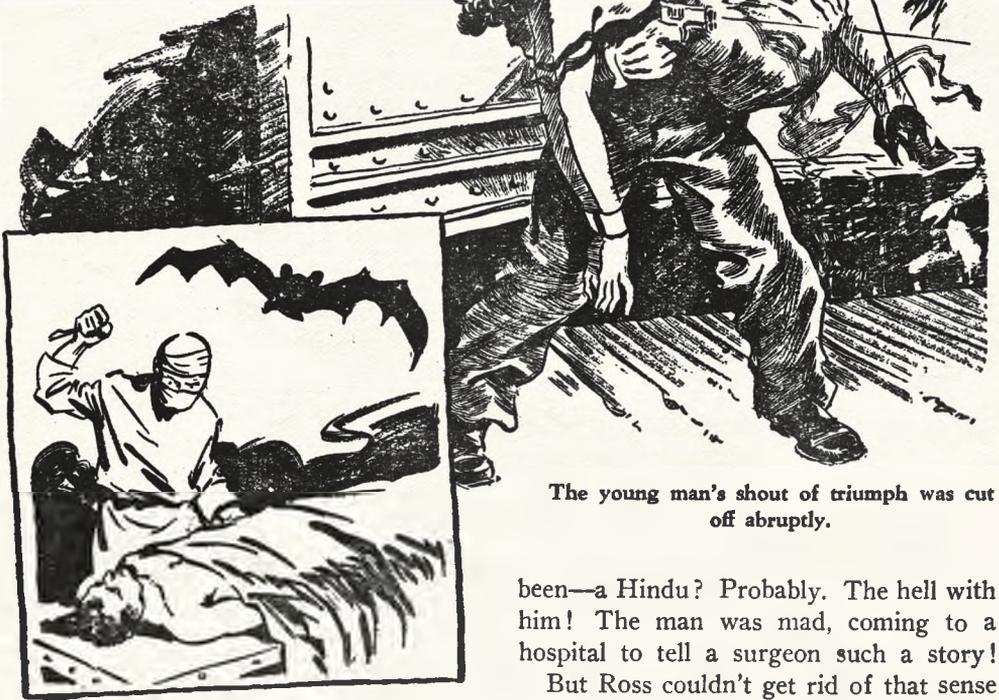
“I got to do that, hon. It says in the manual: ‘A patrolman must immediately communicate with his superior officer upon discovery of a homicide.’” He looked around at the four corpses.

“I don’t know as you’d rightly call it discovering,” he added. “But all the same—”

He took her with him when he went over to the phone.

# THE NIGHTMARE MAKER

*When respected medical men like Dr. Ross suddenly burst into maniac laughter, and murder while they laugh . . . when pretty debutantes stagger on the streets sightless, screaming . . . then even the greatest city folds in upon itself in mortal terror—and only lawmen with the brains and guts of Michael Frost dare sally forth to fight!*



The young man's shout of triumph was cut off abruptly.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Murder in a Hospital

**D**R. NEWELL ROSS was sitting in his office, staring intently at a burnished copper ashtray before him on his desk. He was trying to concentrate on the reflection of the morning sun that glinted there, trying to forget the strange words of the visitor who had just left his office. What had the man

been—a Hindu? Probably. The hell with him! The man was mad, coming to a hospital to tell a surgeon such a story!

But Ross couldn't get rid of that sense of impending emergency, a tight warning that seemed to press down on his brain with an almost physical insistence. It was an annoying feeling; utterly childish. And then the annunciator on his desk buzzed into life and a voice broke the silence with crisp, emotionless detachment.

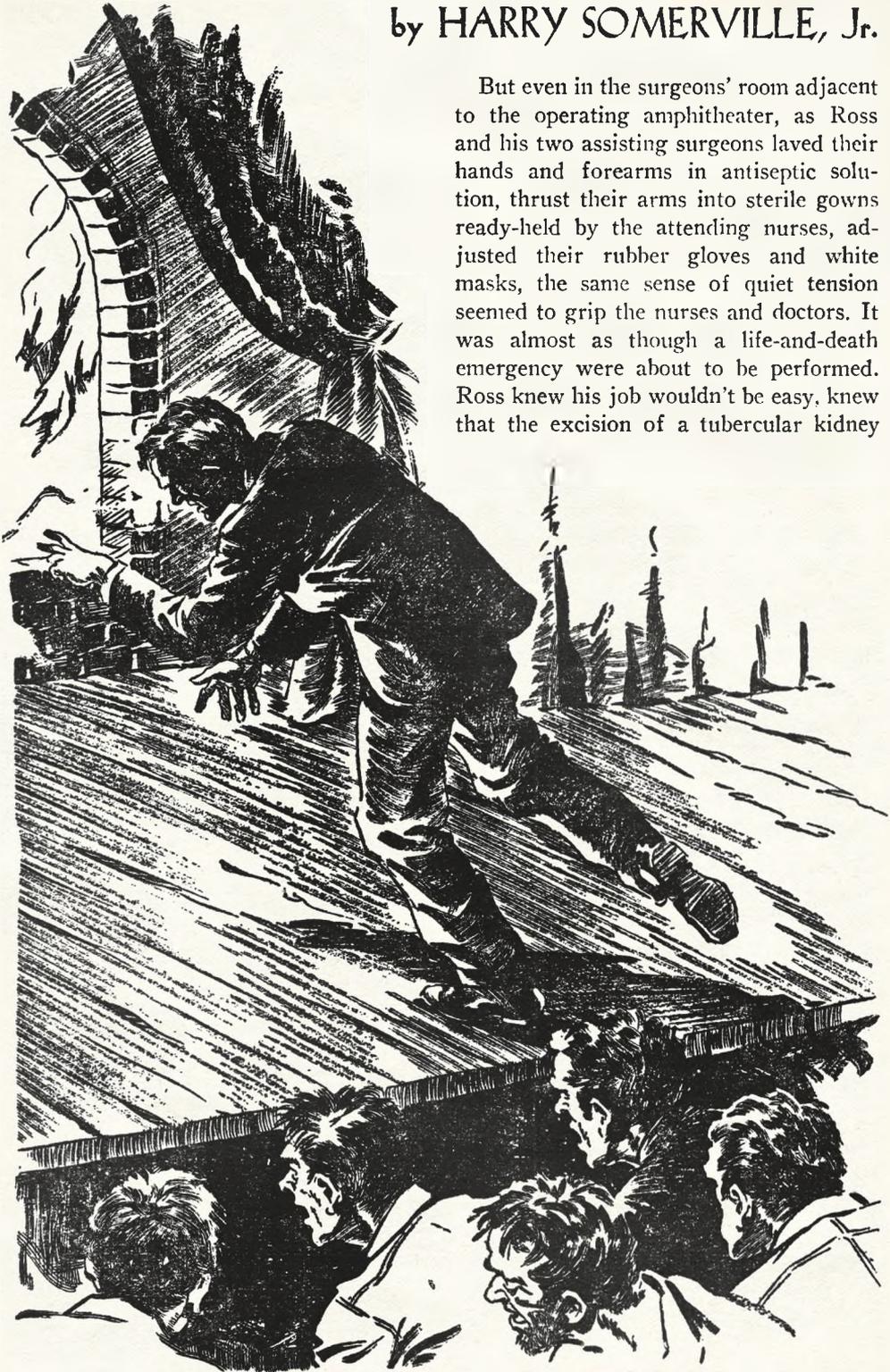
"Operating room is ready, Dr. Ross. Fifteen minutes. . ."

Newell Ross flipped up the two-way switch on the mechanism. "I'm on my way up," he said shortly.

A punch-packed novel of bizarre crime and menace

by HARRY SOMERVILLE, Jr.

But even in the surgeons' room adjacent to the operating amphitheater, as Ross and his two assisting surgeons laved their hands and forearms in antiseptic solution, thrust their arms into sterile gowns ready-held by the attending nurses, adjusted their rubber gloves and white masks, the same sense of quiet tension seemed to grip the nurses and doctors. It was almost as though a life-and-death emergency were about to be performed. Ross knew his job wouldn't be easy, knew that the excision of a tubercular kidney



is a tough major operation, but as he walked into the amphitheater he felt vaguely annoyed at the still white form of the man on the table. What possible danger could be threatening the patient? What plausible menace?

After that, abruptly, all awareness was lost. The white faces of the audience that sat in the glass-enclosed theater, row upon row, faded into the background; the still figure of the anesthetist at his controls became merely a forgotten cog in a smoothly functioning machine; in the dazzling blaze of light that spotted the table, only the patient was important, and even the living quiet that settled over that tense drama went unnoticed by any of the principals.

Ross was aware only of the two surgeons, Williams and Lytell, who faced him across the patient; dimly felt the presence of the two nurses who unerringly answered every unspoken command; was completely absorbed in his task of master surgeon. His short gesture to one of the assisting surgeons; that man's passing of the command; the proper instrument, twice relayed, being placed in Ross' empty hand the instant he held it out; a nurse leaning forward briefly to wipe the perspiration from his brow; an assisting surgeon expertly swabbing away the flow of blood as he assisted Ross in the adjustment of a primary clamp—how beautifully timed the whole thing was.

A scalpel for Ross . . . forceps for Williams . . . a sponge for Lytell. New incision, sponge, forceps . . . more sponge, scalpel, forceps again . . . primary clamps for Williams . . . long-handled scissors for Ross . . . more sponge . . . the snip-snip sound of cutting tissue. . . .

Abruptly all movement stopped.

Across the table, Dr. Lytell was holding a secondary clamp in readiness for Ross' command. Williams, a threaded ligator in his hand, glanced up questioningly at Ross, but the principal surgeon gave no sign. He stared abstractedly at

the unconscious body of the man under the knife. Then Dr. Williams' eyes snapped wide in disbelieving terror above his white-masked face, and the ears of all of them heard the mindless peal of laughter that came from behind Ross' mask. The master surgeon straightened suddenly, laughed wildly again, louder, and then his arm flashed out savagely and plunged the long-handled scissors deeply into the patient's back again and again before anyone recovered his stunned senses.

Utter chaos followed. One of the nurses fainted, the crash of her instrument tray and the thud of her collapsing body seeming to shatter the icy grip that paralyzed the group. Then Williams was dragging Ross away from the table; Lytell was working desperately to save the swiftly ebbing life of the patient as the second nurse jumped to his assistance. The sound-proof glass of the amphitheater, enclosing the group of observing surgeons, revealed a silent riot of horrified movement, and a moment later a gowned surgeon was rushing into the room to assist Lytell, calling for an emergency transfusion. But it was obvious to those who struggled in desperation that it was already too late. . . .

Ross' gibbering, mirthless laughter continued endlessly as he was led, dazed and unresisting, from the operating room. But at the door he struggled quickly from the arms of his warders, turned and pointed shakily up toward the ceiling.

"Look!" he gasped between the peals of his flat, dead laughter. "The little black creatures of doom!" The sounds that shook from him were weakening now, turning to sad sobs of despair. "Look! Can't you see it? The winged omen of death!"

Movement and noise stopped again as all eyes followed the direction of his pointing, trembling finger. Swirling about the high roof of the operating room in erratic, blind flight was a small black bat!

THE crowd of men who had sat in the amphitheater observing the operation, and who had seen the hideous climax, poured into the hallway now, their faces grey masks of gruesome shock as their taut lips and frightened voices phrased unanswerable questions, desperately seeking—almost pleading—for a reasonable, sane reply. The tight voices of all the men in that crowd blended in a rumbling volume of sound, and that sound was the voice of terror itself. But occasionally a single phrase would break loose, become audible above the rest. "It was a fit, I tell you, that hit him right in the middle of the thing. . ." "He saw the man was going to die, and it snapped his nerve; he went berserk. I saw that happen once. . ." "A creeping insanity of years' time. It just happened to strike him violently then. Exactly the wrong moment, as usual."

Apart from the crowd of doctors, standing quietly by himself, a young man of medium build waited patiently for the elevators to clear the hallway. But just as his size concealed the true strength of his tempered, whipcord muscles, so did his indolent attitude hide the intent searching of his quick eyes and active brain. No doctor in that mob could have hidden a guilty nervousness or a vicious exultation from that probing, analyzing gaze.

The man who stood alone was not a doctor. He was Michael Frost, a private investigator, and it was just chance that had unfolded the whole mad drama before his eyes. Chance? Not entirely. Six years ago Mike Frost had been in medical school himself. He had been a brilliant scholar, popular with his classmates and the faculty, connected socially with many wealthy families, heir to a fortune himself, and it looked as though Fate would hand him the world to do with as he pleased. But Fate had other plans. It took just six short months for all that to be wiped away—the death of his father, a widower; the

failure of his father's business; the stock-market crash that cleaned out what money was left. And Michael Frost found himself alone, penniless, his medical training half completed, debts hanging over his head.

He had turned to the one profession he loved next to medicine: private investigation. First as an apprenticed aide, then as a partner, and finally as a lone investigator, he had fought his way up. It took him five years, but at the end of that time he found himself with all the money and fame he desired. But it was then too late to return to his study of medicine; his classmates had even finished their interning and had set up in private practice. Frost, however, hadn't let his interest in medicine die. Through his contacts, he was constantly going to lectures, observing operations, and that was how he happened to be present on that fateful morning when madness donned a surgeon's gown and stood at the operating table.

As Frost stood in the noisy hallway, the one question he was trying to answer was, "Is this act of insane butchery but the prelude to some mindless criminal horror that will sweep the whole city?" It was the incongruous memory of a bat flying above a bloody body in a spotless, modern operating room that prompted the questioning. But in the faces that milled before him he could find no answer—only a puzzlement to match his own.

Then a tug at his elbow interrupted his thoughts and he turned to face an old classmate, Bob Mann, now the house doctor at the hospital. They shook hands warmly.

"Mike," Bob said abruptly, "I heard you'd be here today. And as soon as this hellish thing broke, you were the one I thought of. This is a case where a hospital needs detectives, not doctors. Old Doc Caldwell is fit to be tied, so you better come down to his office and see what you can do. One of the surgeons has already

called the police—Doc Caldwell never would have thought of it.” He guided Frost through the crowd. “There’s a private house elevator at the end of the hall.”

**WHEN** they pushed into the ornate office of Harrison Caldwell, Resident Directing Surgeon and owner of Caldwell Private Hospital, Frost saw that “fit to be tied” was putting it mildly. The grey-bearded old man was striding up and down the luxurious room, pausing only briefly now and then to direct a few remarks to the half dozen listeners who stood about. When Frost came in he acknowledged the introduction without a break in his stride.

“For thirty-five years I’ve been building up this hospital,” he said in a quiet voice that expressed controlled rage and nervous fear. “Over three decades building up its staff and its reputation. And one horrible incident like this can smash thirty-five years labor. My God! People may have to die in hospitals, but they certainly don’t go there to be murdered! I’ll have to close this hospital—it’ll be empty in two days!”

Frost saw that he’d get no information from Caldwell, so he drew Bob Mann aside, began to question him.

“Name of the patient?” Dr. Mann took a few moments to recall. “Oh, yes. Raymond, Howard Raymond. A pretty nice fellow, from all I hear. About fifty years old, I’d say.”

“What about his financial standing?” Frost wanted to know. “Did he seem to have money?”

The doctor shook his head. “Raymond wasn’t wealthy,” he said. “As a matter of fact, I believe his firm was paying the expenses of his hospitalization. You may have heard of the outfit: Whitelaw and Bandy, Manufacturing Chemists. I remember that, because a relative of mine used to work for them.”

Michael Frost nodded dumbly, unable to speak. Whitelaw! That name brought back memories of days before his father’s death. William Whitelaw had been a frequent visitor at their home, and it had been through Whitelaw that Michael had met Alice Whitelaw, the old man’s niece. The friendship between them had lasted through the years and they had not lost touch, even after his father’s death, though their meetings since then, of necessity, had been very infrequent. Michael Frost felt a warm glow run through him as Alice came to his mind—a glow that was suddenly banished by a chilling thought. Could the strange death of an unimportant executive in her uncle’s business mean that Alice was threatened in any way? Michael shrugged the thought away. That was carrying things too far—the first “murder” hadn’t been established yet. But there were plenty of questions still to be answered.

The shrilling of the telephone brought sudden silence to the group in the office. Dr. Caldwell picked up the receiver, listened for a few seconds to a crackling voice on the other end, then hung up slowly as a frustrated, bewildered look spread over his face. At that moment Detective Inspector Jeffers and some of his men from headquarters came shouldering into the crowded room.

“That was Doctor Lytell,” Caldwell said in an obviously controlled voice. “He reports that Doctor Newell Ross just died without regaining coherent speech. That’s the second death today. As I told you earlier, Raymond died while still on the operating table. Ross’ nurse is hysterical. She says she saw a . . . a bat . . . flying around the doctor’s room just after his death.”

“What in hell is all this?” Jeffers boomed into the silence.

Michael Frost was pushing his way out of the room at that moment. He wished fervently that he knew that answer—the

reason behind the sudden madness, the murder frenzy, the black bats of death. And he wondered in a stunned daze if the horror would strike again . . . and if it did, where the next stroke would fall. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Hindu Cult Strikes

**M**ARCIA GOULD'S sleek roadster purred gently in well-mannered restraint, its austere foreign lines fitting in perfectly with the wealthy suburban country through which it sped. Then, abruptly, its tires whining softly on the pavement, it swung off the road and into a private driveway.

The sun had already set, and as the roadster climbed the winding gravel road its powerful headlights raked the tree-secluded grounds in great swinging arcs. Past the elaborate, rambling estate of Marcia's parents, back to the discreetly hidden garage the car rolled, then whispered to a stop among the larger cars that were housed in the dark interior.

Marcia swung from her car, leaned forward to snap off the lights, but suddenly stopped in mid-action as quick fear settled over her. In the grey half shadows at the side of the room she saw one of the chauffeurs tied securely to a wooden chair, his mouth gagged. The sharp whispering rush of Marcia's indrawn breath was the only sound, and then dim forms were circling quietly in upon her from all sides. They came from the far flung shadowy corners and from behind the black hulks of the other cars housed in the garage.

An upsurge of fear constricted Marcia's throat and left her muscles limp and unresponsive. For long moments she stood staring wide-eyed at the silent group, and now Marcia's face had lost its haughty sophistication; her wealth-conscious attitude of superiority and command had dropped from her like a melting shell. She was just a frightened girl

now—any girl—and the deathly paleness of her face was grotesquely emphasized by the black rings of mascara that encircled her staring eyes and the violent gash of red that was her mouth. Time itself seemed to hang trembling, unmoving.

"What . . . what do you want . . . of me?" she whispered at last. But there was no answer; only unwinking silence. And now, as they pressed closer, she could see the close-cropped black beards that covered the brown-colored faces of the men who stalked her. And then she knew; it was then that the hideous truth came to her!

"I know!" she whined. "You're from *him*! But I paid; last night I put the money where I was told to. You don't want me." The girl's voice rose higher with her fear. "Leave me alone! Go away!"

Still there was no answer. One of the Hindu henchmen reached toward Marcia and she gave a small, terror-stifled scream as she shrank further out of reach.

"You don't want me," she sobbed. "I've already paid, I tell you."

"You've been talking!" a deep voice growled. "The Master wants you. You haven't paid yet—the way he wants you to pay!"

"No!" the girl screamed, cowering. "No! You can't. . .!"

But hands clawed upon her then, the brutal hands of a devil's unquestioning henchmen, and Marcia's stunned senses reeled in a giddy haze, surfeited by dread of the unknown.

"I didn't talk," she kept whispering dully. "I wouldn't talk. If I did, it would hurt me more than anyone else! If that secret were known to the world, I'd kill myself!"

She was vaguely conscious of being bundled from the garage and into a small delivery wagon that stood hidden in the shrubbery at the side of the building. After

that the ride became a nightmare recollection, a hazy dream confused by her own half-fainting state, by her trembling fears and awful imaginings, by the heavy presence of the eight dim forms that squatted, cross-legged and unspeaking, about her in the darkness of the car.

**B**UT she knew when the delivery car had completed its swift drive through the country and had entered the slow traffic of the city, and by the street sounds she could tell that they were working deeper and deeper into the noisome city slums. Then they were turning from the street and jouncing up a narrow, gloomy alley that ran beside a rotting, deserted building. For a brief moment, as she was bundled roughly from the car and into that tumbledown structure, she felt a thin, cold drizzle of rain strike sadly against her face.

For long minutes afterward, Marcia Gould was in a state of border-land unconsciousness, but then abrupt awareness of her surroundings came to her with a snap. It was like a brilliant picture being suddenly thrown on the wall of a dark room, but was more hideous than any picture could have been, for it was . . . reality.

