

FEBRUARY



10¢ DIME

MYSTERY

MAGAZINE

A LONG NOVEL
OF BIZARRE
MYSTERY
**LEAGUE
OF THE
GRATEFUL
DEAD**
by DAY KEENE



**THE GIRL AND THE
KIDNAPED
CORPSE**
by DONALD G.
CORMACK

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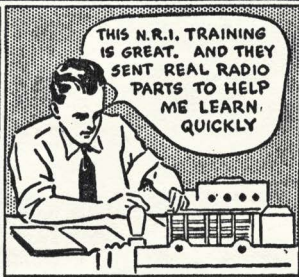
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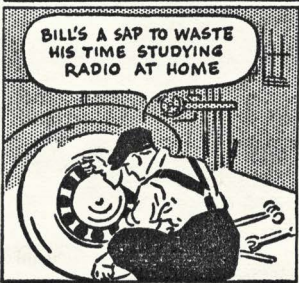
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THE MAGAZINE OF WEIRD MYSTERY!

10¢ DIME 
MYSTERY
MAGAZINE

Volume 25

February, 1941

Number 2

TWO OUTSTANDING MYSTERY NOVELS

LEAGUE OF THE GRATEFUL DEAD.....Day Keene

Already three men had joined the ranks of the shriveled, mummified corpses before drunken Doc Meredith heard from the lips of Tim Murphy the incredible tale of the rites that had taken place at that lonely cemetery. And so an old, broken man set out to match wits with a daring criminal genius—with horrible death the reward for the loser!

MURDER IN HELL.....Wayne Rogers 82

Why should anyone want to murder so frightfully those doomed, friendless lepers? Tom Herrick could not guess—but he did know that in some weird fashion the plague of madness and murder which had invaded hell's sanctuary, was tied in with the epidemic of bank robberies and suicides that had baffled the police of three states!

TWO NOVELETTES OF WEIRD MENACE

THE GIRL AND THE KIDNAPED CORPSE.....Donald G. Cormack 34

I was looking for adventure—and I found it! On that deserted, dark street, I saw a lovely girl steal a corpse, while a gun was punching in my ribs! And the next morning I found that I had only twelve hours to recover that corpse—or die!

DEATH STALKS IN PURPLE.....Ralph Oppenheim 62

At first the Bystander refused to help the police find the maker of those hideous, purple corpses. But then people began taking pot shots at him from dark corners, and he realized that Ahmed Bey and company had no real interest in his further health. And the Bystander was never the man to turn down a dare—especially from Death!

A SPINE-TINGLING SHORT STORY

WHICH ONE OF US?.....Russell Gray 52

One was a brutal, merciless killer, and four were potential victims! Here is a tense, vivid drama which saw its bloody ending in a lonely, snow-bound cabin—a story you will long remember. . . .

— AND —

THE WORLD OF CRIME.....A Department 4

The case of the vanishing killers. . . .

MARCH ISSUE ON SALE FEB. 7th

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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

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The World of Crime

AMONG the many things that differentiate man from animal, one of the most important is man's perpetual discontent with his lot on earth. It is this characteristic that has carried us from the realm of the primitive Stone-Age hunter to the highly complex, industrial civilization we know today. It is this which causes human progress. And also, in a narrower form when applied to the individual, we may call it either ambition or greed—for discontent is just as responsible for a Hitler or a Capone as it is for an Edison or a Marconi.

As the means for living a better and more comfortable life have developed, so, too, have the means and ambitions of those who would destroy that life for their own benefit. Nothing is sacred either to the scientist or the criminal. Every new conquest of land, water or air is exploited by those who would rob and murder us almost before we ourselves are aware that there is a new conquest. It is a sad but inescapable fact that those whose sense of morality is twisted or lacking entirely are often fully equipped with imagination and inventiveness.

Such a man was the mysterious leader of the gang of saffron-skinned, deformed bandits who appeared and disappeared in the crowded streets of New York with such incredible ease that they might have been possessed of the fabulous cloak of invisibility. And wherever they appeared, there followed a plague of destruction and death. Mal Varney first met them when they delivered to him the hideously mutilated body of his friend, Dr. Brundage, Director of the famous Hospital Center—and then just plain vanished, taking with them the girl who had sought Varney's aid.

Later, at the Center itself, Varney and Jock, his assistant, found themselves in the toughest spot of their career. Only by uncovering the actual killers could they clear themselves of a nasty murder rap—and the cops were close at their heels!

One of the cops closed in, tried for a clinch. . . . Varney smashed home a short, right-arm jolt that landed flush on his attacker's chops; took a numbing blow across the temple, from the officer's night-stick in return. Varney stag-

gered, couldn't see anything! For an instant he thought he must be out cold on his feet—then he realized it was the hospital lights which were out. The corridor was pitch-dark.

Varney couldn't figure what had happened but it was a life-saver, temporarily. The whole building became one roaring pandemonium of alarmed shouts and frightened screams. Patients and nurses poured out of ward rooms and offices; milling about with the occasional flash of an electric torch only adding to the confusion.

Varney pivoted away from the policeman's grasp, dropped to the floor, pulled Jock down beside him. Cautiously, keeping close to the wall, they snaked away in the gloom.

At a turn in the corridor, they scrambled to their feet, broke into a trot. Emergency current was making the electric bulbs glow feebly; but the light was so dim, so intermittent, it could hardly be called illumination. It was enough, though, for Varney to see something that made the hair on the back of his neck stand out stiffly!

Hurrying along the broad passageway toward them were three short, squat men wearing dark glasses. Their faces had that same peculiar, greasy sheen which Varney had seen before; and every one of the three was deformed!

Varney lifted his gun. "Up!" he barked. "Way up over your heads!"

None of the goggled three made any reply. But they spread out across the passageway—kept right on coming. Automatics sprang magically to their hands, began to spit death. . . .

Varney took no chances that they might be protected by bullet-proof vests. He shot the first devil square in the mouth.

Jock fired, missed; he grunted as hot lead seared his thigh—toppled over against Varney, pinning him against the wall! He couldn't raise his gun—and the other devils were taking deliberate aim!

Varney swore; struggled desperately to get free from Jock's hampering hulk. This was a hell of a way to go out! Gunned down by one of these slimy-skinned thugs; unable to clear himself or Jock of the murder charge that would be placed against them posthumously! . . .

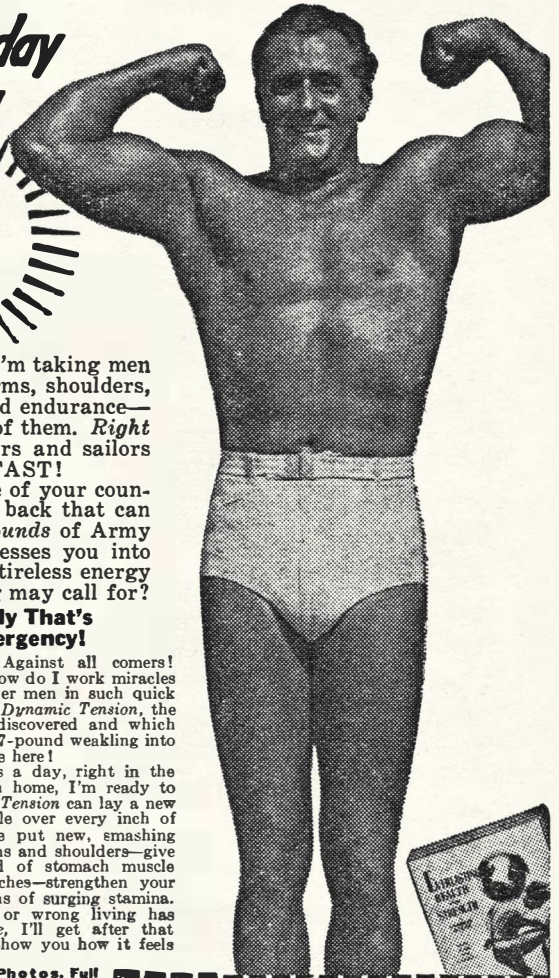
How did these deformed, cold-blooded killers get in this great hospital, already surrounded and over-run by a swarm of police? What did they want? What had they done with the lovely Glenna Hill-yard? And—also important—would Varney live long enough to find out? Stewart Sterling is the one man who knows all the answers, and he tells them in his latest full-length novel, *THE LEGION OF TERROR*, appearing in the March issue of *Dime Mystery Magazine*. . . .

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Now As Never Before You Need a Body That's Ready for ANY Job in National Emergency!

"GOD BLESS AMERICA"—yes, we all pray that. But it's the BODIES of America's MANPOWER that must make that blessing safe. Where do YOU fit in? Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you want the help I can give you—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

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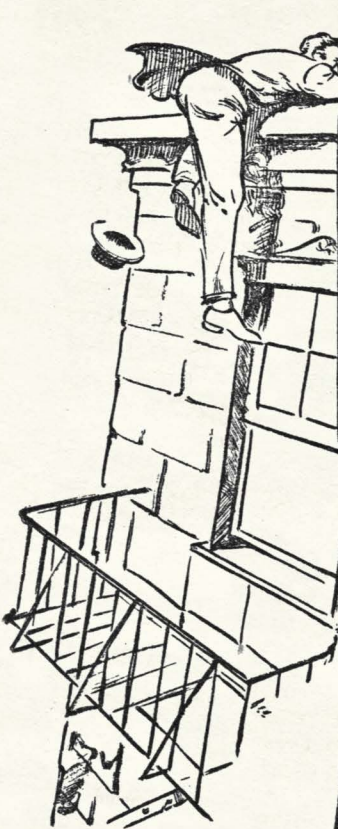
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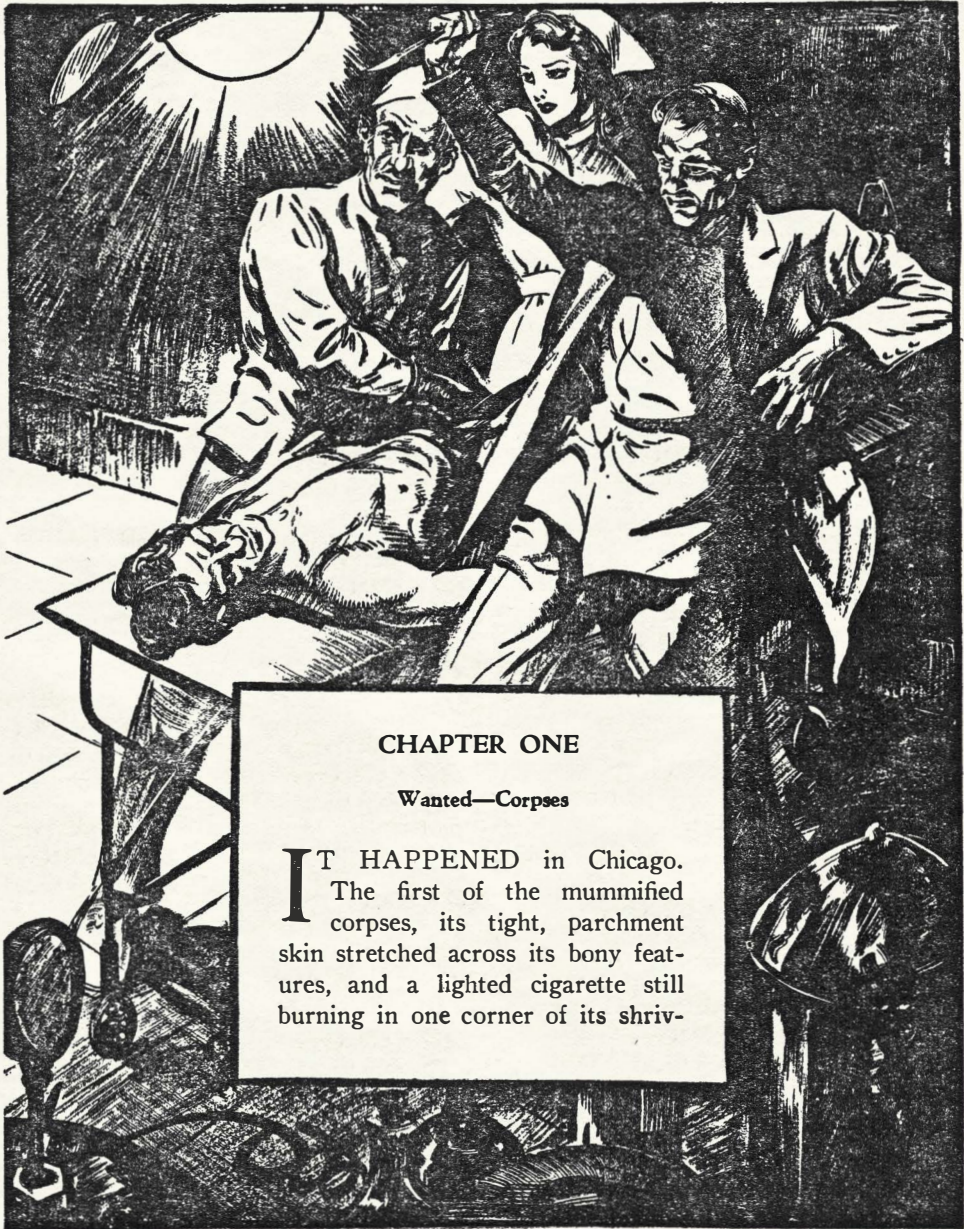


LEAGUE
OF THE
GRATEFUL DEAD



A Bizarre Mystery Novel by DAY KEENE

Before Tim Murphy died, he told drunken Doc Meredith the incredible truth of what he had witnessed in a lonely, snow-blanketed cemetery outside Chicago. And so the Doc, because Tim was his friend, nominated himself to become one of those shriveled, mummified corpses!



CHAPTER ONE

Wanted—Corpses

IT HAPPENED in Chicago. The first of the mummified corpses, its tight, parchment skin stretched across its bony features, and a lighted cigarette still burning in one corner of its shriv-

eled lips, was found sitting on a Help-Keep-The-City-Clean box leering through its hollow sockets at the busy traffic on the corners of La Salle Street and Monroe.

The second corpse was found huddled in the doorway of the West North Avenue Station by desk sergeant Phil Regan of the 30th District Police when he went off duty in the morning.

One man had been a multi-millionaire. The other had been on W. P. A. They had only one thing in common. Despite the fact that reputable witnesses swore that both had been alive and seemingly in the best of health five minutes before their mummified bodies were found, both men were listed on the records of the Department of Health as 'dead' and should have been rotting in their graves for weeks.

The third mummified corpse was a woman of the streets. But she wasn't found. Tim Murphy of the *Morning Reform* and a bartender named Thompson watched her die. She mummified right before their eyes as she sat on a high legged stool in a dingy North Clark Street bar. One minute she had been a red-lipped, hard-eyed wanton, smoke curling from a cigarette clenched between white teeth as she talked with crisp, staccato bitterness. Within the next five minutes she was dead. Her soft, white flesh had shrunk upon her bones to leave her a withered mummy whose dried brown skin stretched tight across her straining skull and whose empty eye sockets stared down vacantly at the thin brown sticks that had been her legs, and on which her sheer hose hung in folds.

At least so Thompson, the bartender, testified before they led him away, a shrieking maniac, to an asylum.

Tim Murphy couldn't testify. His was the fourth of the mummified corpses to be found. But before he died he told the incredible truth of what, acting on the dead woman's tip, he had witnessed in a

lonely, snow-blanketed cemetery on the outskirts of Chicago. He told it to drunken Doc Meredith, who in turn used the ladder of eerie tragedy and fantastic horror to climb back to the personal and professional heights from which he had fallen. But that comes later in our story—much later.

NIGHT, cold winter night, had begun to creep up Clark Street from the tall spires of the Loop in swirls of icy pellets that battered against the frosted, lighted window of the bar like so many frozen finger-tips that were anxious to be warm. From where he sat on the high, leather-cushioned bar stool, a paper spread on the bar before him, Tim Murphy raised his eyes to the window. Ghost-like figures flitted past it, eager to be home—those who had homes. The reporter poured himself another drink from the bottle at his elbow, sighed deeply.

"Tough on a guy who hasn't got some place to crawl into on a night like this, eh?"

But for himself and the bartender, the bar was deserted. The bartender paused in his toweling to fleck a bit of lint from a brandy glass with his thumb.

"It sure must be," he agreed. He nodded at the headline of the paper on the bar. It read: FIND SECOND MUMMIFIED CORPSE.

"But them guys," he continued after a moment, "won't worry about where they're going to sleep tonight. Were you in on that, Tim?"

"I saw both corpses," Murphy admitted.

"What did they look like?" the bartender wanted to know.

The reporter shrugged.

"Just like the mummies you see over in the Field Museum. Only—" he hesitated for a word—"well, fresher."

"How do you explain it, Tim?" the bartender asked.

"I don't," Murphy told him. "The thing is impossible. Somebody's screwy. Witnesses have testified that they saw both guys alive five or ten minutes before they were found. And down on the records at the City Hall, both guys are listed as dead. One died four weeks ago. And the other, that broker, died two months ago."

The bartender eyed the brandy glass with a critical eye.

"Then supposin' the witnesses are mistaken, could guys turn into mummies in that time?"

Murphy sipped his drink, glanced up at the clock on the back bar.

"Don't ask me. That's why I'm waiting for Doc. I thought perhaps he'd know."

The bartender opened a cigar box on the back bar and took out a small, clipped bundle of tabs.

"Four-twenty you owe me for his tabs," he told Murphy. "He was in here last night until I closed."

The reporter laid a five dollar bill on the bar and tore the tabs into pieces.

"Yeah. I know. He came back to the apartment last night as stiff as an owl."

"Why be a sucker for that rum hound, Murphy? What if he was a big shot doctor once? Why I'll bet he wouldn't even have talked to you when he was a big shot."

"So what?" Murphy bristled. "When he was a big shot he didn't need a friend. But now that he's down on his luck, he does. Why? You want to make something of it?"

"Certainly not, certainly not," the bartender soothed. "Just keep your shirt on, Murph. So you want to support him, that's your business. But you don't have to keep him lushed up, do you?"

The reporter toyed with his glass.

"Booze is about the only thing that he's got left. It keeps him from remembering. But I've got faith in that guy. Doc'll make a comeback some day. Besides, I like him."

In that one last statement Tim Murphy summed up his philosophy of life. If he liked a man, he'd go to hell for him. If he didn't, the man could go to hell, and the back of his hand from Tim Murphy.

THE door to the street banged open and shut. Both men looked up instinctively. Neither of them recognized the girl who stood in the doorway shaking the snow and sleet from a cheap, white fur jacket. Her hair was a bleached and frowsy yellow. Her profession was obvious.

"Sorry, sister," the bartender waved her out.

The girl's smile faded. She glowered at him with cat green eyes. Her lips were two crimson slashes across a dead white face that had once been pretty.

"Who's talking to you?" she demanded. She walked slowly down the bar to where Murphy sat and climbed up on the stool beside him. "You're Tim Murphy, the hot-shot reporter of the *Morning Reformer*, aren't you?" she accused.

"My name is Murphy," he admitted.

She smiled at the bartender.

"A double brandy, please. The gentleman is paying."

He looked at Murphy.

"Give her a drink," the reporter told him.

The girl sipped at her drink in silence, then turned back to Murphy.

"You're a good guy, Murphy. Everybody says so. That's why I've come to you. They told me in the restaurant next door that I'd probably find you in here."

"Yes?" Murphy said. His tone was noncommittal. The girl, he decided, for all her attempt at nonchalance, was on the verge of panic. Her lips were quivering and the muscles of her neck stood out like cords. "Yes—?" he asked once again.

Fear fought with avarice in the girl's green eyes.

"How much will your paper pay for the biggest story that it ever printed, Murphy?"

Murphy lit a cigarette. "Concerning what?" he asked.

The girl tapped the headline of the paper on the bar.

"Concerning the devil," she told him. "I don't know how he did it, but I know who killed those fellows."

"A cigarette?" Murphy offered.

"No, thanks. I've some of my own," she refused. She opened a shoddy handbag, extracted a package of cigarettes, lit one from the match he held, then fished in her bag again. She found what she was looking for and laid it on the bar. It was a small red card printed in flamboyant and gold. "You seen one of these yet, Murphy?"

Murphy picked up the card, sat looking at it.

"Yes. I have," he told her.

There was small doubt the man was a charlatan, but his advertisement was tempting. Too strong for any of the daily papers, it was printed in gold on scarlet cards and passed out discreetly on the corners. It was simple and to the point. It read—

WANTED—CORPSES: Have you a loved one who has died? Would you like to bring them back to life, know again the thrill of their caresses? You can. Would you like to assure yourself of everlasting life, know youth again and all the pleasures it once held? You can. See Satan—Suite 21A, Braddock Building.

They had flocked, still flocked to Suite 21A by the dozens: the rich, the poor, the young, the old, the halt, the maimed. And they went away seemingly satisfied. But what Satan promised, or what Satan did, the general public didn't know. For Satan wouldn't talk to anyone but a legitimate applicant—and his consultants wouldn't talk at all.

THE hands of the police were tied, had been tied for six months. That it was a racket, they knew. But until someone filed a complaint they were helpless.

So were the papers. Murphy, with every other leg man in town, had tried to crack the story since the printed cards had first appeared. But they couldn't. Satan could smell printer's ink through the closed inner door of his expensively furnished suite of offices. All that any reporter or sob sister had ever gotten was a bland smile from Satan's smug-faced Oriental secretary and a courteous, "So sorry. Satan no can see." There were even a dozen descriptions of what the man himself looked like.

Murphy laid the card down on the headline of the paper.

"You mean the two are connected?"

The girl nodded. Her face seemed suddenly lined and haggard. She had difficulty in breathing.

"That's right." She turned to the bartender, smiled. "Give me a glass of water, will you, Jack? I guess I'm scared," she admitted. "I feel like I'm burning up."

She gulped the water greedily, sucked deeply at her cigarette and spoke through a wreath of smoke as she tapped the card on the bar with a too long, crimson, fingernail.

"I went to him two months ago. He told me he could bring Bill back to life." She paused, added bitterly. "But he never. That's why I'm talking."

Murphy studied the girl's face, puzzled. In the indirect, fluorescent lighting of the barroom she seemed much older than he first had judged her to be.

"You aren't sick, are you, sister?"

"No," she shook her head. "Just a little scared, that's all." She glanced at the clock on the back bar. The hands stood at three minutes to eight. She laughed, nervously defiant. "He told me I'd die by eight o'clock. But I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"Who told you that you'd die?" Murphy asked.

She tapped the card on the bar impatiently.

"He did. The devil. He told me I'd dry up and burn in hell flames if I talked so much as a word."

"And just who is the devil?" Murphy probed.

"Why, Satan," she told him unsmiling. "Didn't you know? He came up from hell to organize the League of the Grateful Dead."

The bartender grinned and went back to toweling glasses.

"You're out the price of a double brandy, Murphy. She's hopped to the eyes."

"Go on," the reporter told her patiently. "You said you went to him two months ago to bring Bill back to life. Who's Bill?"

"My baby," she said simply. The flesh had grown strangely taut across her cheeks. "He died six months ago. And Satan told me if I gave him all my earnings for two months, he'd bring Bill back to life. That's why I went on the street. But he never. I guess we were such small fry he wouldn't mess with us."

Murphy stared at her, hard. The girl's lips were twisted as though she was crying but there were no tears in her eyes. Her cat-green eyes, themselves, had lost their hardness and their glitter and were sunk deep in her head. He had to rap sharply on the bar to recall her wandering attention.

"You say that Satan murdered these two men?"

She nodded, with an effort.

"That's right. First he brought them back to life, and then he let them die again because they threatened that they'd talk just like I'm doing."

"Brought them back to life?" the bartender scoffed.

"Yes," the girl told him slowly. "He could empty all the graves in town if he

wanted to. He's bringing Max Boderman, the rich banker, back to life tonight at Maplewood Cemetery. They say at the Club that his widow is paying half a million dollars for the resurrection." Her voice trailed off in a whisper.

The bartender reached for the phone.

"Better let me call a squad, Murph. The dame is not only hopped, she's nuts."

The reporter stopped him. He pointed to the girl but made no attempt to touch her.

"Turn on those ceiling lights, Jerry," he ordered curtly.

The bartender switched on the brighter lights and stood staring at the girl, his eyes bulging from his head.

THE girl still perched on the stool, one arm on the bar. But in the glare of the full light her whole figure seemed shrunken and shriveled. Her dress gaped loosely from her body. Her skin had turned a sickly brown. As they watched, it tightened across her cheekbones until it cracked like parchment. With an effort she turned her shrunken, faded eyes up to the clock and shuddered. Her voice was faint and seemed to come from far away.

"He said I'd die by eight o'clock if I talked. Satan said—"

Accustomed as he was to scenes of violence and sudden death, the reporter turned away briefly, gagged. The girl was dying, drying up as she sat there. Her words had stuck in her throat as the flesh of her neck contracted visibly to a taut, dried thickness no larger than a small man's wrist. Then, as he watched, her eyes dissolved, dropped back inside her skull and disappeared. But the burning cigarette still dangled from her grinning teeth and smoke began to issue from the empty sockets where her eyes had been.

The bartender, staring wide-eyed, began to whimper and make strange noises

in his throat. Murphy leaned across the bar and shook him.

"Snap out of it, Jerry. This is murder."

"But she's dead," the bartender whimpered. "She's dead. She turned into a mummy right before our eyes."