Marcia found herself on her knees, a bearded Hindu on each side pressing down on her shoulders. In a semicircle about that group stood a dozen other black-joweled East Indians, their arms folded majestically across their chests—and the eyes of all faced a single figure, clean-shaven and with a small mask covering his upper features, who sat between the open arms of the semicircle. It was like some monster's cruel court of judgment. And then the Master spoke.

"Marcia Gould," the heavy voice intoned, "you were one of our delegates, but the time of your usefulness is past. You and your two converts must be wiped from our society. The other two are al-

ready gone. Now you must go, because we have changed our original plans."

Marcia's face was set coldly, her voice bitter when she replied.

"I'll be glad to die," she whispered. "Death will be a release from the living hell you gave me, from the madness that crept over me as I slipped deeper and deeper in your power. At first you sold me exhilaration, ecstasy for my jaded appetites, and I was willing to pay." The girl's tone became brittle with hatred as she went on. "But then my body, my mind, my very soul, was consumed with the unquenchable craving your evil inspired. I was no longer a human being—I was your slave! Do you think you can frighten me with death?"

The Master laughed tauntingly, clapped his hands together in mock applause. "A very pretty speech," he sneered. "Very pretty. So you *want* to die. Well, I'm always glad to oblige a lady. But first—" his hand went up to his face, tore the mask away—"I want you to know to whom you are indebted for this favor."

The kneeling girl recoiled as though she'd been struck.

"*You!*" she gasped incredulously. "A man whom everybody trusted, respected. . ."

But at that moment her captors descended on Marcia; rough hands flung her backward as a hypodermic syringe was jabbed into a vein in her neck. She saw the circle of fierce, gleaming eyes closing in over her prostrate body, saw the glint of sharp steel swinging down slowly toward her face. Faintly, then, she could hear a girl's thin screams—screams that must be her own, she realized with a sick wonder—and afterward a rolling chaos of agony blotted everything out. Her last groping thought was a childish wonder. "Marcia Gould, can this really be happening? Can it truly be happening to *you!*"

It was a policeman who found her a long time later. She was down in the old

deserted warehouse district, near the waterfront, wandering in the rain. At first the cop thought she was drunk. She was holding on to the wall of a building, staggering forward a few steps, then pausing as though in thought, laughing quietly a little, mumbling incoherently. Drunk? No, the cop could see that when he walked up to her.

She turned slowly toward the sound of his footsteps, lifted her rain-washed face, a wet face that cascaded broad crimson rivulets from her sightless eyes, drooled a bloody froth from her mutilated mouth. She was blind and mute. And in that horrible moment, the cop remembered later, he wondered why such unnecessary precautions had been taken in removing her tongue to prevent speech.

Talk? She was stark, raving mad.

**I**T WAS late evening when Michael Frost returned uptown. He had spent the afternoon checking what pitifully few leads he possessed. First, a trip to headquarters for a talk with Jeffers, in charge of the case. But the detective-inspector hadn't offered any answers; instead, he'd only confused the set-up further. The day before, two young debutantes had been reported missing, and that afternoon the body of one of them had been found, horribly mutilated. Frost was about to dismiss the news from his mind until Jeffers happened to add another fact.

"There aren't many details yet, Frost," he said. "Body was picked up in Westchester. But I do know this—on the palm of that girl's hand the outline of a bat had been branded! A tie-up? You bet, mister. And if the second girl is due for the same fate, how many other girls still unreported are headed the same way?" The big man exhaled a long, puzzled breath. "God alone knows!" he answered himself. "I've got six men on the case already. And I wish I had twice that number!"

And then Frost had gone to the offices

of Whitelaw and Bandy, where a second, worse complication awaited him. William Whitelaw wasn't at the office, hadn't been seen all that day!

Michael Frost didn't waste a minute after that. He grabbed a cab and went directly to Alice Whitelaw's house, though it was already dark when the butler opened the door and he went hurrying in. Alice must have heard his voice in the hall because she came running to him, met him in the doorway to the living room, her brown eyes filled with trouble and a poorly concealed fear.

"Mike!" she whispered with relief. "I've been trying to get you all evening. Did you receive my message?"

"Your uncle, Alice," he interposed irrelevantly. "Has he—"

"That's just it," she interrupted in a rush. "He didn't turn up at the office today, nor did he return home tonight!"

She was fighting to keep her trembling voice from breaking, and as Frost took her hand and led her into the room he saw Arthur Bandy, Whitelaw's partner, standing there. The heavy-set man, naturally of a florid complexion, was now pale and lined, as though the strain of the past hours had been too much for him. He came over to Frost, shook hands with him, then collapsed in an easy chair.

"When Alice couldn't get you, she called me," he said. "As a matter of fact, I didn't know Bill wasn't at the office until she told me. You see, I was at the hospital all afternoon doing what I could about Raymond's death. I hadn't met Caldwell before, but he and Bill were good friends and Caldwell's all the more shocked by what's happened, because of that." His eyes found Frost's, bored into them, as though for him alone to emphasize his next words. "The authorities, at first, may place an unfortunate construction on certain facts—I know we'll all do what we can to prevent that."

He turned toward the hall, started from

the room. "I've already notified the police about Bill's disappearance. . . . Good night."

**A**LICE turned to Michael, started to ask a question, but he interrupted her, knowing what she'd ask. "What has your uncle been doing at the office during the past few weeks?" he countered.

"Something experimental, Mike," she told him. "That's about all I know. He and Raymond were working on some organic formula; it was all very secret and only those two men knew anything about it. But he did tell me that it would be valuable only in a scientific way, not in a financial way. The formula was just about complete."

And then Frost understood what Bandy had meant by "unfortunate construction." Two men are working on a new formula; one of them is murdered, the other disappears—with the unrevealed discovery. The cops would spot that angle immediately, but even supposing that such an explanation were true, how had that weird murder been brought about? And a dead, mutilated debutante up in Westchester, how did she fit in? And there were a half dozen other angles, too, including the black bats!

Alice lived alone in that big house with her uncle, and now that Whitelaw was gone, Frost was unwilling to let her stay, in spite of the three servants upstairs. After all, what did he know about the servants? And a maiden aunt of Alice's lived not two blocks away, the iron-barred doors of her private home firmly closed against all but members of the family. The chronic illness of declining years and the natural spirit of a maiden recluse had made of that home all but a fortress before the world. It would be a perfect haven for Alice until the groping tentacles of the unseen murderers had been finally stilled forever.

Alice agreed readily to Mike's sug-

gestion, admitting in no other way the fear that lived within her and her need for another woman's help and comfort, and in a few short moments she had packed the things she needed, was ready to go.

Outside, the rain was falling in a somber, miserable drizzle, the same rain that was washing the blind face of a girl who wandered in pain down by the waterfront, and faint thunder seemed to warn of a distant but approaching cataclysm. Alice and Mike drew their coats about them, bent their heads against the sudden gusts of wet wind, and soon they could make out their objective—a stone house that was set back from the street, boasting its own small plot of ground. The light above the entrance was glowing, and before the gate stood an idling car.

"Probably Aunt Mary's doctor," Alice explained from between chattering teeth. "He calls about this time each night."

Frost didn't have time to think of what she'd said; they both came to an involuntary halt at that second, standing rigid in the rain.

The front door burst open, showering light down the wet walk, and the tall figure of a man came weaving unsteadily toward the street. It was the unearthly sound of his laughter that made them stop. He was laughing the way a dead man might laugh—loudly, but flat and lifeless, a sort of mechanical mirth. The man wobbled up to the car, staggered in and slammed the door.

Inaction left Frost then, and he shouted once as he raced forward. But the car lurched away from the curb before he came up to it, the man at the wheel seeming to have difficulty steering and shifting gears. Swaying perilously, the rear end slewing in dangerous arcs as the erratic driver twisted the wheel back and forth, the automobile began to gain speed, its motor rising from a hum to a whine, then to a scream. At the far end of the ave-

nue, out of sight, was a dangerous traffic intersection, and as Alice came panting up to his side, Frost was waiting for the sound he knew he must hear.

It came, shortly. The thunderous crash of twisting, rending metal and splintering glass. After that, silence—the same dead silence that came from the home beside them. . . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *Crime's Spreading Tentacles*

**T**HE front door of the home was ajar, a flood of light coming down the walk to guide their reluctant feet, and Alice and Mike walked up the stone steps slowly, hand in hand. It wasn't fear that held them back; it was an unwillingness to look upon the scene of violence they knew they must find inside.

In the foyer hall, half of him stretching into the living room as though brought down in mid-stride, lay the body of the grey-haired butler. One arm was out-thrust before him as he lay there, face down, the fingers of his hand clutching wildly into the nap of the rich Oriental rug. From the center of the man's back protruded the haft of a thin surgical knife. He must have died almost instantly.

Frost had seen one example of the laughing madness earlier that day, had seen its desire for insane butchery, so now he made Alice wait downstairs as he went up to look for her Aunt Mary. He found the old lady in her bedroom, and even though he had steeled himself to what he knew he must see, the sight was still a gruesome shock—a scene that brought involuntary shudders in spite of himself.

The old woman had been in bed but now she lay on the floor, the bedclothes strewn about her. From the looks of things, she must have put up a good fight in spite of her age, but the work of the mad doctor had made a crimson ruin of her head, face, shoulders and chest. And

she was still now in death, her once-grey hair in wild disarray, encrimined with her own blood.

Michael Frost turned quickly away and went back downstairs.

Alice was waiting for him in the living room, and she questioned him now, mutely, her agonized eyes imploring his. Frost didn't answer; he nodded slowly, and then Alice broke down for the first time. Frost walked over to her, took her in his arms until the first bitterness of the shock had passed. She was a brave little soldier!

They were standing so, in the concealing semi-darkness of the living room, when the sound of running footsteps pounded in the night outside, came scraping up the stone steps to the house and halted abruptly. Frost swung Alice against the wall, covered her with his own body as his gun appeared quickly in his right hand. The front door opened slowly, by inches, and then a man stepped into the foyer hall and stood staring at the body of the butler, his breath coming in panting gulps. As Frost walked into the room, the man's head came up to stare at him—it was Arthur Bandy.

"Frost!" he gasped between his labored breaths. "My God, where is this thing going to end?" He came toward them, seemingly unconscious of the gun Frost still held unobtrusively at his side. "And Alice's aunt?" he asked quietly, but the look on the girl's face was a sufficient answer. Then his eyes swung back to Michael Frost and he caught the meaning of the cold analytical expression he saw there. For a moment silence held the group as tight anger hardened Bandy's face.

All during that afternoon and evening Frost had been searching for the one central clue that would lead him through the intricate maze of undecipherable violence, lead him toward the answer behind the whole plan of cold-blooded extermination. Motive! Profit!

**A**T FIRST it had seemed that Alice's uncle, Whitelaw, might be the mind behind everything. That conclusion in spite of Frost's knowledge of the man's apparent character. But then seemingly irrelevant atrocities had complicated the picture of simple formula theft—a theft for personal profit after wiping out anyone familiar with the discovery. Furthermore, Alice had said that the new chemical, whatever it was, was worthless from a financial point of view.

But what of Bandy, the second partner? Suppose Whitelaw, like Raymond, had been murdered, but murdered secretly to throw suspicion on his strange disappearance. Couldn't Bandy, with some wider, more horrible plan, be behind all that? Tied in, perhaps, with some outlaw crew that would stop at nothing. And now Bandy read those thoughts in the young detective's searching mind.

After a silent moment the anger faded from Bandy's face. Without being asked he offered an explanation for his sudden appearance in that house of death.

"After I left you at Alice's house," he said, "I drove my car to the public garage, housed it for the night. Then, as I was walking home, I saw an awful accident at the intersection just below here. A man drove his car through the red light, slammed right into the middle of a stream of fast moving traffic. There was no chance for anyone to avoid him." Bandy stopped for a second, his face grim at the memory of the smash. "Two cars hit him, sent him spinning, careening into the path of a heavy truck—the truck crushed the car against the wall of a building."

Bandy's hands clenched tightly at his side. "The man was imprisoned in the wreck, but he was still . . . laughing! When they finally got him out, fast dying, I knew who . . . he was. I knew . . . too . . . what that laughter meant! That's why I came . . ."

The tension relaxed then, and the three

of them stood quietly gazing at each other, realizing to the full their helplessness before the creeping murder plague that engulfed them.

It was then that the call came out of the night. A faint call, but clear, full of urgency and fright. "Bandy! Arthur Bandy! Quick!"

The big man whirled, went racing to the door. Frost leaped forward to grab him, missed by inches.

"Stop, Bandy," he yelled. "You fool, don't . . . !"

But Bandy had already flung the front door open, started through. Then he was hurled backward, as though smashed on the chest by a giant hand, staggered a few retreating steps, then sprawled heavily to the floor. And it had been a giant arm that smashed him—a deadly leaden arm that reached from the mouth of a chattering tommy-gun to blast everything in its path.

As Bandy had opened the door, heedless of Frost's warning, the investigator had thrown Alice and himself flat. And now as the reverberating echoes died away he was crouching at the window, seeing a small delivery truck slink rapidly out of sight.

But the private investigator couldn't see the bearded brown faces of the Hindus in the truck's dark interior—couldn't see those foreign faces grinning coldly at each other, celebrating evilly once again their victorious murder cavalcade. . . .

**F**ROST didn't have to examine Bandy to know he was dead. It was obvious that the man had taken the hail of leaden extermination full in the chest, annihilating him instantly. The young detective threw a table drape over the body, then walked to the 'phone in a mechanical sort of way, asked for police headquarters. Alice stayed close to his side all the time, her slim body trembling as she fought bravely to maintain her control in the face

of the powers that threatened them.

As he stood at the telephone waiting for his call, a surge of anger ran through Michael Frost because of his futility to cope with the menace—an anger that was made worse by the bewilderment and helplessness that he had to admit. What had he to go on? The murder of a man in an operating room by a mad doctor; the disappearance of a chemist and a new formula; the gruesome mutilation of a young debutante in Westchester; other girls missing—or dead; the butchery of a harmless, aged recluse; the assassination of a man who knew as little of the reasons behind it all as Frost himself.

And then a sudden chilling thought came to him: with the exception of Raymond and Bandy, who just seemed to have been in the way of the criminals, *all the victims were women!* How many unreported girls had fallen in the killers' hands? And Alice! Was she next on the evergrowing list of girl victims?

After making his report to the police, Frost put through a call to the main office of a cab company and asked them to send a car. He wasn't taking the chance of walking Alice through those dark streets, no matter how short the distance, and he wasn't trusting the first cruising cab that came along, either, even if the killers apparently didn't suspect that anyone else had been with Bandy.

When the cab came, the two of them started directly for Alice's home. Frost didn't even bother searching upstairs for the bodies of the two other servants that he knew would be found there. His jaw was set grimly as they entered Whitelaw's house, and the investigator told himself coldly that it wasn't the dead who mattered now—but the living.

While Alice got ready for bed, Frost went down to the kitchen and brewed himself a large pot of coffee. After that he took up his post outside Alice's door, standing sentinel there for the few hours

of night that still remained—but they were long, grueling hours for Frost, hours that crept slower and slower as his mind revolved with conjecture, speculation and fear, unendingly, like a frantic squirrel on a revolving treadway, returning ever to the starting point and helplessly repeating the circuit again.

But morning seemed to bring a new strength, a new optimism to them all. The light that flooded the city's streets, the people and traffic that coursed busily around them, seemed to lull the fears of the night before—but they were fears that were too easily stilled, too easily put aside. For the night before had been only a prelude to the climax of the murder cavalcade.

Frost borrowed Alice's little yellow coupe, drove directly to police headquarters to find out what Detective-Inspector Jeffers had discovered from the autopsy on the debutante's body. It was when he entered the ancient, fortress-like building that he sensed the tense urgency, the suppressed alarm of the city police. Jeffers' office was packed with his lieutenants and the detective-inspector was snapping assignments, orders, like a king dispatching his generals in time of war. And it was war; war against a treacherous, ambushing enemy. At last the room was cleared and the detective leaned back wearily in his chair, silently motioned Frost to be seated. The two of them had worked together on cases before, had helped each other, and between the two men a mutual respect had grown.

“**B**Y GOD, Frost,” Jeffers grunted in a hoarse voice, “all hell has broken loose on this city! It's being withheld from the public as much as possible, but the Commissioner has ordered an emergency status in all departments.”

His fingers drummed nervously on the desk for a minute. “I might as well give you the whole story,” he went on. “Re-

member the deb they found in Westchester yesterday? Well, two more have been picked up since—alive, if you could call it that! The last two are raving mad, dying slowly from some brain infection and the ravages of brutal mutilation.” His finger jabbed out at Frost to emphasize his words. “And, mister, all three of those girls have been newly branded with the sign of the bat! One of them’s Marcia Gould, if you’ve ever heard of her.” Jeffers grunted in understanding when he saw Frost’s look of incredulous amazement and shock. “And another thing, Frost,” he added. “All three of those girls were confirmed narcotics users—dope fiends!”

There was a long silence then, until Jeffers went on again.

“Last night,” he said, “there was a raid on the First National Bank—a new kind of criminal raid. A horde of them descended in trucks, shot it out with the police with tommy-guns while they dynamited the doors of the bank, blasted open the vaults.”

He grunted savagely. “Don’t worry, we brought down plenty of them, but the rest were gone before sufficient reinforcements arrived—we aren’t prepared for a minor war on a moment’s notice. But here’s the point: Crimedom’s organizing into an army! And every one of those thugs last night was hopped up to the ears with dope! Kill-crazy, murder-mad! They cared as little for their own lives as for the lives of the cops.”

His fist pounded the table softly as he emphasized each word.

“Frost, there are three-and-a-half million criminals in this country, a force larger than any army on earth! What happens if they all band together in a dope-delirious rout of law-hating murderers? You don’t have to tell *me!*”

Michael Frost’s mind had been working swiftly as Jeffers talked, and now a horrible, dim pattern was beginning to form

from the clues that were known to him. He edged his chair closed to Jeffers’ desk as he began to speak.

“Jeffers, here’s the answer,” he stated grimly. “The isolated murders, the inexplicable madness to kill, all the rest of it, are only the trimmings of the major plan. They don’t count for the moment. But here’s the big point: somewhere behind all this is the master criminal, the man who’s handing out the dope—recruiting the underworld. He’s the spider at the center of the web that’s enmeshed the city. And, Jeffers, *there’s only one way to get him!*”

The two men looked at each other silently, and Frost felt his throat go dry, tight with the thought of death, before his next self-condemning words were spoken.

“Like a country at war,” Frost said slowly, quietly, “we need a man in the camp of the enemy—a spy! Jeffers, *I’m that man!*”

Without a word Jeffers offered his hand across the desk.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Recruit for Death’s Army

**T**HE next hour of inactivity was hell for Michael Frost. Jeffers had sent out two of his men to bring in a known stool-pigeon and drug addict, Moe the Mole, and until they sweated some information out of that human rodent, the whole plan had to hang fire.

Frost wandered about headquarters observing the activity, talking with the detectives, watching squad car after squad car dispatched to various points of the city. All that purposeful movement in contrast with Frost’s idle waiting was an annoying factor, but at last the stoolie was brought in and the private investigator joined the other detectives in Jeffers’ smoke-filled office.

“All right, Mole,” Jeffers ground out, “out with it! We hear there’s a new joint

in town where you get the happy-dust—cheap! Where is it?" The ring of hard eyes that glared at Moe seemed to draw closer and the wizened little outcast tugged at his white lips with a trembling hand while his rheumy, watering eyes jumped nervously from one face to another. "Answer!" Jeffers roared.

Moe the Mole tried twice before his quavering voice formed intelligible words. "Honest, chief, I don't know much," he whispered in a cracked, palsied tone. "The boys are talkin' about a place down on Water Street. But I ain't been there . . . honest! Some says it ain't so healthy if you can't take care of yourself with a gun or a knife. That's all I know, so help me!"

They sweated The Mole for another twenty minutes, but the terrified little bum wasn't able to add anything further except that "the scarred man" seemed to be the look-out for the drug peddlers. At last they had to let him go, and after that Frost had a long conference with Jeffers. When he strode out of the building his features were grim and lined—he knew that now he was turning his back on all organized support. He was on his own, headed for the underworld hide-out of dope-crazed killers, pitting his single strength and wits against a hundred wily human jackals.

But on the steps of headquarters Frost came to a sudden stop as little chills brought goose-flesh on his skin. Below him, on the pavement, a group of tight-lipped detectives stood silently, and in the center of that group lay a man—a shriveled, ragged form that twitched feebly on the pavement with weak convulsions. The Mole!