The reporter stood up on the rail and slapped him sharply.

"Snap out of it, Jerry!" he ordered. "You'll go nuts if you don't!" He discovered that he himself was shouting and fought hard for self-control.

His stomach retching, he backed off his stool, his eyes still on the girl and fumbled for his overcoat.

"You call the police. I'll phone the paper from the cab stand." He paused, fought his queasy stomach. "Then I'm going out to Maplewood Cemetery to watch Satan resurrect Max Boderman." One searching hand swept the bottle from which he had been drinking from the bar. The glass neck chattered against his teeth, briefly. Then he corked the bottle and dropped it in his pocket. His face was white but determined. "This is more than a story. Hell's loose in this man's town!"

The reporter forced himself to check the contents of the dead girl's purse. It held nothing but a motley assortment of make-up and odds and ends that gave no clue to her identity. Then he turned up the collar of his coat and strode out of the bar.

But the bartender didn't even see him go. He was still staring at the grinning mummy on the stool. A big man, his plump, smooth shaven jowls shook like jelly. Then, as the still contracting skin of what five minutes before had been a living woman caused a bony, brown, mummified arm to slide along the polished bar, its outstretched fingers pointing toward him, he screamed. He was still screaming and smashing at the 'thing' with bottles from the back bar when the police from the Chicago Avenue Station arrived.

CHAPTER TWO

The Devil Laughs

AT twenty-four hundred north, the western limits of Chicago are 72nd Street or Harlem Avenue. That's where the car line stops. Beyond that stretch, there are only a few cheap real estate developments, a few small suburban towns, then prairie. In between, several cemeteries blossom white and pink with their old-fashioned tombstones, stark white crosses, and squat, expensive mausoleums. Of these cemeteries, the largest and oldest is Maplewood.

Bounded on one side by the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul tracks, on the others by two highways and the little unincorporated town of Prairie Grove, Maplewood slept—its dead wrapped warm under fragrant evergreen grave coverings and a three foot blanket of snow.

Two yellow eyes that groped through the blinding snow and sleet grew to be a cab that skidded to a stop before the heavy wrought iron gates that separate the living from the dead.

"Four-sixty, Bud," the driver pulled his flag.

Murphy passed a five up through the glass partition, changed his mind and made it ten.

"Wait for me," Murphy repeated to the cabby.

The cab driver scrubbed at a side window with his glove, peered through the snow at the gates.

"You can't get in there no more tonight, Bud. They lock them gates at five o'clock."

"Wait for me," Murphy repeated.

He turned up the collar of his coat, pulled his hat down over his eyes, and stepped out of the cab, slamming the door behind him. The snow came to his knees and ten steps away, the cab had vanished behind a stinging curtain of white.

"But it's nice to know it's there," Murphy smiled wryly to himself. "If I have gone nuts he can drive me right on out to Elgin. If I haven't—" He shrugged and shook the wrought iron gates.

The gates clanked eerily but didn't give. Murphy ran his gloved fingers down the center bars and found they were looped with a chain, in turn fastened by a stout steel padlock. There was, however, if he remembered correctly, a second, smaller gate that opened directly from the platform of the now obsolete and seldom used Maplewood Station. There was a chance it might be open.

The reporter braced himself against the wind and plowed through the snow along the fence. At the corner of the fence he stopped and looked back. Loud on the rushing wind, the cemetery bell had begun to toll a requiem for the dead. Yet there was no light inside the lodge house or the office. Murphy stood, irresolute, listening to the bell while the short hairs on his neckline stiffened.

"What the hell," he reassured himself, "it's just the wind, that's all. Every phenomenon has got to have some natural explanation."

Still, it seemed strange that the bell should have started to toll. He turned the

corner grimly. The wind was stronger here and he had to pull himself along the fence hand over hand. The gate he had remembered was both unlocked and open. And the snow on the path that led inside had been freshly trampled by many feet.

"So," Murphy said.

He crouched in the shelter of the ancient station and finished the whiskey in the bottle in his pocket. It tasted good but failed to warm him. When he had phoned the office regarding the girl on the stool, they had claimed that he was drunk. He almost wished he was.

FAR inside the cemetery a yellow light showed through the curtain of snow, went out, then showed again. Murphy moved toward it cautiously, wading from tombstone to tombstone where the bare shrubbery and trees failed to hide his progress from any possible outposts whom Satan might have stationed. The bell still tolled.

"Three mummified corpses and a resurrection," he muttered to himself. "What the hell? No wonder the office thought I had an edge on."

The yellow light grew brighter, turned out to be a pressure lantern standing in the low, stone doorway of a mausoleum.

From the Confidential Notebook of Mr. F---



3 Felt like a million when I got up this morning. Ex-Lax worked fine. Just watch me go after those birds today!



1 Muffed two important sales today. Had no pep—just couldn't get going! Wonder if I hadn't better take a laxative—been putting it off too long.



2 Harry said I ought to try Ex-Lax. Took some before I turned in for the night. Say, this Ex-Lax taste is a new one on me—just like chocolate!

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

10¢ and 25¢



Its intermittent periods of darkness were caused by the passage of a score or more of heavily muffled figures who tramped a narrow circle around the mausoleum.

The reporter edged as close to the circle as he dared, stopped finally behind a huge stone cross. In the light from the lantern he studied the faces of the figures as they passed, and was surprised to find he knew as many of them as he did. Most of them were prominent business men and women whom he had interviewed at one time or another. But all had a strange unearthiness about their faces; an eager rapture he had never seen before. They seemed to be waiting for something—or for someone.

He tabulated their names mentally as they circled the expensive white marble Boderman mausoleum, stamping their feet and beating their arms against their bodies in an effort to be warm.

There was Boderman's widow wrapped in a sable coat that brushed her heels. She looked frightened. There was Judge Taggart, the retired Federal judge. And Marc Long, the merchant. Sam Green, the banker. Pete Harris the labor leader. Grenfal the lawyer. There was Petey Nichols, the gunman who had dropped suddenly of a heart attack in the lobby of the—

Murphy's mind stopped short in its tabulation. The grim, cold hand of fear clutched at his heart until he gasped for breath. He knew with a sudden, sickening sense of horror what had made their faces seem so strange. But for Max Boderman's widow, they were dead—had been dead, some of them, for half a year. He, Tim Murphy, himself, had written the obit on most of them, had seen them lowered into the ground and had heard the thump of clods of earth upon their coffins. He leaned back on the cross and fought for sanity. He was mad. This thing couldn't be. Or could it? He had seen a living woman turn into a mummy

right before his eyes—was seeing living dead tramp in a circle around the mausoleum of a man whom the girl had said that Satan meant to resurrect. He forced his eyes back to the circle.

As he watched, a puff of smoke rose from the snow before the mausoleum, turned into a red, blinding glare that forced his eyes to blink. When he opened them the flare had faded and a man stood where the smoke and flame had been. He was a man of medium size, well built, with a jet black mustache and a small goatee that looked like they were painted on the ivory pallor of his face.

Murphy realized he was breathing in huge, labored gasps.

"Satan, I'll bet you." He grinned involuntarily.

"That's right," a bland voice whispered in his ear. "That's right. He Satan. Supposing you come meet."

The reporter felt something prod him sharply in the back and knew without looking that it was a gun. He turned to see the usually smug, now evil and distorted face of Satan's Oriental secretary not six inches from his eyes.

"Why—" he hesitated.

The snout of the gun dug viciously in his spine.

"You come meet," the Oriental hissed. "Satan not like spies."

The gun insistent in his back, Murphy plowed in silence through the snow toward the circle of men and women clustered around the man who had appeared in smoke and flame. Satan was laughing. Murphy could hear him laugh, an unpleasant, tinkling little laugh that cut at his nerves with icy razor blades of fear.

DOCTOR MEREDITH was sober. There were three reasons for that. The first was that he had no money. The second was that in the only bar in which Tim Murphy had guaranteed his credit, a burly Irish cop had replaced the slaver-

ing bartender who claimed the dried and fragile mummy he had been discovered pounding into dust with whiskey bottles had walked into his bar alive. The third and most substantial reason he was sober was that Tim had not as yet come home to be imposed upon.

A tall, gaunt man with sad smiling eyes, Meredith had once been the top man in his line. His skill and his fees had been fabulous. And then the post-operative deaths had started. One, two, three, four, five, in orderly succession. Then there had been a lapse of almost two months before they began again. After the tenth death, Doctor Meredith had laid down his scalpel and vowed he had scrubbed for his last operation. And he had. A highly sensitive, cultured man, he had gone to hell fast.

It had taken him fifteen years to climb to the pinnacle of his fame as a surgeon. Ten months from the day he had laid down his scalpel, Doctor Agnew, who had been his assistant, had cut him dead on the street. Two months following that, Tim Murphy had picked him out of a Clark Street gutter and given him a home. For that Jim Meredith was grateful.

His long white fingers beat a tattoo on the frosted window of the apartment as the Doctor stared out at the night. His eyes were bloodshot and his nerves were screaming for a drink. Then the clock on the mantle struck twelve.

Meredith stared at it reflectively. If he could find a hock shop open he could hock it and perhaps buy half a pint. That the clock belonged to Murphy didn't even enter his consideration. He had fallen too low for that.

He picked up the clock and was weighing it in his hand when Murphy's key turned in the door. Murphy closed the door behind him and stood leaning up against it. His face was lined and haggard, his eyes deep pools of puzzled horror.

"You look," Jim Meredith told him, unabashed, "as though you'd seen the devil."

"I did," Murphy answered briefly. "And no need to hock the clock. I've brought you a quart of whiskey."

He tugged an unopened bottle from the pocket of his overcoat and set it on the table. The derelict reached for it, stopped, came around the table.

"You look all in, boy. Let me help you off with that coat."

"No," Murphy backed away. "Don't touch me, Doc. I don't know what the devil's done to me. But he did tell me I'd die if I talked. And I've got to talk to someone before I phone the paper."

As he talked he stripped off his snow-sodden overcoat and tossed it in a corner. Then followed it with his hat and shoes. He took his money, cigarettes, and notes from his pocket, piled them on the table and stripped to his shorts and shirt.

"You can't—catch—death, can you, Doc?" he asked.

"N-no," the once-great surgeon smiled. "I wouldn't say that death was catching. Why?"

"Because I've been rubbing shoulders with it for the last two hours," Murphy told him curtly. "I've been interviewing men and women I saw buried. I've been talking to the devil."

Meredith smiled politely.

"And damn it, don't smile at me." Murphy rapped. "Crack open that bottle and pour us both a drink—a big one. I'll be back as soon as I wash."

THE surgeon did as he was told. His fingers were trembling so he could hardly hold the glass but he waited for his drink until Murphy had finished splashing in the bathroom.

"How long," the reporter asked him as he sat down at the table, still dressed in only shirt and shorts, "would it take to turn a guy into a mummy, Doc?"

The surgeon sniffed at his drink, savored the bouquet reflectively, then gulped it.

"Perhaps," he coughed, "two years. Perhaps two thousand, dependent on the condition of the soil. Why?"

"Then you haven't read the papers?" Murphy asked.

"No," Meredith admitted, not the last few days, "I haven't."

"The devil can do it in no time at all," Murphy told him. "I saw a woman turned into a mummy in five minutes by the clock. I saw her dry up and die right before my eyes as if by magic. Now look, Doc. Pour us both another drink and listen to me."

Impelled by the urgency in his voice the older man obeyed.

"Yes—?"

Swiftly, graphically, Murphy told him what had happened in the bar.

"Impossible," the surgeon said.

"I saw it happen," Murphy shook his head. "And I saw more. I saw the devil bring a dead man back to life tonight." He sorted through the papers on the table. "I've written down the names of a dozen dead men and women whom I talked to. And if anything happens to me—"

Meredith smiled.

"It won't. Nothing more than a headache. But you certainly have gotten yourself a peach on, boy. I envy you."

"That's what my city editor told me," the reporter said dryly. He tossed Satan's red card on the table. "But if anything happens to me, that's the guy. He told me tonight I was going to die. And somehow I believe him."

Meredith sat staring at the scarlet card printed in gold that began, "WANTED—CORPSES."

"I met him tonight out at Maplewood Cemetery," Murphy told him. "His secretary, a slant-eyed chap by the name of Yoshama, prodded me up to Max Boderman's tomb with a gun."

As he talked the air in the room grew electric.

"I saw the devil lay his hands on Max, saw Max sit up in his coffin." The reporter's voice rose shrilly and broke. "So help me God, I did."

"Steady, boy," the surgeon told him. He poured a water glass half full of Scotch. "Drink that."

The reporter gulped it, stretched his forearms on the table and cradled his head for a moment. When he looked up his eyes were calmer.

"I'm letting it get me, Doc. And I mustn't. I've got to make someone believe me. The devil's come up from hell and he's right here in Chicago."

The derelict surgeon regarded the man who had befriended him. He wasn't drunk. And he wasn't mad. Jim Meredith would stake what little honor he had left on that.

"Go on, boy," he said quietly.

The reporter fished a cigarette from the crumpled pack on the table, lit it, and drew the smoke deep into his lungs.

"I don't know just exactly what his game is," he began. "But he's making millions at it. He charged Max Boderman's widow a half a million dollars tonight for bringing Max back to life."

"And it *was* Boderman you saw?" the surgeon asked.

"I THOUGHT of that," Murphy looked up at him sharply. "But it wasn't a switch as far as I could tell. His widow recognized him and after a few hysterical shrieks she fell into his arms."

"But not even the devil could bring a dead man back to life." The surgeon shook his head. "The thing is mad."

"Or I am," Murphy said grimly. "I tell you I saw it, Doc. And I talked with Judge Taggart, and Sam Green, and Grenfal."

"But they've been dead for weeks, months."

"So have the two men whose mummies were found on the streets today," Murphy said grimly. "I—" he hesitated. "Would you mind getting me a drink of water, Doc? I guess I must have caught cold out there. I feel like I'm burning up." He gulped the glass of water greedily, sucked deeply at his cigarette, continued. "They were brought back to life, then allowed to die again because they threatened to talk, just like the girl did, just like I'm talking now."

The surgeon sat eyeing him sharply. His friend seemed somehow older, more haggard than he had ever seen him.

"Did he give you anything out there, Murph, make you drink anything, or inject anything subtravenously?"

"No. Not a thing," Murphy told him. He grinned wryly through lips the skin of which seemed taut. "All I had to do was kneel in the snow with dead men and women all around me while Satan said Black Mass." His voice seemed faint and far away. "He promised us everything here on earth our hearts desire. And in return all those living dead men and women had to promise him—" His voice trailed off inaudible.

Meredith got slowly to his feet, stared with clinically professional eyes at the other man's face.

"You're not well, Tim."

"No," the reporter admitted frankly. "No. I'm not." Revulsion filled his face. "I don't feel any pain, but I'm dying. I—I can feel my insides dissolving, drying up. I—I don't know how the hell he's done it, but he has."

He spoke dispassionately, calmly, drugged by the sleepy torpor of death. He was a dead man and he faced the fact. He had watched another die as he himself was dying.

Meredith stood in silence, his eyes on the other man's face. There was nothing he could do. There was nothing that anyone could do. He had watched death's

stealthy approach too many times not to know. But this death was obscure.

The reporter's shrinking lips framed a word. But he never spoke it. The word evaporated in his throat as the liquid and the tissue of his glands and organs dissolved and shrunk into atomic matter in the painless hell flame that was eating at his vitals.

Then Murphy's eyes began to run, dripped down, a gelatinous mass, inside his skull. He was dead. Only the smoke-plumed cigarette stuck to his withered upper lip was still alive. What once had been a man was but a leering mummy with cracked, dried parchment for a face.

Meredith sloped some whiskey in his glass with shaking fingers, raised it to his lips, then set it down untouched.

"No," he shook his head. "I don't need that. Murphy was my friend." He picked up Murphy's notes from the table and stared at them through blood-shot eyes. There was something vaguely familiar that the names of the living dead had in common—but what it was, his drink-sodden mind was unable to recall. "Murphy was my friend," he repeated. "I'll find the devil who killed him."

The dead man shifted slightly in his chair as the flesh on his bones contracted. The night wind howled cold and mocking at the window like a laugh—a devil's laugh straight out of hell.

CHAPTER THREE

Please to Meet Satan

THE girl at the switchboard was new. She stared dubiously at the unshined shoes, the unpressed suit, and the beard-stubbled chin of the man before the desk.

"Yes—?"

"Doctor James Meredith," he told her. "To see Doctor Agnew."

She raised an eyebrow slightly.

"You have an appointment?"

"No," he admitted. "I haven't. But I know he always operates on Thursdays and I had hoped I'd find him here."

The girl had been about to order him out of the lobby, but the obviously cultured voice emanating from the derelict's bearded lips gave her pause. She consulted a list on her desk.

"Doctor Agnew will be here today," she admitted. "He's scheduled to operate at eight."

Meredith looked at the clock on the wall. It was seven.

"Thank you," he told her. "I'll wait."

His worn shoes scuffing on the tile, he crossed the corridor of the hospital foyer and seated himself in a large, over-stuffed chair just to the right of a door that bore a small brass plate announcing that it was for Doctors only.

From time to time a surgeon with an early morning schedule passed him. Most of them didn't even recognize him. The few who did merely nodded.

He opened the paper he had brought and stared thoughtfully at the headline. It was terse and grim with understatement. It read: TERROR GRIPS CITY.

The sub-head read in almost as many points: Tim Murphy Ace Reporter of Morning *Reformer* is fourth mummified body to be found!

There followed a description of the finding of the reporter's underwear-clad mummy following an anonymous phone call. There had been no one else in the apartment but there had been a whiskey bottle on the table with two glasses. The whiskey was being analyzed. A homeless derelict known to have been befriended by Murphy was being sought for questioning. It was believed, however, that he could throw little light on the situation. The best medical minds in the City after an exhaustive examination of the three mummified bodies previously found admitted themselves to be baffled.

A new and insidious terror had grown

up over-night. Nor was that terror modified by the fact that two of the mummies found, while listed by the department of health as 'deceased' some weeks previously, were said by sworn testimony to have been seen alive but a few minutes before their dried and mummified bodies had been discovered. As yet, their families had not been located for questioning.

This was contradicted, in turn, by an A. P. dispatch from Los Angeles. The widow of one of the men had been located there and swore there must be some mistake in the identity of the body. For, despite the fact that she and her multi-millionaire husband had been estranged for some time over another woman, she had been with her husband on the night that he had died in Mercy Hospital. The death certificate had been signed by Doctor Agnew.

MEREDITH folded his paper neatly and slipped it back into his pocket. He wondered grimly if it might not have been best for him to take Tim Murphy's scribbled notes directly to his paper first, decided that it wouldn't. Tim's notes consisted mainly of a dozen scrawled names of men and women known to be dead. He, Jim Meredith had the story, he believed, but he wanted to be certain of his facts before he talked.

He sat rubbing the worn welts of his shoes together and listening to the conversation in the doctor's lounge. It was, as was natural, mainly of the gruesome terror and tragedy headlined by the morning papers.

A voice he recognized as Ben Winton's, the noted pathologist, scoffed at the whole affair.

"But damn it, you know as well as I do," Winton snorted, "the thing's impossible. It's mad. Certainly. Some chemicals can burn up flesh and tissue like that." He snapped his fingers. "After all, in the chemical composition of the body

were found sixty-six percent water, three percent nitrogen, two percent hydrogen, six and seven-tenths percent oxygen—all vulnerable elements easily done away with by an opposing chemical process. But the papers claim that two of those men were dead, climbed back up out of their graves and walked around for several weeks before they dropped dead—mummies.”

“But not Murphy, the reporter,” Glendive the geneologist protested. “Nor the mummy of the girl they picked up in that North Clark Street bar. Both of them

it by making it all the more obvious.

“Hello, Bill,” Meredith greeted him.

Doctor Agnew paused, pretended to wipe the steam from the Oxford glasses he affected, although Meredith knew that he had seen him when he first came in the door.

“Oh. Oh it’s you, Meredith,” he said finally.

“Yes,” Meredith admitted. “It’s me.”

Agnew cleared his throat impatiently, frowned, and reached for his wallet.

“Well? How much this time?”

The name of William R. Cox has long been a favorite with readers of this magazine, so we know that you will not want to miss his latest feature-length novelette, STUKAS OVER TEXAS, appearing in the March issue of ACE G-MAN STORIES, on sale at your newsstand today!

were known to be alive at eight o’clock last night.”

Someone else said something that Meredith couldn’t catch. Then he saw Agnew coming in the front door of the hospital and got slowly to his feet as the other surgeon who had once been his assistant paused at the desk for his mail.

Prosperity, he decided, agreed with Bill Agnew. His former assistant, who had taken over his practice when the series of unexplainable deaths had driven him to drink, was plumper, less ferret-like about the features. He wore an expensive broadcloth overcoat lined with fur. His silver mounted bag was of pin seal.

Jim Meredith ran his hands down the sides of his own greasy top-coat. Despite his own fall, he didn’t envy Agnew. The man was a fair surgeon, but he was money-mad. And not even his prosperity could conceal nor heal the twisted and deformed right leg that had left its indelible stamp of bitterness on the mind of the man. Agnew was always conscious of it, thrusting himself forward as if to hide

“This isn’t a touch,” his former superior assured him. “You’ve read the morning papers?”

“I have.”

“Well, Murphy was my friend.”

THE other man looked puzzled, then his thin lips twisted. “What am I supposed to do, cry?”

“No,” Meredith said quietly. “I just wish that you’d make it possible, Bill, for me to look at the hospital records.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Judge Taggart died here at Mercy, didn’t he?” Meredith asked him. “And Grenfal the lawyer? And Marc Long? And Pete Harris?”

Agnew puzzled his brow in thought.

“Some of those names are familiar,” he admitted. “Perhaps they did. What about it? Mercy is one of the largest hospitals in the city. A lot of people die here. A lot of people die in every hospital. Just what is it that you want?”

“To have you make it possible for me to look at the records.” Meredith smiled

wryly. "I believe I've been dropped from the staff."

"Yes," Agnew nodded, "you have. And you can't blame the board, Jim. Frankly, the way you've let yourself go to pieces—"

"I know, I know," the older man interrupted wearily. "But if you'll just okay me to the girl at the desk and see that I have access to the death records for half an hour, that's all I ask."

For a moment the other man seemed about to refuse, then he shrugged.

"All right. But it sounds as insane to me as some of the other things that you've done." He stepped across the corridor to the desk. "This is Doctor Meredith," he introduced him. "He formerly was on the staff here and I'll appreciate it as a personal favor if you give him access to any of the hospital records he may care to see."

The girl behind the counter beamed. Her smile alone was proof of the former assistant's standing.

"Yes, Doctor Agnew. Just as you say, sir."

Agnew smiled in his superior fashion, turned to Meredith.

"Certain a few dollars wouldn't help you?"

The night before Meredith would have taken them and been grateful. Now he shook his head, flushed slightly.

"No. Thank you." He paused, eyed the other man intently. "But you might tell me this, Bill. What did you ever do with that saline anaesthetic that we were working on?"

Agnew looked puzzled.

"I don't recall it, Jim. Why?"

"No reason," Meredith told him. "Just wondered." He turned his back abruptly, faced the desk. "And now if I may, Miss, I'd like to look at those records. The case records and death certificates of certain names I'll give you. Men and women who have died here."

For a moment the ferret-faced surgeon

glared at the threadbare back of the man who had once been his superior, then he turned on his heel and stamped across the corridor into the door that was marked—
For Doctors Only.

WHEN she found out that he had been *the* Doctor Meredith, the record clerk couldn't do enough for the shabby man, who for the best part of an hour had sat poring over the case records of men and women long since supposed to be dead.

"You saved my mother's life," she told him. "You trepanned for a blood clot."

Jim Meredith smiled wearily.

"That was a long time ago, before I lost my skill." He folded up the papers on which he had been writing and put them in his pocket. "But thank you. You've been kind."

He slipped into his top-coat as a fresh-faced young intern banged into the office.

"Four-sixteen just died," he told the clerk.

"Mrs. Boderman?" she asked.

"That's right." The intern grinned. "And boy. Would I like to inherit those millions."

Meredith frowned, puzzled.

"You don't by any chance mean Max Boderman's widow?"

"That's the one," the intern told him. "She came in an emergency last night. It seems she smashed that big imported car of hers right smack into a culvert out on the Maplewood road."

Meredith closed his eyes. In his day he had been considered an over-conscientious surgeon who refused to cut until every detail of the diagnosis checked with all known facts. And in the case on which he was working, Max Boderman's widow had worried him. Her death had clarified a lot. He was ready now to face Tim Murphy's editor. If he wasn't locked up as insane, he believed he could point out the devil. Proving it would be up to the police.

He bowed, thanked the record clerk again, and left the office. Through the thin partition he could hear the intern ask—

“And who was that bum?”

“Why that,” the record clerk told him, “was Doctor Meredith. *The Doctor Meredith.*”

The intern’s muffled, “Gee!” was solace to his soul. Perhaps Tim Murphy had been right. Perhaps he could come back. Perhaps he hadn’t been responsible for those ten deaths. Perhaps—

The bite of the icy wind that rushed up Michigan Avenue to greet him as the door of the hospital closed behind him cut short his thoughts. It sank its icy fingers through his threadbare clothes and tore at his tortured nerves. What he needed, he decided, was a drink.