Frost pushed forward into the group. Moe the Mole's slowly filming eyes were gazing up at the ring of faces around him, and even in death the addict's cowardly spirit was fearful of these men of the law. Small streams of blood oozed out of the

corners of his mouth as he tried several times to speak.

"Had to . . . do it," he gasped between his contortions of pain. "They was passing . . . when I came out. Saw me . . . here. I'd rather go out this . . . way . . . than the way they'd make it!" His body shuddered violently once, then became forever still.

"Jeez!" one of the detectives beside Frost murmured. "Can you imagine what it must've been to make that spineless little water-blooded rat ram a knife into his own guts! I didn't think the sight of hell itself would give him that much nerve!"

AND as Michael Frost drove Alice's yellow car back uptown he knew with a deadly certainty that what The Mole had seen—the horrible fate that loomed over him—had been a far more frightful threat than the terrors of any imagined hell. And he knew, too, that within a short hour or two he himself would have descended into that criminal world of dementia, cruelty and lingering death. And he knew that probably, of necessity, he would have to cast in his own life, would have to die, to stop the onrushing avalanche of the underworld!

An unquestioning fatalism, a cold deadly purpose had settled on Frost's mind in the past hour. He had a single aim now, a sole objective—to gain his way to the headquarters of the Master of crime-dom. The devious reasoning behind the whole plan no longer interested him. That could come later.

Every nerve, every mental faculty of Frost's was on the alert now, steeled by the rapid-fire action of the morning and by the all-important necessity of the solitary assignment he had undertaken. And that is probably why he noticed the heavy red gasoline truck long before anyone else had seen it.

The truck had been paralleling his car

for the past dozen blocks, and when the uptown traffic came to a stop, snarled by a turning car in the block ahead, Frost found himself standing in the middle of an intersection. At that moment the red truck turned right, started to climb a long hill in the crosstown direction. But some warning sense in Frost made his attention follow that truck.

When the truck got to the middle of the hill, it stopped. And a second later the driver was swinging down from his cab—and the truck was beginning to slide backward down the hill! Frost let out a yell, but he was trapped by the cars in front and in back. He saw the driver on his left leaping from his car, and a second after Frost followed suit.

Then others began to yell, noticing the truck too, but by that time the thundering gasoline truck was racing into the intersection—it would have been too late to have escaped. With a splintering crash the ten-ton juggernaut picked up the little yellow coupe—and a split second before it had hit, the two cars that had hemmed Frost in moved quietly out of danger! It had been a deliberate trap!

Now the run-away truck was rocketing down the side street, weaving drunkenly as it mounted the sidewalk and crushed the light coupe against a building, grinding it to a twisted, formless mass as though it were a tissue-paper toy.

Frost stood in the quickly gathering crowd, cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. But it wasn't a fear-inspired perspiration at his own narrow escape. He was thinking of Alice! That coupe was hers, the yellow color was easily spotted, and a deliberate trap had been set. Could it possible be that the finger of death was pointing at her?

A moment afterward and Frost was running down the few short side streets to Alice Whitelaw's home, and as he raced his heart was pounding heavily—but not with the exertion.

And ten minutes later he knew the answer. The trap had been set for him, not Alice—because she was already gone! A police sergeant who was in charge at the Whitelaw home, interrogating the servants, said that Alice hadn't been there when he arrived, that everyone thought she had accompanied Frost.

Then the young investigator returned to his own apartment, a deadly fury burning in his heart. And he knew now that his last desperate play was for more than the lives and sanity of the city's citizens, for more than upholding the law before a criminal wave—it was a cast of the dice for everything he held dear and priceless, and if he failed . . . death would be a welcome penalty!

**D**USK was beginning to shroud Water Street, closing over it with long shadowy fingers, and the people of that ragged, furtive little world were retreating into the dilapidated slum dwellings that lined the foul street. It wasn't so healthy to be out after dark on Water Street. But the grimy thoroughfare was far from deserted—it was peopled now by the slinking forms of those who appeared only after dark. And among those derelicts, indistinguishable from the rest, was Michael Frost.

His thirty-six hour growth of beard had been darkened by a blue-black stubble; a harmless chemical made his eyes red and watery; his hands and face were dyed a grimy, sallow pallor; and the expertly padded shoulders of his wretched suit gave him a stoop-shouldered appearance that matched the weary sag of his ragged cap.

For three hours Michael Frost had shambled up and down the ten-block stretch of Water Street, searching for the scar-faced man, but so far he had had no luck. Had Moe the Mole purposely misled them? That couldn't be! It was Frost's single contact between the world

of the sane, and those who walked in living death—his only link to Alice! Doggedly he kept his vigil, the fear that shone in his nervous eyes more real than acted, and each slow minute that dragged into eternity increased the panic in Frost's mind. And then, an hour after darkness had settled, the private detective saw him.

The scar-faced man was leaning against a building, a dim light falling on his yellow features, his dead-looking eyes half closed and a cigarette hanging limply from his parted lips. Not a muscle in the man's face moved when Frost scuffed up to him, whispered his question.

"Joy-powder?" the thug repeated. "How would I know, screw?"

Frost took a long chance. "Moe the Mole," he said tonelessly.

The man with the dead eyes looked at him for long minutes, the smoke from his drooping cigarette curling slowly around his expressionless face. "Got a dollar?" he asked irrelevantly, and when Frost's grimy paw passed it over eagerly, he nodded down the street. "The Chapel of the Trimurti," he murmured. "Say 'Scarface'."

A block away a dirty electric sign announced, "TRIMURTI MISSION—The Hindu Brotherhood—ROOMS." And a moment afterward Frost was stumbling across a dingy "lobby" and up to the desk. A bearded, brown-faced man behind the desk was speaking before Frost could open his mouth.

"Sorry, brother," he said with a strange accent. "Filled up." But when Frost whispered the magic word "Scarface," the clerk's expression changed. "Never seen you; from outa town?" he asked.

"From Chi," Frost answered eagerly, almost whining. "Just blew in."

The Hindu clerk pushed a register over to him. "Sign anything," he grunted. "And gimme five bucks." Then, when he saw the incredulous expression on Frost's

face, he smirked meaningly. "You want all the fixin's that go with it, huh?" And a moment later he was taking the bill Frost had produced from the heel of his shoe, and was tossing a key on the desk. "Three flights up," he said.

Frost climbed the stairs, let himself into a dark cubbyhole that was furnished with a bed that boasted of a mattress and blanket, and a single wooden chair. He snapped on a dull, unshaded bulb, sank down on the chair to collect his thoughts. But it was almost impossible to think; the brooding, tense atmosphere of the place prevented it. He was too acutely conscious that he dwelt in a half-world of strange violence, of stalking suspicion, of insane minds directed to one all-important object—self-preservation!

**T**HEN his quiet was abruptly broken as his door unceremoniously smashed open and two hulking figures walked into the room.

"All right, get up!" one of them snapped.

For a moment Frost wondered if the end had come already, if his identity had been discovered. But then the muscles he had tensed for a sudden spring relaxed. He decided to face it out. As one of the strong-arm men took a step toward him, he came slowly to his feet, and a second later he was spun in a circle as quick hands went over his body, removing the gun from his shoulder holster.

"Hey, wait, pal," Frost wheedled. "Look—"

"No good," one of them grunted. "Guns ain't allowed. But you'll get it back when you leave; we check 'em." Then he spoke in a voice of mock solemnity. "This is a house of peace, brother."

Frost knew then that this was a regular procedure; the Hindu cult was afraid of guns in the place, afraid of the three-hundred insane minds that were housed there.

"About something else," Frost whined as the two thugs were about to leave the room. "When do I get . . . the fixin's? I can't wait all night, pal. I'm bad."

They grinned at him coldly. "The brotherhood meets in the auditorium in a few minutes," one of them said. "When the bell in the hall rings, go downstairs." Then they were gone.

Frost sank down on the chair again, for the first time realizing how alone he was, how utterly lost in this unimaginable world. And without even his gun as a temporary solace, how could he face down the alert mob that surrounded him? If it were only possible to spot the leader of the outfit, to learn a little more of the layout of the building and the system of the mob, then to go for the police, slipping away quietly. . . . But Alice, what of her? And Frost's jumbled thoughts were sent spinning by the angry clamor of a bell in the hall. The meeting! The dread convocation of The Cult of the Trimurti!

Frost pushed from his room and joined the throng of vague forms that shambled down the hall and clumped down the stairs like a troop of the dead. And as he went along with them he suddenly realized that not a single word was spoken. This army of the living dead had no more use for words; every mental faculty, every physical energy, was directed to one end—the appeasement of the dreadful yearning that seared their bodies and minds. Dope!

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Land of the Dying!*

**F**ROST noticed that the stairs they descended was not the one that led into the lobby. It was a rear stairway that led down to the cellar of the rotting wooden building, and though an army of derelicts was tramping down it now, from the street the lobby would appear quiet and deserted. And then, at the foot of the stairs, the derelicts formed a single line

that passed between a row of sharp-eyed Hindus that scrutinized every face as the men walked in.

When Frost started to walk between the column of thug guards, two hands jabbed out and gripped him on each side—and he was held until the Hindu who had admitted him to the "mission" had identified him. After that he walked into the huge gloomy cavern—the "auditorium"—and took his place with the other drifters on the long wooden benches that filled the the place, row on row.

As soon as they were all seated, lights flared up on a stage at the head of the hall, illuminating a tall masked figure that stood there. Expectantly the cadaverous faces of the audience watched him—hungry, wild-eyed, yearning faces. This must be the Master! And as silence settled over the throng, he raised his arm solemnly.

"Welcome, brethren!" his voice boomed out. "Welcome to the worship of the Trimurti, the Hindu Sacred Trinity!" One of his arms pointed to the dark curtain behind him. "Hail to Brahma, the Creator!" As he said that, a Bhudda-like figure appeared on the screen, the arms of the god stretched upward. "Hail to Vishnu, the Preserver!" And at those words a similar figure appeared on the opposite side of the curtain, this god with his arms stretched forward. And now the Master's voice rose to a booming roar. "But all Hail to Siva, the Destroyer! To him, greatest hail!" And a monstrous figure blazed out in the center of the curtain, a hideous, flame-spewing caricature of a god, two clawed hands held vengefully over his head.

At the sight of the last figure, a wave of restless nervousness rippled through the audience, a shuffling of feet and a shifting of bodies. Frost understood then that the figure of Siva was symbolic of the punishment that would be meted out to any betrayer of the drug-cult—and it

was obvious that some fearful penalty had already been exacted from delinquent members of the mission.

After that, a hidden choir of voices began to chant in the background, singing in a weird tongue, and as the singing went on the rows of men began to file, singly out of the room. One by one they reappeared through another door, and Frost knew that the dope-giving was under way. Rapidly, efficiently, the inoculation went on, and after a very short time Frost was on his feet, moving forward with his line of men. But as they approached the point of exit, he was able to swing quickly into the returning queue and thankfully take a seat.

For a time his heart beat rapidly with fear of discovery, but in the darkness he had apparently escaped detection.

As the last of the men took their seats Frost was aware of the change that had come over the mob. There was an electric tension in the air, a bursting energy, and the rumble of excited whispers, the quick turning of heads and the blaze of excited eyes showed plainly the effects of a drug-intoxicated rabble.

For a brief moment the Master appeared again on the stage. He gazed at the audience for a second, then delivered his last message.

"In keeping with the policy of the Trimurti Mission," he said tonelessly, as though repeating a speech for the hundredth time, "all members are provided with an opportunity to make a little money. If any of you wish to take advantage of this offer tonight, report to the main office before twelve. A business opportunity has come up which will pay each accepted applicant the sum of five hundred dollars for his night's work. Remember that the rates of this home are five dollars a day, in advance, and any extra 'service' exclusive of these meetings will cost five dollars additional."

He paused for a moment, his eyes

sweeping the room as he let his words sink in. "The membership of tonight's business delegation is not restricted to any number. All are welcome."

The crime wave! So this was how it was done! It was, actually a recruiting station. The derelict addicts were offered a home, all the drugs they could pay for, protection from the law—and a chance to make the money to continue their deadly habit. How devilishly perfect it was! And if half of each night's crime contingent failed to return, who was to care? No one, not even the drifters left dead or dying on the scene of the "business opportunity."

"But before you go," the Master's voice snapped like a whip over the heads of the assembled crowd, "I must once again resort to disciplinary measures. There is one among you who must feel the weight of our vengeful hand of authority."

**T**HE silence that followed those words was absolute; a dead hush as though five hundred convicted murderers awaited the dread pronouncement of the judge who would commit their souls to an everlasting hell. In the mind of each man must run that awful wonder, "Am I the one? Can it possibly be me?" And the man who stood before them allowed long moments of agony to pass before he went on. There could be but one cunning purpose in his mind—to impress ever more indelibly on the twisted wills of those lost creatures the merciless and absolute authority that held them in a crushing hand of steel.

"The cardinal rule of this brotherhood," that vicious, dead voice ground out, "is implicit obedience. Last night, while engaged in the brotherhood's business, one of you miserably failed. That man's only defence was that murder is a sinful thing. Sinful! Well, we will now let him decide whether murder—or our punishment—is the lesser evil for a man to sustain!"

The Master gave a signal with his hand, and the central portion of the curtaining back-drop rose slowly. The hideous features of Siva, the flame-spewing Destroyer, rose with the curtain, and the eyes of every man in the auditorium lifted in hypnotic fear with that face.

Behind the curtain, its bolt-studded steel face toward the audience, was a huge furnace, its massive door thrown open and showering the red, flickering light over the entire room. Beside the steel inferno stood a grotesque figure, almost shapeless in the voluminous folds of a protective asbestos suit, his inflamed eyes peering from behind the small glass shield in his helmet with a drug-crazed anticipation. With startling suddenness, a scream ripped through the fear-tight silence—a girl's scream! And at that moment a young body, clad only in a silk negligée, was thrown onto the stage at the executioner's feet. She lay there dazed for a split second, then tried to push herself erect, but the asbestos-clad figure had stepped forward as she fell, and now his arms were under her shoulders and legs as he swept her to his chest. She was screaming again—a g o n i z e d, pitiful screams of absolute terror—struggling violently, futilely in the arms of her captor. And a man's yelling voice could be heard then, a man of the audience who had beaten down his drug-paralyzed mind and body and who raced down the aisle toward the stage.

"Helen! Helen!" he shouted. "I'm coming, dear!"

But as he got to the stage, one of the hidden guards leaped at him, brought his gun down on the man's head with killing force as the two of them collided and went to the floor in a twisting heap. But it was the raging, howling rescuer who got to his feet first, who staggered onto the stage on rubbery, half-conscious legs and lurched forward toward the writhing, twisting girl.

Frost would never forget the grim setting of that tragedy—the sneering form of the Master standing imperturbably at one side; the desperate features of the lone young rescuer whose love was greater than fear, who must have been a new recruit for this underworld of outcasts; the asbestos-garbed monster who held the struggling young form in his arms; and the roaring mouth of the furnace that gaped for its prey like a living thing. And then it happened! No one had noticed the gun that the executioner held in his right hand, but as the young man hurled himself forward in a desperate, fearless effort, the arm of the executioner that was partly hidden under the girl's shoulders suddenly straightened, held firm for an instant, then belched roaring flame. The young man's shout of triumph was cut off abruptly, his tensed body became slack in mid-air, and then he was dropping to the stage in a crumpled, loose heap.

The executioner turned stiffly to face the furnace door, then, with jerky, mechanical strides he *walked directly into the middle of that all-consuming hell!* The girl's ever-increasing screeches choked suddenly off as the man carried her over the furnace threshold.

Before the asbestos-covered man could reappear, the curtain was slowly dropped to blot out the scene, and the white, open-mouthed faces of the spectators could see only the ghastly face of Siva, the God of Awful Destruction.

**I**N the breathless seconds that followed, Frost wondered dazedly whether that grotesque executioner could survive in the withering heat of the furnace, his fire-repellent suit beating off the flames for a few moments, or whether he, too, was a dope-befuddled victim walking to his unsuspected death, willingly sacrificed by the Master to instill fear in the animal minds of his creatures.

Then, in the avid faces around him,

Frost became aware now of another purpose behind the Master's gruesome spectacle. After the lesson of obedience had been given to the drifters and the victim had been made known, the sub-normal, cruel minds of these dregs and sweepings of crimedom were inflamed with the sight of deliberate, merciless destruction, with kill-lust and the avid love of pain for pain's sake. It was preparatory to their evening's work!

Presently, then, they were filing out of the auditorium. But now the steps of the members no longer dragged, their eyes were no longer dead and a rumble of excited conversation buzzed electrically among them. At times quick voices would snarl above the others, fists would flash out as two animals went for each other with teeth, feet and nails. But the ever-present guards would be quickly among them, smashing them unconscious and kicking them aside.

And now Frost knew why no guns or knives were allowed!

Behind him Frost heard a quick, piping voice whispering to a partner. "I got it straight from one of the guards," the voice insisted. "The job tonight is Loring's, that jewelry and silver shop on Fifth. It'll be a push-over, a breeze! I'm on. But no more of that bank stuff for me. Takes too long!"

As they walked up the stairs again Frost was conscious for the first time of the stench of the men around him. Their bodies had a decaying odor as though they were decomposing in physical structure just as their brains were already crumbling with drug-rot.

The involved workings of this embryonic crime empire were slowly becoming clear to Frost. His next two important objectives, he knew, were: Who is the identity behind the Master's mask? And, where is Alice being held a prisoner? That last terrifying question was the one that made his pulses pound. What hor-

rible indignities were they inflicting on her now? Was she still alive?

It was the agonizing pain of those last questions that made Frost start stupidly, uncomprehending, when he pushed open the door of his room. A cold-eyed Hindu was standing directly in front of him, his eyes bitter and cruel. The gun he held was trained directly on Frost's stomach, unwaveringly.

"Hello, copper!" he spat out. "Come right in!"

Michael Frost heard the door slam and he started to twist around to see who was behind him. But he never completed that action. A heavy weapon smashed down on the back of his head and he lost consciousness almost instantly. He never remembered hitting the floor.

CONSCIOUSNESS seemed to be a long time returning to Frost. He was aware only of a borderland reality and a great pain, but suddenly memory of past events came to him and his eyes snapped open, fully awake, the agony in his body forgotten.

He found his body crumpled against the wall of a room, unbound, and directly before him a grey-haired man was bending over a long table. The table was filled with all kinds of chemical apparatus—Bunsen burner; retorts; racks for test tubes; bottles of powders and liquids; an asbestos oven; a centrifugal machine; strange appliances unknown to Frost—and when the old man raised his head, Frost recognized him. It was Whitelaw!

The chemist heard Frost's gasp, looked over at him in a disinterested way, and no slightest sign of recognition came to his face! Then he had been, after all, the one behind the whole dreadful scheme. And his own niece was in the hands of the killers! But Frost remembered suddenly—his disguise. Of course Whitelaw hadn't known him! He made himself known immediately and the two men

exchanged excited greetings, greetings that were interrupted by a girl's voice from back in the shadows. It was Alice!

Anger ran through Frost when he saw her there, seated in a chair, with her wrists chained to rings in the wall behind her. But so far she seemed to be unhurt—if that could mean anything in this house of madness where death, or worse, could come in a second's time.

"I didn't know it was you, Mike," her voice came to him dimly. "But thank God you're all right!"

"Yes," Whitelaw said bitterly, "still all right, like the rest of us—until they're through! Until we've done what they want us to!"

"And who's the head man?" Frost asked. "The Master?"

Whitelaw shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't seen anyone but hired thugs since they brought me here," he said. "Brought me here to make their dope! And when I refused at first, they picked up Alice, used her as a threat over me."

The sudden rattle of a key in the lock interrupted them. The door swung open and a man entered. As he bowed mockingly to them the door was closed, relocked. It was the Master!

"Greetings, brethren," he smiled. "How's Moe the Mole?" he asked Frost. "The one who recommended you—is he still at headquarters?"

"Caldwell!" Whitelaw gasped. "Harrison Caldwell; I'd know you anywhere! So you're the one behind all this!"

A brief annoyance passed over the face, but then he tore off the small mask he wore and tossed it aside. "Yes, Caldwell," he said, "who was forced to close his hospital. But minus his white beard and with his hair dyed black. It doesn't matter if you know now—after it's too late." His eyes traveled slowly over each one of them, remained on Alice for a long time.

"Furthermore," he went on presently,

"since both you men will accompany us on a little trip tonight—and will remain behind, dead, victims of police bullets—there are a few other things you ought to know. It makes a most unusual story. Instead of answering a lot of silly questions, I'll tell the whole thing through from the beginning." He dragged a chair out from one of the corners and sat down, the gun he had carried when he entered conveniently placed in his side pocket.