He counted the change in his pocket. He had exactly fifteen cents and he had picked that off the table on which Tim Murphy had died. He braced his body against the wind and walked out to the curb. The traffic light was against him. He stood huddled against a lamp post waiting for it to change.

“Taxi, mister?”

A cab drew up beside him and he shook his head.

“Better get in and ride, mister,” the driver insisted.

“No thank you,” Meredith refused. “I—”

He looked up to find himself staring into the muzzle of a gun held by the slim yellow fingers of a smiling Oriental who sat on the rear seat of the cab.

“I think perhaps you had better ride,” the Oriental smiled. “Satan would like to see you.”

Meredith licked his lips. The smiling Oriental was a killer. It showed in the glittering pin points of his iris, in the cruel, thin lips.

“But I don’t know Satan,” he protested.

The Oriental’s yellow fingers whitened on the trigger of his gun.

“That is an oversight we mean to remedy. Step into the cab. You will please to meet Satan.”

Meredith did as he was told. There was nothing else he could do.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead Men Don’t Talk

THE room was as impressive as the man. Semi-dark, it was lighted by four red flares, one in each corner. Each flare gave off an insidious, yet somehow pleasant, smell of sulphur. The walls were draped in thick black folds of heavy silk. The only furniture was the chair and desk at which Satan sat and a chair for the consultant. A fifth red beam of light shone through the glass-topped desk and etched Satan’s ivory face in bas-relief against the gloom behind him.

“So,” Satan smiled, “you are Doctor Meredith.”

“I am,” Meredith admitted.

Satan waved the waiting Oriental from the office.

“You may leave us, Yoshama. I hardly think that Doctor Meredith will attempt any violence.”

The Oriental backed to the door, bowed from the room.

Meredith sat studying the face of the man before him. It was vaguely familiar. It once had been a strong face but both the eyes and the ivory pallor of the skin gave evidence to trained eyes that the man was addicted to drugs.

“You wanted to see me?” Meredith asked finally.

Satan smiled.

“Yes. It has been brought to my attention that you have developed an overwhelming curiosity concerning certain of my subjects who belong to the League of the Grateful Dead.”

"Can't we drop the fol-de-rol?" Meredith asked. "You're not impressing me at all. I know you're a fake. And I believe I know the man who is behind you."

Satan merely smiled his languid smile.

"No one is behind the devil. I have chosen this means and form of returning to earth for certain reasons of my own." He paused. "But we digress. I want those notes and names that your friend Mr. Murphy so unfortunately wrote down last night at Maplewood Cemetery while I was resurrecting a certain Mr. Max Boderman from the dead."

Meredith took the notes from his pocket and laid them on the desk.

"Also what data you collected at Mercy Hospital this morning," Satan insisted.

Meredith added his own notes to the small pile of papers on the desk.

"I can remember the names," he smiled. "And when I leave here I'm going to the Morning *Reformer* first, and then to the police."

"The police?" Satan smiled. "I see you are still laboring under a grave misapprehension, Doctor Meredith. You still believe I am a fake, a charlatan."

"I know you are."

Satan shook his head.

"I am sorry, for your sake, but I am real. And when you leave this office, you won't talk. The police will merely be more mystified when a fifth mummified corpse is found." He chuckled. "You have no idea of the disciplinary effect of those four corpses on the members of my League of the Grateful Dead."

"They aren't dead. It's a racket," Meredith said grimly.

Satan smiled.

"There have been complaints?"

"No," Meredith admitted. "Dead men can't talk. You kill them before they can—kill them as you killed Tim Murphy, killed that woman in that Clark Street bar."

"That's right," Satan agreed. "As I

am going to kill you in just a moment." He paused, opened a humidor on his desk, selected a cigarette and lighted it. As an after-thought, he waved his long thin fingers to the box.

Meredith took one.

"Thank you."

Satan extended the still burning lighter in his hand, an amused smile on his face. Meredith leaned forward, the cigarette between his lips. But before he could light it, the door to the office opened.

"Is the police again," the Oriental hissed. "They will not believe you are not here."

A frown of annoyance crossed Satan's face. He gathered the scattered papers on his desk into a mound.

"Burn these in one of the flares," he ordered. "I had hoped we could postpone this, but it seems we can't." Ignoring Meredith completely, he sat stroking his small black goatee. Then he smiled at the heavy, impatient rapping on the door. "So the police want to question Satan. All right. But I am afraid they will be surprised."

THE corridors of the South State Street Central Bureau swarmed with camera men and leg men. A palpable fake though he was, they were covering the biggest story Chicago had ever known. Satan had been arrested.

Inside the commissioner's office, Commissioner Craig sighed wearily.

"Why will you persist that you are Satan? You're a faker and you know it."

The man who claimed that he was Satan smiled.

"Yes?"

The commissioner spat out his cigar.

"All right. We'll wait until your fingerprints come back from Washington. Until then we'll hold you on an open charge."

Satan shrugged.

"And now you." The commissioner

turned to Meredith. "What were you doing there inside this charlatan's office?"

"I was forced there at the point of a gun," Meredith told him truthfully.

"By whom?"

Meredith pointed to the sober faced Oriental. "By that man there. I believe Yoshama is his name."

"Is that right?" the commissioner asked the oriental.

"No, sir," Yoshama lied. He pointed to Meredith. "He come in answer to advertisement. He say he lose good friend named Murphy, would much like to meet his spirit."

The commissioner covered his face with his hands for a moment, then exploded.

"Now look here, damn it," he stormed. "I'm getting tired of all this run-a-round." He leveled a finger at Satan. "Just what kind of a racket are you running?"

"No racket," Satan told him. "If you would ever care to consult me profes-

sionally, I'll be pleased to talk to you. But under the circumstances I am afraid I must refuse. As you yourself suggested, why don't we wait until my fingerprints come back from Washington?"

The commissioner looked around the grim, stern faces in his office. Most of the more influential civic leaders had gathered there at his request.

"Is the editor of the *Morning Reformer* here?"

A wiry little white-haired man stepped forward.

"Here I am, sir."

"Murphy, the fourth mummified corpse that we found, worked for you. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"And you say that he phoned you last night that he saw the dame in that Clark Street bar turned into a mummy?"

"He did."

"And that he was on his way out to

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Maplewood Cemetery to watch Satan here resurrect the body of Max Boderman?"

"That's what he said. I figured he was high."

The commissioner nodded.

"I still do. But we can tell better on that score when the squad I've sent out to Maplewood call in their report. If Boderman's body is still in his tomb, then Murphy was drunk."

"But he wasn't drunk," Meredith protested. "I talked to him when he came back." He pointed a finger at Satan. "And as I've already told you, Tim said that he not only saw Satan there resurrect Max Boderman but he had talked to at least a dozen men and women whom you have listed on your files as dead."

The commissioner smiled skeptically.

"I believe you were once quite a well known surgeon, Doctor. Can you explain a dead man coming back to life?"

"In this instance, yes, I think I can," Meredith admitted. He scribbled a phone number and a name on a piece of paper. "But before I begin my explanation I'd like to have you call that number and ask that man to be here."

The commissioner pursed his lips.

"**W**HY not?" he decided finally. "The more the merrier. The whole town is going to have hysterics unless we crack this case." He handed the paper to an assistant. "Send out a squad car and bring this fellow in."

The assistant left the office.

"Might I ask the name of the man for whom you're sending?" the white-haired editor of the *Morning Reformer* asked.

"Doctor Agnew of Mercy Hospital," the commissioner told him. He stared hard at Meredith. "But just where does Doctor Agnew come in?"

Meredith smiled grimly.

"If I'm right, he's the devil."

The man who claimed to be Satan laughed thinly.

"How amusing. I seem to have a competitor."

"You, shut up," the commissioner ordered. He turned back to Meredith. "And you say you know how those guys and that dame were turned into mummies, Doctor Meredith?"

"I think I do."

The commissioner wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Thank God for that. Another of them mummified corpses popping up, and I'll have hysterics myself." He looked at the man who claimed to be Satan. "I was beginning to believe you were the devil."

"I am," the other told him smiling.

A lieutenant fought his way into the office through a mob of howling reporters. His eyes were puzzled. His face was pale. He looked at the man who claimed to be Satan and then looked away.

"Washington has just reported on those fingerprints, sir," he saluted.

"Yes—?" the commissioner looked up.

The lieutenant stared hard at the man who claimed to be Satan, huge drops of perspiration beading his forehead. He forced his eyes back to his chief.

"And Washington wants to know what the joke is, sir. They say that according to the fingerprints we sent them, he's ten men—and that all ten of those men are dead!"

The silence grew inside the office until the beating of their hearts pounded in the eardrums of the straining men like strange and somehow obscene tom-toms.

White-faced, the lieutenant laid a sheaf of telephoto pictures on the desk.

"According to the whorls of his left thumb, he is Mace Manders the magician who was electrocuted at Stateville two years ago for the murder of his wife. According to the whorls of his right thumb, he's Johnny Green, the bandit, who was shot last year by a squad from the Woodlawn station. According to the whorls of his left forefinger—"

The man who claimed that he was Satan laughed an unpleasant, tinkling little laugh.

"Perhaps now you will believe me." He picked up his hat from the commissioner's desk and shaped it on his head. "Satan is not one, but many people." He stretched out his hand and a belch of smoke and crimson flame flared in the doorway. "If you want me for any further questioning, gentlemen, I'd suggest that you go to hell!"

He had the door already open when the commissioner came to his senses.

"Stop him! Shoot him! Stop that man!" he bellowed.

The lieutenant leveled his gun.

"Stop!" he ordered.

Satan smiled, turned his back deliberately and walked out of the door into the hall.

"Stop!" the lieutenant ordered—then fired.

Six steel-jacketed bullets picked curiously at the cloth of Satan's well-tailored and departing back. But that was all they did do—that, and scatter the reporters who scrambled cursing for safety. Satan didn't even turn his head, just kept on walking down the hall.

"So sorry," Yoshama beamed. He closed the door behind them.

For a moment there was only silence in the room and the pungent smell of gun smoke. The commissioner broke it with an oath. His superstitious, Irish face was florid.

"By God!" he swore. "By God! *He was the Devil!*"

CHAPTER FIVE

League of the Grateful Dead!

DESPITE the fact that it was three o'clock in the morning and bitter cold, the corners of State and Madison were as crowded as they had ever been at

noon. Men and women avoided each other's eyes as they milled in a mass for safety. The thing was mad, impossible—still, there was no explanation but the fact that it was so. Hell was loose in the streets of Chicago and the devil roamed the by-ways.

Twelve blocks down the street, past VanBuren, in a cheap South State Street bar, Doctor Meredith stared with solemn eyes at the headlines of the paper in which he had just invested the last three cents he had. A glass of five cent beer sat on the bar in front of him—untouched.

The paper made no exaggerations. It merely stated fact. Since disappearing from the police commissioner's office in a harmless fusillade of lead, Satan had not been seen. . . . Contradictory witnesses testified he had disappeared into the ground—stepped into a cab—walked briskly north on State Street. . . . A mysterious fire had developed in the suite of offices that he had used in the Braddock Building. . . . The corpse of Max Boderman, said to be resurrected was not in its tomb. . . . According to the infallible fingerprint department of the F.B.I. the prints sent them by the C.P.D. were those of ten men who had been executed in the State of Illinois within the last two years. . . . A ragged derelict, once one of the city's most respected surgetons, had made wild and unsupported accusations against a prominent citizen whom the paper allowed to remain unnamed. . . . The derelict, believed to be insane from drink, had disappeared. . . . It was known to be a racket of some kind. . . . It was known to be the truth. . . . Several noted clergymen were holding special services in an effort to re-establish the city on a normal spiritual keel. . . . The thing couldn't be. . . . It could be. . . . Responsible citizens were beginning to report to the police that they had recently seen men and women on the streets who were known to that department to be dead. . . . The grief-stricken

families of the men and women specified had sworn that it wasn't so.

"And it all boils down," Meredith told his glass of flat, stale beer, "to the fact that no one knows a damn. No one even suspects the truth but me, and they say I'm mad."

"You say something?" the barkeep demanded.

"No, just thinking aloud," Meredith shook his head.

"Then drink your beer and get out," the barkeep ordered. "You bums make me sick. You come in here and soak up a night's warm lodging on a nickel beer."

Meredith walked to the door and stood staring out into the night. It had begun to snow again and the curbs had piled high with the drift. He wondered what he ought to do. Perhaps he was crazy. Perhaps the man was Satan.

He fished in his pockets for a cigarette, found one in his coat pocket, put it between his lips and fumbled for a match.

His hand stopped halfway to his pocket. He took the cigarette from between his lips and stared at it. It was an expensive Turkish brand. It was the one that Satan had given him in his office. His eyes grew suddenly cold.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said. "I will be damned."

He put the cigarette carefully back into his pocket. Then he strode out into the night, his shoulders squared. He knew where he was going—and he knew what he had to do.

THE building itself was attractive and comparatively new. It had been built in the boom of '29 as a hotel, sold in the slump of the early '30's to Doctor Meredith for a private hospital, and at his mental collapse had been absorbed in the general debris of his estate. Later, an undisclosed syndicate had bought it as a residence club house, and as such it was now used.

A liveried doorman stood at the door, but few members came or went. Those who did went out the back way and at night. The neighbors were normally curious, but no more. It was obviously a rich man's club and as such held little place or interest in their own busy, narrow lives.

Outside the heavily curtained first floor windows, a lone watcher crouched behind a tree for meager shelter from the wind and snow. From time to time he raised his eyes to contemplate the bright white light that shone through the skylight window on the top and seventh floor in what once had been an operating room.

Inside the heavily curtained windows of the club house, the air was thick with smoke and conversation. The lounge was filled with old men, young men, rich men, poor men; colorful with red-lipped youthful girls whose eyes were too bright; drab with pursed-lipped, prim old ladies; tempered with well-dressed matrons, and all had one bond in common.

Most of them were living dead. Most of them had died, been buried, and were resurrected. All were in debt to Satan. All had sold him their souls for life. All belonged to the League of the Grateful Dead.

The League rules themselves were simple. There were only three of them. They were:

- 1: Thou shalt Eat, Drink, and be Merry for thou hast been dead and buried and now thou shalt live forever.
- 2: Thou shalt converse with no one but a fellow member of the League concerning thy resurrection under penalty of returning to the grave.
- 3: Thou shalt remember thou hast sold thy soul to thy master who is Satan. When he speaks *thou shalt obey*.

ON THE second floor of the club house Yoshama the oriental rapped softly on a paneled office door.

"Come in," the voice of Satan called.

Yoshama turned the door knob then stepped politely to one side.

"Please to proceed," he bowed.

The florid faced, white-haired man in the doorway nodded curtly, took his younger, golden-haired companion by the arm and walked into the office.

It was similar to the office where Satan had held his consultations in the Loop but even more elaborate. Purported hell flames flared against the entire background of the wall. The air was heavy with incense.

"Yes, Mr. Green—?" Satan asked.

"Yoshama says you want to see me."

The dead banker nodded glumly.

"I do."

Satan indicated two snow white chairs with legs of gleaming human thigh bones, seats of interlaced human ribs, and backs of tibias webbed with human clavicles, each corner tibia posted with a human skull.

The resurrected banker sat down heavily.

"I want to get out of here," he said grimly.

Satan raised his neatly arched black eyebrows.

"That is possible—for a price."

"But we've given you almost everything we have," the golden haired girl protested. She began to cry. "Oh, if I'd only known that it was going to be like this I never would have come to you the night Sam died. I'd have let him stay in his grave."

Satan shrugged.

"If it is Mr. Green's desire it can be arranged that he return to his grave." He smoothed out the pages of an early morning extra that featured a picture of the four mummified corpses. "I have sent three of our League members who grew garrulous down to hell within the last two days."

"No. Not like that," the banker shud-

dered. "I don't want to die. I want to live. But I want to leave this awful place—this clubhouse. How much for Gwendolyn and me to leave here?"

"Money," Satan mused, "is the root of all evil, and I am evil." He considered. "Suppose we say the customary plastic surgical operation that I insist upon whenever a member leaves, your promise to report to me once every month, and five hundred—" He stopped short in the middle of his sentence, listening.

"Yes, Master—?" Yoshama asked him tersely.

Satan pointed to the wall.

"I thought I heard something just outside the window there, something that sounded like leather scraping on rungs of steel."

"Is perhaps somebody climbing up fire escape." The Oriental smiled evilly. A long, thin, glittering knife appeared in his hand. "You please to excuse me, Master."

Satan listened thoughtfully for a moment, then shook his head.

"No, Yoshama." He rose from the chair behind his desk, nodded curtly to the man and girl in front of it. "You two will leave now. We will discuss the matter later."

The elderly man got up wearily from the gruesome chair on which he sat and helped his still weeping companion to the door.

"Yes, Master," he said quietly.

Yoshama closed the door behind them, pulled a switch that killed the crimson hell flame, and parting an asbestos curtain on the wall, looked out and up through a window.

"Is man," he announced in a whisper. "One man. Is almost up to fourth floor now and climbing higher."

Satan lighted a cigarette, smiled thinly.

"He is welcome, Yoshama. Being Satan, I am intuitive. It must be the one

man in all this city whom we might have reason to expect." He placed one long ivory finger to his forehead in mock psychic thought. "Yes. I should say it is the once-great Doctor Meredith who has grown over-anxious to become a member of the League of the Grateful Dead."

He chuckled evilly, without mirth. Yoshama ran his thumb nail the length of his glittering knife blade, chuckled with him.

FROM where he clung to the last steel rungs of the spidery fire escape, slippery with ice and sleet, the crawling lights of cars on the street below looked like toys. And the wind was stronger here. Jim Meredith braced his weight against the ladder and blew on the tips of his gloveless fingers to warm them.

It would, he thought, be so easy to just let go. He put the thought from his mind. He was the one man in Chicago who knew who the devil really was. It was up to him, for Tim Murphy's sake, if nothing else, to prove it—kill him if he could. He clutched at the icy steel rungs with his bleeding fingers.

"Up we go," he grunted.

With the last of his strength he pulled himself over the bulge of the roof. He lay there in the snow for minutes, breathing hard.

The skylight window, only feet away, lighted the snow around it. Too tired to stand, he crawled across the flat roof through the snow to where he could look inside. It once had been his own private operating room. It was as he remembered it with no new equipment added. Only the scrub nurse, the third nurse busily picking bloody sponges from the floor, and the anesthetist were new. They were, he decided grimly, probably members of the League of the Grateful Dead.

The corners of the room, lighted only by the powerful dome light over the operating table, lay in shadows. He stared

long at the operating surgeon's back. He was performing a difficult operation on an elderly white-haired patient, and was bungling every move. The devil was attempting, probably had attempted hundreds of operations, that only six or seven surgeons in the world were qualified to do.

Meredith got slowly to his feet and peered through the blinding snow to locate the kiosk of the trap door that he remembered led down through the roof. It was piled high with the icy drift but was unlocked. Painfully, with bleeding fingertips, the once-great surgeon picked the ice and snow away. It was then he found the bar. It was of steel, thumb thick, and two feet long. A pry bar, forgotten by some worker, it was a murderous bludgeon in the hands of a determined man.

The surgeon laid it down again where he could find it and tugged gently at the door. It opened slowly, outward. Then he picked up the bar again, stepped into the darkened stair well and closed the door behind him.

The familiar odor of antiseptics filled his nostrils. He smiled wryly. He was only a few steps from his own operating room. He had come back as Tim Murphy had prophesied. But not in the manner Tim had meant. He had come to take life, not to save it.

"For God's sake hand me that adrenalin syringe," he heard a thin voice say. "Quick. The old goat's dying on the table."

"He's gone," a male voice Meredith decided must be the anesthetist's answered. "I can't feel any pulse at all."

"Well, take him away, then," the thin voice said impatiently. "And send up another case." Meredith could visualize the thin lips smacking.

Meredith waited where he was until he heard a swinging door sway shut and the soft suck of the rubber tires of a stretcher on tile fade down the hall. Then he stepped out of the stairwell, stared with

hard, cold eyes at the door of the operating room presided over by the bloody butcher who posed as a human being.

"Wish me luck, Tim," he said quietly.

Grasping the bar firmly he strode across the hall and in through the swinging doors.

The surgeon looked up, smiled.

"Well, so you got here," he said thinly. "You're just in time. I'll take you next. I guess I'll do a trephine on you in an attempt to find your brains."

not immediately. The Oriental was expecting him to draw away. But he didn't.

Meredith literally spitted himself on the knife as he lunged, sideways, felt the blade slip into his flesh and twist from Yoshama's hand. Then the swinging steel bar in his own right hand curved in a vicious arc and he heard a satisfying crunch of bone as the Oriental's skull caved in.

"Stop him! Stop him!" the white-faced surgeon behind the operating table screamed.

For thrilling mystery and fast action, Dane Gregory, the author of many stories that have appeared in these pages, is pretty hard to beat. You will be sure to enjoy MY FELLOW TRAVELER, a story that will have you gasping and guessing until the last word. Read it in the February issue of DETECTIVE TALES. . . .

Meredith stood where he was, the bar tensed in his hands, his muscles poised to spring. Then two figures stepped out of the shadowy corners of the room.

"Drop that bar!" a sybilant Oriental voice hissed in his ear. "Drop that bar or else you are a dead man!"

Meredith gritted his teeth against the pain as the sharp point of an eager knife sank experimentally for a good half-inch into the thin flesh between his ribs.

Then the soft voice of Satan chuckled.

"Your English composition is very poor, Yoshama. Doctor Meredith is a dead man whether or not he drops that bar."

CHAPTER SIX

The Dead Die Once

MEREDITH hadn't a chance, and he knew it. But he resolved to die hard. With a surgeon's knowledge of anatomy, he knew that the slanting thrust of the knife blade where it was started would be painful, but not necessarily fatal. At least

Panting on one knee in the corner where the force of his blow had sent him, Meredith thought desperately. A wire ran around the baseboard of the operating room. If he could break that wire, plunge the room into darkness—he hooked the curved end of his bar in the wire and yanked. The wire snapped in two, its insulation frazzled. But the lights still burned.

"Ripping out the outside telephone wire won't do you any good," Satan smiled. "We don't need to call for help."

He walked slowly, warily, an automatic in his hand, toward the panting figure crouching on one knee. He didn't dare to fire for fear of hitting his compatriot in evil. Before he could, Meredith again did the unexpected. He ducked in under Satan's guard and swung the short steel bar at the terror-stricken surgeon's head.

It missed its mark by a hair's breadth as the screaming surgeon jerked back his head and the bar slid off his shoulder to fracture his upper arm just above the elbow.

That was the last that Meredith re-

remembered. The whole back of his skull exploded and Yoshama's dead face came up from the floor to meet him.

When he recovered consciousness he was surprised that he wasn't dead. He hadn't expected to open his eyes again. He looked around him blearily.

He was still in the operating room, lying in the shadows in one corner. In the full glare of the dome light Bill Agnew sat on the operating table on which he had but recently killed a man while the anesthetist set his fractured arm, arranged it in a splint, and bound it to his body.

Jim Meredith smiled grimly. It was at least a compound fracture. He'd done that much. Bill Agnew wouldn't operate for months, if ever.

The man who claimed to be Satan was the first to notice that the man on the floor had come to. He walked over and kicked him in the teeth.

"You die hard, don't you?" he said.

Meredith spit out a mouthful of blood.

"Yes," he admitted, "I do. Perhaps," he added quietly, "it's because I've been dying for the last two years." He looked at the man on the table. "You did that to me, Bill."

His former assistant scowled.

"Just you wait until Breen, here, finishes fixing my arm. Then I'll fix you." He toyed with the scalpel in his hand.

"No," the man on the floor shook his head. "You can't do anything more to me than you already have."

But for the dome light over the operating table the rest of the room was in darkness. Meredith moved uneasily. He seemed to be lying on something sharp. He found it was the ripped end of the phone wire and hunched himself up to a sitting position against the wall. The knife was still in his wound. He drew it out and mopped ineffectually at the oozing blood with his hand.

"Knowing what I know now, though," he continued, "if I had that phone at your

unfractured elbow for just five minutes, and could talk to the Commissioner of Police, I believe I could send both you and Satan, there, back to hell where you belong—via the electric chair!"

DOCTOR AGNEW slashed viciously at the cord of the useless phone with the scalpel in his hand, then hurled the heavy instrument at the man who had been his superior. It struck Meredith on the temple, fell, the mouth-piece one way and the receiver another while the severed cord lashed across his eyes like a whip.

"Certainly you may have it," he taunted. "Go on and call the police. They wouldn't believe you if you could." He chuckled obscenely despite the pain of his fractured arm. "The great Doctor Meredith." His face sobered. "But what caused you to suspect me? That new saline anæsthesia on which we were working when your patients started to die?"

"That's right," Meredith agreed. He hunched himself back to a sitting position, his hands behind him. "I dropped it as too dangerous. But you added several new ingredients, didn't you, broke it down into a powerful gas, piped the gas into tiny vials and put them into cigarettes? All your victims had to do was light them. The heat dissolved the gelatine and they sucked the gas down into their lungs with the smoke. In five minutes they were dead . . . mummies, all the juices in their bodies burned into atomic matter."

"It was really very simple," his former assistant boasted. "That is, once you know the ingredients and principle." He warmed to his subject. "I went back to the early Egyptians, took—"

"If you please, Doctor Agnew," the anesthetist protested. "Sit still. I want to be certain that this splint is supporting your fracture correctly."

"It had better," Satan warned. "Doctor Agnew is a very important member of our League of the Grateful Dead." He

chuckled. "He makes young men out of old men—sometimes."

"That one tonight was too old," Agnew shrugged. "He died on the table." He looked over at Meredith in the corner. "But just you wait until I start on you. You'll wish you died two years ago—" He stopped abruptly. "What was that?"

"What was what?" Satan asked.

"I thought I heard a woman's voice," the thin-lipped surgeon told him. "Probably one of our little coryphees down stairs that's drunker than usual."

"Probably," Meredith agreed coldly. "And if I had one last dying wish," he spoke distinctly, "it would be that the police could only know the type of place that you're running in my old hospital."

"Wistful thinking," Agnew chortled.

"Perhaps," Meredith agreed. "But I do wish that Commissioner Craig could be listening in on this little conversation here before you kill me." He looked at the man who claimed he was Satan. "The Commissioner actually half believes you are the devil—after that shooting in his office this afternoon."

"Merely a bullet proof vest and a lot of nerve," Satan chuckled. He nudged Doctor Agnew. "You should have seen them when the fingerprint report came back from Washington. It was worth the pain I suffered when you grafted on those fingertips just to see the expression on their faces."

Meredith sat up more erect.

"Who are you, really?"

"Mace Manders the magician," Satan boasted. "Sure they electrocuted me. But Doc here brought me back to life with methylene blue, gave me a nice new devilish face, and nine dead men's fingertips."

"You figured out this racket?"

"He did not," Agnew boasted. "I did."

"No, Bill," Meredith shook his head.

"You're not smart enough to figure out a thing as big as this is."

"NO?" Agnew jeered. "I was smart enough to kill ten patients of yours by always managing to leave a sponge inside the wound and fishing it out before you found it when we did an exploratory or a post."

"So," the gaunt man on the floor breathed quietly. He closed his eyes, a wave of relief sweeping over him. "So that was how it was done." He raised his voice. "And some of them died right here in my old operating room where we are now."

Satan kicked him again.

"We can hear you. You don't need to shout."

Meredith sat doubled in pain for a moment, then managed to sit back erect, the wound in his side throbbing madly, the pain stabbing deep into him.

"I—I suppose," he said, "you two have made millions."

"Millions," his former assistant boasted. "And I've had all the experimental material that I needed. It's been a surgeon's dream."

"But how in hell, Bill," Meredith demanded, "do you bring the dead to life?"

Both Doctor Agnew and Satan chuckled like school boys. Then Doctor Agnew grinned his twisted smile.

"You compliment me, Doctor. I don't. They merely think they've been dead, that's all."

"It is simple," Satan boasted. "When a patient worthy of our attention goes to Mercy Hospital, Doctor Agnew merely drugs them into a cataleptic state and signs their death certificate. Then before the undertaker goes to work, Yoshama calls on the dead man's sweetheart or his wife, and tells her I can bring the dead to life—and I do."

"But all your members of the League of the Grateful Dead aren't rich," the man on the floor protested.

"That," Agnew told him, "is where we are smart. We take in an assortment

of various types to staff our place and to entertain our paying guests. Some of them believe they have been dead—the others have sold their souls to Satan, here, to bring their loved ones back.” Doctor Agnew’s thin face was sharp with triumph. “And you are the man who said I was a fool, Jim—said I was money mad. Well, I have it. And I’ll have more. I’ve got a perfect racket.”

Meredith shook his head.

“No, Bill. No racket is ever perfect. No matter how smart you are, there’s always someone who out-thinks you.” His battered lips formed the semblance of a grin. “You don’t know it, Bill, but you’re going to burn for murder. That’s a promise.”

“Kick him,” Agnew ordered.

Satan did. In the mouth.

Meredith spit out a mouthful of blood, continued calmly.

“For example. You think you’re so secure. What would you do if the police should raid this place and find two dozen men and women who they believe are dead?”

“They wouldn’t find them,” Agnew boasted. “Our doorman is a lookout. And at the first sign of the police, our ‘guests’ know what to do. They merely file into the cellar and from there into an unused portion of the little known merchandise tunnel that has honey-combed the ground beneath the streets of downtown Chicago for years.”

“But we won’t be raided,” Satan stated with assurance. “Our ‘guests’ are afraid to talk. They believe I can send them to hell—and I can.”

The anesthetist stepped back from the table.

“There. I think that will do it, Doctor Agnew.”

The thin-faced surgeon slid down from the operating table.

“Pour me a drink, a stiff one,” he ordered.

His younger assistant did so. The surgeon lifted the glass in a toast.

“To your long and lingering death, Doctor Meredith.” He gulped his drink and threw the glass on the floor. “All right, put him on the table,” he ordered. He smiled thinly. “I won’t bother to scrub. I don’t *think* that he’ll die of infection.”

THE other two men laughed as they lifted the limp and unresisting figure of the bloody, once-great surgeon from his corner to the table.

“First—” Agnew probed none too gently with his dirty scalpel at the bleeding wound in Meredith’s ribs—“we’ll see how his reflexes are.”

He turned the scalpel in his hand.

“Next, we’ll see—”

The sharp bark of a service revolver spat at him from the swinging doors and the scalpel flew from his hand.

“What the hell!” he demanded, stopped short, his thin face blanching as the swinging doors swung open simultaneously with the frantic flashing of a red light on the wall—and a squad of grim-faced Chicago plainclothesmen walked into the room, guns in hand.

“Up with them. And up with them fast!” the lieutenant who had fired the first shot ordered. “The whole building is surrounded and you haven’t got a chance.”

Satan chose to disbelieve him. His arm jerked up and down, his gun spitting in his hand.

The big lieutenant staggered—then fired again.

Satan tried to raise his gun, but couldn’t. He was dead, shot through the heart. He toppled to the floor, a crumpled, motionless heap.

The anesthetist chose to run. The phone cord tangled in his feet and tripped him. He lay where he fell, whimpering for mercy.

Doctor Agnew stood staring at the corner where Doctor Meredith had been lying. The phone he had flung from him in anger was connected roughly to the outgoing end of the severed wire along the baseboard.

The big lieutenant grinned, felt of his shoulder where one of Satan's wild bullets had burned a flesh wound. He nodded toward the phone on the floor.

"Clever, eh? The big Doc on the table there out-thought you. I don't know how he got you to throw him the phone, but you did. So he connects it to the outgoing line and we've been on our way ever since."

Doctor Agnew didn't answer. And they saw then why he didn't. One of Satan's wild bullets was embedded in his temple. His nervous system was completely paralyzed, and Dr. Bill Agnew was dying on his feet.

Eager hands lifted Jim Meredith from the table.

"We come up the outside fire escape," a red-faced detective explained. "And mighty glad to get here when we got here, Doctor."

"The relief was mutual," Meredith smiled. His eyes were on the face of his former assistant.

"He's going to die, Doc?" the lieutenant asked, plugging a wad of cotton pack-

ing against the wound in his own shoulder.

"No. Not just yet," Doctor Meredith told him. He seemed another man. Despite his bleeding wound, his unshaven, battered features, and his bloody, ragged clothes, he fully looked the great and famous surgeon that he was. They all looked at him with respect in their eyes.

"No. Not just yet," he repeated. "There are several little items like the pretended resurrection of Max Boderman and the murder of his widow still to be explained. Besides, we'll want him to go to trial, spread the whole story in the papers, so that the countless men and women upon whom he has imposed will know the truth. I'll see to it that he's able to take the stand."

The lieutenant looked dubiously at the once great surgeon's battered lips and trembling hands.

"But can you save him, Doc?" he asked.

"Why of course," Doctor Meredith said simply. He held out a shaking hand and it ceased to tremble. "Of course I can save him. Tim would want me to. I'll save him for the chair. I promise you that, Lieutenant."

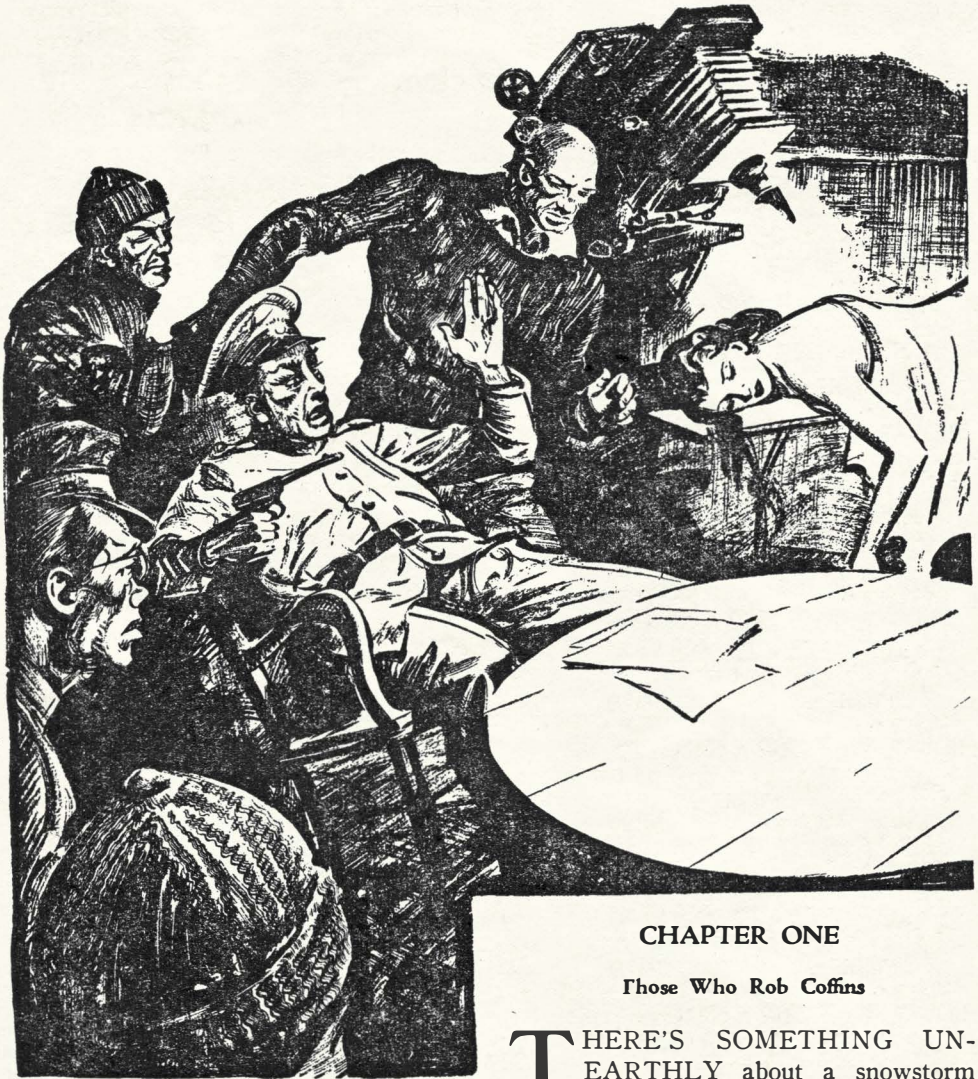
And he did. Tim Murphy had been right. For Doctor James Meredith did come back.

THE END



THE GIRL AND THE KIDNAPED CORPSE

A Thrilling Mystery Novelette
by DONALD G. CORMACK



CHAPTER ONE

Those Who Rob Coffins

THERE'S SOMETHING UN-EARTHLY about a snowstorm that breaks upon a city at three o'clock in the morning, if you happen to be out at that time. The streets are deserted, the tall buildings are dark,

Why should anyone, particularly a young and lovely girl, want to steal a corpse? I didn't know—but I did know that in twelve hours I would be a dead man unless I found that corpse and returned it to the minions of the devil!



"We'll take that dare, admiral!"
I shouted.

silence is everywhere, yet you know there are hundreds of sleeping people within call of your voice. Then comes the snow; big flakes at first. You can see great swirling masses of them cascading past the unwinking street lamps, but still there's no sound other than your own heels striking the pavement. The snow



shrouds about you, cutting visibility to a brief circle, and soon the streets are carpeted with a white, cushioning blanket. Now even the friendly sound of your own footsteps is lost. You feel that you're alone in some strange land of the dead—a lonely wraith yourself.

That's the way it was that morning as I walked up Lexington Avenue in the dark hours before dawn. In the daytime I'm a private detective, prosaic and hard-working, but at night I like to prowl. Just like some big kid looking for adventure. Well, this was one of the nights I found it—and found more than I was bargaining for.

The first thing I noticed was a sedan parked by the curb, its lights dead. Then I glanced up at the sign that hung over the sidewalk. HAVERFORD AND SON, MORTICIANS, it read. A light was burning in the rear of the place, but I couldn't see anyone inside.

In the snow I could see several sets of footprints, all made by the same person—a girl. One set, the faintest, entered the shop; another set returned to the car; and the third set, the plainest, went back into the undertaker's parlor again.

The shades of the sedan were drawn, but I figured there might be someone inside. I was about to go over and ask some questions that might have been none of my business, when the latch on the undertaker's front door rattled and the door swung cautiously open.

I stepped close to the building as the girl came out. She glanced toward the street, then pulled the door quickly shut. At that moment I stepped toward her and I could see her slim, youthful body tense in sudden alarm. She was startled, but she wasn't terrified or panicky. Her control returned quickly.

"You—you gave me quite a shock," she said in a voice that was almost a whisper. "You came up so suddenly."

I looked at her closely. Man, she was

a honey! Just picture yourself the most beautiful girl you can think of, and this girl would top her. She was obviously refined and her eyes, besides being beautiful, were direct and honest. The falling snow put a sparkling silver sheen on her auburn hair.

"I'm sorry I startled you," I said, and I meant it. I began to feel like a sap, but I still wasn't satisfied. "I noticed the dark car and the lights inside. I thought I'd better investigate. At this hour . . . a robbery, maybe. You see I'm a detective and it's part of my job. . ."

"A police detective?" she asked?

When I explained that I was only a private cop, she breathed an audible sigh of relief.

"I had some urgent business with Mr. Haverford," she explained readily. "It's an emergency burial and he agreed to meet me here at this hour. He's inside now; he'll tell you everything's all right."

Looking at her, you couldn't help believing what she said, so I kept my eyes fixed on a distant street lamp.

"We'll go inside and check, if you don't mind," I told her, stressing the "we." "I'm sorry again, but I have an irresistible passion for minding other persons' business. And we might as well ask your friend in the car to come with us." I was only guessing on that last statement.

"That's my sister," the girl said readily. "Just go over and ask her, if you don't mind. My low shoes and this snow. . ."

Then, like a sap, I turned my back on the girl and walked over to the car. She must have figured what would happen. I swung open the door and poked my head into the sedan—and remained standing exactly as I was, mouth open for a speech that never came. . . .

THE girl sitting there—or, rather, sprawling against the back cushion—was completely nude! The lap robe that

had been wrapped around her had fallen away. Her exotically beautiful Eurasian features were breath taking in the soft reflection of the streetlight just ahead. Her slanted, blue-lidded eyes were closed as though in sleep, and the utter relaxation of her body told me one positive fact. She was dead. She was a corpse.

It must have taken me a full thirty seconds to get over my shock and realize this. By that time it was too late. I felt the hard muzzle of the girl's gun poke me in the back.

"Turn around slowly and keep your hands away from your sides," she ordered as though she were asking me to pass the sugar. Then, when I had obeyed, she laughed aloud at my obvious expression of amazement. Her laugh was quiet, as though we were sharing a joke together.

That lovely, slim little girl was holding the biggest gun I have ever laid eyes on. Or maybe it only seemed huge in her tapering, dainty fingers. But it was certainly a real gun, and she focused it rock-steady on my belt buckle.

"It is big, isn't it?" she said in a polite conversational tone. "But, then, I hate the sound of a gun. The noise hurts my ears. I don't want to be obliged to shoot a person more than once."

Deftly, she slipped my own gun out of its shoulder-holster, then walked around the car and got in the driver's seat. With that French .75 in her left hand—never wavering—she started the motor, shifted the gears, and zoomed out into the avenue, driving with her right. She was an expert with a car, too, and no doubt about it.

But just before she left she said one thing that puzzled me more than ever. Her words, the tone of her soft voice, the sincere expression on her pretty features, all carried conviction.

"I'm sorry to have done this to you. I'm *really* sorry, friend."

My one redeeming act in this whole episode was to jump into the street after the speeding car and note the license number as it passed under the street lamp. After that, I went back to the undertaker's.

The front door was open so, after making sure I was unobserved, I went in. I called out once, but there was no answer—as I expected. I had known instinctively that I was alone—except for the dead.

Nothing in the outer reception room seemed to be disturbed. The safe was still whole, and locked. The somber, gloomy furnishings were in perfect order; nothing had been ransacked. On the wall a huge portrait of gray-haired Haverford senior looked down on me sadly. In the rear room, behind some curtains where the light came from, I found a number of coffins, their small silver nameplates glinting newly. All of them were undisturbed and securely locked, ready for shipment. Only one of the names meant anything to me.

LIN HAN WEI, the legend announced, with the dates of birth and death. Wei had been senior attaché in the office of the Chinese consul. The newspapers had gone extensively into the life of the well-liked Chinese after he died of old age. He had lived in the United States for decades, and now his body was to be shipped back to China to be buried with his ancestors.

After that I went down into the embalming room in the basement. I didn't stay long, I'll admit, but I could discover nothing unusual. Several bodies were in the process of being embalmed, each cadaver covered with an oilcloth sheet. Stacks of coffins, both cheap and expensive, filled one end of the room. One lay on the floor, open, its plush-lined interior waiting to receive a body. Or had that coffin just given up a corpse? I bent over and examined the silver plate.

NATASHA LADISLAWA, it read. An Eurasian name? Very certainly. And it was also likely that the cadaver I had seen in the car had recently rested here.

Feeling a little sick, I went back upstairs. All I could be certain of was that the lovely girl I had seen had robbed the undertaker of a dead body. That accounted for the two sets of footprints, one entering and one leaving. But why that third set? Why had she returned a second time after placing the body in her car? That I couldn't guess. Maybe it would have told me why the young girl had kidnaped that beautiful corpse—or maybe it had no meaning at all.

Anyway, I decided to wait until morning before I made any wild, incredible reports to police headquarters. I could scarcely believe what I had seen myself, and I wasn't anxious to get the raspberry from the cops. I wanted to talk to Haverford first, tell him I *thought* I'd seen someone leaving his shop the night before. He could do the reporting to the police. And, frankly, the memory of that girl's lovely face had something to do with my reluctance to believe what I'd apparently seen her do. She wasn't at all my idea of a midnight ghoul.

Outside, the fresh air, sweet with the snow, revived me a little, I was just about to close the door when I saw a man walking quickly down the street, about to pass. I couldn't avoid detection, so I slammed the door loudly, as though I owned the place, then strode into the avenue, whistling "*I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You.*"

For a full five hours after that I heard nothing more from the mortuary or the people who were interested in it. I was sleeping during those five hours. But they weren't.

I HAD intended sleeping late the next morning, but I didn't. Shortly before nine the phone at my bedside began

howling for attention. I reached over a groping hand and pulled the receiver to me.

"Uh," I mumbled, one eye still closed. "Go ahead."

"Frank Dolan?" a girl's silvery voice inquired. She knew darn well it was, so she didn't wait for any confirmation. "I think you'll remember me. I'm the girl you chatted with a few hours ago outside the Haverford funeral parlor. Auburn hair, about five-foot-four. . ."

Both eyes were wide open now and I sat up abruptly. I could tell by the girl's voice, in spite of her attempted bantering manner, that she was in the tight grip of some desperate emergency. It wasn't fear she betrayed, but rather anxiety and nervous tension.

"I remember," I said quickly. "But I don't remember the name."

"Of course not," she replied. "But you can call me Caroline; the rest of it doesn't matter just now."

"Look, Caroline. Will you please tell me. . ." I began.

"Just a minute," the girl cut in. "I'll do the talking. I don't have much time, so it'll have to be fast. It's about last night, of course." She was silent for a few seconds after that, and when her voice came back there was no longer any pretense. She was very frankly pleading. "Mr. Dolan, please don't tell the police about what you saw last night. Don't tell anyone! I'm begging now—and I've rarely begged for anything in my whole life. Will you promise me your silence?"

"I can't promise anything like that!" I snapped angrily. And I was angry because a vision of the girl's face was before my eyes; I didn't want to refuse her request. I could picture, too, what she must look like now. "If you're in trouble—honest trouble—I'd be glad to offer my help. Or if you'd only explain a few things, perhaps I could give you some advice."

"I can't explain!" she burst out wildly. "Don't you see? It isn't for myself I care a hoot! It's something else—something I'm honor-bound not to talk about. But I can tell you this—" Her next words were slow, tense, almost fierce—"if you insist on investigating this matter any further you'll do more harm than you know! My life is in peril now, but you may condemn me absolutely—and yourself as well, just as certainly! I'm not a criminal now, and I don't intend to commit any crime. You must believe me! Forget everything about last night. Forget you saw me, and forget . . . what you saw in that car. Please! Will you do that for me, Frank Dolan?"

"No," I said dully. "I can't, Caroline."

"Oh, God," I heard her whisper to herself. "He doesn't understand!"

The line went dead then, but I sat there holding the receiver without thinking to hang up. How had the girl learned my name? I wasn't exactly unknown in the city; I realized that. And then I remembered that my name had been engraved on the gun she'd taken from me. But that wasn't the important thing. The important thing was the emotions that played tug-of-war inside me. To which side should I give in? Should I do my obvious duty and report? Or should I trust blindly a beautiful youngster who had kidnaped a corpse? I didn't know. . . .

IT WAS nine-thirty when I reached Haverford's. A sallow-faced young man stood up behind his desk as I entered. He was dressed completely in black and his hands were folded awkwardly across his chest.

"I'm Mr. Haverford's Mr. Johnson," he announced in a despairing voice. "How may I serve you, sir?"

"I want to see Haverford himself," I told him. "But I don't want to give him a new corpse. I've come to help locate an old one."

He didn't seem to understand my words. He was still struggling with them when I crossed the reception room and pushed through the curtains to the chamber beyond. Sad-faced Haverford was there, as I'd thought he'd be. He looked up from the desk at which he'd been working, but he didn't speak. He simply raised his eyebrows in solicitous inquiry. Haverford was a handsome, dignified-looking man, and he had a reputation as the finest mortician in the city. I couldn't take any liberties with him; I'd have to handle the guy with gloves.

"I'm from the City News Service, Mr. Haverford," I said, flipping my wallet open and shut so fast I couldn't tell myself what sort of identification I'd shown. "I hate to bother you, but we got a call saying there'd been a robbery here last night—or, rather, our tip said someone had broken into your place about three this morning. Have you found anything missing?"

Haverford smiled gently. "Your informant's sense of humor must be somewhat on the macabre side. What could anyone steal from a funeral parlor? I keep nothing here but my equipment and the bodies of my . . . er . . . clients. Would that booty attract thieves, do you think?"

"That's why it sounded like a story," I put in quickly. "I thought maybe some crazy loon had stolen something like . . . well, a casket, or a dead body."

The undertaker laughed aloud now—perhaps the first laugh that had ever sounded in his shop. "It *would* be a story—if it were true," he said. "It so happens it's utterly false."

"You couldn't be mistaken, Mr. Haverford?" I persisted. "I mean, you haven't checked your whole shop yet. Maybe, just by chance, a body *is* missing. Our informant is usually reliable."

The old guy was getting sore now. A little flush of red mounted into his usually

pale face. "Young man," he snapped, "you're becoming impertinent—and tiresome! If you're so impressed with your information, why don't you go to the police? Otherwise, don't bother me longer. And for your further information, let me add that I was in this parlor during the whole of last night, working on an emergency case. From dusk to dawn I didn't leave these rooms—and neither did my assistant, who will bear me witness. Now are you satisfied—or shall I call the police?"

That almost floored me. What good would my word be against that of the famous Haverford, backed by a witness? The disappointed, contrite look I put on my face wasn't entirely assumed.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Haverford," I said quietly. "You see, I was sent out to get a story—or else. I haven't been doing so well lately. I figured this was a chance to square up." I was looking down at my shoes like a chided schoolboy, trying to soften the old guy up. "But maybe . . . maybe I could save my job if I got a feature story—a story about Lin Han Wei, for instance. How he's going to be shipped. . ."

"I'm not looking for any cheap newspaper publicity!" Haverford burst out, cutting me off. But after a moment's silence he seemed to relent. "All right—but I don't think it's of much interest to the public. Lin Han Wei's body is scheduled for delivery this morning to the *Mitsi Maru*, of the New York, Panama and Orient line—is already on its way, in fact. The ship will sail at midnight for Japan. Later the body will be delivered to the Chinese government through the Italian consulate. Can you find anything in that?"

"A small box, maybe," I said. "But if I could tie it in with another angle. . . For instance, we heard you were handling the body of a famous Asiatic beauty, a girl who was formerly the consort

of several important European figures. Natasha Ladislawa, I think her name was. Now, if she is going to be shipped back, too. . ."

Haverford was plainly amazed at my last statement. He was silent for several seconds. "I wasn't aware of any such notoriety connected with this woman," he replied at last. "She was brought here by two white men—foreigners, I think. Anyway, they paid for the funeral and told me to bury the body as soon as I was ready. No services."

"And where are you going to plant her, Mr. Haverford?" I asked.

"She's to be planted. . ." Haverford began unconsciously, then he stopped and flushed a deep crimson. "She's to be interred in the Woodhaven Cemetery before noon today! And now will you please leave me; will you look somewhere else for your public items?"