"The whole thing starts about five years ago." Caldwell said. "At that time I needed money badly. My hospital was prosperous enough, but I had lost heavily on the stock market and I was up to my neck with personal debts. So I devised a novel scheme to get money quickly—I bought up this bankrupt mission, hired a dozen Hindu thugs to give it atmosphere and started a narcotics joint for the underworld.

"It was really quite simple. By falsifying my records at the hospital I was able to get great quantities of dope that cost me practically nothing. That dope had been bought legally. And in that way I pulled myself out of the financial jam I was in; but when I found myself on my feet again, I decided the mission was too good a thing to lose. I determined to continue it, expand it even."

The doctor was looking at Alice as he talked, ignoring the other listeners, and there was a certain note of vanity in his voice as he went on. This was his big moment.

"It was obvious that my richest field lay up in the higher social brackets, and after a lot of patient scheming I lured a popular debutante into my confidence—the thrill-crazy Marcia Gould. After a few months she was a confirmed user, completely in my power, and I forced her to bring in other socialites. She brought in two new girls, others were on the way, and I saw myself with an assured income

—a tremendous one—and with the possibilities of extortion and blackmail always open to me.”

His eyes left Alice for a moment to fall on her uncle. “But Whitelaw himself changed all that. We were friends, and during the course of our frequent chats he mentioned the new experiment he was about to conclude—the development of a brand new drug through organic chemistry! And Whitelaw said it would be worthless from a financial angle! Of course it would, if the formula were handed over to the authorities to become contraband on the market. You see, it was proven useless clinically because, though it could be diluted as ordinary hospital narcotics from the standpoint of strength, its effect was just as pronounced in small quantities. It did not merely alleviate pain—it produced more fanciful hallucinations than any known drug. And it became habit-forming from the very first dose! But suppose the underworld had such a formula! A potent narcotic that could be compounded quickly and cheaply from common chemicals!” Caldwell leaned back and laughed at the thought of the riches his victory would bring him.

“I determined to get that formula,” Caldwell went on. “So by pumping the unsuspecting Whitelaw, I had a pretty good idea as to what it was. But when I tried to compound it myself, then experimented with the drug I had produced, I found that it did increase the user’s happiness, but that it also released his murderous passions and shortly resulted in his death. My only recourse then was to get the very formula that Whitelaw had produced—mine was obviously useless.”

**C**ALDWELL lighted a cigarette, silently relished his success before he resumed. “It was when Whitelaw told me that his co-worker in the experiments needed an operation that I saw both the

way to get the formula, and the method.

“I had the man Raymond brought to my hospital, had an operation scheduled. Then, on the morning of the operation, I sent one of my Hindu aides to the doctor as a patient. That man gave the surgeon a cigarette that was impregnated with the kill-maddening dope—my discovery. And twenty minutes later, in the operating room, the drug . . . worked. Thus I saw my murder done for me by a man who subsequently died himself. And to heighten the mystery a bit, I released a bat in the amphitheater—but I will tell you more of the reasons why in a moment.

“With Raymond out of the way, I had Whitelaw picked up—and then the priceless formula was isolated in my hands, and Whitelaw would manufacture the drug for me until I had mastered the technique. But, as I said a moment ago, my plans were changed with the acquisition of this new cheap drug, so I had Marcia Gould and the other two girls picked up and . . . er . . . destroyed. After that, between me and the complete overlordship of all dope selling in the underworld remained only one person who could conceivably link me with the crime—Alice Whitelaw’s maiden aunt. Whitelaw might have told her of the nature of his discovery—no one else knew, of that I was sure.

“So, through the old woman’s doctor, her death was arranged. It so happened that Bandy interfered, was about to make the crime known before we were ready, so he too had to be dispatched. Of course, Frost’s presence there was unknown to me. After that, the stage was set.

“And I might as well tell you that as soon as I saw the power of my unlimited drugs gave me, I decided not only to control the entire narcotics market, but to be the master of crimedom, of the whole underworld itself!”

There was a manical glitter in the man’s eyes as he spoke of this, and Frost knew

that an earlier suspicion of his was confirmed—the doctor was a confirmed drug addict himself! The use of drugs over a long period of years had finally snapped his mind, and a wily, insane Napoleon-complex was the result.

"Last night I emptied the vaults of the First National Bank; tonight the most famous jewelry store in the world will be cleaned out. Tomorrow night—who knows? But in a few months time every city in the land will be under my dominion! My fighters are the maddest, craziest soldiers in the world, and their number is unlimited!" Caldwell was breathing hard with the grandiose dreams he was having.

"And that's about all," he ended. "Except for the bats. Well, it seems obvious to me that my whole plan centered about the underworld. Naturally, then, any deliberate clues must be used to throw the police off the track. You will notice that all three debutantes were so marked; the police would center on the upper strata. Also, the murder in the hospital was associated with a bat. In no one of those murders was I directly involved, and all of them were far from the actual center of the whole plan. They confused the issue beautifully."

A rumbling noise came from the rear of the building, interrupting Caldwell. After a moment's puzzlement, he smiled with relief as he remembered what it was, turned to his prisoners and explained.

"The brethren are gathering in the auditorium for a last 'shot' before we distribute arms and set out on the evening's business. And that reminds me that I have to give them some orders before they leave." He rapped sharply on the door for his bodyguard to open it. "We'll be downstairs about fifteen minutes; when we return you two men will be ready to accompany us. Miss Whitelaw can keep house for us while we are gone, just as she always will—for me!"

The door clicked open then, and he was gone.

WHEN they were alone, Whitelaw's head fell forward on his arms, a tortured groan coming from his chest. In the background Frost could hear Alice sobbing as she fought unsuccessfully to maintain her control. But all the time Caldwell had been talking the detective had been desperately planning an escape. He had carefully noticed the thickness of the single door to the room—it was unbreakable. The sole window was heavily barred and tight shut. It had been a grimly humorous thought that had given him his wild idea for escape: "Hell, even the air in here is a prison!" Then he had it.

Now he dragged himself to his feet, saw Whitelaw's head come up in sudden hope as he looked at Frost.

"Whitelaw!" Frost gritted urgently. "How much alcohol have you got there?"

"About a gallon," the old man said wonderingly.

And after that the plan went into effect. A large flat piece of tin was slanted into the crack under the door, guards erected on each side, and then the alcohol was poured in a slow stream onto the tin plate. As they stood tensely waiting for the bottle to empty, they could hear the volatile liquid seeping along the hallway.

Next, Frost took the Bunsen burner, lighted it, and brought the searing blue flame against the plaster that surrounded the chain-bolts of Alice's shackles. After a few minutes the plaster blackened, cracked, and with the strength of both Frost and Whitelaw heaving against them, they tore loose from the wall.

A second later Frost had flipped a lighted match under the crack of the door and a booming conflagration leaped into life. The hallway outside, swept by the house's ventilation, was growing rapidly to a roaring inferno as the ancient wooden

structure caught like tinder. All they could do in their prison, now, was to sit and wait. Frost was betting on the lack of air currents in their room to keep the outside fire away from them long enough for the fire department to arrive on the scene, and he was betting a lot on it, too: his life, an old man's life—and Alice's!

Soon, from the auditorium beneath them, they could hear a confused shouting, wild screams, trampling feet. Would the fire department get there in time? Already the woodwork that bordered the hall was beginning to crack, blister with the tremendously high temperature, and the room itself was a searing oven. Yet to open the window would be inviting disaster.

And then, plain to the ears of all of them, came the welcome clamor of the engines in the distance. They shouted with relief, and Alice threw herself in Frost's arms. They were standing so

when the apparatus arrived, when a steel cable was attached to one of the trucks, wound through the bars on their window, and the whole contraption pulled from the side of the building, when a grinning fireman's head was framed in the shattered window.

And outside were a half dozen riot cars, three patrol cars—and a beaming detective-inspector, looking at his array of prisoners.

"Frost!" Jeffers shouted as he clapped Michael on the back. "We've been waiting all night for a small earthquake to hit this part of town. We didn't know where you were, but we knew we'd find you when the trouble started! Great work, fella, this'll be. . ."

And then he stopped, laughed sheepishly. Michael Frost hadn't been listening to a word he said. He was too busy whispering to someone else—and holding that girl in his arms.

THE END

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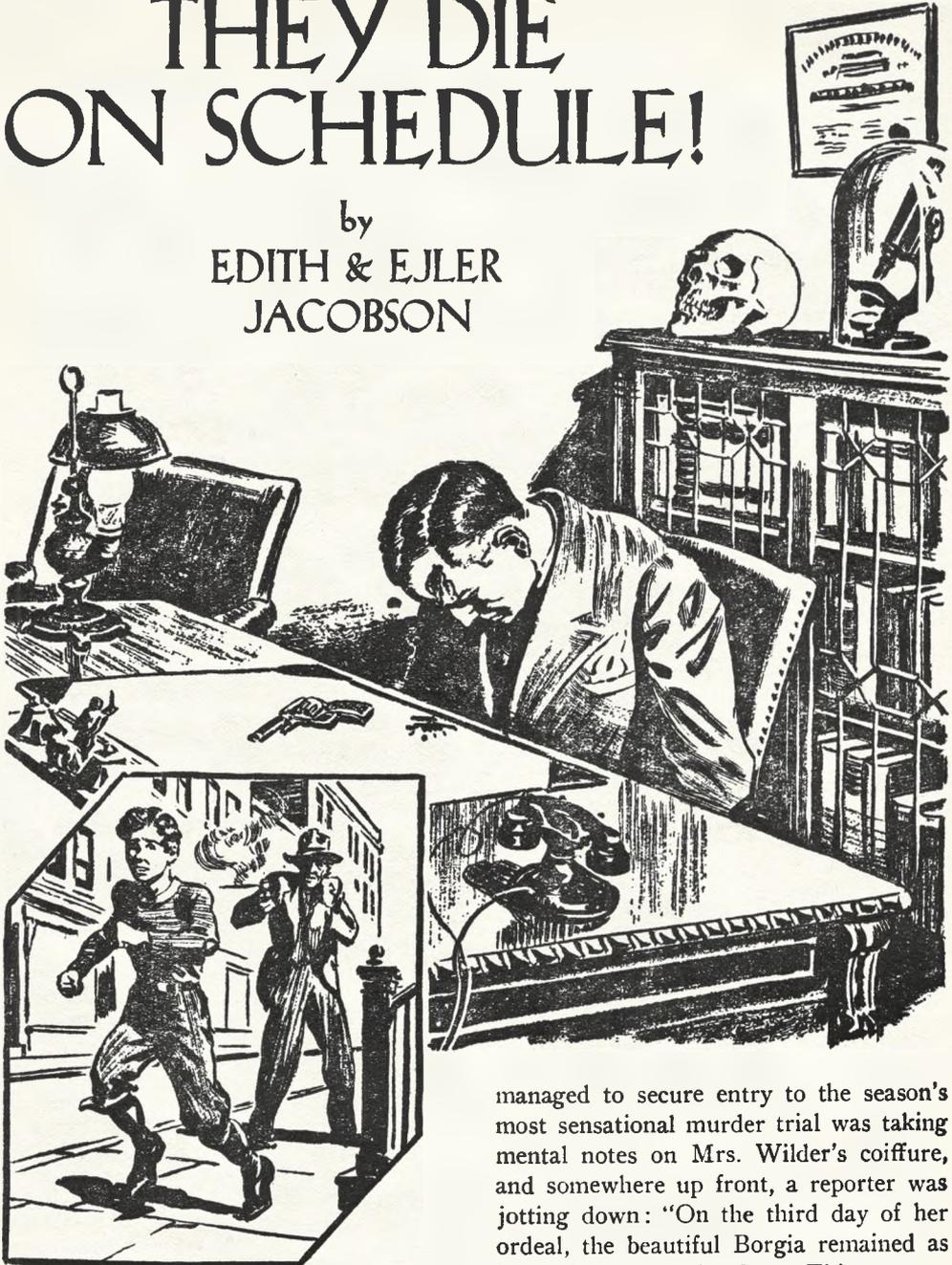


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# THEY DIE ON SCHEDULE!

by  
EDITH & EJLER  
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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Frozen-faced Borgia

**I**T was hot in the courtroom, but it was hotter outside. In the back, two attendants were laying bets on Virginia Wilder's chances of acquittal. Every one of the fifty-eight women who had

managed to secure entry to the season's most sensational murder trial was taking mental notes on Mrs. Wilder's coiffure, and somewhere up front, a reporter was jotting down: "On the third day of her ordeal, the beautiful Borgia remained as impassive as on the first. This woman, against whom the state has built an airtight case for the murder of her husband, young Doctor Grant Wilder, sits beside her lawyer as calmly as though she were at a tea for the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Clinton Hospital . . ."

She was more looked-at than a visiting cinema star, more talked-of than Hitler.

She had received enough fan mail, free advice, and crank threats to fill a cell the size of the one she occupied. There was only one thing about her on which all the world agreed: She must be smart; she could keep her mouth shut.

All the world, with one exception; a tall, blond young man in a suit of navy gabardine who was admitted to the courtroom after all others had been turned away.

She's a fool, Nathaniel Perry decided. Even if she's guilty, she's a fool. With a face like that, almost any alibi might have been meat for a lawyer like Arnold Ruppee. . . . He looked at the woman on trial. She was silent and grave and young, and before the curious transformation that comes over persons accused of grave crimes, she might have been beautiful. Beautiful in an almost professional way, and rather sweet. That, of course, didn't have to preclude murder.

Mrs. Wilder had given the press the worst possible impression. She had given her lawyer no impression at all, except that she seemed to trust him to defend her. Yet, two weeks ago, Ruppee had offered Perry five thousand dollars to unearth any data that might support a reasonable defense for his client.

Guilty? The police had virtually proven it, and she hadn't contradicted them. But Ruppee didn't take hopeless cases, and he had never lost a client, so far, to the chair. Ruppee must have seen some path to freedom for his client; five thousand is a lot to throw away on a futile gesture.

Nat Perry, through having worked with the police, respected their final opinions. His foster-father, plainclothes Inspector Harry O'Connor of Homicide, had helped pile up incriminating evidence in the Wilder case. And now, as Nat leaned against the wall in that hot little chamber of justice, listening to testimony he had already heard, his thoughts drifted

to the man who had brought him up. It would take a lot more than five thousand dollars to make him oppose Harry O'Connor.

O'CONNOR had saved Nat Perry's life at their first meeting, years ago. He had given an orphaned kid an example of nerve and stamina and morale that made him grow up into one of the shrewdest private detectives in New York. Harry was sixty now, not the man he'd been, and sometimes he managed to get his work done only because Nathaniel Perry covered up for him unfailingly.

That was the debt of a lifetime, and the desire to pay it was Perry's reason for sticking to a career more perilous to him than to any man alive. His life was risked every time he took a case. The simplest violence might finish him—he was a haemophiliac. His blood was unable to congeal at even slight breaks in the skin. No, Nat Perry wasn't throwing his life away merely to substantiate the department's contention that Mrs. Wilder was guilty of murder.

Perry's wandering stare caught a return glance from Mrs. Wilder. She looked unseeingly at him, and then turned. The newspapers, because she'd given them no other peg for a soubriquet, had dubbed her the "Frozen-faced Borgia." But that frozen look made Nat Perry vaguely uneasy. It was definitely unpleasant to think of any woman going to the chair, especially as young a woman as Mrs. Wilder. He had already decided she was not too bright. It was barely possible she could have another reason for her silence.

The more Nat thought of it, the worse he felt. Police investigation had hinted at no accomplice, but there mightn't be an accomplice. Besides, that was the only human explanation to someone who knew how silent she really was. Ruppee must have guessed at something like that.

He looked up expectantly as a new defense witness was called. The look of worry deepened on his face, and his hands clenched at his sides as he stared at the short, shabby Negro with defective teeth who answered to the call for Johnson Tolliver.

The man was sick, but it wasn't his sickness that brought an ominous silence into the packed courtroom. His wide white rolling eyes had an unseeing terror that made Perry think with startled intuition of death and that fear which is stronger than death. A fear so strong it forced a dying man to stalk into a courtroom to testify—as though he were the victim of Voodoo, come back from a century-old grave to tell a story he had been bewitched into telling.

No one ever heard what Johnson Tolliver was about to say. The little Negro's arm was raised solemnly over the Book, and his lips were parted to repeat an oath, when the invisible thunderbolt struck.

Suddenly, before a silent, shocked courtroom, the Negro's face went the color of grey ash, and his features screwed into a mask of pain. His left hand clutched his abdomen, but that solemn right arm, the arm he had raised to bear witness, stiffened in mid-air, rigid as in catalepsy.

A silent eternity was compressed into a second—and then the silence splintered as Ruppee's witness screamed wordlessly to the invisible power which had stricken him.

Before anyone had time to move toward the fallen man, another shriek echoed again and again through the courtroom, the shriek of a woman.

**I**T was the Frozen-faced Borgia, breaking her silence at last. Over the heads of the confused attendants, Perry could see her. She wasn't human—she was a fury. It was as though she knew what had died on the witness stand, as though

she had seen all faith, all ideals, withered by a blow from nowhere, and known herself a helpless party to the destruction.

Ruppee was trying frantically to calm her. No one helped. They were no longer citizen-spectators, those people in the court—they were a terrified herd, stampeding away from a brutal miracle.

Perry shouldered his way toward the defense block. He felt that Ruppee needed him. His own mind was as terror-gripped, for the time being, as everyone else's, but some vestige of normalcy reminded him that black magic is impossible. Normalcy gripped him more completely, when he reached Arnold Ruppee.

"Do you see now?" the pudgy little lawyer yelled over the chaotic din. "Not you nor anyone else believed my client innocent. You all had her convicted and condemned before she ever came to trial!" He whirled like a dervish toward the bench, where Judge Ferris was rapping vainly for order. "Johnson Tolliver's testimony alone would have freed my client. I demand a postponement until this murder is investigated!" He turned toward Perry, and his voice dropped. "And in case the police bungle this investigation as they bungled the last, my offer to you still stands."

It was too violent, too unheard-of, Perry thought. Sharply, he realized that if he took the case now, he might be called on to solve a black miracle single-handed. He might face alone this grisly thunderbolt which had turned a roomful of people into terror-stricken beasts. . . . He wrenched away from Ruppee's grasp. He had to look at Johnson Tolliver. There'll be a reasonableness to it, he felt, an explanation; something a man can understand who's seen death in all its recognizable shapes.

The corpse was ugly. Even in death, the right arm was as incredibly stiff and disjointed as a log attached to a man. A phrase leapt into his head, the only phrase

that tallied with that sight. Blasted by lightning. And that was no explanation at all.

The one man who could have saved Virginia Wilder from death, according to Ruppee. . . . Was she *fated* to die? His eyes followed her as she was led from the courtroom to her cell. Turning, he found Ruppee's anxious face close to his own.

He tried to keep his voice cool. "Nice show, Ruppee," he said. He succeeded better than he expected.

The defense lawyer's eyes grew horrified, and once more Perry found his arm gripped tightly. "Show? You mean I—Perry, you're crazy!"

Maybe that was true—Ruppee looked saner than any other man in the vicinity. There was a surprising strength in the pudgy lawyer's manicured fingers, and a surprising lack of emotional upset in the grey intellectual eyes that alone saved his face from grossness. He looked exactly what he was: an attorney who has met his first break in a desperate case, the first incident that might conceivably sway public opinion the other way regarding his client.

"You can't help but understand what this means, Mr. Perry," he continued, more calmly, almost triumphantly. "Virginia Wilder was framed, and we're trying the wrong party. I can get her an acquittal on what we have now. But I want more than that. I want justice. For the last time, will you help us?"

Nat suddenly wanted to say *yes*—but he knew he was feeling more than he was thinking, that he was still infected with a trace of that rabid mass hysteria which hung like a tangible substance over the courtroom.

"Wait until I'm satisfied that what Johnson Tolliver had to say was important," he said slowly, "and until I've spoken to Virginia Wilder. After that—maybe."

The anxiety faded from the lawyer's plump face, and Perry saw beneath it the profound relief of a harried man. "Come with me," he said. "I think we can see her immediately."

**T**HE State's case against her was strong and simple. She had sent for help at four in the morning, and when the police arrived they found her husband dead. The amount of strychnine in his stomach must have been administered four hours previous, or at midnight, to kill when it did—and there had been no one in the Wilder home but Dr. Wilder and his wife. How could a shabby Negro have broken that case?

She was small-boned, delicate, and the most striking thing about her wan, sweet face and her low, quiet voice was fatigue. As though some tremendous burden had fallen at last from her shoulders, Perry thought, and she was finally free to think how weary she was. She apologized to both men for having made a scene in the courtroom.