"One more question, Mr. Haverford. . ."

"Young man," the old bird growled in a surprisingly tough voice, "*get the hell out of my shop!*"

I left pronto.

CHAPTER TWO

Deliver That Corpse—or Else!

IT WAS only a few minutes after ten when I finally got to my office on lower Lexington. Dora Middleton was already there, reading her tabloid with wrinkle-browed absorption and with supreme disregard for yesterday's urgent but unfinished business. The morning's mail was unsorted and unopened. Dora tore herself away from the paper long enough to give me a smile and a kind word.

"Good morning, Mr. Dolan," she said sweetly. "It's a nice day, don't you think? Or maybe you don't think it's so nice. Maybe you think it's sort of in-between." Then she went back to her newspaper,

her brow wrinkling again to its reading position.

When her parents named her Dora they showed remarkable insight. She was dumb—but beautiful. And she was very fond of me, which maybe shows how dumb she was. I've got the kind of face that every human gorilla likes to take a punch out of—and most of them have. My nose has been broken so many times I've lost count—and I guess the nose has lost count, too. It looks it. The best you could say about me is that I'm big enough and I've got a kind heart. Maybe it was the kind heart Dora loved in me. Anyway, it was certainly profitable for her.

"Look, Busy Bee," I said. "Here's a license number—the kind of number they put on automobiles. I want you to go down to the license bureau and find out the name and address of the person who belongs to this number. It's important, so please make it fast. Do you think you could manage all alone?"

Dora took the piece of paper from me and scowled at the writing as though the whole business needed her personal okay. She was looking at the license number of the car that beautiful girl had been driving—with a corpse in the rear seat. Finally Dora smiled and held out her hand. It was the old song and dance.

"If you want it fast I'll have to take a cab. Could I have five dollars expense money, Mr. Dolan?"

"No!" The answer was firm and uncompromising. "I don't want it that fast. A five-cent bus is fast enough."

"Please, lamb! I'll give you the change." The voice was small-girl and wheedling, and I forked over the fiver. Which was the old song and dance, too. I never got any change. I've often figured I'd do well to marry Dora for her money. Hell, she was burying more dough in the bank than I was!

I stood in the outer office until Dora left; I wanted to be sure she *did* leave. First, of course, she had to re-apply her make-up, which had been exposed to the elements for a good hour. Then she snatched up the tabloid and her high heels went clicking happily out of the office. Now maybe I could get somewhere. As I walked across the reception room I was wondering whether I should call the cops and tell them about that screwy episode last night.

Haverford's reputation was unassailable—and he swore he hadn't left his funeral parlor all night long. Where would I stand against that sort of refutation? And I could be mistaken. Maybe the girl was trying to *deliver* the corpse to the mortuary, but had lost her nerve. That explanation smelled, though. And Haverford admitted he was handling the body of an Eurasian girl. . . .

My thoughts broke off abruptly and I came to a dead stop in front of the door

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to my office, my outstretched hand arrested in mid-air. I had heard the springs of my swivel chair give a warning squeak. There was some guy in there waiting for me! And he was an uninvited guest—not a client. I knew Dora wouldn't have let him through; she'd have kept him in the outer office until I arrived. Then, through the open transom, I caught the aroma of a cigar—one of my best Havanas, the kind I didn't even smoke myself but reserved for clients. I began to burn up after that, plenty. But I didn't make the mistake of charging straight in, the way he expected me.

There was a private entrance to my office from the hallway outside. I slipped out of the office and into the corridor, soft-footing it to the back entrance. I eased my key into the lock, figuring I'd take the guy by surprise—and I did, in a way.

I WENT through fast and immediately spotted a burly plug-ugly sitting at my desk, his feet up and a cigar in his mouth. He was facing the door on the opposite side of the room. His feet slammed to the floor as he whirled to face me, and he bounded out of the chair just as I came up to him. My left hook caught him flat on his square chin as he came to the top of his rise and he went over the chair backward. But while he was still flying, a gun grew in his hand. By the time he landed, shoulders first, the gun was centered on me. Even if I'd been heeled, it wouldn't have done me any good. I've never seen a man faster with a gun!

I saw the bleak fury in his small, stupid eyes, and I saw the flesh of his trigger finger whiten as it tensed. But then he controlled his anger and the pressure eased up. Those must have been his orders. I'll admit a knot eased up in my stomach at the same time.

"You got a habit of doin' that, chump?" he asked in a sour voice. "I don't see how

you managed to stay healthy this long. But maybe you got a change of luck comin'—and soon!"

"I don't like guys sneaking in my office," I told him with more courage than I felt. "I don't like guys sitting at my desk and smoking my best cigars, either. And when I know they wouldn't be here except to make trouble, I'd just as soon get in the first belt. Incidentally, how did you manage to get in? Did you pick the lock, or did you just crawl under the sill?"

"Skip the vaudeville!" his sandpaper voice grated. "I'll do the askin'—you give the answers."

He had been rubbing his blue-stubbled chin with his free hand, and now he got slowly to his feet. He kept looking at me intently, as though he were trying to figure something out or as though trying to put the hex on me. When he spoke again his voice was low and strained with urgency.

"What'd you do with the body of that young doll you stole last night?" he whispered. Then his voice grew louder. "The boss wants her! He'll take either her corpse—or yours! You got just twelve hours to figger which it's gonna be. At the end of that time we get either that Natasha doll's body—or we get you. And don't guess wrong, chump. The boss don't miss. Ever!"

"You're hopped up," I said as easily as I could. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about. So you go back and tell your boss to think up another number. He's got the wrong address!"

"DON'T get smart!" the gorilla snapped. "There ain't any mistake. You was seen leavin' that corpse hotel last night, and you was seen talkin' with that other girl in the street. Your secretary, maybe, pally? And you was seen at the same body joint today." He reached over and grabbed a handful of cigars,

shoved them in his pocket, but his small black eyes never left mine.

"We're not askin'; we're tellin'," he finished. "Twelve hours you got to let us know where you hid that doll's body—or else. And smarten up, chump. You're not foolin' around with any neighborhood gang. This thing is big—much bigger than you!"

In a flash of motion his gun-arm chopped at me and the blue-steel barrel smashed me across the cheekbone. I reeled backward into the chair, kept right on going until I hit the floor. The blood was warm on my neck and I groped for my handkerchief and began to mop it so it wouldn't stain my shirt. I was dazed and groggy, but there was nothing wrong with my swearing vocabulary. The office door slammed and I knew the gorilla had gone. . . .

The ringing of my telephone was the thing that snapped me out of it and got me back on my feet. Holding onto the desk for support, I picked up the receiver and grunted.

"Mr. Dolan?" It was Dora Middleton. "I traced that number you wanted. It was taken out for a new Lincoln sedan. The owner is listed as Stanley Haverford, with a Lexington address. Now do you want me to come back to the office, or is there something else I can do for you, lamb? I still have a little expense money left."

The car belonged to Haverford, the old boy himself! But where did that get me? He could still deny the fact—or admit that his car was parked in front of his place of business. All I knew was that I couldn't hold out on the cops any longer. I'd rather have them laughing at me now than have them revoke my license later. After Dora had repeated, "hello," several times, I went back on the wire.

"Come back to the office after your lunch, Dora," I said briefly. "I'll be out, but stick here until I call you."

After that I called headquarters, reporting just what I'd seen at the funeral parlor that morning. And my message was received just as I'd known it would be—with wise-cracks about my sobriety and a general running accompaniment of laughter. But they'd check; I knew that. And before they did, I swore I'd soften that sad-faced mortician up somehow. I was through being pushed around like a dope.

I got a spare gun out of my desk and shoved it in my side-pocket. I was thinking of the miniature cannon that beautiful girl had been carrying last night, and I was thinking of Haverford and Son, Morticians. I hoped that empty casket I'd seen in the basement wasn't tagged with my name. Then, as though in answer to my thoughts, the phone rang again. I grabbed it up impatiently.

"You have exactly eleven hours left," a cultured voice reminded me. "You can do exactly as you please; it doesn't matter to us. New corpses for old!" And a soft laugh followed; a particularly unpleasant, chilling laugh. After a pause, as though waiting for me to give any information I cared to, the line went dead.

These guys meant business! But how in the name of Heaven could I deliver a body I didn't have? Whose whereabouts was a complete mystery to me? Then my old anger came surging back and I swore Haverford wouldn't give me the run-around again.

CHAPTER THREE

Lovely Kidnaped of Corpses

I WAS so sore at myself and everyone else, so fed up with the whole case, that on the way over to Haverford's I almost turned the cab around toward Grand Central Terminal. I had more than half an idea to grab the first train I could and leave the city for a week. What was

I getting out of this business, anyway? Just high blood pressure and a lot of nothing else. But I suppose the quirk in my brain that made me crazy enough to become a private dick in the first place was still quirking. I didn't turn the cab. Like the dope I am, I kept on going, getting deeper into something that couldn't possibly make me any profit, and in the end would probably let daylight through my ribs.

When I strode into the funeral parlor I swore I'd smack that sallow-faced kid clean over his desk if he tried to stop me. But he wasn't there; the reception hall was empty. The rear parlor was deserted, too—except for the heavy caskets and the wavering flames of the tall candles that stood about the sides of the room.

Then I heard a noise that came from the basement, where the embalming room was located. It sounded like cautious footsteps, but I wasn't sure. I pulled the automatic out of my pocket and checked the load. This time I wasn't taking any chances.

On my way across the room I passed Haverford's desk. There was an open ledger lying on it—his official burial schedule. I glanced at the last two entries. The first read: "Lin Han Wei. Out, nine A. M. Delivered, receipted, S. S. *Mitsi Maru*, nine-fifteen A. M. Attested, Morgan." The second read: "Natasha Ladislawa. Out, ten-thirty A. M. Interred, Woodhaven Cemetery, eleven A. M. In charge, Rogerson." The old guy hadn't been fooling me about his schedule. But how could Natasha Ladislawa have been buried when I had seen Caroline abduct her cadaver the night before? When I had been punched around by a human ape who was demanding "that doll Natasha's body?" And if not Natasha—then who had been buried in that grave? I didn't know it then, but a lot of other people were interested in that same question.

To glance at the ledger had taken only a moment, and then I crossed to the far side of the room as quietly as I could. The stairs leading down to the basement were made of concrete, and carpeted, so my footfalls were absolutely noiseless. Three-quarters of the way down I was able to stoop low and see into the entire workroom.

Only a single dim bulb was burning in the center of that gloomy chamber, and it took me several seconds to accustom my eyes to the darkness. Then I could make out the vague shapes of the embalming tables and the other paraphernalia I had seen the night before. At that moment I heard a warning sound again and my eyes jumped to the opposite corner of the room. A tremor ran through my spine as I saw a motionless form standing there, gazing down into an open coffin that had been set on upright supports.

After a few more moments of absolute quiet the figure suddenly turned and walked quickly across the room. Then I saw who the silent watcher was! *The dim central light revealed the beautiful features of Caroline, the girl who had been here the night before!*

I barely suppressed a gasp at the knowledge. At last I had her cornered! But, strangely, that fact didn't give me any joy. As she disappeared from sight at the far end of the room for a second, I jumped down the remaining stairs and sped across to that open casket, peered into the satin interior. And this time I couldn't repress a sound as my breath drew in sharply. *The body in that coffin was the corpse of old man Haverford!* A round, blue-ringed hole in his forehead told how he had been killed, and his open, terror-staring eyes and twisted features told of the stark, mindless fear at that execution.

For a second I stood there undecided. Any evidence that Haverford could have given was completely wiped out. My only

remaining link with the mystery of the stolen corpse was the beautiful kidnaper herself—Caroline. I had the drop on her now; a gun in my hand. I could confront her, threaten her, demand that she explain this whole weird crime and produce Natasha Ladislawa's body. But then I remembered the girl's frank, fearless eyes as I had seen them last night. And I knew I was licked. She wouldn't yield to threats.

Then, on the heels of that thought, came a second. Caroline was probably driving the same Lincoln she'd had before. If I could conceal myself in the car, she'd take me unwittingly to the source of the mystery. At least it was my only chance. Quickly, I jumped for the stairs, ran to the upper floor and left the funeral parlor.

There was no familiar automobile in front, nor across the street. For a minute or two I felt the leaden weight of defeat within me. But finally I located Haverford's Lincoln on the nearest side street.

In the rear of the car I found a heavy robe, and it was under that robe, curling myself on the floor, that I hoped to ride as an unsuspected passenger. It wasn't until I had settled myself that the gruesome thought came to me. Was this the same robe that had been wrapped about Natasha's cadaver a few hours earlier?

But I had more things than that to worry about. Three of them, in fact. Was this the car Caroline would drive? Would she discover me here if she did come? And would the police arrive at the mortuary before she could get out of the place? Then I found myself praying that she would get away in time, that she wouldn't be caught with the body of the murdered undertaker who had been laid out so carefully in one of his own coffins. In spite of myself, I believed in Caroline—no matter what she had done. I knew she was in desperate peril, facing alone some band of madmen and unable to ask anyone for

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aid. Well, I intended to give her that aid unasked—and I prayed it would be enough.

Then, just as a police siren sounded in the distance, I heard a girl's quick footsteps coming down the block. They stopped; the front door clicked open, slammed shut, and almost immediately afterward the car lurched into motion, slewing into the street and whining protestingly around the nearest corner. I grinned to myself. It was Caroline at the wheel, all right. I remembered the way she had handled this car in that dark hour before dawn.

Grinned to myself, I said. It's odd to do anything like that when you're racing headlong straight into the mouth of hell. . . .

I DON'T know how long we drove. When you're lying in a cramped position like that, wondering what's going to happen next, time seems much longer than usual. But I know we drove a long time by any clock.

At last the car slowed, turned sharply into a gravel road, and a moment later came to a stop. I could tell by the hollow reflection of sound that we were in a garage. Caroline cut the motor and got out of the car. I heard her heels tapping out of the garage, then the sound of her footsteps dying in the distance, but I made no attempt to follow her at once. I lay where I was for a good five minutes.

When I finally did come out from my improvised cocoon to climb stiffly from the car, I saw that I was well out in the country somewhere, and that the garage stood next to a small cottage. Here, evidently, was Caroline's hideout.

There was no way of concealing myself from the house as I approached it, so I walked boldly across the small yard, taking my chances. The kitchen door was unlocked, and once inside I knew where I would find the beautiful girl. The door

leading down to the cellar was open, and bright light flooded up into the kitchen.

Now I don't waste any time. I crossed the kitchen on my toes and started down the cellar stairs, keeping close to the banister to avoid any loud creaking of the wooden steps. But half way down I stopped. I could see into the entire cellar now—I could see Caroline, her back toward me, and I could see the marble-white figure of Natasha Ladislawa stretched out on a long table!

The beautiful Eurasian's body was lying face down, a sheet covering its lower half. It was the flawless white skin of the corpse's back on which Caroline's attention was fixed. An elaborate camera—so large it looked almost like an X-ray machine—was arranged above the table, and Caroline was absorbed in focusing it on Natasha's back. There was a quick urgency about the slim youngster's movements now, and the excitement she felt seemed to communicate itself to me.

It was at that moment I must have made some noise. Caroline suddenly spun around, her eyes wide and her face pale. For a second we faced each other, and then the fear left the girl. Now her face expressed both anger and relief, a flush of color coming back to her cheeks.

"You fool!" she said, but there was the faintest suggestion of a smile on her lips when she spoke. "I warned you once, as strongly as I could. But you insisted on finding the answers for yourself."

"I insisted," I repeated. "But it was you I wanted to help more than anything else. From what I have learned, you could use a little help. If you'd explain a few things, perhaps I could supply that aid. For instance, what is it that's so interesting or so valuable about the corpse of Natasha Ladislawa?"

I walked down the rest of the stairs as I was speaking. It was then that I noticed the gun I had unconsciously taken from

my pocket. Feeling a little foolish, I put it away.

"In half an hour," Caroline said, "I'll have all the help I can use—more than I can use. At that time I'll be glad to give you all the answers there are. Not now."

"Look here, Caroline," I began. I was going to argue with the girl, but I never finished. I didn't get a chance. A crushing weight struck me from behind and carried me flat on my face on the floor. I heard a shot reverberate through the cellar and Caroline's scream of terror seemed to coincide with the roar. Before I could move a muscle in defense, my skull seemed to split as a black-jack caught me just behind the ear. From a far distance I heard Caroline scream again. Then I heard nothing more for a long time. . . .

WHEN groggy consciousness came back to me I saw that I was alone in the cellar. The light still blazed, the camera was still suspended over the long table—but Caroline and the corpse were gone. I pushed myself slowly to my feet, swaying unsteadily, and began to mouth savagely every curse I'd ever heard. The swearing was a big relief, but that was its only help. It didn't alter the facts any. And those facts were painfully clear. I hadn't the vaguest kind of a lead. Everyone who had been connected with the incredible mix-up was either dead or missing. I was some detective, all right.

Then, as my head began to clear and the room stopped shimmering before my eyes, I got a sudden hunch. I had one faint lead left—and that lead was buried in Woodhaven Cemetery. The grave of Natasha Ladislawa was obviously my next stop.

Caroline's car was still in the garage, the key in the ignition, and I had that sedan out on the highway in about nothing flat. Up till now I hadn't been able to determine where I was—it could have been Westchester or Long Island. It

didn't take me long to discover I was on Long Island, and I realized I had gotten my first break in the past twenty hours. Woodhaven Cemetery was on Long Island, and it wasn't more than ten miles away from where I was now.

Dusk had already fallen when I got to Woodhaven, and the cemetery, at best, was a forlorn, unlovely place. It was one of the cheapest burial grounds in the metropolitan area. There wasn't any gate-keeper or grounds' watchmen to worry about—in fact, there wasn't even any gate. I drove the car right into the place, winding my way through long rows of identical plots, until I came to the rear portion of the grounds where the new graves were being opened.

Leaving the car, I discovered a pile of workmen's tools and grabbed up a pick and shovel for the ghoulish task that was ahead of me. I didn't figure I'd have much use for the pick because the earth, new-lain today, would be so soft. When I finally found the small marker that indicated Natasha's grave I saw that I wouldn't have any use for either. It was already open, the coffin resting crookedly on the pile of fresh-smelling earth.

A faint nausea twinged my stomach, but I forced myself to go through with the task ahead. I inserted the blade of the shovel under the edge of the metal casket and pried it open. The small squealing noise that the lid made sounded like a person in pain. Shivers ran up and down my back—but when I could peer into the coffin, aided by the brief flame of a match, those shivers turned to an electric current. Instead of the beautiful, exotic face of Natasha the light revealed the seared, yellow features of Lin Han Wei!

I tossed my tools aside and sat down heavily on the pile of earth. Rapidly, my mind ran over the facts I knew. It didn't take me long to figure the thing out—or at least to come to a reasonable conclusion. I knew that some thug had been in

my office demanding the return of Natasha's body even before her supposed burial had taken place. That must have meant they knew of the body's theft beforehand. But after the burial, on a chance, they had exhumed this body. Obviously, they had found what they had expected—and they weren't interested in Wei. The answer was simple—there had been a pre-arranged switch of Wei and Natasha. Those were the only two coffins Haverford had sent out today. And the delivery of Wei's body at nine o'clock—rather, the coffin supposed to contain his body—would account for the previous knowledge on the part of the thugs that Natasha was missing. They knew then that the switch hadn't taken place according to plan.

My next step from there was obvious. The rendezvous of this corpse-jealous band of thugs must be the Japanese ship, the *Mitsi Maru*.

I swung the car around and roared out of the cemetery, headed for the lower East River where I knew the New York, Panama and Oriental Lines maintained their docks.

Ever since I had regained consciousness there had been a living, growing fear within me—for Caroline. Now that fear burned to fever heat. She must be held aboard that ship, the prisoner of some conscienceless horde of yellow Japs! And it was she who had been fighting them alone, contesting bitterly with her life at stake for the secret that was locked in an Eurasian corpse!

CHAPTER FOUR

The Secret of the Dead

IT WAS pitch-black when I finally got to the waterfront. And for the first time the thought of calling the police entered my mind. Even if it had earlier, I doubt if I would have stopped. My fears

for Caroline were too great. But it took only a second now to step into an all-night restaurant and put through a call to headquarters. I knew that after the discovery of Haverford's body earlier that day, the cops would listen to my story.

I located the pier of the *Mitsi Maru* and I was standing out of sight, trying to locate the pier watchman before I ventured further, when I saw the group come quickly down the gangplank from the ship. There were about a half dozen men, and when they came into plainer view I saw that a girl was being walked in the midst of them, her arms held by a man on each side and her mouth obviously gagged. It was Caroline!

The party didn't leave the pier. Instead they went over the side by way of a short ladder and got into a ship's longboat. They were taking Caroline to some other ship! The police could come and search the *Mitsi Maru* all night and never find her! The only one who stood between her and death—sure death—was me!

I searched desperately for a second boat but there wasn't another one in sight. I had only one recourse left. I squirmed over the side of the pier, held by my fingers for a second, then dropped into the foul, oily waters of the East River. The ship's boat was a good fifty feet away, but I swam most of the distance without fear of detection in the blackness, then swam blind under water for the last fifteen feet. When I came up, the boat was just above my head. I reached up and grabbed the stern painter with my right hand, keeping all but my face and arm under water.

The Jap sailors who rowed must have blamed the heavy drag of the boat on the swift current. Anyway, nothing was said. In about five minutes I saw the looming hulk of a ship towering above us.

A creaking companionway was lowered and the passengers got out of the boat and mounted the steps. I heard Caroline

struggling, but it was a futile gesture of defiance. She was dragged along by the two men who held her. As soon as the three of them were aboard, the companionway creaked on its pulleys as it was hauled up again. The rowboat I had been clinging to turned and started back to the shore. I had no choice but to release the rope and tread water frantically until they were out of sight.

THE climb up the chain wasn't as difficult as I had thought. The huge links gave me a firm purchase for my hands and feet, and as I passed the upper bow I saw the ghostly letters *Saito Maru, Yokohama*, gleaming whitely in the darkness. Then, a moment later, I was on deck, crouching behind the canvas-covered engine of the main-derrick hoist. Only the ship's riding lights were showing and the decks seemed to be deserted. I figured it would be safe enough to prowl about.

As I crept amidships I took my automatic out of my sodden pocket, wondering if it would fire after that thorough soaking. I'd have to chance it. The cold wind that swept the river began to freeze my water-soaked clothing, but somehow I never felt the cold. My fear for Caroline—and, I confess, personal fear—burned too hotly within me.

I found Caroline in the officers' midships cabin. There were a dozen Japs sitting around, and Caroline was now standing alone, her gag removed. All of them faced a Jap in Naval uniform.

"It is unnecessary for me to ask," he said in perfect English, "if you are in the counter-espionage service of your government. We already know that. What I would like to know is what measures you have taken to prevent our getting out with the plans tonight?"

"You won't get out," Caroline said shortly. "No Japanese ship will get out. You can depend on it."

"Perhaps," the Jap officer asked, "an Italian ship? Please?"

But his question wasn't answered. At that moment two sailors wheeled in a table on which lay a familiar sheet-covered figure. The sheet was rolled part way down and an elaborate camera was adjusted over Natasha's body and focused on her back. A moment later the picture was made and one of the men hurried from the room to develop it.

"How was it you discovered us?" the Jap asked now, his attention returning to Caroline. "In what way did we blunder?"

"You and your agents have been under suspicion for a long time," Caroline told him. "We knew you were trying to get the plans for the United States Army bomb sight, and we knew you were working hand in hand with Italy and Germany. Also, we suspected that you had had partial success—that you had the plans, but couldn't get them out of the country. That was our job—to see that you didn't."

"And Natasha?" the officer asked. "You suspected the lovely Natasha? And did you guess how she was going to carry the plans out for us? That would have been very clever."

"We didn't know *how*," Caroline admitted, "but we knew she would be the agent. Now we know how. Your scheme won't work. We know that you were tracing the plans on her back with a silver-salt solution as they came to you, piece by piece. A sort of invisible tattooing, it could be called; invisible to the naked eye—but very easily detected and registered by a sensitive camera!"

"Yes," the Jap admitted. "Invisible to the eye but easily photographed by a camera. But you say *we* know; I think that is incorrect. I think only *you* know. I have been an espionage agent, too, and I know that an agent assigned to a case is forbidden to communicate with his fel-

low agents or superiors until after the case is complete. To do so might reveal the whole organization to the enemy, once the enemy had spotted an agent on a case. And since you have only just learned our secret, I don't think you have passed on your knowledge. Yes. Only you know—and you must die!"

NO FLICKER of emotion registered on Caroline's set features. At that moment a sailor returned with a print of the photograph and the Jap officer studied it eagerly. It was an intricate maze of lines, angles and minute measurements—all of it invisibly but indelibly registered in the flesh of Natasha. To memorize the plan would be impossible.

"You might tell me this," Caroline said, curiosity getting the best of her. "Just why did you have to kill Natasha? Why not have her simply sail as a passenger? Certainly no customs officer would have suspected your scheme."

The Jap smiled broadly. "Natasha was an Eurasian—and she was an adventuress. Any living person may be bribed. She would just as willingly have sold the plans to China or to anyone else who would bid higher than we. We did not trust her. The living may be faithless—but the dead can never be bribed!

"So," he went on complacently, "we saw a way out of our difficulties. When the Honorable Lin Han Wei passed on to his ancestors, we knew he would have to be shipped back to China—and on a Japanese ship! What would be simpler than effecting a change of bodies—and shipping the lively Natasha in Wei's coffin and under diplomatic immunity? And that is exactly what we did. We put Natasha out of the way and arranged to have a switch made through the undertaker."

"That was your first mistake," Caroline pointed out. "Haverford could be bribed—but you overlooked his assistant. Since

I suspected some scheme when Natasha died so mysteriously, I went to Johnson, the assistant, and forced the truth out of him. And it was he who agreed to leave the shop open so that I could abduct the body. I was afraid to leave it there any longer. Also, I used a car registered falsely under Haverford's name—just in case. I had intended weighting down Natasha's casket and sealing it, but someone in front of the shop frightened me away before I could. You know what happened after that."

"I know that we didn't believe Haverford," the Jap said. "It is regrettable he paid for something he didn't do. But tell me. Why didn't you simply walk into the funeral parlor with legal papers and seize the girl's body? You knew it contained the secret in some way, and once you had that you would have to worry no more."

"We were prepared to gamble that the secret would never leave the country," Caroline told him. "Our main purpose was to round up the band of secret agents who had made possible the discovery of those plans in the first place. What had happened once might happen again. To us the agents were the most important quarry."

Caroline had been edging slowly toward the door and I knew that she was prepared to make a break for it. But I knew, too, that the Jap officer was aware of her intention. He didn't say a word until she was quite close to the door.

"You were prepared to gamble on that," he repeated her last statement, and laughed. "*We* were prepared to gamble that you were working with that private investigator who was trailed after he left the undertaker's early yesterday morning. But you see we were wrong. One must be prepared to lose—just as you have lost, too. But I am going to give you a sporting chance, young lady," the Jap went on, his smile broadening and his hand creeping toward his Luger. "I am going to

give you a chance to get out that door before I can shoot you!"

I KNEW this was the end. I knew even if Caroline didn't take the dare she'd be shot in cold blood anyway. It was then I leapt into action, almost without thinking. With my left hand I wrenched the door open, jumped inside as the men in the room came to their feet.

"We'll take that dare, admiral!" I shouted.

I had Caroline by the arm and was

I handed the gun to Caroline, shouting to her to hold them off, then jumped for the ship's whistle cord. I started blasting on that whistle, its thunderous, booming voice echoing back eerily from the shore—three shorts, three longs, three shorts, the blasts came. It was the Morse code S. O. S. booming out over the harbor. Twice behind me I heard Caroline shoot, and I prayed she could hold them off until help came—as help would certainly come soon.

Every coast guard cutter and police

The March issue of DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE will contain as fine a list of writers as can be found between the covers of any magazine. Among those to be present are Norvell W. Page, Dane Gregory, Russell Gray, Emile C. Tepperman, and others. Tell your friends about this great all-star issue!

leaping backward to the doorway as the Jap grabbed for his gun. That was his last mistake. My automatic roared once and he was hurled backward in his chair, sent crashing to the floor. As an angry yell came howling from the others in the room, I slammed the door and Caroline and I went racing down the deck.

I hadn't an idea where we were going. Anywhere to get away from that howling pack. A gun blasted behind us and I heard a bullet whine crazily as it ricocheted off the steel plates. Then we were racing up a narrow companionway to the upper deck. From there, a narrow ladder led up to the bridge. It was then that the idea struck me!

I pushed Caroline up first, holding off the pack behind us with a warning shot, then scrambled up to join her. Just as I came to her side, a dark figure came lunging at us from the far end of the bridge. I didn't waste a precious bullet on him; I slugged him with the butt of the gun. The little Jap went down in a heap.

launch within two miles would come racing to investigate.

Then, cutting through the deeper notes of the whistle, I heard the thin, banshee wail of a police launch, saw its green lights as it whipped the river into foam in its headlong rush. From the other side, too, a fireboat was racing to the scene. This was the ned—and we had won.

Caroline turned away from the head of the companionway.

"They've gone," she said simply. "They've scuttled below—probably to mingle with the rats in the hope of avoiding arrest." She hesitated for a moment after that. "I don't know how to thank you," she said at last. "I don't know the words."

Then, without warning, she pulled my head down and kissed me, her two small hands holding me by the ears. I was thinking of what I'd said to myself earlier in the day—that I wasn't getting anything out of this case. Hell, it was more than I'd gotten out of most!

THE END

WHICH ONE OF US?

by RUSSELL GRAY



It was a grim, slow procession, wordless save for Whitfield's gasping breathing. . . .

There in that isolated cabin, five people stared at each other in mutual distrust and terror. For one of them was a merciless, cold-blooded killer, and only one person knew who it was—the killer himself!

FOR TWO days snow poured down into the crooked, winding valley. With the coming of night, the snow ceased and the temperature dropped

twenty degrees. The clogged, frozen roads checked the manhunt, but not the killer.

Allan Lynn had been listening to the details of the manhunt since the beginning of the storm. There was nothing much else to do save to read or eat or sleep. Which was perfect. For the first time in a year he was having a real rest in this little cabin on the side of the valley. He could hold out as long as the canned food in the pantry did.

He was seated before the cheerfully

cackling flames in the fieldstone fireplace when news of the fourth killing came over the radio. No more than two hours ago the stabbed corpse of a boy of seventeen had been found near Everston. The final snow flurries had obliterated all tracks.

Automatically Allan Lynn glanced about at the windows. He snapped off the radio and went into the kitchen and took a heavy Sheffield steel carving knife from a drawer. He wasn't the nervous type; the wiry muscles of his lank body had got him out of difficult situations in the past. But neither was he the kind to take needless risks.

He had scarcely returned to his chair in front of the fire when he was again up on his feet, listening. In the stillness outside feet were crunching in the snow.

Carving knife in hand, he went to a window next to the door and peered out. All he could distinguish was a shape looking somewhat like an animal walking upright laboriously approaching the cabin. Lynn stepped to the side of the door and slid the latch back and raised the knife.

The stranger did not turn the knob on the chance that the door was unlocked, which was a good sign. Instead fists pounded anxiously, almost frantically.

"Who's there?" Lynn asked.

"May I come in, please?"

It was a woman's voice. Lynn relaxed.

He pulled the door open and the bundle of fur stumbled through. Then he shut the door against the cold—and against something worse than the cold—and locked it.

The girl cried out. He whirled and saw her staring with fixed horror at the carving knife in his hand.

He laughed. "Don't be afraid of me. I'm not the killer. I've just got this knife for protection against him in case he shows up this way."

Her eyes shifted upward to study his face. The high collar of her fur coat was up about her ears, and between it he saw

a charming face blue with cold. The coat would have been adequate protection as far as it went, but on her head was only an absurd little felt hat and her legs were covered only by silk stockings and futile shoes.

"Here, come to the fire," he said. "And you'd better remove your shoes and stockings. They're soaked."

HER eyes continued to be suspicious. Shrugging, he tossed the knife on a table and pulled a chair in front of the fire. She sat down, still watching him, but she couldn't keep from leaning closer to the blaze to drink in its warmth.

At last she spoke. "It seems that if you want to kill me, I can't help myself. I'll have to trust you."

"And I'll have to trust you," he said. She looked sharply up at him. He explained: "The killer could be a woman, you know. Nobody's seen him—or her. And I happen to live here, while I have no proof where you came from."

She shuddered and sank lower into the chair. "My name is Leora Moore," she said. "I've been driving to visit my aunt on the other side of the valley. The storm stopped me in Everston. When the storm let up, I set out, but drifts have piled up on the road near here and I couldn't get through. The wheels of my car wouldn't grip and I was afraid to stay out there all alone. My car radio told me about the latest murder as close as Everston. I saw your lights and came here."

"You're certainly welcome," Allan Lynn said. "Let me help you with your coat."

Leora Moore stood up and shrugged out of her fur coat. He saw that she was a small thing, beautifully formed. As she reached down to pull off her soaked stockings, her hands trembled. Even if there hadn't been a killer running amok in the community, she'd have reason to be uneasy in a cabin with a strange man.

He went into the bedroom for a pair of his slippers. When he came back, he said: "Look. I'm Allan Lynn, a lawyer. I'm considered respectable and safe. I don't know how to prove that I'm telling the truth, but it will be more comfortable for both of us if you'll believe me."

She stuck her bare feet into his slippers. They were sizes too big for her, but they were better than nothing. She had very nice legs.

Leora Moore smiled wanly up at him. "I believe you. Or to be perfectly honest, I'll try to."

As she spoke, her eyes were drawn inexorably to the knife on the table. She shrank lower into the chair. He couldn't blame her for still being frightened.

He said: "Look here. Yesterday morning, just about the time the storm began, a woman was found stabbed to death in a quiet street in Utica. The knife was missing. There were no clues. Indeed, the woman herself is still unidentified. The manhunt started. Late yesterday afternoon a man was found stabbed to death in an alley in Yarn City, which is only thirty miles away. The third victim was a farmer whose body was discovered in his barn early this morning—also stabbed. Utica, Yarn City and that barn form more or less of a straight line to here. He was obviously bound for this general direction, and through the storm the manhunt swept after him. His fourth and last victim died a couple of hours ago, at the side of the road in the storm outside the town of Everston."

She was all eyes staring up at him and her lips trembled.

He went on: "I'm not trying to frighten you. I'm trying to clear myself. For two days and one night, since the first murder, the killer has been fleeing, slaying as he went along. Look over this cabin. Does it appear like a place into which a hunted killer has just rushed after his last murder in Everston? All over the place

you see signs that it's been thoroughly lived in. The dirty dishes are still in the sink and I haven't bothered to make the bed. That might prove me guilty of bad housekeeping, but not of murder."

Slowly Leora Moore nodded, but her face still lacked conviction. The carving knife was responsible. Lynn swore at himself for not having disposed of it before admitting her.

Suddenly she was on her feet. "What was that outside?"

LYNN had heard it also. He hadn't had company for a week, and now within ten minutes a second person was approaching.

Lynn picked up the knife and went swiftly toward a window. He heard the slap of over-sized slippers behind him; then he felt the girl's hand on his arm. It was odd, he told himself with a twisted smile, how the mere sound of footsteps outside was now causing her to rely on him for protection.

He whispered: "Take it easy. Probably just a neighbor."

Light splashing out from the cabin windows revealed a man in mackinaw and hip-boots plowing through the snow. A rifle rested on the crook of his arm. He came directly to the door and knocked.

"Who's there?" Lynn asked.

"Sheriff Hackson. Open up."

Lynn stuck the carving knife out of sight inside his shirt. Leora Moore stepped back from him, watching, and once again suspicion crawled in her eyes.

He grinned wryly. "How do I know he's really a sheriff?" he whispered. "If he is, I don't want my possession of a knife to give him the same ideas you got, and seem to still have. If he isn't, I want to have the knife handy."

He threw open the door. The sheriff stamped snow off his feet and entered. Out of small eyes set in a rugged face he appraised Lynn narrowly.

"You're not Bob Gillan who owns this cabin," he snapped.

"Bob's my law partner," Lynn explained. "He gave me permission to use this place."

"Yeah?" Sheriff Hackson turned his head toward Leora Moore. "She your wife?"

"No. She got stuck on the road and came here for shelter."

"I saw her car." Hackson rubbed his jowls. "Guess you know who we're looking for. Might be a woman at that. Can you prove who you are, miss?"

She showed him her driver's license and Lynn did the same. Then Lynn said: "How about you identifying yourself. Sheriff?"

"Huh? Yeah, I guess you're right. Can't be too careful with a crazy killer roaming loose. Here are my credentials."

Lynn looked them over and returned them and the sheriff started for the door. With his hand on the knob he turned. "You two look all right, though that doesn't mean a thing. The fiend might be as respectable looking as the next person, have a good reputation and all that. Best be careful and keep your door locked." He chuckled. "Maybe he'll even make out he's a sheriff."

Lynn closed the door after him and then watched him making his way through the deep snow until a tree hid him.

Leora said: "They must be closing in

on the murderer right in this section." She glanced apprehensively about. "He might come in through a window in one of the other rooms."

"They're all locked. He'd have to break the glass and I'd hear him in time." He took the knife out of his shirt and tossed it on the table. "How'd you like some hot coffee?"

She followed him into the kitchen to be near him while he prepared the coffee. Of necessity she had to trust him, and she was growing increasingly at her ease. That pleased him. He kept glancing with approval at the trimness of her figure tight against her blue gown. She was certainly a girl he wanted to know better.

They were sipping hot coffee in front of the fire when the scream shattered the clear night air. Leora's cup clattered to the floor, spilling the coffee. Lynn was on his feet, lunging for the knife on the table.

The scream died abruptly. Nearby there was an exciting clatter of voices.

LYNN rushed into the bedroom and came out with a flashlight. He said: "You stay here. Lock the door after me, and don't open it for anybody but me."

She grabbed his arm. "It's dangerous out there in the dark. He might attack you from behind."

He was getting into his overcoat. He said softly: "You're no longer afraid of



me. Instead you're worried about my safety."

She flushed. "I don't want anybody to be killed."

"I might be needed," he said. "And I can take care of myself. Don't forget to lock the door."

He went out and slammed the door after him. He waited until he heard the clicking of the latch, then went forward through the snow.

Ahead a spray of light denoted a flashlight. He had his own light in his left hand, the carving knife ready in his right.

The voices ceased at his approach. "Who's that?" somebody asked anxiously.

"I'm from the cabin."

The beam of the flashlight swung fully on him. A woman shrieked: "He has a knife! He did it!"

Lynn saw them for the first time, two men and a woman standing in a huddled knot. A third man lay face down at their feet.

"Don't be silly," Lynn said. "I snatched up this knife when I heard the scream. See, it's a carving knife, but it will do for a weapon."

One of the men, thick-set, wearing a coat with a fur collar, said: "Looks as if he's telling the truth, but be careful. Anyway, I don't think the murderer will give himself away with three of us around."

Lynn dropped his flashlight to the man in the snow. He saw the boots and the mackinaw. "Sheriff Hackson!" he exclaimed. "He was in my place not more than ten minutes ago."

"He's dead about that long," the thick-set man said. "Though it's hard to tell in this cold. A knife severed his jugular. I took the liberty to raise his head when Mrs. Whitfield almost stumbled over him."

"Who are you?" Lynn asked.

"Dr. Bradford Apling. I'm on my way to Rochester. My car is stuck in the drift. There are two other cars also stuck. One

belongs to Mr. and Mrs. Whitfield here."

The other man nodded to acknowledge the introduction. He was a youth of hardly more than twenty, weak-chinned and eyes weak behind a pair of thick glasses. His wife might be about as old, though one couldn't be sure. Too much make-up obscured her age.

Lynn again played his flashlight on the corpse. The sheriff's rifle was gone. The killer had either run off with it—or, if he was one of the three standing before him, had thrown it into the bushes.

Mrs. Whitfield shrilled: "We can't stay here all night! That horrible fiend might be lurking behind those trees right now."

"Our duty is to inform the police immediately," Whitfield said.

"The problem is how," Lynn said. "There's no phone in the cabin. The nearest is about a mile away."

"At least let's get into the house," Mrs. Whitfield insisted.

Lynn nodded and led the way. He kept looking over his shoulder, careful not to let any of them get too close behind him, and he kept his fingers tightened on the knife.

LEORA MOORE saw them coming and flung the door open. They trailed in and made for the fire, extending their frozen hands to the blaze. Quickly Lynn told Leora what had happened. She did not utter a sound, but she moved closer to him.

Lynn stood with his back to the wall so that he could face them all without any chance of anybody getting behind him. He said: "One of us will have to go for the police. Frankly, I'm not going to be the one. I propose to stay here and watch over Miss Moore."

"I won't let my man go," Mrs. Whitfield burst out. "How do I know one of you won't murder me while I'm alone here?"

Dr. Apling cleared his throat. "That leaves me, and I don't intend to be the goat. First of all, I don't know my way about in this neighborhood. Secondly, I'll be damned if I'll hike through the darkness with somebody who's already killed four people—five now—at large."

Whitfield laughed mirthlessly. "For all we know, we might be safer outside. There's a good chance, you know, that one of us in this room might be the murderer. After all, the sheriff was killed only a few feet from here and you said there's no other house for a mile. I hardly think the murderer would be wandering about in the cold. He'd have made for some sort of shelter."

"Oh God, why didn't we turn back to Everston?" Mrs. Whitfield moaned.

"So it seems we're set here for the night, watching each other," Lynn said grimly.

Nobody said anything. The three newcomers stripped off their overcoats. Leora took up a position at Lynn's side. He reached up a hand and closed it over hers.

Presently Lynn said: "We don't have to be too much afraid of each other, even if one of us is the killer. I don't think he's mad or simply running wild with that knife of his. There's a method to all these killings. In my law practice I've come across the murderous desperation of a hunted man before. It started after the murder of that woman in Utica. He might have—"

"Or she," Dr. Apling broke in.

"Huh?"

"I mean a woman might be the murderer," Dr. Apling said. "I saw the first victim. Her clothes were rather cheap and gaudy, but she had an extremely attractive, voluptuous figure. I couldn't tell about her face, but it must have gone with the figure. What I'm getting at, her face was hacked to ribbons with a knife—the way one jealous woman would mutilate a rival."

The other four stared at the doctor as he spoke. When he finished he sensed the horror in all their eyes.

"Why are you all looking at me like that?" he demanded.

"You—you say you saw her," Leora expressed the thought of all of them.

"Oh, that." Dr. Apling laughed. "By a strange coincidence, I happened to be in Utica at the time, right on the street where the body was discovered. I saw a crowd and natural curiosity drew me. As I am a doctor, I examined her to see if she was dead."

Allan Lynn licked his lips. "You said you were bound for Rochester. Utica is only forty miles from here, and that first murder occurred yesterday morning."

"The storm held me up, of course. Good Lord, folks, you don't think that I—"

Lynn shrugged. "I started to show that there was nothing insane or vicious about the killer. If he's not one of us, he probably looks as normal and ordinary as any of us. Almost anybody, given a strong enough impetus, can murder once. That's what happened when that woman was killed in Utica. The police hadn't any clues, but the killer wasn't sure. Panic completely possessed him. As he fled, it seemed to him that everybody he came across was hunting him.

"THE man he slew in Yarn City probably acted or spoke in what the killer believed was a suspicious manner. At night he took shelter from the storm in a barn, and when the farmer found him there in the morning, he felt that he had to kill him. The boy slain near Everston a couple of hours ago must have died for the same reason as the second victim. Then just a short time ago in front of this cabin he stumbled across the sheriff, who must have stopped him for questioning, so the sheriff was the fifth to die."

Nervously Whitfield cleared his throat. "According to you then, if the murderer

is among us, he knows that we suspect him and so—" The rest of the sentence trailed off unspoken.

Lynn waved the carving knife. "I'd advise him not to try it. I'm stronger than any of you and I have this knife." He jumped to his feet. "I'm a sap! The killer evidently used the same knife on all five victims. According to the radio, he'd wiped the blood off on the clothing of each after the job was done. . . . Dr. Apling, did you notice blood on the sheriff's clothing which couldn't have come from the wound?"

The doctor nodded. "On the back of his mackinaw."

"Then the killer must still have the knife," Lynn declared. "I'm going to search every one of you."

"By what authority?" Dr. Apling protested angrily.

"Do you refuse?"

"Certainly not. Only—I insist on searching you first."

Lynn handed the carving knife to Leora and lifted his arms. Rapidly the doctor patted his body.

"You've been holding a knife all along," the doctor growled as he stepped back.

"But if you insist on looking—"

"I do," Lynn clipped.

But he found nothing more deadly than a penknife in the doctor's pocket. Then he took back the carving knife from Leora and the two girls searched each other. Still there was no sign of the knife.

"Haven't you overlooked our overcoats?" the doctor suggested.

"I'm getting to that," Lynn said.

They watched him breathlessly as he examined the overcoats one by one. Finally he straightened up. "Either we're all innocent or the killer ditched the knife."

"Which means we still have to take for granted the innocence of you two," Dr. Apling sneered. "You had the best chance to get rid of the knife. And haven't you neglected to search one coat?"

He pointed to Leora's fur coat lying over a chair.

Lynn shrugged, then dug his hand in one pocket of Leora's coat, then the other. His hand lingered in the second pocket; his face drained of color.

"Well?" Dr. Apling demanded.

Slowly Lynn withdrew a big clasp knife.

Mrs. Whitfield moaned with horror.

"No!" Leora whispered. "That's not mine."

With unsteady fingers Lynn opened the clasp knife.

DR. APLING stepped to Lynn's side. He was breathing hard. "Look at that!" the doctor exclaimed. "Blood! That along the hinge is dried. And look at this little streak—still moist."

"It's not mine!" Leora said again.

Allan Lynn laughed harshly. "Of course it isn't. The finding of this knife stopped my thinking for a minute. She couldn't have killed the sheriff. She was in here with me all that time."

Leora's gratitude showed in her eyes.

"That's what you say," Whitfield scoffed. "Why should we believe you?"

"You needn't," Lynn said quietly. "I know for my own well-being that one of you three is the killer. You slipped the knife into her pocket. That was a mistake because now you're not armed and I am. We're going to stay right here until it's light enough for Miss Moore to go for the police."

"You mean, for her to get away," the doctor snapped.

Lynn spun toward him. "You were the one who insisted that I look at her coat. You were the only one of us who could have been alone out there with the sheriff. Mr. and Mrs. Whitfield alibi each other. I intend to—"

"Stop it!" Mrs. Whitfield burst out. Her face was screwed up with terror. "All you're doing is goading the murderer into killing the rest of us. I'm going—"

She dove out the door.

"For God's sake, come back!" her husband yelled, starting after her. Lynn gripped his arm as he passed. Whitfield struggled furiously.

"She'll freeze to death in the snow," Whitfield sobbed. "She hasn't even a coat. I've got to bring her back."

Reluctantly Lynn released the youth. He had no right to keep a man back from trying to save his wife.

Whitfield, also forgetting his overcoat, dashed out of the cabin. Shivering under the cold blast which whipped in through the open door, Lynn turned to Dr. Apling. But the only other occupant of the room was Leora Moore who had dropped wearily into a chair.

"Where'd Dr. Apling go?"

"Out while you were fighting with Mr. Whitfield." She sounded as if she no longer cared what happened.

Lynn swore under his breath. "Listen. I have to go out there also. Your shoes and stockings are still wet, so you'll have to stay here. Here's the carving knife. Be sure to lock the door and keep it locked."

"Must you leave? You're not the police."

"But I can try to prevent another murder," he said.

He handed her the carving knife, then pulled on his overcoat. Flashlight and clasp knife in hand, he stepped out into the cold.

He came to Sheriff Hackson's body and went past it without giving it more than a glance. In spite of the cold, his undershirt was plastered with sweat.

"Hello, you with the flashlight," a voice called. "Who are you?"

"Lynn. Did you find her?"

Whitfield stepped into the beam of the flashlight. His weak eyes blinked behind his glasses. He hugged his coatless chest as the cold knifed into him.

"I lost my head, running out without a coat or a flashlight," Whitfield said.

"Did you try your car?"

"No. She couldn't get it going. But let's go there anyway."

THE two men ran. When they burst through a thin patch of trees, they saw the lights ahead.

"Headlights from my car," Whitfield panted. "I must have left them on."

Somebody was crouching in front of the headlights. He was broad and wore a fur-collared overcoat. Outstretched on the snow was a woman clad only in a dress.

Lynn put on a burst of speed, holding the open clasp knife ready to strike. He was almost on the two figures when Dr. Apling glanced up.

"Stay right where you are," Lynn ordered.

Dr. Apling made no attempt to rise. He said in a thin strained voice: "It appears that I got here too late. She's dead."

"You killed her!" Whitfield shrieked.

Lynn put his body between the young man and the doctor. "Take it easy, Whitfield. Let's get her back to the cabin. There might still be hope."

Dr. Apling lumbered up to his feet and shook his head. "Too late, I said. The murderer no longer had a knife, so he strangled her with his bare hands. One of you two did."

"That's a lie!" Whitfield wailed. "You were the one! We found you bending over her." He kneeled down at his wife's side. "Maud, speak to me. You can't be dead!"

Lynn said: "I still have the knife and I know I can run faster than either of you two. . . . Whitfield, you lift your wife and carry her to her cabin. . . . Dr. Apling, walk right behind him. I'll bring up the rear. And no funny business."

Leora Moore was waiting for them at the door. She moaned at the sight of Mrs. Whitfield's body, then scurried away to the other end of the room, as if fleeing from all three men. Whitfield moved after

her, deposited the body on the couch.

As Lynn was stripping off his overcoat, he looked at the sixth victim. Her face was as dark now as some of the paint on it. Her left hand dangled limply over the side of the couch.

Suddenly Lynn's eyebrows flicked upward. He was trying to remember something.

Dr. Apling had gone over to the body and was again examining it. He lifted the left hand, then turned to Whitfield with a wry grin: "You say this lady was your wife?"

Then Lynn had it—just as that idiot doctor was warning the murderer!

Knife balanced casually in his hand, Lynn started to saunter across the room. He said: "Why the hell should you worry about everybody's morals, Doctor?"

But his voice or words couldn't fool Whitfield. The young man leaped.

Lynn had been prepared for Whitfield to go for himself, but instead Whitfield jumped around the end of the couch and threw himself on Leora. Before Lynn could get halfway across to her aid, Whitfield had wrenched the carving knife from her hand.