"It was a ghastly sight. You couldn't help it," Perry said.

She shook her head, and answered with quiet abruptness, "That wasn't it. You see, Grant died like that, exactly like that, on the morning of April tenth."

Ruppee sat down heavily, his mouth wide open, staring at Virginia Wilder in the thin light of the cell block. The Frozen-faced Borgia was breaking her silence. Now she looked neither frozen nor sinister. She looked haggard and troubled. "Until now, it hasn't seemed to matter," she went on. "Nothing seemed to matter after that night when Grant came home to die. I didn't realize then that an innocent man might die because I had stopped caring enough to tell what I knew."

Was it her silence that had killed Johnson Tolliver? Silence on what? "Did you know the witness?" Perry asked.

She nodded. "He was a cab driver who had the stand in front of our home. He drove Grant away that night, and brought him home again at half-past two in the morning. Grant—was very ill. He died soon after. . . . I don't know how Mr. Ruppee found out. It wasn't I who told him."

Ruppee had been right. Tolliver's testimony would have cleared Virginia Wilder. The State's whole case rested on the fact that Grant Wilder had been home alone with his wife the night he died!

Ruppee hopped to his feet, looking like a huge ground bird. "Virginia! Where was your husband that night?"

A deep flush came into her cheeks, spread slowly over her face and throat. Her voice grew very hushed. "I didn't tell you before, because I didn't think I could be convicted of something I hadn't done. I loved Grant too much—I was too proud—to desecrate his memory if I didn't have to. He was with Peggy Anderson, his nurse. I lost everything but that memory—long before he died. But if I'd known another innocent life would be taken, I'd have told."

Ruppee said, with a brusqueness that barely concealed a note of triumph, "You couldn't have saved Johnson Tolliver. I'd have had to call him as a witness in any event. The world, Mrs. Wilder," Ruppee grew oratorical, "does not accept any person's unsupported testimony without corroboration, not even the word of an innocent woman like yourself. . . . Mr. Perry, what are you going to do now?"

Perry said, "I'm taking a stab at that corroboration. Where does this Peggy Anderson live?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Death's Perfect Timing*

**N**AT went out into the June sunshine with a sense of startlement greater than he usually felt at the beginning of

a case. His own susceptibility had in times past rendered him utterly ruthless with the underworld. In spite of his handicap, he was expert at equalizing the risks between himself and his enemies, yet he felt now that all his old defenses were useless in this particular case. That morbid sense of superhuman intervention he had felt in the courtroom had not died with his excitement. It remained, and grew stronger.

He tried to put it out of his head as he nosed his green sedan steadily through morning traffic, but it couldn't be done. He could think of other things, but only with thought processes. There was something inexplicable about Johnson Tolliver's death, something no amount of cool reasoning could clear up. It was that desperate compulsion which had made the Negro drag himself into court to testify—and to die.

The timing of that death! What earthly agent could have stricken a man down at the last possible moment? Was it some dark unseen power that Johnson Tolliver had defied? And if Grant Wilder had died in the same manner, as his widow said he had, had his death been timed also?

Timed to involve his widow in a skein of murder-guilt?

It wasn't possible. Grant Wilder had died of strychnine poisoning, and no chemist can predict the efficacy of strychnine to the split-second.

He was still groping for a credible solution when he pulled up in front of a cream-and-red facade on Charles Street, in Greenwich Village. It was almost unbearably warm, with the sun reaching its zenith, but there was an instinctive premonitory chill inside Nat Perry. He looked about. There were few people in sight. A small Italian boy with scuffed shoes and enormous brown eyes asked solemnly, "Watch your car, mister?"

"Sure." He gave the boy a dollar. He

didn't know what he expected, and that was the worst of it, because he knew he could expect something. "Don't stand too near it, and don't let anybody see you watching. If you see anyone trying to monkey around, run for the cops. Understand?" The boy nodded, wide-eyed, and Perry entered the flashy-fronted building.

A thin girl with a white face under pale flaxen hair answered his ring at the third floor rear apartment. She wore a blue silk bathrobe, and she plucked nervously at the folds of it with her left hand, as a dope addict might fidget. Traces of unremoved cosmetic outlined her sharp mouth, looking ghastly in the daylight that filtered through the hall.

"Yes," she said too quickly, "I'm Peggy Anderson." Then she looked at him with an odd combination of terror and pleading, as though she were trying to determine whether he were wolf or shepherd. There was youth under the nerves and the stale lipstick, youth gone haywire and terror-silly as only youth can go. She was twenty at the outside. She was nothing a man in his senses would have preferred to beautiful Virginia Wilder.

But something else about her struck Nat. She was helplessly desperate as a puppet revolting against a puppet-master. Her terror had an un-human quality that made him think of Johnson Tolliver.

Was she afraid of the same thing? Was it visible, was it behind that half-closed door? "I'm a friend of Mrs. Grant Wilder's," he said, as gently as possible. "I want to talk to you. She doesn't mean you any harm."

The gentleness wasn't enough. "No!" the girl exclaimed. "You can't come in—you don't belong here!" Her hand dropped the loose edges of her bathrobe, and darted toward the door. It was a clumsy gesture, with no strength in it, and with comparative minute effort, Perry shoved his way in.

It was a neat little room, with a college banner across the wall above a studio couch, and reprints of good etchings on either side of a maple bureau. There was no sun, but the room could have borne the scrutiny of sunlight. It looked not at all the kind of room where a drunken party-girl would have entertained a drunken philanderer.

He asked. "Was Grant Wilder here the night he died?"

The girl had looked jittery. Now she became utterly panic-stricken. Her voice rose, as though to convince some unseen audience, and she cried out, "He was, he was! And I'm not sorry! He loved me, see! He came here—"

She didn't finish, and Perry saw why she was using that clumsy left hand to hold her robe. A certain stiffness came to her thin immature body, and she jerked like a marionette on strings. Her mouth opened, as though to emit a scream, but the scream was never uttered. One hand clenched at her waist, and she doubled up on it in ghastly pain—but the whole right arm hung like a length of stone from her paralyzed shoulder. She staggered toward him, her face writhing in torment. He caught her as she fell.

When Perry felt for her heart-beat, he found nothing. She was dead. Dead, with the same look of torture on her face that had been on the face of Johnson Tolliver. Dead, with the testimony Johnson Tolliver hadn't had time to utter stifled on her parted lips.

There was a phone in the hall, and in a voice that sounded cool enough to be someone else's, Perry heard himself summoning Homicide.

**H**ARRY O'CONNOR'S eyes narrowed into hard blue slits. "If you were anyone else on God's earth," he said ponderously, "I'd say you were deliberately pulling something pretty bad. Do you think we're trying to convict Mrs.

Wilder for the fun of it? I don't know what she told you, but she didn't tell it to us when we were willing to give her a break.

"She wouldn't do it because she couldn't have told a trained cop a thing that would hold. She waited for a sap like you to come along—"

"Pop!" O'Connor had come into a room where invisible death had taken another witness, and the sight only made the old man more furious.

"—a sap like you," the plainclothesman continued implacably, "who'd run riot for sentiment. But you're not the only sap. Ruppee got your client free on bail. A very high-powered bag of wind, Ruppee. As for that business in the court, there isn't a trick Ruppee wouldn't pull."

Perry's face went as hard as his foster-father's. It had to. There was too much going on inside him. It wasn't what O'Connor thought—that was understandable. O'Connor hadn't heard Virginia Wilder's story. It was the way the man felt.

"Give it up," O'Connor said more softly. "Nat, this isn't your kind of game. You've got half the crooks in town scared stiff of you. They call you the Bleeder—and they don't call it out loud. But the man who roped you into this belongs to the other half. He'll want you either on his side, or—dead!"

"At least," Perry answered, "I'm giving Mrs. Wilder the benefit of the doubt until she's proven guilty. That happens to be the law, but maybe you don't remember the law."

The two men exchanged stares, not in enmity, but in fright. The fright showed on O'Connor's face, and not on Perry's—but Perry felt it. And he knew that O'Connor's fear was for the man some called the Bleeder. As he turned to go, he knew O'Connor had said one undeniably true thing: he wasn't fighting an

ordinary crook. The Bleeder had established enough of a reputation for deadliness to guarantee him a modicum of immunity where he was known. But this was different.

This time, he didn't even know from what he needed to be immune. He didn't know who was checkmating him, and more important, he didn't know how it was being done.

What had frightened the Anderson girl? Justice? But she had protested passionately that Wilder was with her on that fatal night, and if she read the papers, she must have known that would put her right in Mrs. Wilder's spot, removed only by hours from trial for first degree murder. Would she have felt safer in a spot like that—than where she was?

Because she would have been safer—and he was almost sure she had been lying.

Not his game? Not by a long sight. It didn't look like any lone man's game. But what he hadn't bothered to tell O'Connor, what the other man knew already, what had brought the fear into O'Connor's eyes and into Perry's heart, was that he couldn't give up now. He was in it up to the neck. Peggy Anderson's death proved that the killer knew he was working for Virginia Wilder. If Johnson Tolliver had been timed to die, and Peggy Anderson, then it was within the realm of possibility that somewhere, someone was making a memento of the Bleeder's name on the second hand of an incomprehensible clock.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Mrs. Wilder's Corpse-Guest

THE street was still innocent of people, even of the boy he had engaged to watch his car. Perry's eyes scanned the pavements, and on the diagonal corner, located a small wide-eyed figure, frantically waving him back.

He retreated into the doorway, one hand feeling toward his gun. He didn't understand now, yet he knew there would be trouble. The kid, having assured himself that his temporary employer was standing still for the time being, darted down the block toward Seventh Avenue.

The next ten seconds went livid, as though illuminated with hell-fire. It had barely penetrated Perry's mind that the child was running toward a strolling patrolman a block ahead, when something like a war broke out immediately to the west. A gun crashed, and the pavement erupted into little scars.

Five paces from where he had started, the small Italian child dropped suddenly and horribly. The shooting stopped, and then Perry knew why the child had waited for him to emerge before running for the police.

After that shocking reveille of gunfire, Charles Street woke from its noon siesta to a rocking blast of sound. For almost a minute, fragments of Perry's green sedan continued to drop into the gutter. There had been an explosive under the car—placed there by someone who had foreseen the exact second of Perry's exit.

There was a red haze in his brain, and the vague shape of a certain realization in it. His mind flashed back to the loud, almost shouted protest of the Anderson girl, just before she died, and in that remembered echo, a number of things became clearer.

Another figure took dark shape, far up the block, on the shaded side of Charles Street, emerging from a delivery entrance. A man with a gun. This was understandable language at last, Perry thought savagely. He leapt into the street, started after the killer. His automatic was poised when something about the fleeing figure forced a sharp hoarse cry back into his throat and kept him from firing.

The killer's right arm was swinging like a pendulum at his side, stiff, jointless.

At the corner of Charles and Bleeker Streets, Perry's hand reached out to grasp a paralyzed shoulder. The swift moment of reckless rage was dead in him. He was facing — not the puppet-master, but another of his puppets.

PEOPLE were coming down the street, outraged people who from their windows had seen the child killed. The thin elderly man, hollow-chested under his worn respectable suit, struggled feebly in Perry's grasp as he gaped at them. "You've got to let me go," he whispered. "I didn't—any jury would acquit me! But I'll die if I don't get back to him—"

There was a cold certainty inside Perry that the man was telling the truth. Once, this oldster might have belonged to the same order of beings as those people who approached him with hot hatred in their eyes. Once, he might have been subject to judgment by their laws. But that time was gone. He was the maimed projection of another will, outraging the earth he walked on. He had the stamp of terror in his ashen face, the same terror that had marked Johnson Tolliver and Peggy Anderson.

They were dead, but this man was alive. He was Perry's only link to justice in the case of Virginia Wilder.

The crowd was thickening, but the patrolman had arrived, his eyes round and shocked. He recognized Perry, nodded curtly, and then tried to stem the mob from the detective and his captive.

"Please, please!" the man whimpered. "He'll kill me if I don't report to him—he could kill me a thousand miles away. I didn't want to hurt you. I'm not the one . . ."

"Who is he?" Perry asked. "What has he done to your arm?"

"I don't know! I don't know how he did it—" the frightened voice broke off, and for a moment, Perry thought the man was going to die then and there.

In a voice he might have used to soothe a lunatic, Perry persisted, "Tell me where he is."

The answer was a whisper deathly as a last confessional. "I can't be sure. He can be in more than one place at a time. You might find him now with that woman they freed on bail, the Wilder woman."

Behind him, Perry heard a short, shocked laugh with no mirth in it. "A nut," said the patrolman.

Perry said, "Get this man to a prison hospital—I'll report there later." He rammed through the crowd, into a cruising taxi at the curb. He heard himself give an address on upper Riverside Drive, and an order to hurry, but there were other words in his brain, and thoughts coming so fast that the words for them were half-formed.

A child had been killed in broad daylight, by a man deathly ill, with no motive. Anyone would call it insanity.

At last the ghastly aura of events shrouding the Wilder case began to assume a pattern. Nat Perry knew he had crossed purposes with the perpetrator of a devilish and brilliant scheme, who had so far enjoyed the added benefit of luck. But luck like that couldn't hold out—it was maniac's luck.

He was no longer surprised at the thought that the man he wanted would be at Mrs. Wilder's. It seemed the most logical place for him to be. A certain detachedness came to Perry, so that he could relegate the blood and the pain he had seen to another part of his mind. Maniac's luck, against the man who refused to die. Nat couldn't afford to doubt the outcome. He had to think as clearly as though he were playing with wooden pawns instead of flesh-and-blood ones, and as though the stake were infinitely less important than life and death. Much later, he would remember what had happened, and in Nathaniel Perry's cheerless thoughts, the child who had died on the

pavement would die a thousand times again. But not now.

Fifteen minutes later he stood at a sloped curb, with the Hudson sparkling behind him, staring at a barren-looking window with its shades drawn. It still sported a small undusted plaque reading Grant Wilder, M.D. Wilder had been dead two months. But the apartment wasn't empty now.

The shade slapped violently, only once. Wind hadn't caused that, nor were his eyes playing tricks. He was on the verge of an encounter with the power that reached out of nowhere to kill.

**T**HE door to the apartment on the first floor was locked. There was a length of steel wire in Perry's pocket, and the Bleeder's fingers were dextrous. But time was limited. Whatever had slapped that shade had been moving quickly, and this was an unfamiliar lock. He pried the ends of the curved wire into the keyhole, and let them tremble among the tumblers, delicately, surely. The second time he tried it, there was a dull click.

Very quietly, he shut the apartment door behind him. He was in a dark hall, musty-odored, as though nothing had breathed in it for weeks. The darkness concentrated into the solid hurtling mass of a human body, flying into him, and the impact knocked the revolver from his fingers. The attack was sooner than he had expected. He glimpsed a fair-skinned face, lean and pale as his own, angry and intent, as he braced himself.

A hundred thoughts wrote themselves on his brain during the next third of a second. No terror-stamp of slavery on that glimpsed face. This was the man, not one of his underlings. This might be a trap, this might be the end of the Bleeder, but—his thoughts ended abruptly as the brief combat itself, as the dim apartment re-echoed to a shrill and soulless shriek.

Perry broke away from his antagonist, ran through the darkness, down the long hall. Virginia Wilder had shrieked like that, that morning in court. By the pencil-line of light that came through a crack in the shade, he saw her. She was crouched in an overstuffed chair in the carpetless living-room, her mouth a frozen oval. She was unharmed. It took strength to shriek like that.

He wheeled about, expecting to face his recent opponent. There was no one. No one in the hall, no one in the living-room where Virginia Wilder had grown suddenly silent. Nathaniel Perry had been close enough to put a bullet into his quarry's heart—and the man was gone.

He looked at his client with a kind of numb fury. There was still terror in her face. And then he saw that they were not alone. He followed her glance across a threshold into another room, where another woman was seated on a couch.

The woman wore a hat and coat, wrapped surprisingly close for the heat. There was a thick, sick-sweet odor in the heavy air about her couch. She did not speak as Perry approached, nor turn her head, and when he touched her, she fell abruptly on her side.

She was dead. He knew, from the odor, and the swollen look of decay on her face, that she had been dead for many days. Even in the coat, even after all that time, he knew by the right arm of the corpse that he had found all that was left of another crippled puppet.

The detective sought for the shreds of detachment in his brain, and did rapid mental arithmetic. The police had closed the apartment a month ago, and this body must have been here for almost half that time. It was the link he needed—the proof that the murder-series which began with the death of Grant Wilder had not been interrupted, merely to resume today.

He heard Virginia Wilder's gasps lengthen into sobs. He did not speak to

her as he crossed the room and picked a dust-covered telephone from a side-table. He kept his voice low and distinct; Harry O'Connor's voice at the other end was neither. It was high-pitched, as an old man's voice often grows in excitement. "Nat? We've got the report on Tolliver. Ever heard of jake-leg?"

"Not lately."

"You wouldn't have, lately. It went out of circulation a good fifteen years ago, before they even repealed prohibition. It's a distilled ginger drink, a hell-brew that the old-time hi-jackers used to sell at eight dollars a quart. It crippled some people, blinded others, and killed or paralyzed about two thousand kids whose parents thought they needed something for a cold. That's what Johnson Tolliver had in his stomach. There was something else, too, but we won't know about that till the examiner's finished with the corpse. Where are you?"

"I'm uptown," Nat said, "with Mrs. Wilder and a corpse. It's not such a fresh corpse, but keep that under your hat. You can use it as a peg to re-arrest her. She's guilty as sin, but I'll need a little time to make it stick."

## CHAPTER FOUR

"Two Places at Once. . ."

HE heard a startled gasp behind him as he replaced the phone. Virginia Wilder's face was no longer merely white—it was livid.

She clutched at the back of a chair, and her knuckles were pale with the effort. Her cheeks blazed and she was beautiful. Beautiful enough to make a man lie and cheat and murder . . . beautiful and evil as the first sin. "You're insane," she said.

"Maybe," he admitted. "I'll grant you that—until I've cleared up the details. Though I'll have a hard time proving what I've just said. Obviously, the corpse

in this apartment met death while you were in jail, which would seem to exonerate you. But even so, I'm not as insane as the man who conceived this hellish scheme."

Triumph crossed her face, fleet, desperate triumph, with fear and guilt beneath it. "So you see—" she began.

"You probably banked on that," he went on. "You and the man you've been working with. You expected that if anyone did get wind of your scheme, it would seem fantastic beyond belief. But Johnson Tolliver's death in the courtroom served as well as his testimony would have to indicate a frame against you—which made that spectacular timing seem useless to whoever wanted him dead.

"Then it occurred to me that it couldn't matter, from the murderer's point of view, whether Tolliver testified or not. The important thing was for him to die, so that his death could add weight to your innocence and point at someone else's guilt. Exactly the same logic applies to Peggy Anderson's death, except that she lied, and she spoke louder than necessary. She wasn't the actress you are.

"She spoke loudly—and yet there were only the two of us in the apartment. If it was true your husband was out most of the night he died she had undoubtedly seen him. That was why she was drawn into the case and terrorized. Adding those two things together, I would say he had been in the house, probably in the apartment next door to hers. That's where I'm going to look for your accomplice—and while you're back in police custody, nobody's going to stop me from finding the man or woman you and your co-worker must have planned for a frame."

There was a fiery quality about her that he had not seen before. "Can't I stop you!" she cried. "I'll show you! You won't dare go through with this! I'll tell the police you're assaulting a decent man—"

"And suppose the police find your decent man has assaulted me—fatally? Then they'll have a certain murder case. There isn't a chance of that, of course. But you think there may be."

Her face went grey again; the fire had died to an ash. Still, she held herself erect, her hands tight on the chair back. "You don't know what you're saying," she whispered. "I could show you that. And I could show you a great deal about love. . . ."

He laughed, a sharp ugly laugh, and her eyes went wild with fright. Like a small trapped animal, she turned and bolted for the door. He stepped into her path, caught her wrists in his strong hands. She went limp without struggle. He could feel her body pressed close against him. Her eyes were shut, and she did not move, but her heart was beating furiously. She was playing her last desperate card.

For a moment, he knew how it must have felt to risk everything for her. Then he pushed her away from him. "Sit down," he said, "and don't bother trying that again."

She knew it was hopeless. She could neither lie nor flirt her way past him. Her hands reached out like a cat's claws. "You filthy Judas!" she cried. "You—"

As he seized her shoulders and held her forcibly away from him, Nat Perry's heart was somersaulting at last. She may not have realized it in her fury, but her fingernails were far from being futile weapons; they were capable of killing him.