"Come a step further and this knife goes through her," Whitfield panted.

LEORA made queer sounds in her throat as she stood rigid with the point of the knife digging into the small of her back. Lynn stopped dead.

Dr. Apling gasped: "So you're the one! Lord, if I'd known—"

"You warned him, Doctor," Lynn said tightly. "When you mentioned about that woman he said was his wife not having a wedding ring".

Whitfield laughed dryly. "I shouldn't have come back here. But I was sap enough to forget my coat and without it I couldn't go roaming about at night like this. But I'll go now and I'm taking the girl with me. Throw my coat over before

I change my mind and kill her right now."

Lynn was watching desperately for a chance, for a break. He had to keep Whitfield here.

He said: "I should have guessed sooner, but it wasn't till I saw she had no ring that the pattern fell together. She looked like what I'm sure she was—the kind of tramp any man with a little money can pick up on the road to stay with him for a while. The real tip-off came when I recalled at which point in my conversation she had fled. I had been saying that Dr. Apling was the only one who could have been alone in the night with the sheriff. That was when she fled. She knew that you could have also. She knew that after your car was stuck, you had left her for a while. I don't know exactly why, probably to see if you could find shelter. The sheriff stopped you and you killed him. You figured that it would be senseless to flee. You couldn't get your car started—you'd probably stolen it—and anyway, you were posing as a respectable married man. You must have picked the girl up for that reason after the Everston murder."

Whitfield's face was a mask of hunted bitterness over Leora's shoulder. "They've been hounding me all over, through the storm, everywhere. I couldn't even get a night's sleep in a barn. But I'll beat them all yet. I'll kill and kill if they make me, but I'll beat them."

Dr. Apling shook his head. "No, you won't, boy, and you know it. The police won't have any trouble tracking you in this snow. And after you leave here they'll have your description for the first time. How far do you think you'll get?"

"Far enough. She'll be my hostage. They won't dare touch me. I say throw me my coat."

"All right," Lynn said. "But you want both coats—yours and hers."

"You talk too much," Whitfield snapped. "The longer you make me wait, the thirstier this knife gets."

Taking his time, Lynn picked up Whitfield's coat from in front of the fireplace, then went to the chair over which Leora's coat hung. He was praying for the courage to risk another person's life. It was harder than risking his own.

A coat over each arm, he started to move languidly toward Leora and Whitfield.

"Don't come too close to me," Whitfield warned.

it plunging for his heart. Then his own knife bit through skin and flesh and grated against bone.

The carving knife clattered to the floor. Lynn stared with transfixed incredulity at Whitfield falling away from him—and at the hilt of the claspknife protruding from Whitfield's side.

Suddenly all the voices in the room were quiet. He swayed in an immense silence, and then slowly, with sickening

Are you getting a kick from this Russell Gray story? For the same kind of thrills, don't miss HOME OF THE HEADLESS ONES by this same well-liked author, appearing in the February issue of HORROR STORIES.

"Catch," Lynn said.

He threw Whitfield's coat, just out of reach. Whitfield had to take a single step sideways to catch it—and Lynn threw Leora's coat and dove in behind it.

The coat slapped the wall above Whitfield's head and dropped down on him.

FOR a long second the two coats flying through the air confused Whitfield. Lynn had banked on that. As Whitfield had started to reach for his own coat, the point of the carving knife had slid inches from Leora's back. Now Whitfield tore the fur coat away from his face and drove the knife viciously into Leora's back.

By that time, Lynn was close enough to sweep her aside, knocking her sprawling against a chair. He heard her scream and Whitfield sob with rage. Then he himself was roaring as he saw, hovering inches from his chest, the tip of the carving knife glistening with Leora's blood.

Lynn sidestepped and brought down the claspknife which all along had remained open in his grip. Whitfield was pivoting toward him, the carving knife lashing out. Time stood still as Lynn saw

heart, turned toward where Leora Moore lay.

Dr. Apling was dropping down at her side and turning her over on her stomach. He looked up at Lynn over his shoulder.

"That was fast work, son. I would have gone to your aid, but it was all over before I knew what was happening."

"Leora?" Lynn muttered. "Is she badly hurt?"

The doctor bent over her again, then, chuckling, stood up. "I'm glad to say he failed with his seventh victim. Only a flesh wound. Hardly broke the skin. I suggest you take her into the bedroom while I attend to Whitfield."

Lynn lifted her in his arms. Her eyes were open, and there was no pain in them.

As he crossed the threshold into the bedroom, Dr. Apling's voice followed him. "Don't give him more than a half hour. Got him in the lung. That's retribution, being killed with the same knife with which he killed the others."

But neither Lynn nor Leora heard him. She was smiling up at him, and, as he carried her across the room, her arms wound themselves about him.

Death Stalks In Purple

The Bystander—self-sworn enemy of crime since the day his bride became the innocent victim of gunmen's lead, knew he must chalk up another score on his card of vengeance. For the death-loaded touch of an invisible finger was turning lovely young girls into rigid corpses—hideously purple!

CHAPTER ONE

Death Dons Purple

THE GIRL standing on the corner of Elmore Drive waved frantically at the thinned late-night traffic. Mist swirled about her wraith-like, lonely figure, but she seemed unaware that she

shivered in a flimsy evening gown. A car slowed; an inebriate face grinned "Goin' my way?"—then the car went on by as if its driver had seen something fearfully sobering in the taut white oval of the girl's face. Finally a cab rolled up; the girl climbed into it with such distraught haste that the mesh evening bag slipped from her unheeding fingers, bounced and skittered across the sidewalk.



"Drink," the Hindu commanded.
"I shall only force it down your
throat, otherwise!"

A Pulse-Jolting Novelette by RALPH OPPENHEIM

Daniel Craig picked it up. The "By-stander"—as Craig was known—raised the little bag, waved it, shouted: "Hey, wait!" But the cab was now only a red tail-light shrinking down the misty drive.

Craig opened the purse under a street-lamp. Chance had brought him here, and his agate-keen eyes had noted the girl's distraught behavior. Now he groped through the feminine miscellany so large for a little bag. Keys. Compact. Not much money. But a bank-book, and on it the name: *Dorothy Carstairs*. The By-



stander's hard, mask-like face showed recognition. A well-known society girl, she wouldn't need this bag; any cabby would trust her. Craig was deciding she'd just had too many cocktails, and he could return the bag in the morning, when he found the little white square of paper. Under the light he read four bold, hand-printed words:

BEWARE THE PURPLE DEATH!

The ink, appropriately, was purple. Some joke, doubtless—memento of a parlor game. But then a vision of the girl shivering in the mist returned to Daniel Craig with a sixth sense that told him: *she's in real danger!* Nerves tensing, he hurried on long legs around the corner where he had previously parked his coupe.

"A case in the morning, and I chase a social butterfly!" he was chiding himself as, speeding down Elmore Drive only seconds later, he spotted that cab. It was rolling smoothly, no traffic near it—yet Craig still felt chill prescience saying: *the danger is closing in on her!* His eyes remained glued on the cab as he gained swiftly; when it turned off the avenue he was close behind, and he was almost overhauling it when it rolled safely to a stop before a granite building fronted by green lights. The Bystander breathed relief. Police headquarters. Sensible girl, going to the law, but she'd want her purse, the white paper—

Climbing from his coupe, the little feminine bag in one big hand, Craig strode to the parked cab and—his still-taut nerves seemed to shriek then: *it's happened!* The cabby stood outside the vehicle, shaking, his pug-nosed face ashen, his eyes staring in transfixed horror through the cab door he must have opened. "Gawd!" he sobbed. "Oh my Gawd!"

The Bystander's agate eyes followed that stare. Inside the cab the automatic light that went on with the opening door showed what was there.

Her flimsy-gowned body was sprawled stiffly from the cushioned seat, slanted lengthwise to the cab floor like some stiff full-length dummy, with dull marbles for eyes. Rigid as a board, as if *rigor mortis* had set in, impossibly premature! But this alone wouldn't have made a pretty girl so hideous: Craig saw now *that she was purple!*

It wasn't just the color. . . . Leaning closer, the Bystander got the full horror of it. On her oval face, on her neck, under the transparency of sheer stockings, veins and arteries were monstrously swollen and protruding! Embossed on the dead white flesh so that from any distance she looked completely purple. . . .

Craig forced a finger to the big vein in her wrist, to ascertain there was no pulse. The swollen vein felt like cold, lifeless stone. The Bystander withdrew, whirled on the pug-nosed cabby.

"How did it happen?" he rapped. The cabby made a retching sound. Craig seized his arm, and the man screamed, jerked away. "*Leggo!* You touched it; you might give it to *me*—that plague—!" When Craig released him, he managed to blurt, evidently taking Craig for a policeman, "Hones', I dunno how it happened! She says, drive to the police. Nothin' touches us—I don't hear nothin'! We get here, and there she is . . . like that!"

The Bystander, his hard face masking his feelings, sent the cabby into the building to get policemen—while he himself stood clutching the little mesh bag he could never return to its hapless owner. . . .

THE AUTOPSY room adjoined the morgue, which itself adjoined the police headquarters. Lights gleamed through the odor as of a disinfected abattoir, where a white-robed doctor from the Medical Examiner's staff was completing an autopsy.

But the gruesomè, purpled corpse on the table was not the corpse from the cab!

It was the cadaver of a woman longer dead, its rigidity worn off—which was not so with Dorothy Carstairs.

"Well, Craig, still claim you just happened along?" Inspector Rawlings, Homicide chief, was eying the Bystander suspiciously. "No idea there'd been three others, eh? One the doc's got there was a Mrs. Humboldt, wealthy dowager. Found on Market Street yesterday. Other two—one found near a night club, second at her own home—were also society dames, of different ages." His rugged face greyed. "This Carstairs girl will be the youngest yet."

"And to think that until tonight we thought it was some sickness!" the other man who had come here with Rawlings and Craig exclaimed. Stocky, bushy-haired, he was an assistant District Attorney named Charles Harris. "We kept it from the papers. Now that note you brought us, Craig—'Beware the Purple Death'—proves murder! Won't the D.A. be surprised?"

Had his face not looked a trifle sick from the sight on the autopsy table, it would have looked pleased, thought Craig, recalling that Harris had once been D.A. himself. There had been some scandal; Harris had used methods believed too rough, gone in for too much third-degreesing. Whether for this or pure politics he'd been given the toboggan—was now humble assistant to the incumbent D.A. who had put him only on minor confidence rackets and vice—but had ordered him to make a routine report on the purple deaths thought to be some sickness. . . .

"Now it's my case, and by God I've got to break it!" Harris' jaw jutted; this was of course his chance for a comeback. "Well, doc?" he demanded, as the medical man now mercifully drew a rubber sheet over the purpled cadaver.

"Same as the others," the doctor said wearily. "I'll lay odds new one will be the same too. Hardened arteries, veins.

Death from blood-stoppage and congealment. Nothing in brain or viscera. Nothing—" despite his professional detachment his voice shook—"to show how this purple death strikes out of thin air!"

"That's dandy!" Inspector Rawlings spread out his hands. "No method; no motives; no suspects—two of the victims died with only cops near them, and that cabby seems cleared! Families of the women as mystified as we are! As for the warning note; the brand of both paper and purple ink are common, and try to trace block printing! As Craig says, the girl would have smeared any other prints there were with her own. Nothing else in her purse except that bank-book showing recent withdrawals, but a spoiled brat like that squanders her dough—" he remembered, with quick remorse. "Poor kid!"

Harris turned hard, pleading eyes to the Bystander. "Look here, Craig—you brought us the big lead. Now I'm asking you as a personal favor: help us break this case! I've heard of things you've done—"

Daniel Craig slowly shook his head. "I've got another case—"

"Drop it!" Harris demanded, aggressively. "Good Lord, man, nothing can be as big as this! And if it's money, I'm sure there'll be a reward offered, with rich women like this the victims—"

"Sorry, but I'm still not having any." Craig's face was hard now. "Rawlings doesn't like me messing in anyway." The Inspector reddened; many times the Bystander had jumped him to a crime's solution. "My duty was done when I brought in the mesh bag," Craig finished. "I was just a bystander; the girl wanted to bring the case here—and though she didn't make it, it's all yours now—reward included!"

But the Bystander's mind was not as decided as had been his words when, hours later, in a morning that had broken grey and chill, he drove across town in his coupe. The Purple Death—inexplicable, stiffening doom which had struck down

four women, haunted him. The awful, purpled corpse of Dorothy Carstairs, now probably undergoing autopsy, remained like a sickening image in his mind.

He was trying to supplant it with the image of a lovely, living girl—Evelyn Prescott, the client to whom he was going. He had known her casually; yesterday she had phoned his office. She was worried about her Aunt Martha—with whom she and a half-brother, Paul, lived. Aunt Martha, Evelyn had said, was being blackmailed or something—

Vague as that, yet Craig had promised to look into it, not for money he might get (he still resented Harris' remarks), but because Evelyn Prescott warmed in him that flame of memory time never could erase. Something about her—indeed, about any truly beautiful girl—reminded Craig of the only woman he had ever loved—the woman who had died in his arms on the very day set for their wedding. When walking past a bank, they had inadvertently got into the blazing path of escaping bandits. "Innocent bystanders," the papers had called them. Long after hunting down the thugs whose guns had killed his fiancée, Craig, who had changed from a humble clerk to a hard private detective, was still a "bystander"—whose night roving often found undercurrents of a crime seen only on its surface by the police. Thus he had come to learn the Purple Death was murder—

THE Purple Death: his mind had revolved back to it again. Now he was mechanically slowing his coupe before a sprawling, opulent but cheerless mansion set among shadowy trees. Climbing out, the Bystander approached the house, and he was wondering if he shouldn't forget this little personal case and go back to tackle the Purple Death—when the bullet whined close enough to fan his cheek!

He flattened against the nearest tree, cursing, whipping out **his own** Colt .45.

There had been only a faint *pop* just before that bullet came; he knew only that a silenced gun must have fired from the general direction of the house. He waited, his agate eyes angry with surprise, but his face impassive. Nothing happened. Warily, gripping the Colt in his pocket now, he moved on towards the sprawling mansion. He had forgotten about the Purple Death.

A man suddenly loomed round the hedged path from the front of the house, almost collided with the Bystander. "I beg your pardon!" the man muttered and Craig looked at him narrowly. He was stocky, with a little bristly mustache, and dark, alive eyes under a black Homburg hat. He carried a small black bag. "I beg your pardon!" he repeated, and Craig moved aside to let him pass. The Bystander glanced over his shoulder to see the man make mincing hurried steps to the street. Then, since there was no telling *who* had fired the shot, Craig continued to move cautiously towards the house, ready to match shot for shot if any more came—but none did. Reaching the front door, he rang the bell.

"I'm so glad you came!" Evelyn Prescott said, as she admitted him a moment later. Even in his tense state he was conscious of his need of sleep and a shave; the girl's clean-cut cameo-like beauty had that effect. She was tall and lithe-limbed, with gold-tinted brown hair wound in braids around a shapely head. Her cool slender hand took Craig's, led him into the foyer where a mousy-looking maid took his things. Casually he had transferred his gun from outer to inner coat.

He didn't like this house. A shadowy gloom pervaded it; there was overstuffed furniture and archaic, badly carved statuettes standing on ugly pedestals. The girl didn't seem to belong against such a background at all. The young man who looked up with sullen, furtive eyes from the living room divan, did. Evelyn introduced him as her half-brother Paul.

"So you did call your detective friend?" His voice was a sullen boy's whine, but there was nothing boyish about his sallow, dissipated-looking face. "You're a fool, Evelyn."

"Paul—!" the girl reprimanded, her eyes flashing.

"She's a fool!" The sullen eyes went to Craig. "Our aunt would resent anybody butting in. I resent it."

Craig detected years of pampering in the voice as his own agate eyes met the sullen ones. "Do you do your resenting with a silenced gun?" the Bystander asked casually, noting the open windows behind the divan which commanded the front of the house. The girl's eyes went wide, tense; Paul Prescott also looked genuinely uncomprehending. In the little silence Craig again felt the pall-like gloom of the house—the sense as of thick menace. He didn't go on to explain what had prompted his remark. Instead: "Is your Aunt Martha sick?" he asked the girl. "Or *wasn't* the man I saw coming out with a black bag—a doctor?"

"You must mean Doctor Stockton, the psychiatrist," Evelyn Prescott said, a distasteful flicker in her hazel eyes. "He left Aunt Martha resting upstairs; said she was in a nervous state." Her voice, as if in habit, had dropped to a tense whisper, but it was very audible in the gloomy, shadowy room. "That's what I want to talk to you about. . . ." She ignored a whined protest from Paul Prescott, touched Craig's sleeve, whispered. "You can help, I know, Dan—Mr. Craig! She's been making big withdrawals from the bank—even been borrowing from my personal account and Paul's! Then there was a phone-call: I heard her pleading with somebody to wait! She won't confide in us; she just consults these—these quacks!" she said angrily. Paul again seemed about to protest, but reached for a cigarette, lit it jerkily, his sullen furtive eyes watching Craig.

"Quacks?" Craig was repeating. "You mean this Dr. Stockton?"

"Oh, I know he's a reputable psychiatrist—but all his talk of complexes seems to do Aunt Martha more harm than good. Then there's this Ahmed Bey she goes to almost every day!"

"Ahmed Bey? A Hindu?"

"Haven't you heard of him? A fortune-teller who's all the rage now."

Craig frowned. "Would the bills of this psychiatrist and the fortune-teller account for the money she's been spending?"

"No. I've seen the bills. She's spending much more than—"

"*So sweet of you to worry, dear!*" a feline voice suddenly spoke through the thick air. "Especially since, if I spend my money I'll be leaving less to *you!*"

THE Bystander had been startled enough to half-pull out his gun. Now he looked at the woman who had stepped into the room, and who was buttoning up a leopard street-coat. She was much younger than he had expected. "Aunt Martha" had sounded old-maidish, stuffy; but actually she must have been a child herself when her brother's children, Paul and Evelyn, were born. Now, just approaching middle-age, she was richly formed in figure, her hair a deep red, her face with full-curved lips attractive even in taut anger.

"Aunt Martha—" Evelyn was blurting now, and the appellation really sounded absurd. "You don't understand—" and Paul Prescott, crunching out his cigarette, whined: "I told her, Aunt Martha! I knew you wouldn't want any detective!" Craig gave him a hard glance; evidently this young man wanted to stay in the wealthy aunt's good graces.

The woman's face had tautened more; she walked up to Craig—and he smelled a perfume exotic and thick and oppressive as the house itself. Her eyes blazed at him, yet he thought he saw something besides

anger there—was it a gleam of fear?

"You might as well go at once!" she said. Her voice began to rise, shrilly. "I don't want any detectives in my house." An angry vein swelled on her temple, another on her neck. "Now get out, do you hear me? Get out before I—*what are you staring at?*"

For the Bystander had gone rigid, feeling as if his very scalp were shrinking. In that instant the whole shadowy oppression of the house seemed concentrated in one pall of eerie menace—and Craig was *staring at those veins which remained swollen purple in Martha Prescott's forehead and neck!* Staring, while Evelyn and Paul seemed not to see, and Martha herself was unmindful. *The Purple Death*, he thought again now, his nerves iced; *this case is linked with the Purple Death!*

And scarcely realizing it, he was seizing the woman's arm, almost brutally. "You're going to see a doctor—a good doctor!" he was rapping at her. "At once!"

"Take your hands off me—!" With astonishing strength, she broke free of his grip, those veins still standing out rigidly purple. "You can't bully me, you—" Craig saw her reach in back of her, as Evelyn cried out, and Paul also started to move. All in that enraged instant, the woman grasped one of the statuettes that abounded here and, with a scream of distraught anger, hurled it at Craig!

The Bystander ducked, swiftly enough to avoid a full impact, but not enough to stop a skull-grazing blow that sent his brain reeling and his knees buckling. He didn't really pass out, but his mind was a virtual blank until he found himself sitting on the carpet taking a swig of whiskey held to his lips by Evelyn Prescott.

"Dan," she didn't hesitate over his name now, as she spoke tremulously, her eyes wide with horror, "Are you all right?"

Craig gingerly felt a bump on his head. Next to him were the shattered pieces of the statuette; across the room Paul Pres-

cott stood holding the whiskey decanter, looking frightened but still sullen. Somewhere outside the sound of a car-motor was receding—and now Craig lurched to his feet, Evelyn's slim arms trying to help him. "Where is she?" he rapped. "Where did she go?"

Paul whined: "She drove off in the Cadillac roadster. . . ."

Craig shook his head like a dog to clear it. But his growing awareness only heightened the panic beating in his heart, the vivid mental image of swollen, purple veins. . . . "Where would she go? Have you any idea?"

"To the Crescent—most likely," the girl blurted. "That's the little restaurant on Lorel Street where this Ahmed Bey is. Oh, Dan," she cried then, "I don't know why she—did it—she must have been out of her head—"

But the Bystander wasn't listening. He was striding to the door. Over his shoulder he said, "I'll get in touch with you—later!" He felt her worried gaze and Paul's sullen one staring after him as he hurried from the house, still wondering now who had fired that first silenced gunshot at him.

CHAPTER TWO

The Confessing Corpse

LOREL STREET was a narrow, cramped alley in the foreign section, and when Craig pulled up his coupe before the sign that said "*Crescent Restaurant: Real India Dishes*," he thought it strange that wealthy people would come to such a place. But there were some expensive cars parked here. Looking them over, he saw no sign of a Cadillac roadster.

He strode into the restaurant, thinking: *Better get in touch with Rawlings and that assistant D.A. Harris, tell them I'm on their case now*—Hot thick air, pungent with the exotic odor of curry, filled his

nostrils. It was well past noon now, and he was hungry, but this heavy smell was unappetizing to him. In tables set in little booths, he saw a few swarthy-skinned patrons, but he saw several fashionably dressed white men and women who seemed to be enjoying themselves over tiny cups of coffee.

"A table, Sahib?" A large Hindu with a scar across one swart cheek bowed at Craig.

me. When Omar said you were here, I looked into my crystal, and can you guess what I saw?"

Craig eyed him narrowly. "No."

"I saw," sighed the fortune-teller, "that you came here with some dark and brooding suspicion. That in some way you try to link me with the forces of evil." The smooth, precise delivery was impressive at that, Craig thought, as he said crisply:

"Maybe your crystal told you just what

On page four of this magazine, you will find a few excerpts from a new novel by Stewart Sterling, THE LEGION OF TERROR, that is featured in next month's issue of DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE. You'll find it one of this author's finest stories.

Craig said: "I want to see Ahmed Bey." He was looking around the cramped restaurant whose other end showed a swinging kitchen door.

"You have an appointment with Ahmed Bey."

"Yes," Craig lied. "Tell him Daniel Craig wants to see him."

"A moment, please." The Hindu waiter bowed himself away, went through a side-door near the kitchen entrance, and Craig was genuinely surprised when the man came back, white teeth flashing in a smile. "The sahib will step this way, please."

When they reached the door, the waiter stood aside to let Craig pass. An odor of incense engulfed the Bystander as he entered a square, draped chamber, luxuriantly furnished with deep-cushioned sofa and lounges.

"Good day, Daniel Craig." The turbaned man who spoke precise English faced Craig, tall and lean, from behind an inlaid table on which a huge crystal flickered with the reflected designs of the drapes. "You wonder that I see you without an appointment," Ahmed Bey smiled. "Your reputation, Mr. Craig, is known to

I'm going to have to ask you now, too?"

"I fear not. My crystal is not omniscient, Mr. Craig. However, if it is a reading of your fortune—"

"Save that for the suckers," the Bystander broke in. "You have a—a client named Martha Prescott, correct?"

"A Miss Prescott sometimes comes here, yes."

"Has she been here today?"

"I have not seen her. But perhaps Omar knows . . . if you will excuse me—" The tall Hindu left the draped room. Alone, the Bystander moved to the big crystal, looked at it curiously—until something else on that table caught his roving eyes. From some papers, the top of a letter protruded; he could just see the engraved lines of the stationery: *Dr. Ernest Stockton, 22 North Street*. In one swift move the Bystander edged around the table, got a corner of that sheet, pulled until the hand-written letter became visible to his swift-reading, slitted eyes: ". . . my pecuniary needs being pressing, my dear Ahmed Bey, you will have to reimburse me with ten thousand dollars in cash. Sincerely, Ernest Stockton."

"Omar says Miss Prescott was not here," the precise voice of Ahmed Bey made the Bystander whirl. The tall turbaned Hindu had returned; his dark piercing eyes met Craig's with a look of ominous reproach. "And now I must request that you leave, Mr. Craig. To one of my race, the betrayal of a host's confidence is quite unpardonable. You will kindly go without further words—and you need not return!"

His 'request' was made meaningful as the drapes at the door parted again to reveal the huge figure of Omar, who stood with arms folded, the scar on his swart cheek greyed in anger.

The Bystander, who had felt like a small boy caught stealing jam, stood hesitating. He would have stayed and faced both these Hindus, had he not been certain that Martha Prescott was not here; now his mind was on Dr. Ernest Stockton, the psychiatrist. He gave a shrug. With his face hard, impassive as ever, he strode past Ahmed Bey to the door. Omar silently opened it for him. The Bystander walked out through the dingy restaurant whose diners seemed blissfully unaware of the drama that had gone on in the sumptuous back room.