That was how O'Connor found them. Perry turned to the older man, who stared at him bewilderedly. "You can make her talk now, Pop. I'll see you later and explain."

**A** PATROLMAN was walking up and down in front of the cream-and-red facade on Charles Street. He looked hot

and intent, and at the sight of Nathaniel Perry, surprised. "Coming back for more?" he asked. "The old man's ready to give you hell when he catches up to you."

"The old man's busy elsewhere," Perry said. He went into the dark hall again, up the three flights of stairs. Two apartments on that floor, and he had been in one of them already. The neat white plaque on the door of the other read *Dr. Ralph White*. He might have expected to find another doctor, he thought. The lock was easier than Virginia Wilder's.

He was in a short foyer opening into what seemed an office. A lean, pale man sat in a tall chair behind a big desk, and his cold blue eyes met Perry's stare unflinchingly. It was the man who'd escaped him, the man whom Virginia Wilder's scream had saved from justice in that dark little hall uptown. This time, there would be no scream, and no intervention. Perry kicked the door shut behind him, bolted the chain with his left hand. The gun felt stern and steady in his grasp.

Dr. White did not rise, nor flinch, nor blink. There was a revolver on the desk, and a welling dark circle of ooze on the side of his head. He was dead.

Perry's hands went hot and wet, and he sheathed his gun. It wasn't suicide. Dr. White's arms were clasped on the arms of his chair. He had not died by those hands. Murder had forestalled justice once more.

Behind him, a voice said quietly, "Don't move now, or you'll never move again."

Very slowly, his hands held visibly at some distance from his hips, Perry turned round. Then he thought he was either crazy, or in another world.

If the man behind the desk, with a hole in his head, was the man he had tangled with before—so was the man with the gun!

"I told you not to move," the new-

comer repeated. His voice was not cool—it was harsh, sibilant. "If you'd come ten minutes later, you would never have known that the dead man was my brother. You would have had a perfectly satisfactory scapegoat, and the eminent Dr. Ralph White would have succeeded in death, as he did in life, in denying the existence of his criminal twin."

"It had to be like that," Perry said very quietly. "Of course. . . . Peggy Anderson, who lived next door, was obviously speaking for your ears when she raised her voice to talk to me. I'd have been here much earlier if your poor murderous dupe hadn't told me you were at Mrs. Wilder's.

"There's nothing miraculous about a man's being in two places at once, White. Any normal mind, under ordinary circumstances, would immediately leap to the explanation of twins. But those weren't normal circumstances. You took that old man's mind and visited the living fear of death on it. You persuaded him that only you could save him from the slow, sure effects of the poison you had given him. You made him a monster who would shoot down a child.

"You knew I would go to Mrs. Wilder's—and so did she. You both knew that I would meet your brother there, because she had sent for him. You even hoped I'd kill him."

White grinned. "Fine, Mr. Perry. That's all I wanted to know. If Peggy Anderson's words led you here, then I don't have to worry about anyone else arriving immediately. How much else have you guessed?"

**P**ERRY said wryly, "Enough to tell you that there's an excellent reason why you oughtn't to shoot me on the spot. But I'll let you do the guessing on that for a while. As for Grant Wilder's murder: He found out that you knew his wife rather too well. Taking you for your

brother, he came here that night two months ago and met you, posing as Dr. Ralph White. You poisoned him that night, and sent him home."

White's face was growing pale, but his voice was still steady. He kept the gun trained on Perry, and the defiance in his voice indicated some inner struggle about using it at once. "Yes, and the scheme's going to work! Virginia's been vindicated. The police are going to find a confession among my brother's effects. I've built a small fortune out of my private business, enough to support Virginia and me some place where we'll never be found. We've got more than Grant Wilder's insurance; we've got the insurance on all the people whose beneficiaries I obliged."

"I see," said Perry. "That accounts for the old man and the woman whose corpse I found in Grant Wilder's apartment. Posing as Dr. White, you administered slow poison to your chosen victims for a cut in the fortunes of their heirs. It was a two-edged weapon; before the victims died, they went through a period of sheer terror. You used distilled ginger with some drug that enabled you to control the paralysis that precedes death from jake-leg . . . and in the inexplicable uniformity of that paralysis, lay your hold over your victims."

"I'll wager you first met Virginia Wilder when she contacted you to do away with her husband. And that his death was the first. You accomplished it by ordinary means—deliberately—so that police might think they had a case. After that, you saw your chance to let your brother take the blame, with you and your exonerated woman friend free. Then, none of your other murders would have seemed unsolved. I have only Virginia Wilder's word that her husband died as your other victims died—the word of a murderess trying to frame an innocent man."

White's face went livid. "You've told them about Virginia," he said.

By all rights, that should have been the end of the Bleeder. But Nat Perry was no longer in front of the desk when the bullet landed. He was on his stomach, skidding across the floor toward White. His powerful trained fingers twisted around the man's ankles, and jerked. White grunted—it happened too quickly for a louder protest—and fell backwards. Then Perry was on him.

"John!" It was a woman's voice at the doorway, and there were men's fists rapping against the door Perry had chained shut. "John, don't try any more—"

Virginia Wilder's voice. A voice utterly hopeless, lost beyond redemption, but to the man Perry was fighting it was like a command. He went limp. As Perry stood away from him, he came shakily to his feet. "You win," he said, in a ghost-tone. "Better open the door."

O'Connor was there, and his prisoner, the prisoner who would not escape again. She lifted her hands to John White, and he took her in his arms. . . . Perry didn't stay to see what happened after that.

It was cooler on Charles Street when he went out. A child had been killed on that corner; the red stain was still visible. As he remembered the child, all those waves of revulsion he had fought down earlier rose in Perry.

"Caught 'em, didn't they?" said the patrolman, with satisfaction.

"Yes," said Perry. "Yes, they caught 'em." Caught what? Virginia Wilder's poignant and evil beauty, that would leave this world a darker place for having existed in it? Would anything they did to those two people in the apartment upstairs bring back the life of a dead child?

"Hell," he said to the cop. "I ought to be sorry. It's costing me five thousand dollars."

**THE END**

# KING of the CORPSE TRADE

A Novelette by  
DONALD  
G. CORMACK



Morgan knew he'd be blasted down before he could move two feet. . . .

*From any angle Thatch Morgan looked at it, the thing was incredible—and horrible! Why should anyone want to steal those nameless corpses who lay on cold slabs in the City Morgue? Was there any connection between this and the series of fantastic accidents that followed? Thatch couldn't tell that the gruesome answer would be his before many hours had passed—and that he, himself, was slated to occupy one of those vacant slabs at the morgue!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Unbury the Dead!

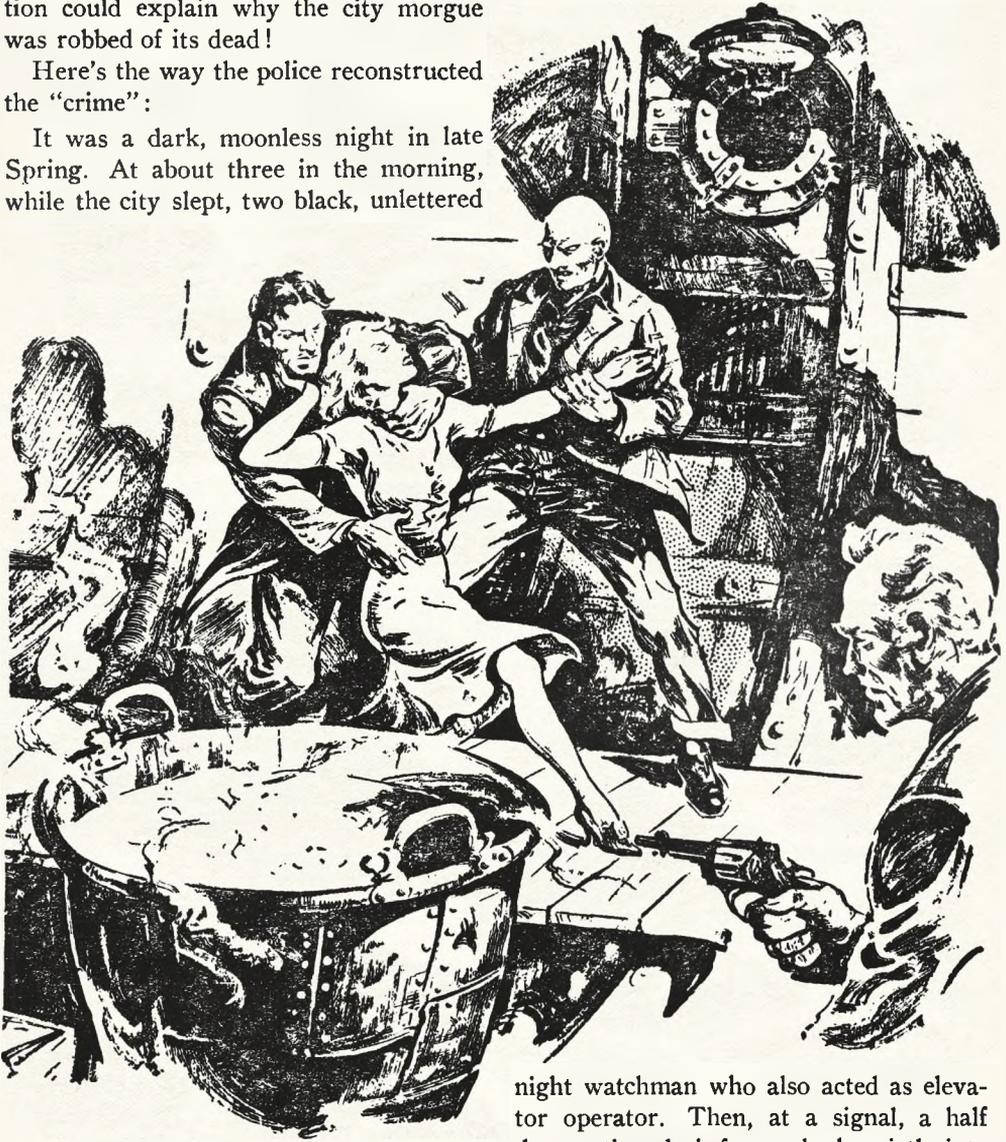
THE newspapers of New York City couldn't begin to figure the reasons behind that seemingly mindless mystery. And there aren't many things that happen in this crazy world that the metropolitan newspapers can't explain from at least five or six different angles—real or imagined. But no sane imagina-

## "Old corpses for new!" Was that to be the cry of a grim new industry that raised havoc all over the city?

tion could explain why the city morgue was robbed of its dead!

Here's the way the police reconstructed the "crime":

It was a dark, moonless night in late Spring. At about three in the morning, while the city slept, two black, unlettered



moving vans turned off First Avenue toward the East River and coasted slowly to a stop before the gloomy, dark building in which the city morgue is housed. After a moment's quiet, three men slipped softly up to the glass-paneled front door and crouched out of sight as one member of the crew worked swiftly on the lock. A second later and they were inside, guns drawn as they confronted the uniformed

night watchman who also acted as elevator operator. Then, at a signal, a half dozen other dark forms slunk quietly into the building as the night-watchman was bound and gagged.

Seconds later the original three henchmen were slipping down the stairs to the basement where the morgue proper was located, were overcoming the single attendant on duty, binding and gagging him, and then were signaling their companions that the roomful of bodies was at their complete disposal.

The movements of the gang were leisurely, methodical, and apparently well-rehearsed. As the marauding crew pulled out the icebox "drawers" in which the bodies lay, their leader briefly examined each corpse, rejecting most, accepting some. And each accepted body was quickly bundled in a sheet, was clutched to the chest of one of the gang as he sped from the room.

And as they went about their task, grim but unhurried, their movements silent, no word spoken, they must have seemed like an army of the dead themselves, come to prey on their kindred. The dim overhead light . . . the long, wavering shadows in the gloomy dungeon . . . the rasping of the drawers as they were opened and closed for the examination of the cadavers . . . the silent rejection or the nodded acceptance of the leader as he made his swift decision . . . the final exodus of the gang . . . the sudden roar of the trucks as they swung back toward the avenue, back toward some hideous hiding place for corpses . . . . What a gruesome pantomime it must have been!

An hour later the helpless attendants were discovered, the police summoned and an investigation begun. But there were no explanations, no clues—only a dead-end of pointless conjecture.

"I seen 'em!" the terrified attendant blurted out. "They was all Chinks or Japs, except maybe the leader who was masked. They come slitherin' in, never speakin' a word but always knowin' what they was goin' to do next—and I had the feelin' that maybe they was dead themselves!"

But further than that no information was obtainable. The newspapers played up the story as the Ghoul Gang, and ignorant tongues in the city began whispering of old superstitions—of the ancient Eastern legend of the Ghouls, those midnight demons who rob graves and feed on corpses. And there were whispers, too,

of a zombie-legion that had descended on the city in search of new, fresh dead. Would the cadavers of the morgue satisfy that midnight legion, or might they return again to prey upon the living for their dreadful needs? So ran the stupid fears of superstitious minds. But even some intelligent people began to wonder if that midnight crew was really composed of human beings who lived and breathed. . . .

**T**HE sun was already beginning to set behind the surrounding Pocano mountains, bathing the ultra-exclusive Mountain Country Club in the red rays of dying day, when the club's giant, private transport was wheeled from her hangar and her motors started to growling life, warming up for the short hop to Newark Airport. And the sound of those fanning blades served as a summons to the wealthy men who were scattered about the grounds and the buildings of the club—a summons back to the working world, and an announcement that another week-end of luxury and ease was over.

They came straggling from the golf clubhouse, from the sprawling, ornate club itself, from the chromium-and-onyx cocktail lounge where they reluctantly left cooling highballs. And as they climbed slowly into the cabin of the transport, they looked just like a bunch of schoolboys summoned back from play by teacher's warning bell.

Luther Bachelder, president of the club, watched them all aboard, saw the long line of bellboys stow the last of the baggage in the ship, then as he got in himself, waved the "all ready" sign to the pilot who stood waiting up by the club buildings. Jimmy Hanson, pilot for the club for years, signaled back and disappeared into the locker rooms to collect his own duffel.

A few minutes later the blocks were pulled from beneath the wheels, the motors whipped into droning thunder and

the heavy ship headed out across the fairway, swayed slightly as it left the ground, then pointed its nose toward the north-east and home.

The ship leveled off at about fifteen thousand feet, cruised above the great sea of clouds that hung close to the mountain tops, and most of the men aboard, tired by the day's exercise, slumped comfortably in their chairs for a nap. But Luther Bachelder continued to peer out of his window. Something he had noticed had disturbed him, but he didn't know what it had been—a small warning voice in his subconscious mind kept telling him of danger. And then through a break in the clouds he saw it, and knew. The sun's rays weren't coming from behind the ship, as they should have been but from a spot ahead of the right wing. They were flying south-west, not north-east!

He heaved himself to his feet, went forward to speak to Hanson about the sudden change of course. Bachelder had complete faith in Jim, knew his judgment was unquestionable, but he was anxious for the reason for this radical detour. He pushed open the door of the control room, gasped and froze in his tracks. Bachelder was looking into the ugly snout of an automatic, saw a twisted yellow face and slanted Oriental eyes mocking him sardonically. The man at the controls was not Hanson, but a Jap! And even as that horrible knowledge came to Bachelder, the yellow man wrenched the controls violently, sent the ship plummeting earthward in a power dive as the motors reached a deafening scream.

The last thing Bachelder remembered was the sound of confused, terrified shouts from the cabin compartment and the blood-chilling noise of a madman's mindless laughter . . . .

**T**HE whole of the Westchester Golf Club had been taken over by the Wall Street Brokers Society for one day, and

the golf tournament was a big success. By three o'clock in the afternoon the match had been decided, and after that until time to leave the members had gathered at the convivial "nineteenth hole" for rounds of drinks and to discuss the relative merits of the brassie versus the mid-iron on that tough seventeenth hole. So by the time they had to leave, many of them were half-seas over—but that was all right, too, because none of them was driving his own car.

At five-thirty the bus they had chartered for the occasion pulled up in front of the building and the brokers piled aboard for the trip back home. When they swung into the highway the tree-shrouded road was almost completely dark, though the sun had not gone down yet, and the driver switched on his own headlights as well as the reading lamps within the bus. It seemed like the end of a perfect outing even to those spoiled businessmen, those men of luxury and leisure.

But they hadn't gone more than a mile when that false security was blasted. For perhaps the space of a quarter mile a heavy moving van hung on the tail of the bus, its deep-throated engine blasting the quiet of the countryside with a staccato chatter. Then, as the bus driver glanced nervously in his rear-view mirror once or twice, the van suddenly blazed up beside the bus, pulled slightly in front of it and started to nudge the bus to the side of the road.

The driver swung down his window savagely, screamed obscenities and threats at the driver of the van, but his voice was lost in the roar of the powerful motors. And then his words suddenly choked in his throat as he saw the slant-eyed yellow faces that peered at him from the front of the moving van, saw the group of expressionless Orientals that watched him from behind the tailboard of the van with eyes that were vicious and inscrutable. Then the right wheels of the bus left the road

and began to kick and bounce wildly in the soft shoulder-dirt, and at that moment the wide-eyed bus driver's foot smashed down heavily on the brakes . . . .

No one can know what happened after that, but when human beings arrived at the scene shortly afterward they found the bus a crumpled mass of twisted steel lying at the bottom of a hundred-foot gully that bordered the road. The huge gas tanks in the rear of the bus had been set afire, as though purposely, and after that fire had been extinguished with chemicals—fortunately before most of the bodies were consumed, making identification impossible—the gruesome task of extricating the dead was begun.

The driver of the bus was one of the first victims to be removed and it was found that through some miracle of chance he still breathed, though it was obvious that his life was fast ebbing. As his painfully broken body was placed on the ground, the man opened his eyes in a dull, uncomprehending gaze. Then he began to whisper, perhaps in a delirium, but the rescuers bent close to hear what he was trying to say. The words came with labored slowness.

"The black moving van . . . of death," he breathed. "Look out for . . . the little yellow men . . . who ride in the black moving van. They're . . . ." His voice became an inaudible mumble as strength and life fast ebbed from his body.

It was a tense, fear-filled group that returned to that tumbril of death to unload its ghastly cargo. Just before the crash, evidently, a group of the passengers had been playing cards, and now when they hauled one of the players out the cards were still clutched in the pathetically stiff hand.

"Look!" one of the men said in a taut voice. "Three aces and a pair of eights. The old sign of disaster and sudden death—aces and eights! Ain't that the damndest thing!"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Invitation to Die

IT WAS late afternoon of the day following the tragedies that had shocked New York when an open-topped taxi sped along West End Avenue. In the rear of the cab sprawled a lanky young man whose ruddy face was completely overshadowed by a violent shock of unruly red hair. From his ungainly posture, and from his seemingly awkward movements when he was walking, a casual observer would have been tempted to call him clumsy. But there were many unlucky members of the underworld who would profanely insist that private investigator "Thatch" Morgan was anything but a slouch when it came to dangerous hair-trigger action. In fact, his reputation with the city's gangdom had grown to such an extent that he was reputed never to carry a gun—which wasn't true—and to be afraid of nothing, two legged or not—which also wasn't strictly true.

But if any of crimedom's demi-monde had seen the look on Thatch Morgan's face at that moment, his fame might have increased even more, for his expression was a mixture of grim puzzlement, of deep pity and of hard determination. And when Thatch looked like that it spelled bad news for the person on the receiving end.

The morning papers had been filled with the news of the airplane disaster, had listed the names of the men who were known to have been passengers on the ship—men whose bodies were now little more than twisted blackened remains without human form—and that list read like a roster of Who's Who in Finance. They were men who held the strings of financial empire in their hands, men who guided industry and controlled the money markets of the world. And added to that shocking account was the mysterious complication reported by the Mountain Country Club:

the body of the regular pilot, Jimmy Hanson, had been found in the locker room of the building, stabbed in the back and through the heart by a thin, wickedly murderous knife. But what could it all mean? Deliberate murder of an airplane's passengers by some homicidal maniac? A maniac with a crazed hate for all the captains of industry? Or was it, perhaps, an attempted abduction that had ended in disaster? But there was only one definite clue to that tragedy—the body of the hijacking pilot, on examination, seemed to be that of an Oriental; a Chinese or a Japanese.

And for the rest, the answers were forever locked behind lips that would never speak again.

And then, as though that horror weren't enough, the newspapers reported the bus disaster up in Westchester. Here, too, the victims were leaders in the business world, men of wealth and power, but in this case, the facts were not quite so gruesome. For although the bus had apparently caught fire after the smash, a passing truck crew had seen the flames and had fought the conflagration with their chemical apparatus until the fire-fighting equipment from the neighboring town arrived on the scene and quenched the flames. Due to that lucky chance, the bodies of the victims had been recovered and practically all of them identified before hopeless disfigurement occurred.

**T**O THATCH MORGAN, the most saddening part of the whole disaster was that single name—Luther Bachelder—listed among the airplane crash victims. For Thatch had known Bachelder, had been a good friend of his, and he had also known Bachelder's daughter, Betty, and for a time they were much closer than friends. But that had been several years ago. And as Bachelder continued to amass more and more money, Morgan had slowly and quietly let the friendship fade, had

forced himself to stay away from the Bachelder home. He saw how hopeless it would be to go on loving Betty—for he could never marry a girl who had millions while he had practically nothing. So in spite of Betty's hurt, unspoken questioning, he had backed out of the picture, determined never to see her again. And it had been largely the aching void in his heart that had driven him into the most dangerous of all professions to try to find some solace, some forgetfulness, in pitting his life against the underworld killer-hordes of the greatest city in the world.

Fame had come quite easily to red-headed Thatch Morgan. His natural aptitude for criminal investigation, his love for the game, had been doubled in strength by the fervor that burned within him, by his devil-may-care recklessness and savage enthusiasm. His name had been in the papers, too, in connection with several cases, so that Betty must have read of him—the poultry-market rackets; the big Wall Street bond swindle; the Tipton murder. And he had read of her, as well, in the society pages—the Riviera; Nassau; Lake Placid. How far apart their lives seemed to have drifted.

The sight of Bachelder's name in the papers that day had brought back a lot of memories to Thatch, and he had decided to go to see Betty and offer his help if she needed him in any way. But before he left his apartment, Betty herself had called him. She said that she was troubled about something, that she needed his advice. Behind her carefully chosen words and controlled voice there was a sense of tight fear and apprehension of an unknown menace that she could not hide. Just the sound of her voice had sent Thatch's pulses jumping again, had revived all his old, forgotten dreams, and when he sensed that she was in desperate need of help, was perhaps in danger, he had jumped for a cab and headed for her home on West End Avenue.

On the way, he tried to find some common denominator in the events of the past few days. Was some criminal king decreeing the death of all the leaders of finance, perhaps to further his own control of the money markets? Or was some revolutionary band attempting to bring chaos and panic to the land? Or was some bankrupt financier, driven mad by his losses, seeking a grisly revenge on the source of his ruin? But none of those conjectures sounded plausible, somehow. For those same makers of corpses, Morgan was sure, were the corpse collectors who had raided the morgue two nights ago—those collectors of the bodies of worthless, unclaimed drifters, the demi-monde of the world of the dead. For, although it had been withheld from the public, Morgan had learned from a friend at headquarters that the bus driver's dying words had exactly described the moving vans that had formed the raiding party on the morgue—"the black moving van of death!" Furthermore, the driver had spoken of "the little yellow men." Japs and Chinks had formed the raiding party, and an Oriental pilot had crashed the Mountain Club's transport plane. The three mindless episodes were tied together, that much Morgan knew.

But what he didn't know was that the gruesome answer would be his before many hours had passed—and *that shortly afterward he, himself, would occupy a cold slab at the morgue!*

**W**HEN Morgan arrived at the Bachelder home, he was admitted by Carelton Weal, Luther Bachelder's white-haired secretary and companion. From the look of sorrow on Weal's face, and from his whispered words and silent gestures, Morgan had the feeling that he was being admitted to a funeral. Inside the huge living room he found Betty, a terrified little girl who ran over to him and whispered his name in a tremulous voice.

Also in the room were Inspector Davidson from headquarters, who nodded to Morgan and went on with his "tactful" questioning of the members present; Anthony Whiteman, Betty's uncle and a one-time associate of Bachelder's; and glum-faced, saturnine Ben Sanger who gave Morgan a cold stare of hostility.

Sanger was, as Bachelder had been, a manufacturing chemist and a researchman in his own right. The two had been associated for years, finally to break up after a violent quarrel about two years ago. At the time it had been whispered that Sanger had urged the exploitation of a new formula evolved by Bachelder, but that Sanger's suggested methods had been unethical. In any event, the new formula came on the market, given freely to science by Bachelder, and the two chemists never spoke again. From this evidence, the public assumed that they knew the reason for the quarrel. But the truth was known to only a few, Morgan among them. Sanger's attentions to Betty, his infatuation for her when he was old enough to be her father, his refusal, or inability, to stop courting her in spite of Bachelder's protests, had really brought the two men to the breaking of their association.

And now, the day after Bachelder was out of the way, Sanger was back at Betty's side and offering his comfort and aid in that time of sorrow. The whole thing seemed repugnant to Morgan, but there was nothing he could do—Betty, in the kindness of her heart, had refused to condemn Sanger in the past, had felt that her father was too harsh with "harmless Ben-ny." And now Sanger stood in the background glaring at Morgan, whom he looked upon as an interloper for the affections of Betty, his eyes almost luminous in the half-dark room. Thatch could see in those eyes an almost hypnotic, compelling force, a magnetism that had served to gain for Sanger a reputation greater than he deserved, probably, in his hobby

of dabbling in the occult, the mystic. For Sanger was quite boastful of his prowess in the field of spiritualism.

"In a routine way," Inspector Davidson's voice was droning on, "the police investigate all violent deaths surrounded by suspicious circumstances. This tragedy, naturally, calls for such an investigation. The families of all the victims are being interrogated to find out if there were any known threats made against the principals of this disaster." Morgan grinned inwardly as he heard those carefully prepared phrases coming from Davidson, realizing that the police were far more interested in the mysterious deaths than they would admit. "And you, Miss Bachelder," Davidson asked, "and Mr. Weal, know of no threats, of no avowed enemies who may have had reason to wish Mr. Bachelder's death?"

Betty and Carelton Weal mumbled a negative and Davidson looked disappointed. He asked a few more routine questions, then picked up his hat and started for the door. As he passed Morgan he gripped his arm, drew him to one side.

"Glad to see you here, Morgan," he said quietly. "We've got two men outside watching the house. If Miss Bachelder leaves alone, or with anyone but you or a member of the family, she'll be followed to see that no harm comes to her. And those men'll see that no stranger gets into the house. You know as well as I do that this thing goes a lot deeper than the public suspects—I've got a feeling that all hell's going to break loose inside of twenty-four hours. But in heaven's name don't ask me how it'll come! So stick around, Morgan, and keep an eye on that girl! You know where to reach me if you need me."

**A**FTER Davidson left, Tony White-man, Betty's uncle, and Weal, Bachelder's secretary, continued with their

arrangements for the funeral service that would be conducted from a private funeral home. Sanger hung aimlessly about, obviously wishing that Morgan would leave so that he might talk to Betty alone. But Betty, at the first opportunity, gripped Thatch's arm, drew him from the room and upstairs to the library. Once inside, she closed the door and leaned back against it. No longer was her face set in a forced composure, and now the baffling terror that she felt was plainly obvious to Morgan.

"Thatch," she said in a slow, trembling voice, "there's something I didn't tell the police—something I was afraid to tell them for several reasons until I had spoken to you. It sounds crazy, but if what I suspect is true . . . !" She hesitated then, bravely trying to collect herself for long moments.

"And those reasons were . . . ?" Morgan prompted.

"Maybe I'd better tell you something else first," she said. "Do you remember Gwan Lee, Thatch? He was Dad's house-boy."

Morgan felt a sudden chill run through him. He'd forgotten all about the seemingly harmless little Chinese who'd been with the Bachelders for years. Now he nodded dumbly.

"Lee disappeared this morning," Betty said. "When he didn't appear as usual, I went to his room and found him gone, belongings and all—and behind him he'd left a strange message. You read it, Thatch, then I'll tell you what I think it means."

She handed him a sheet of paper on which a message had been neatly printed in ink. It read:

#### **THE CULT OF ETERNAL REGENERATION**

**Would you speak with your loved ones again? Would you see them face to face? Lao-tse preached the truth six hundred years before Christianity. The followers of Lao-tse offer the manifestation of that truth**

today. Taoism is the bridge from life to death, and from death to life again. To the true believer, the dead may be brought back to life through great personal sacrifice on the part of the supplicant—if the believer is discreet, keeps his own council and swears never to divulge the sacred mysteries. Otherwise those who are dead must remain dead forever! The wise will keep the appointment!

Below was scrawled an address in New York's Chinatown, and the hours of the scheduled meetings—one already past. Betty had been watching Thatch sharply as he read the note.

"I couldn't show that to the police until I'd spoken to you," she said when he was finished. "Maybe I'm a fool, Thatch, but I felt that they'd bungle the thing—whereas you might be able to do something definite. You see . . . oh, it sounds crazy, but if that note isn't a hoax, if it's really a message from some mad cult that's after ransom, and through some miracle Dad really isn't dead . . ." Her voice trailed off to silence. "Thatch," she went on earnestly, almost tearfully, "I'm desperate. I wouldn't miss any chance, no matter how slim, to bring . . . him back . . ."

Morgan looked at her in silence, struck by the beautiful girl's unwavering bravery and staunch loyalty.

"Thatch," Betty went on, "what do you think about the whole thing? Do you suppose there's any hope, any chance?"

Thatch's face was grim. "My impressions don't matter a damn; but there's only one thing to do," he said quietly. "I'm going to keep that appointment!"

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Cult of the Skull

**D**OWNSTAIRS in the spacious foyer hall Morgan saw Sanger waiting patiently. The grey-haired man came up to him as he reached the foot of the stairs, smiled coldly at the young detective.

"How fortunate it is," he said icily, "that you've renewed your friendship with Miss Bachelder just at this time. After such a long absence, isn't it lucky that you should happen to turn up when she's in trouble, and especially when she has a great fortune and almost limitless property to take care—"

Morgan's hand shot out and gripped the older man by the arm in an iron hold as fury welled within him.

"That's just enough. Sanger!" he growled.

At that moment Whiteman's weak face and pale eyes loomed up beside them in the semi-darkness of the hallway. Little rabbit-like Weal kept his timid distance in the living room.

But Morgan didn't wait to hear what he had to say. Not trusting himself to speak, he snorted in disgust, swung on his heel and left the house.

Outside, the streets of the city were shrouded by nightfall, but Morgan didn't hail a taxi at once. He walked one block east to Broadway, put in a call to police headquarters from a drug-store phone booth. After a short wait he had Davidson on the wire.

"Look, Frank," he said quickly, "I'm on the trail of something big, I think, but I've got to play it alone. At least it's a contact with some outfit mixed up in this tangle—whether the central one or not, I don't know. I'll call you back and give you the dope later, but I have a hunch extortion's a minor angle.

"And I have another hunch, too, one I can't explain on the phone. But you've got to do me a favor—give out a news release to the papers and the radio that a private investigator claims to have cracked the case and will put the whole thing in the commissioner's lap by midnight! Bye!"

A moment later Morgan was hurrying to the taxi stand at the corner of the block. He snapped a single word, "China-

town," to the driver and sprawled back on the seat, his brow furrowed by puzzlement and worry as the cab swung out into the evening traffic.

Thatch Morgan had ceased wondering if his pretty definite hunches and more vague conjectures were striking anywhere near the truth—the whole set-up was too fantastic. His one driving concern now was to play his lead to the end, play it straight, taking what came. Because he knew that if he did that, the answer would be there right in front of him within a few hours. His uneasiness and worry at that moment was entirely for Betty Bachelder, that terrified, broken-hearted girl who had such faith in him. He had to live up to that faith!

Morgan dismissed the cab on the border of Chinatown, walked down the narrow, gloomy canyon of Mott Street, turned left into Doyer and walked to the very center of that Oriental city within a city. And it was then that a full realization of the utter unreality of the whole episode came to him. The dim, narrow streets, the shuffling alien forms that crowded past, chattering in a sing-song monotone, the exotic smells of spice and perfume that came from the basement shops, the Eastern mystery that seemed to lurk behind the curtained windows that overlooked the street—how bizarre it all seemed.

Then he was turning left again, this time into a passageway marked Dunn Alley, a miniature street that he could almost have spanned with his outstretched arms. Gone now were the shops, the lights and crowds. At the far end of the dead-end street a single lamp glimmered, while the tumble-down wooden houses on each side were silent and dark. Stepping cautiously, keeping as close as possible to the shielding wall of the buildings, Morgan came to the house marked with the address he sought—a dilapidated structure that displayed a large weatherbeaten

sign: Second-hand Furniture Bought, Sold, Stored.

Morgan stood back in the gloom, getting his bearings, and as his eyes became more accustomed to the darkness he could make out the short flight of stone steps that led down to the cellar entrance and knew that his best bet lay in that direction. Gun in hand, he crept forward, started down the stairs and into the inky blackness below, but halted abruptly in his stride as he heard a rustle of garments directly beneath him and a challenging voice whisper something in Chinese.

The action that followed was over before Thatch Morgan was aware of any volition on his part. He remembered his spring through the air, the swing of his clubbed gun, once, twice, and then his deep breathing as he stood over the unconscious form of the guard. The man had been wearing a long silken robe and a fancy skull cap, and Thatch quickly stripped him of these, put them on himself, and then bound his prisoner with his own necktie and belt. After gagging the man with a pocket handkerchief, Thatch dragged him up to the street, hauled the unconscious form away from the building and dropped him behind a shielding row of ashcans.

His heart was beating like a trip-hammer as he returned to the basement entrance and pushed open the massive wooden door to the cellar. Like a blow in the face came an almost sickening wave of incense from the stygian blackness, but Morgan pushed forward, lighting a match and seeking a hiding place by its cupped flame. Just in time he spotted a large boiler, now in disuse, at the far end of the damp room; he flipped out the match and wedged himself behind that temporary concealment as footsteps sounded above and the sound of muffled voices came closer and closer. The session of the cult was about to begin.

AS Morgan watched, half believing his eyes, he saw a group of six or eight Chinese move softly into the room on slippered feet, each carrying a tall, flaming taper. These they placed about the walls of the cavern-like room, then set about lighting other candles that stood ready in brackets. And in that wavering, unreal light the appointments of the seance cellar were dully revealed.

The damp, cracked plaster walls of the ancient basement had been covered with long black drapes that only served to emphasize the gloom, while in the center of the floor stood a group of wooden chairs, evidently placed there for the audience. And the group of a dozen chairs faced a raised platform, like a stage, that was concealed by a sheer black curtain that had a single object emblazoned upon it—the huge outline of a skull: the symbol of death, focal point of all Taoistic worship.

As Morgan watched the proceedings, the thin sound of strange Oriental music came to the room from some outer chamber, and he realized then that such weird music, combined with the ghostly light, the bizarre setting and the heady odor of the incense that was actually intoxicating, might well lull and deceive the mind of anyone. For that exotic incense exerted a strong narcotic influence, compounded probably with cannabis indica or opium, and when Morgan found that his unwitting absorption of the dope made his mind float in a dreamy, docile state, he crouched close to the floor to gain what fresh air he could and fought savagely against the debilitating effect on his brain.

Shortly after the chamber was in readiness, Morgan saw other forms come into the room, robed, as were the first, in long flowing gowns. The newcomers, perhaps a dozen of them, took positions about the walls, concealed from view by the deeper shadows. And then followed what seemed to be an almost endless wait, the seance

chamber in readiness, the motionless guards standing in absolute silence as the half-real light trembled in hideous cadence with the piping wail of the Oriental string music.

A timid knocking at the door announced the first "supplicant," and when a heavily veiled woman was admitted, when the heavy wooden door was closed and stout bars shot in place, Morgan breathed a sigh of relief—the absence of the outer guard hadn't been noticed as yet. And then in quick succession two more women and a couple entered and took their places in the chairs that faced the stage, their backs to Morgan. He realized then that even if he had known the members of the audience, he would have been unable to identify them now.

Hardly had the last callers been seated than the seance began. Suddenly, in some inexplicable way, a figure abruptly appeared in the very center of the stage. He didn't walk on the stage, just materialized, standing there in his black-and-gold robe and concealing hood, shimmering in vague outline before the audience. Then he raised his arm and spoke in a deep, expressionless monotone.

"Welcome to the service of Lao-tse, prophet of the Regeneration for twenty-five hundred years! Welcome, you worshippers of the supreme power that spans the chasm between death and life!"

THEN, as the master of the seance went into an eerie, wailing Oriental chant, a vapory green cloud seemed to envelop his body. His strange words grew louder, the music more insistent, and then two figures appeared at the left side of the stage. One was an ancient Chinese, the other a middle-aged American who clung to his arm in a dazed fashion. With unsteady, trance-like steps the two walked across the stage, their outlines ghost-like and chimerical—walked across the stage and directly *through* the master of the

séance. There were gasps from the audience and at the same time a woman among them started to scream in a high-pitched voice.

"James! James!" she screamed. "I've found you! You've come back and I'm willing to pay!"

She was running down the aisle a moment later and two Orientals stepped to her side and led her from the room. Morgan didn't know the answer to the seemingly supernatural exhibition, his mind dazed by the scene, chills running through him, but he realized that no matter what unholy power had been invoked, cold cash was the object of this foul cult of mystery.

It was the appearance of a second figure that made his eyes jump back to the stage, and then he heard his shout join that of the audience. The man before them was Luther Bachelder! But something snapped inside his mind when he heard a girl scream—a scream that he recognized! It was Betty!

Without realizing it, Morgan found himself standing upright, outside his hiding place, found himself staring dazedly in Betty's direction and at the man who sat beside her, his face briefly illuminated as he turned his head in her direction. For that man was Benjamin Sanger! Sanger himself had brought her to this lair of evil!

Things happened fast then, almost faster than Morgan, in his dope-fogged mind, could follow. He remembered wondering if there was any slimmest chance of fighting his way to Betty's side, of holding off the gang until he got her out of there. But the answer was obvious—it would be a hopeless battle against such odds. The only possible way to save her was to call the police—even if it meant Bachelder's death, and the blasting of all hope of solving the mystery and saving the others.

Then, as those thoughts ran through

his mind, he was aware of the figure that bore down on him. Morgan's hand jumped for his gun, closed upon it as the other came in front of him—but evidently the robe he was wearing was a sufficient disguise in the half-light. The thug leaned toward him to speak.

"Get outside and guard that door!" he snarled: "But one other thing first: The master says there'll be one more push-over tonight at eleven thirty—the last. The big play is at twelve!" Then, the other's face close to his, Morgan saw a startled expression come into the eyes, alarm spread over the face. Thatch Morgan moved quickly then, his hand coming from under his gown, gun clubbed, and a second later he was lowering the unconscious body to the floor. The action unobserved by the rest, Morgan moved quickly to the door, conscious that every second counted in the balance of life and death.

In a sort of dream he was out in the clear, clean night air, running to put an emergency call through to headquarters. Heedless of the strange costume he wore, unaware of the startled faces that turned his way, Morgan ran into the crowded street praying that he wouldn't be too late. . . .

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Stand-in for a Corpse

**H**ALF an hour later Morgan stood facing Davidson in the deserted room that had been used for the séance. Upstairs could be heard the sound of the riot squad as they combed the ramshackle house from top to bottom for any trace of the Oriental gang. There was a hollow feeling in Morgan's stomach as he realized they had come too late—that some warning had been given before the police had arrived. Two officers reported that the lookout whom Morgan had trussed up and left outside was no longer there;

that might have been the warning's source.

"Notice the curtain across the stage," Morgan pointed out with faint interest to Davidson. "It's porous, like cheese-cloth, so when there's light on this side it looks opaque, but if a person stood on the other side with a light falling on him, and this side of the room was practically dark, it'd look as though he were a sort of ghostly figure standing before the audience. And he could appear or disappear at will." Morgan swung around and pointed to the rear of the room. "See that aperture on the wall there? It's for a projection machine. Moving pictures can be thrown on the black back-drop and it will pick them up and make them appear to be actually on the stage."

"Clever, these damn' Chinese," Davidson grunted. Then he swore under his breath with impotent rage, suddenly swung on his heel and pounded out of the room and upstairs to his men.

But Thatch Morgan had been doing more than examine the room with his keen eyes. The effect of the drugging incense was wearing off, and as the realization of Betty's peril, of the horrible degradations that faced her, became more apparent to him, his mind reacted with greater activity. He had in his hands now the knowledge of the entire criminal set-up—even if he didn't know yet the reasons behind it. It was apparent that certain men who had been presumable "victims" of the disasters were still alive. In the two tragedies five bodies had been unidentifiable—and those five men must be the ones who were still living! How? Through the bodies that had been stolen from the morgue; that much Morgan had suspected earlier in the night. By some devilish means the mutilated, unrecognizable bodies from the morgue had been substituted for the kidnapped victims just before the disasters. So far so good.

But would such elaborate and danger-

ous preparations be made for a simple plot of ransom and extortion? The answer was "no." There was far more behind the scheme than Morgan could see yet. But he would bet his bottom dollar on one fact—none of those men would be seen alive again unless he could crack the case in time to save them. And Betty Bachelder would suffer the same dreadful fate!

Now, his mind clicking with its normal clarity, he returned to the memory of that nightmare séance of an hour before, to the cryptic message one of the thugs had unwittingly given him: "One more push-over tonight at eleven thirty. The big play is at twelve!" There could be only one meaning behind the words. Six bodies had disappeared from the morgue; five unidentifiable bodies had found in the two disasters, plus the body of the presumed pilot of the transport. Then the first part of the message must mean that a second raid on the morgue was planned so that a cover-up "accident" could be staged, perhaps to get rid of someone too close to the answers behind the puzzle. And, if Davidson had released that news-bulletin as requested, Morgan was pretty sure who that "someone" was.

"The big play is at twelve!" That could only mean that the gang was winding up their atrocities and clearing out by midnight. He had only until twelve to get to Betty's side!

Thatch Morgan's jaw clamped down tight then, and his hands knotted in fists as he knew what he would do. He'd take his place among the bodies at the morgue, hoping to be selected by the gang as a usable "corpse," and in that way learn the whereabouts of the gang's headquarters. Failing that, he could at least attempt to trail them. Thatch glanced at his watch: ten minutes of eleven. He had exactly forty minutes in which to become a corpse!

**M**ORGAN moved in a hurry after that. He grabbed a cab, went racing uptown to his apartment. The clothes he was wearing were quickly discarded for a ragged shirt and a threadbare, out-at-elbow suit. An old pair of work shoes completed the outfit. Next he got out a preparation he had used on many occasions before—a wash that dyed his hair a jet black to conceal its too obvious rust-red color. Afterward, some cosmetics and grease paint gave him a wrinkled forehead, pouchy eyes and a heavy, blue-joweled expression.

At twenty after eleven, through persuasive words, the display of his well-concealed investigator's badge and the judicious use of a couple of five-dollar bills, Thatch Morgan lay sprawling on a slate-topped table in the "ice-box" room in the basement of the morgue. His eyes closed, motionless and breathing shallowly, he could feel the unearthly quiet of the place sweep over him with an almost physical force, but it wasn't a silence that bespoke peace and contentment. It was a tight, strained silence with a living tenseness that whispered of something about to happen—violence, explosion, chaos. For the bodies that lay in that "tomb" had found death in that way, and the quiet that brooded over the place came from them. The damp chill of the cold room reached out to numb Morgan's muscles and stultify his mind with a coma-like sleepiness, but he fought against it. And all the time a single phrase kept running through his mind: "The stage is set . . . . The stage is set. . . ."

Once he thought he heard a door creak on its hinges out in the direction of the student-undertakers' room. That would be the best way to make a secret entrance because there were no attendants out there. But nothing further followed and Morgan guessed he must have been mistaken. Then, abruptly, a voice spoke right beside him and he would have

jumped with surprise if his nerves hadn't been under a steel control.

"Here's one," the voice whispered, "and he ain't even tagged yet. Must of just come in. And the body's just about the right size."

There was a long silence and Morgan fought desperately to keep his breathing down to quick, extremely shallow breaths as he felt the leader's eyes examine his body speculatively. Then the leader spoke a brief command—and his voice was the deep monotone of "the master."

"Okay. Grab him."

Morgan felt two men seize his arms and feet, roll him into a blanket and swing him to the floor. Then the body snatchers started from the room, himself slung between them like a sack of flour, their slippered feet noiseless on the cement paving.

**M**ORGAN found himself lying on the floor in the rear of a sedan, the three thugs hunched together in front as they sped through the dark downtown streets of the city. There was an obvious nervousness among his captors when the wail of a police siren sounded nearby, and not a word passed between them as they went to keep their rendezvous with murder. From the plans he had laid, Morgan was almost certain where their destination would be, but when the car continued westward, pulled up on a side-street near the Hudson and he could see the house numbers from his position on the floor, Thatch felt his scalp tighten and his pulse throb more quickly in spite of that forewarning knowledge. His scheme had worked; the car was standing before his own brownstone house and he himself was slated as the stand-in corpse for his own disappearance—and eventual death.

He knew that the false release he had asked Davidson to make was really

death's black spot for him as the next victim of the gang's attention. And his discovered presence—and guessed identity—at the séance that evening had made the "attention" more urgent. It had been a desperate move to place himself willingly in the killers' trap, but there had been no other way of obtaining immediate action and a display of the gang's hand. For every second that ticked brought Betty and the others closer to the consummation of their horrible fate.

But why? Why the planned accidents, the substitution of bodies? Simple abduction and kidnapping was simpler than that. And why the seizure of Betty, the elaborate preparations for his own death when a simple murder would solve the problem? Those answers would come later, Morgan knew, and then his wondering was interrupted by an impatient blast of the car's horn followed by the growling voice of the leader—a voice that Morgan recognized now that it was no longer disguised!

"Who sent that telegram?"

"Me," one of the gangsters replied. He was a white man, not a Jap. "I said, like you told me, that Sanger and the kid was afraid to go back to the house, that they'd call in Sanger's car at eleven-forty-five and that he was to come out and meet them."

"Maybe he's wise," the second thug broke in. His voice was jittery, nervous, now that the game was almost played to an end. "Maybe the cops tipped him off the kid's missing, or maybe he was the snooper at the show tonight. Boss, I don't like this . . . there'd be a million flatfeet here now if that telegram was found out about. Let's hit for the waterfront before something cracks."

The leader didn't answer for a minute, then he snapped, "All right, move. That snooper can't know all he claims, anyway—but I wish it were Morgan, not the stiff, we'll be tossing in the bay!"

The car jumped forward, worked downtown and eastward as it headed for the gang's hideout. Morgan felt a mixture of elation and grim expectancy—this was the last act, the showdown, the play that counted. And as they drove he quietly released the small automatic he had taped to his inner thigh. Once they reached the hideout, there'd be fireworks; all Chinatown couldn't keep him from Betty!

For a while the car crept through narrow, grimy streets that had an unmistakable odor, a tell-tale jumble of sound. They were in Chinatown again. Then the car was working further eastward through gloomy streets of warehouses and factories before it came to a stop. And Morgan could hear the gentle lapping of the East River against the night-shrouded piers of the waterfront.

At the same instant the car stopped, he swung open the rear door, leaped out and melted into the protecting darkness. The gun in his hand covered the three startled gangsters in the front seat.

"Hold it!" he snapped. "This is the pay-off time—and that includes you, Whiteman!"

The three gaping faces, illuminated by the dashboard light, were turned blankly in his direction, and for a moment Morgan thought of forcing them to drive to the nearest police precinct. But Morgan hadn't noticed the dark form of the lookout who stood in the all-concealing darkness, didn't hear his soft approach. For a split second Morgan knew that he was falling forward on his face, felt the excruciating pain that crushed on his head. After that, nothing. . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Pay-off in Blood

**B**EFORE Morgan even opened his eyes he knew that he was aboard a ship, held prisoner in some foul-smelling

part of the hold. And then he was conscious that someone had made a crude bandage for his head and was stroking his brow. When he dared to look, he saw Betty's pretty face bending solicitously over him.

"Thatch, dear," she murmured. "Thank God they didn't kill you!"

Morgan hauled himself painfully to a sitting position, looked dazedly about the dimly lighted chamber. Over to one side, leaning against a bulkhead dejectedly, his face expressing hopelessness for himself and fear for his daughter, was Luther Bachelder. Beside him, his eyes closed and his shirt stained red with blood, was Ben Sanger, his vitality fast sinking. But most surprising of all was the sight of Gwan Lee in a far corner, squatting Oriental-fashion on the floor with a look of deep, calm meditation on his face.

Betty put a hand over Thatch's mouth when he started to speak. "Don't try to talk, yet," she said. "I'll tell you all I have found out about the gang's plan. After you left the house, Sanger came to me, told me that he'd received a message like mine. 'Oh, Thatch, I must have been crazy, out of my mind with fear for Dad. Anyway, when Ben urged me to go to the séance, I agreed. He said it was probably a case of ransom and extortion, that we'd agree to any terms that were made. And I think it was jealousy of you that made him urge me so strongly—he wanted to be the one to rescue Dad. Three other women were there—wives of the victims—and one of them told me they'd attended a previous meeting when they'd been told to bring money and jewels. Like me, they were afraid to go to the police for fear of never seeing their husbands again; they were perfectly willing to pay.'"

Her voice tightened a little as she remembered the events of the evening. "But after the third one of them had been ushered from the room, and then

out of the building, those gangsters grabbed Ben and me. Ben fought them, and was shot. Then we were brought here.

"Lee and Dad were already prisoners, as you know. Lee said he'd been picked up the night before, that his keys had been taken and someone sent back to the house to collect his things and leave that note."

"But your father?" Morgan interrupted. "How. . . ?"

"It was simpler than it looked," Bachelder's voice came dully from the other side of the hold. "The hi-jacking pilot power-dived the ship, knocking me unconscious and causing the others to lose their senses or become very groggy. They landed, forced three of us out at gunpoint and put three unidentifiable corpses in the cabin and a body in the control department. The pilot then took the ship up to fifteen thousand feet, bailed out in a parachute." He shuddered at the memory. "I saw it crash," he said softly. "The bus disaster must have been worked in the same way. Bachelder looked dazedly at the listeners. "They kept us in a doped state, took moving pictures for that damned extortion stunt—and I'm the last one left alive. But don't ask me what's behind this horror; I can't guess."

"I THINK I can," Morgan said quietly. "But we've got more to do than make conjectures." His keen eyes had been traveling over the walls of their prison as Bachelder was speaking—and a plan had formed in his mind. "Lee!" he snapped abruptly, strength and clear thinking coming back to him. "If I boosted you high enough, could you get through that porthole, swim to shore and get the police?"

The eyes of all of them turned upward to a port in the bulkhead, about eighteen feet above the floor—a seemingly impos-

sible distance to reach. Lee's eyes brightened and he nodded vigorously. A moment later Morgan had heaved himself to his feet, was dragging a packing case under the port, and then Lee was climbing on his shoulders. Lee's upstretched arms were still three feet from the opening, but Morgan had been prepared for that. His powerful hands fastened on Lee's ankles, the muscles in his back corded and cracked with the tremendous strain, but Lee was slowly inched upward until his groping hands gripped the hold and he was able to wriggle the rest of the way, his small wiry frame slowly disappearing through the porthole. A moment later they heard a dull splash as the little Chinese's body hit the water.

Lee hadn't escaped a moment too soon, for almost immediately afterward the rattle of a key sounded in the locked door and Whiteman and two Oriental henchmen stepped into the room.

"Tony!" The exclamation of Betty and Bachelder was simultaneous.

Whiteman ignored them completely. "All right," he snapped to the thugs. "The girl first. Let's get this over with—God knows it'll be messy enough!" His eyes ran coldly over the rest of them and he seemed not to have heard Betty's terrified scream and Morgan's threatening growl. Suddenly his arm jabbed in the direction of Sanger who was now obviously dead. "Get that out of here first, then come back," he ordered. As the thugs grabbed Sanger's body and dragged him from the room, Whiteman turned his coldly grinning face toward Betty. "Welcome to my cozy abbatoir," he sneered.

**M**ORGAN fought savagely to control the rage that seethed within him, well aware of the revolver Whiteman carried loosely in one hand. And he kept repeating to himself, too, that the only hope for all of them, especially for Betty,

was to stall Whiteman long enough for Gwan Lee to summon the police and lead them back. Stubbornly he refused to give conscious thought to the knowledge that nothing short of a miracle could bring Lee and the police back in time. But in desperation he tried to hold Whiteman's attention, tried to prevent him from noticing that the inconspicuous Lee had already escaped.

"Well, Whiteman," he mumbled, "it looks as though you win." And the tone of his voice sounded convincing without any effort.

"You named it, shamus," Whiteman grunted.

"Would it be too much trouble, Tony," Bachelder asked tonelessly, picking up Morgan's cue, "for you to tell me what's behind all this?"

Whiteman was silent a moment, his face relaxing with the pleasure of triumph. "As long as all of you are making such a big contribution," he said at last, "I suppose you have a right to know." He turned toward Bachelder. "It all begins with you," he stated bluntly. "Do you remember when I came to you with a scheme for marketing your chemicals, a scheme that wasn't exactly legal? Well, I remember! You called me mad, tossed me out of the company shortly afterward. It was then that I determined to do away with you and Betty and get control of the chemical business myself. I knew that to be absolutely safe I'd have to make both deaths appear normal; 'accident' seemed to be the obvious answer.

"But it was necessary to take Weal, your secretary, into my confidence—and he was the one who suggested the enlargement of the plan. Why not stage wholesale disasters through which we could not only wipe out you, but the leaders of the whole chemical field as well? It sounded like a natural to me, and that's the way it was agreed.

*(Continued on page 109)*

# THE WORLD OF CRIME



**T**O ALL of us, there is friendliness and safety in light; the bright light of day . . . the warm light of the fire on the hearth, the peace and security of twinkling street-lights. Since childhood we have been taught the safety of light. And all our lives we have learned to associate the sinister and the evil with darkness. Nearly every child passes through a stage in which he has a real fear of darkness, and only strict parental discipline can break some kids of this habitual fear.

The shadows might enshroud the prowling of the fiercest denizens of the jungle; in the same manner, the human beasts of today's civilization prey upon mankind principally during the mystic hours between twilight and dawn when most innocent people rest in slumber. . . . Think how many words suggesting darkness in our language connote wickedness and ignorance: *blackguard*, *Dark Ages*, *black magic*, *midnight*, *nocturnal*, *bête noire*, *Stygian Pit* . . . and so forth. You can think of scores more.

The blackest time of the night is a period less than two hours before dawn. Strangely enough, it is during this period, doctors tell us, that our resistance is at its lowest ebb. According to actuarial figures, more persons *die* at this time than

in any other part of the daily cycle. So there again we associate death with darkness. And what, after all, is final darkness—as far as man knows—than Death itself?

Every once in awhile you pick up a story in which the author has chosen what has come to be a generally accepted truth, turned it around convincingly, and by masterful craftsmanship brought tremendous power to his work. Emile C. Tepperman has done just exactly that in his newest crime-mystery novelette, *When the Death Light Shines*. It is the story of a terror which seized great New York City in a relentless grip; and that mortal terror was not born of darkness—the usual source of evil—but from a light *brighter than the blessed sun!* The following scene is the aftermath of a mysterious daylight robbery which pre-

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 107)

saged horrors to come—horrors which were incapable of solution, save for the fortitude and genius of Cassius Parsons, whom you have met before:

The street was already full of police. A riot car came squealing around the corner. Officers with riot guns and tear-gas bombs tumbled out. From the other corner, a precinct squad car came tearing toward the bank.

It seemed possible that the ruthless murderers could hope to escape.

Pedestrians who had crowded far away to the other side of the street, cowering in doorways, wondered how these gangsters believed they could get away with such a bloody and spectacular robbery in the heart of Times Square.

The policemen with the riot guns raced toward them, grim-faced and determined. In another split-second they would send a storm of lead to blast out the life of these vicious killers. . . .

And then the phenomenon occurred.

A terrible blinding white light came suddenly into being. It was like the flaming incandescence of a billion watt lamp. It was as if the blazing, searing brilliance of the sun had been moved up to within a mile of the earth!

The police stopped, stunned and helpless before that fiery light. They could see nothing. Not a single man or woman within blocks of the scene could afterward state he had witnessed a thing.

The light lasted perhaps twenty seconds. Then it vanished as suddenly as it had come.

The black-sweated, black-faced men were gone. So was their truck. And the street in front of the bank was filled with the charred and blackened bodies of police and pedestrians. Everyone who had been within five hundred feet of that light was nothing but a mass of brittle cinders. . . .

How could one man, even Cassius Parsons, with his little miracle truck, ever expect to cope with the perpetrators of such crime? Mr. Tepperman tells the answer in the August issue of DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE, in his novelette: *When the Death Light Shines . . . .*

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**King of the Corpse Trade**

(Continued from page 106)

"I suppose you've guessed most of the scheme by now—but let me tell you that you can't have guessed the care with which we set the stage. For months we waited until the five leading men in the chemical business would be simultaneously in a vulnerable position. At last Weal spotted such an occasion.

"Some Chinese and Japanese mobsters we had hired, along with other thugs, raided the morgue and carried off the bodies we selected and all those bodies were dead of natural causes: heart failure, old age or street accident. It would have been embarrassing if the police discovered bullet holes in our corpses!

"Well, the 'accidents' were carried out, as you know, and we retired to hiding with our captives. So far, perfect. Every body would be accounted for, identifiable or not—and no murder has ever been charged without a corpus delicti.

"Why not kill them outright? Why bother with abduction?" Whiteman's enthusiasm and the blazing light in his eyes told plainly of a mind that had become insane. "Ransom, my friends, and some very valuable signatures on pre-dated stock-and-bond transactions. You see, the control of the entire chemical business

(Continued on page 110)

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## King of the Corpse Trade

The gangsters staggered into the room carrying a large vat that steamed and bubbled with vitriolic energy and filled the cabin with an acrid odor. Lye!

"The girl!" he shouted. "Grab her!" And as the two thugs jumped for Betty, grinning at her screams of terror. Whiteman brought his gun up to center on Thatch Morgan.

"Just move, Morgan," he gritted. "I'd love it! But I'd rather have you watch this operation. Like my other corpses, you'll all have to have it done, since we're tossing your bodies in the bay. The skin and flesh of hands and feet must be removed, then the hair, eyes and teeth—that prevents any method of identification." He never took his eyes from Morgan as he snapped a command: "All right, boys, dip her!"

Betty's scream wrenched through the cabin as one of the gangsters threw her to the floor and fell on her while the second ripped off her shoes and stockings. Morgan was paralyzed with horror at that moment, realizing that only fifteen minutes had elapsed since Lee escaped, and that the police would be too late to help them. And then, as Betty thrashed on the floor in a brave fight, as Morgan crouched, muscles tensed for a spring into the certain death that faced him, and as old Bachelor swayed forward onto his knees with a hoarse shout, the sound of the churning of the ship's auxiliary engine and the rattling of the anchor chain sounded as a death knell!

Morgan knew that he'd be blasted down by Whiteman's gun before he'd stand by and see Betty's living flesh horribly burned away; before he'd listen to her agonized screeches of unbearable pain. But the thing that paralyzed him where he stood, that froze the whole room into a living tableau, was the sound of wild, unearthly screams from above deck. It was as though a horde of maddened apes

(Continued on page 112)

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29x4.75-19	2.45	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85
29x4.75-20	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
29x4.90-19	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
30x4.00-20	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.25-17	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.25-18	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.34-19	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.34-20	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.34-21	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.50-17	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.50-18	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.50-19	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.50-20	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.50-21	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.50-22	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.50-23	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
32x4.50-24	2.55	2.65	2.75	2.85	2.95
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*(Continued from page 111)*

had descended on the ship in chattering fury, and the very planks of the vessel trembled with the hair-raising din. Racing feet, hoarse shouts, splintering timber and screams of agony sounded ever closer as the three white-faced gangsters stood paralyzed with fear.

Whiteman whirled toward the door as it splintered under a terrific blow and two Chinese walked in, naked to the waist and carrying great two-handed ceremonial swords. Whitelaw snapped up his gun to fire, but that was as far as he got before Morgan hit his knees from behind and one of those swords had bitten deeply into his skull.

The two thugs had jumped for the doorway at that same instant, but they had no sooner disappeared than the two sword-wielding giants were howling in pursuit. Then, the three captives standing dumbfounded, the bedlam from above slowly abated and little Gwan Lee stepped into the room, grinning broadly.

"It seems to me when I leave," he said in his careful English, "that the time for getting the police is short. Also, that they may not listen to a Chinese who talks of unbelievable trouble. So I run six blocks west to my native people, gather there some friends to help me—" His complacent grin widened. "It was no trouble; I had only to mention that some good friends of mine were in trouble on board a Japanese ship."

Betty was in Thatch's arms then, crying with relief now that the gruesome experience was over. And in the background old Luther Bachelder was being helped to his feet by Lee. Thatch remembered Bachelder's coming over to them, half-heard him mumble something about needing new blood in his business, especially a young man who would be willing to work his way up. But Thatch Morgan wasn't listening, wasn't trying to—he was absorbed in one thing. Kissing Betty.

**THE END**





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