IN A DRUG-STORE phone-booth outside, he dialed the Prescott home number. The maid-servant put Evelyn on the wire; the girl's liquid tones slid through the receiver: "Dan Craig! Did you find Aunt Martha?"

The question made his own prepared one superfluous. "Then you didn't hear from her yet," he said, worried. "Well, if she does come home before I reach you again, you and your brother keep her there."

"Paul isn't here," the girl said then, tensely. "He went out, all upset, and I—I'm afraid—"

"He's been drinking a bit too much, hasn't he?" Craig, remembering the dis-

sipated look, spoke with sympathetic understanding.

"Yes—that's it." Her voice sounded ashamed.

"Well, you stay home, sit tight. . . ." As he hung up, Craig felt a prickling apprehension about the girl alone in that gloomy house with only a mousy maid-servant. Already the tentacles of the Purple Death had seemed to reach towards one member of that family, and the thought of lovely Evelyn, her clear young skin — Foolish! That dissipated half-brother hardly would have been protection anyway.

Craig, still standing in the booth, had out another nickel—but he put it away, pushed out. Rawlings and Harris could wait till he had something definite.

His mind was working as once more he sat at the wheel of his rolling coupe. Blackmail, he thought. This Dr. Stockton seemed to be blackmailing Ahmed Bey. And blackmail seemed to lurk behind the whole baffling skein of these crimes. Dorothy Carstairs' bank-book, too, had shown recent big withdrawals. . . .

North Street was on the other side of the city. Though Craig drove as fast as traffic permitted, the afternoon was deepening, a chill fog bringing premature twilight, when he turned into the fashionable block, picked out the neat, remodeled brownstone house that was number 22, and saw an empty Cadillac roadster parked in front of it!

His narrowed eyes were focused on that car as he started to pull towards the curb. Yet those same eyes must have caught in the rear-view mirror the juggernaut-shape that swerved out ominously from another part of the curb, behind him! It was a heavy dark sedan, and it picked up speed quickly, gears grinding, and when it came abreast of the little coupe. . . .

The Bystander slammed over his wheel, swerved sharply towards the curb—but not sharply enough! The impact of metal

against metal was a grinding shriek as a heavy steel bumper-edge ripped viciously through the coupe like a knife through paper. The weight of the big sedan sent the smaller car toppling sidewise, and Craig never knew how he got the door open in time to catapult his body in a leap which sprawled him to the curb. He kept rolling out of the way while the coupe folded against a lamppost like an accordion!

Craig was struggling to his feet when the sedan, swerving away, disappeared around a corner. He hadn't seen its license nor its occupant, or occupants. He felt himself gingerly. The bump Martha Prescott had made with the statuette throbbed now from new shock; otherwise he was unhurt. *A close call*, his shaken nerves said; he had no doubt that it had been a deliberate, clever attempt to kill him—though to any witnesses it would have seemed an unpremeditated, clumsy accident. Even now, while the street itself was deserted, a few heads poked from windows to quickly withdraw, city-hardened to auto smash-ups. The beat-cop must be at the other end of his rounds.

Pursuit out of the question—by now the sedan must be well away, and his own coupe was a piled junk-heap—Craig turned to Dr. Stockton's house. Was Stockton home, he wondered, noting lights on the third top floor, but remembering how the sedan had been lurking outside, its driver obviously recognizing Craig's coupe. But the presence of the empty Cadillac roadster, still here, urged him on up the small stoop to the front door of the house.

Walk in, a sign under Stockton's shingle told him just as he was starting to reach for the bell. The door yielded when he tried it with one hand; the other he had on his Colt. At the rate attempts were being made to erase him, he was beginning to feel he'd need a charmed life to see this case through.

THE house was silent as a tomb, its opulent ground-floor almost dark in the greying light from street-windows. A large reception room was empty; so was a lounge which was doubtless the psychiatrist's office. Remembering the lights on the top floor, Craig crossed a foyer to a metal door through whose diamond-shape glass window he saw a private elevator, poised on this floor, though unlit. Swinging the door open, he entered; before he found the light-button, he picked out the operating buttons, pressed number 3. The gate slowly, mechanically slid shut, machinery groaned somewhere below, and at the instant the car began its slow ascent a heavy form seemed to lunge sidewise against Craig's body!

His left hand pushed out defensively, his right raised then lowered the gun. For through his left fingertips coursed a shock of horror that reached and chilled his heart! Somehow he managed to find the light-switch; the ceiling light went on. *The stiff, purpled corpse of Martha Prescott was half-toppled against him!*

He pushed at it fearfully, and it slanted back against the wall as the car continued its slow, remorseless ascent. Eyes which had blazed in anger at Craig now stared milkily sightless at him. The two veins he had seen swell out were lost now in the zig-zag maze of purpled veins and arteries that blotched the face and one whole shoulder where the leopard coat and dress were askew! Stiff as a board, the body had had no room to fall prone in the cramped elevator!

The car at last came to an automatic stop, and the slow self-opening of the gate seemed almost a supernatural part of this horror. Craig pushed open the outer door, eager for release from the stiffened, purpled thing he had left propped there. He was in a dim-lit hall, gun in hand, feet padding stealthily as a cat's.

"I did it!" The sudden shrill scream seemed almost to snap his frayed nerves.

"I did it—I killed!" And the Bystander doubted his own sanity! There was no mistaking that voice. Once having heard it, he couldn't fail to recognize it again. *It was a dead woman's voice—Martha Prescott's voice!*

Impossibly it echoed in shrill words which themselves seemed mad: "My brother Henry—father of Paul and Evelyn—I killed him! He was sick, ailing, slowly dying, when I gave him the overdose of morphine! I never told; nobody ever dreamed!"

Every shred of reason crying denial, Craig was moving back to the elevator door. It took all his will-power to wrench it open. His breath escaped swiftly. The purpled, stiff corpse of Martha Prescott was exactly as he had left it; the dead lips did not move. Craig's horror turned to bafflement as still he heard the unmistakable shrill voice—realizing it came from some other source. He turned down the hall, seeking to follow it—around a corner, to the open door of a spacious study, bright-lit, well-furnished, with heavy portieres at the sides of its windows.

Dr. Ernest Stockton—Craig recognized him from their brief encounter at the Prescott house—was bending intently over a modern electric recording machine on a table, where a record was playing out:

"I killed my widowed brother—a mercy killing! I have tried to make up for it to his children!"

The Bystander stood immobile, waiting, gun in hand, until the record came to a stop. Then he leveled the Colt and his own hard voice rasped through the silence that now filled the room:

"All right, Stockton—turn around and reach!"

The stocky psychiatrist spun like a top. His alert dark eyes went wide. He started to edge backwards towards a table drawer—

"Don't," Craig said succinctly. "You'll never get a gun out—"

Doctor Stockton stopped trying, raised hands, his lips working under his bristly mustache. "W—who are you?"

"The name's Craig. We've met," the Bystander crisped. "And I'm guessing you saw me first, shot at me at the Prescott house—then got someone to smash me with a sedan; a lousy job."

Stockton gasped. "I—I don't understand—"

"The police will. That record there: you were blackmailing Martha Prescott with it! As a psychiatrist you somehow got her to make that confession. You're blackmailing Ahmed Bey, too. *How many others have you been collecting from, Stockton?*"

"Wait!" The psychiatrist's forehead was beading. "Cragg—whatever your name is—you're wrong! I didn't blackmail—"

"I saw the letter you wrote Bey!" he accused.

A resigned look came into the psychiatrist's eyes. "All right; I'll take my punishment for that. But listen—" He took a step towards Craig, and Craig's hand tensed around the gun, ready—then, absurdly, for Craig hadn't triggered the gun, Stockton expelled a little plaintive sigh. With an expression of pained astonishment on his features, the psychiatrist toppled forward, sprawled at Craig's very feet! A convulsive shudder went through him before he lay still—*the haft of an evil knife protruding from between his shoulder blades!*

There had been no sound, yet all in that instant Craig thought he glimpsed a flutter of the window-portieres across the room! He aimed his Colt and exploded the silence with two blind shots then he ran to the open window, peering out at a fire-escape which vanished in swirling mist below. He swung over the sill, went down steel-ladder steps, gun still out, fury in

his hard agate eyes. He saw the rest of the fire-escape, empty now; beneath it a backyard, an alley to the next street. Once more pursuit would be futile; the unknown knife-thrower—who must have lurked behind the portieres, then used this window—had made his getaway!

CHAPTER THREE

The Drug of Truth

THE Bystander went back through the window. He didn't want to leave the record unguarded. It was still there. So was the corpse of Dr. Stockton, now lying in a widening stain of blood which crimsoned the carpet. The Bystander's eyes focused suddenly on one of the dead man's outstretched hands. It was clutching something it must have pulled from a pocket in last, dying movement.

The Bystander pried the tight dead fingers loose, lifted up a tiny glass, corked vial filled with whitish powder. He shook his head, uncomprehending. Then he found a telephone and called the police. . .

It was almost an hour later when, at another telephone, at Police Headquarters, Craig called the Prescott home. An alcohol-thick voice answered: "Hello—who ish it?" Paul Prescott had evidently come home.

"Let me speak to Evelyn," Craig said heavily. No use breaking the news to this drunken fool, though it was going to be hard to tell Evelyn how he had found Martha Prescott, whose body was now down at the morgue which had received four other purpled, stiff cadavers!

"Evelyn'sh not home. Went out."

Craig's heart tightened with a different emotion. "Where?"

"Evelyn'sh not home, I shay."

Craig's voice lashed into the mouth-piece: "Pull yourself together, you drunk young fool! She must have left a message."

It had a slightly sobering effect: "Mes-

sage, yesh. Gone to see Aunt Martha isn't at Crescent. Going to tell off this gyp Hindu, drink vile coffee, have her fortune read—expose him. See," the drunken mood became malicious, "she knows you're bum detective, couldn't find Aunt Martha!"

The Bystander slammed down the receiver, striding from the room where he had made the call. He mustn't be a fool. At worst that Hindu, Ahmed Bey, was playing gullibles for suckers. Where did murder fit in with that, unless perhaps the one murder of Stockton, who had admittedly blackmailed the Hindu? And Stockton had not died of the Purple Death. . .

"Well, Craig, did you tell the niece to come and identify the body?" Inspector Rawlings' wearied voice broke into his thoughts as Craig joined him and bushy-haired Charles Harris, assistant D.A., out in the hall. The Bystander made no answer. The three were moving down the corridor.

"Thank God you're on this hellish case, Craig!" Harris said, again evidently hopeful for his own political comeback. "It's still just a baffling puzzle, but maybe what you brought in will throw some light."

They entered a white-gleaming room which was the modern-equipped police laboratory. A wizened chemist in a smock was manipulating a test-tube over a Bunsen burner. Next to him stood the Medical Examiner staff man who had made the autopsy the night before.

"Enough stuff in that vial for analysis?" Craig asked the chemist, feeling an inner twinge of guilt. Habitual distrust of the police had caused the Bystander, on his way here, to transfer some of the powder from the vial, wrested from Stockton's dead hand, to a little cellophane envelope now in his own wallet.

The chemist nodded, stopped playing with the test-tube, and thumbed open a dog-eared pharmaceutical tome. "Here it

is," he stated. "The base of that powder is an alkaloid of the atropin class. It's a by-product of *scopolamine*, which you gentlemen have surely heard by its popular name: the 'Truth Serum.'"

"You mean," Rawlings gasped, "the drug supposed to make criminals confess?"

"It *has* made them confess," the chemist said. "A famous case in Minneapolis was once solved by it. This remarkable drug paralyzes completely the portion of the brain which psychologists call the censor: the inhibiting portion which enables us to lie, to conceal truth. Under the drug's influence, not only will one babble the truth, but later will have no recollection of the entire period!"

"Wish I'd heard of that when I was D.A." Harris sighed. "Maybe they wouldn't have ousted me for 'rough methods' then."

"The drug has been banned for further police use," the chemist supplied. "Too dangerous! A small dose, a pinch of this powder, might have no ill effects; a larger dose would produce hallucinations, coma, and—death. Easy to see what a truly large dose would do."

"Why—" the Medical Examining doctor burst out, "the victim would die as from a stroke. The drug would be absorbed by the blood-stream which it would congeal, and the osmosis would leave no trace. *By God, that's the Purple Death!* Some fiend, has been administering this drug, intravenously or through food or drink, though it would have a bitter taste—"

"Craig!" Charles Harris cried. "What's come over you?"

The Bystander's face had gone the color of ashes. In his mind he was hearing the drunken voice of Paul Prescott: ". . . going to tell off his gyp Hindu, drink vile coffee, have fortune read." *Drink vile coffee*—As in a kaleidoscope the whirling pattern in his brain was assum-

ing shape: suddenly he was sure he knew the answers this time, and his prescience was screaming: *Evelyn! They're going to give it to her, her lovely white flesh will be like the others!* Somehow, outwardly, he controlled his emotions. He did not want to have the police with him now: their sirens and mass moves might advertise them and further endanger the girl. Saying something about being tired and wanting to go home to think it over, Craig got out of there, dashed from the building—out into the gloomy chill night where, less than twenty-four hours ago, a taxi had brought here the purpled corpse of Dorothy Carstairs.

THE Bystander swore as he remembered now that his coupe was still piled in front of Stockton's house; a police car had brought him down here. He was looking for a cab when a breathless voice said: "Craig! I know you're on a lead!" Charles Harris was trying to keep pace with him, a hat jammed on his bushy head. "I've got a car handy; let me in on this, will you?"

"All right, but I'm calling the plays," the Bystander crisped: maybe it would be handy to have a man who had been over-tough on criminals! Nor did Harris complain when Craig, taking the wheel of the assistant D.A.'s compact sedan, jumped lights and took corners on skidding tires. *Evelyn*, Craig kept thinking, he must hurry; maybe even now it was too late—

He braked to a screaming stop a full block from the Crescent, lest they had been followed. On foot he and Harris walked down cramped, gloomy Lorel street to the restaurant. The window was a fogged square of dull light, but no cars were parked outside now. Craig felt his gun, knew Harris had one. "Watch my moves, and if anything breaks—be ready!" the Bystander said, and pushed open the restaurant door.

A swift anxious glance showed him that the dingy, spice-odored place was empty of patrons: booths vacant on each side. "This way!" he gritted to Harris, and they reached the side-door even as the kitchen swing-door flung open, and the huge scar-faced Omar barged out, an angry cry on his lips: "Wait, you cannot go in—"

For answer the Bystander swept out an angry arm which pushed the surprised Hindu, for all his size, out of the way. Then Craig yanked open the side-door; with both Harris and Omar at his heels he burst into the draped, incense-cloyed chamber—but *Evelyn wasn't here*. From behind the big crystal, Ahmed Bey was lifting his turbaned head in dark surprise: Omar was jabbering in Arabic even as Harris snapped: "No funny tricks, either of you! This is police business!" He was backing Craig's play even though he couldn't understand it yet. Omar, who looked threatening, subsided as Ahmed Bey spoke commandingly to him; then the fortune-teller addressed Craig: "After what happened, I did not think you would return here—"

"Save that! Where's Evelyn Prescott?" the Bystander was controlling his own angry muscles with effort. "She came here, so don't try to stall!"

Ahmed Bey lifted his browned hands. "I fear she has long since left. We were just ready to close for the night—"

"Just the same," snapped Craig, inwardly beginning to wonder if he was wrong, "we're going to search the place! Right, Harris?"

"Right," Harris took the cue. "If they say no I'll have a search warrant before they can move, and we'll rip the place apart!"

Ahmed Bey smiled darkly. "You may look without a warrant if you must be convinced." Already Craig was futilely pulling the heavy draperies aside. Now he and Harris let both Ahmed Bey and

the scowling Omar lead the way through other parts of the restaurant, walking behind so they could watch the Hindu warily. They entered the kitchen; nobody here either, but an odor of strong coffee, brewing in a huge urn on the stove, met Craig's nostrils. The Bystander opened a closet; it was full of food, also packages of pulverized coffee—which he examined, opening one and looking at the brown powder.

"You seem interested in our coffee," Ahmed Bey purred. "Perhaps a cup of it would quiet your nerves and make you less agitated. Omar will gladly serve you both."

To Harris' patent surprise, the Bystander assented! Minutes later, with Craig still filled with panic over Evelyn's whereabouts, the two men sat at a teakwood table near the crystal, opposite the dark-skinned turbaned host. Omar, bringing in the coffee, poured it from a large urn into tiny china cups.

Craig's eyes were wary. The whole atmosphere of this draped, incense-filled chamber breathed danger, kept his first suspicions alive. Now he picked up his coffee cup, walked across to one of the lamps and, turning his back to the table, examined the coffee. He took some time. When he came back he saw both Harris and Ahmed Bey sipping at their cups.

"Don't drink it Harris!" he commanded—and Harris almost choked, slamming down his cup. The assistant D.A.'s eyes widened. "Good God, you don't think it's— Why, he poured it from the same urn."

"There are tricks that could be worked just the same," the Bystander said, his narrowed eyes going to Ahmed Bey. "Would you change your cup for mine?"

For answer the Hindu silently took Craig's cup of coffee, cooled it with his breath, and drained its contents. Finishing, he rose to his tall height. "Gentlemen, I do not comprehend this; you seem to

have black suspicions of me. I assure you I am only a humble practitioner of the art of fortune-telling. With it I make my modest living." Craig was beginning to feel foolish; he had been wrong about Stockton—was he wrong again? Evelyn might be on her way home—*then he heard, or thought he heard, a muffled scream!*

CHAPTER FOUR

Your Host Is Death!

IN THAT instant the atmosphere of the incensed room with its crystal was as some evil nightmare place. Yet nothing had changed: Omar was still standing, Ahmed Bey was still looking hurt, Harris sat at his untouched coffee. Only Craig seemed to have heard anything. He could have sworn—"Watch these two men!" he snapped at Harris. Harris promptly rose to his feet, looking tough, his hand in his gun-pocket, his eyes on the two unmoving Hindus.

Craig was again moving about the chamber. *That cry had sounded close, almost in this room!* He tried to remember it exactly as he had thought he heard it; and then he was half-stooping, his hands lifting the heavy carpet, rolling it, until, with a sudden cry, he revealed the cut of a square trap door fitted into the flooring, closed and—

"*Look out, Craig!*" Harris' warning shout made the Bystander whip up his gun—but he was expecting a move to come from either Omar or Ahmed Bey; *not from two white, hard-faced thugs who had burst suddenly into the chamber!* Even as Craig saw them charging, he heard Harris' gun roar in a blind shot—then the lights in the entire room went out! In the opaque gloom Craig only knew that both thugs were piling on him; he was flaying savagely at them with gun and fist, even as he went down under their overwhelming weight. Blows rained

on him; kicks sent the breath groaning from his lips. He clung only to a nightmare-consciousness as now he felt himself being lifted like a sack. He glimpsed the big trap-door opening and through it he was carried down narrow stairs into a dank, dim-lit cellar. Then bonds were searing into his wrists, and his whole body seemed to groan in every muscle as suddenly it was dangling above the floor!

They had strung him up by his wrists to a rusted iron pipe which ran across the cellar wall, near the ceiling. The bonds, he realized, were damp leather straps—strong as steel and impossible to stretch. His own weight only made them keep tightening more as he dangled, his shoes inches above the floor, his pain-hazed eyes striving to take in the surroundings.

Overhead the trap door was shut. Across the floor the two thugs—typical underworld gunmen, one hatchet-faced and wiry, the other burly, with a broken nose, were calmly smoking cigarettes. Closer to Craig, watching him with smoldering hate, was the scar-faced Omar. His big browned hand gripped the haft of a gleaming, long-bladed knife—like the knife that had killed Dr. Stockton!

But now Craig's anguished eyes focused their entire interest on the opposite end of the dungeon-like cellar. There Ahmed Bey's turbaned head was bending over a little, bound heap on the floor—and the heap was Evelyn Prescott! She was moaning faintly. Her gold-tinted hair had come out of its braids, to splash like a golden pool on the filthy cellar flagging. Her dress was torn, disheveled, showing one shoulder where—thank God—the skin was smooth and white!

This Daniel Craig saw as he dangled from his wrists, as some portion of his mind wondered what had become of Harris, the thought bringing a wild, fleeting hope. In the gloom Harris perhaps had managed a get-away—if so, he would bring help—

"Now, my dear Miss Prescott. . . ." Ahmed Bey's smooth voice was speaking to the girl on the floor. "You will tell me what I have asked. You must tell the truth, you know—the truth."

"Yes . . ." the girl's voice sounded dazed. "I will tell. . . . Aunt Martha told me all about it; she found out what you were doing. . . . I know everything!"

"And Craig—?" Ahmed Bey's voice prompted, purringly.

"Knows nothing! I did not tell him, even though I called him on the case! He cannot have real evidence. . . ."

Horror mingled with the waves of pain in the Bystander's dangling body as he heard that listless voice. She *must* be telling the truth, though it seemed incredible to Craig that she wouldn't have confided more fully in him. But certainly she would not be talking like this unless it were truth, forced out of her through no volition of her own; her confessing that she knew this devil's crimes was only asking for certain death! *She must be under the influence of the horrible truth drug—*

"Evelyn!" the cry struggled futilely from Craig's lips, as if he could fight the effects of the drug. "Stop talking like that—they'll kill you for saying those foolish things!" Kill her! *If they'd given her the drug surely they'd have given enough to—* "Stop it, Evelyn—"

Omar, scowling, made a threatening motion with the glittering knife; the two thugs also turned towards Craig, hard-eyed. Then Ahmed Bey waved them back at ease, as his turbaned figure straightened, came striding over to the dangling Bystander.

His dark eyes, incarnate with malice now, raised to Craig like a coiled cobra.

"You had best save your breath, Mr. Craig. You may not have it long. Consider yourself fortunate that you are still alive. One word or gesture from me, and Omar's knife will prove his skill. . . ."

The Bystander, wondering why he *had*

been kept alive, controlled his inchoate rage, spoke in a plea. "Listen, Ahmed Bey—the girl's lying." He wished fervently he could himself believe his own words. "She's trying to shield me. She knows very little. And I *do* know all about your dirty racket!"

AND then across the room came the girl's sobbed cry: "Oh, Dan! Why do you tell them? They might have spared you—!" Ridiculous then, the half-relief that flooded the Bystander's agonized being. Why, she *had* been lying; she had been trying to shield him—his own life, not the drug, was what the Hindu had used to make her talk, thus far. He hadn't had time for the drug, probably; he didn't want to wait for its slow effect! The girl had never known anything; her saying the aunt told her was invention; she had come here with the naive idea of just exposing a man she believed a fake!

"It hardly matters one way or the other now," Ahmed Bey's smile was like a crack in dark ice. "I fear *both* of you know too much! Also, Craig, if you are trying to delay matters," the fortune-teller really seemed to read the Bystander's mind, "it will not help. Your friend Harris will never bring help to you." He laughed softly. Craig's heart constricted in hopeless defeat. They must have managed to get Harris then, done away with him. There would be no help. Nor could Craig have hoped to get out of these bonds even if guns and the knife weren't covering him. The shrunk leather straps could not be broken nor loosed from the rusty pipe where they held him.

Nevertheless, gathering breath, Craig spoke again as he dangled there, spoke volubly though his arms were racked with pain, his breath gasping: "Yes, Ahmed Bey, I know almost the whole set-up. You feed that truth drug to gullible rich women, in the coffee you serve. They then come for a fortune-reading. In their

drugged state they blab their secrets. If the secrets are not too revealing, you simply repeat them back as their 'fortune' when they come out of the drug. They don't remember the period when they were under the influence; and your crystal, incense, and other flim-flam would probably help cover it all up—make them believe they had just been sitting there, concentrating. Naturally, they think you're wonderful to reveal things they never told a soul, and they get you more suckers. But some of them tell you things that are ammunition for—blackmail! That's where your real racket lies. You collect all you can—then an overdose of the drug silences the victim with the Purple Death. But some would die on you even without your intending it, because of the tricky drug. As for the Carstairs girl, my guess is you had a weak blackmail hold on her—had to actually threaten her with your Purple Death, then give it to her when she was ready to go to the police. . . .”

The two thugs were intent now; so was Omar, who was running a finger across the evil-bladed knife. Across the room the girl's bound figure stirred in its horror. Ahmed Bey stood silent, but he was listening.

“Dr. Stockton found you out somehow, through his patient. While she was under the drug's influence, he got her to his home, took a record of her drug-influenced words. . . .” Craig hesitated; Evelyn didn't know the facts, and even now he did not wish to reveal them to her. “Stockton knew your whole set-up then,” he resumed, though in his racking pain talking was getting more and more difficult: “Stockton had proof, but instead of going to the authorities, he was greedy enough for money to start blackmailing you. You fixed that: Omar here you say, is handy with his knife. As for the sedan which smashed me, that was clever too—these gorillas were given a tip-off when I left here. They got to Stockton's first—prob-

ably taking Omar there with them—and they were ready for me. There are only a few things left I can't answer. Who fired the shot at me at the Prescott house? That was no clumsy mobster—but someone who could move fast, and you yourself, Ahmed Bey, seem to stay right here at your restaurant. Also, how do you get hold of the hellish drug that's banned now even to the police?”

Ahmed Bey was smiling icily again. “Loopholes such as that, my dear Craig, indicate that you could not have given the police any real evidence. When you and the girl are eliminated no one will be the wiser. No one will know who knifed you—and as for the girl. . . .” the purr trailed off, and Ahmed Bey turned away. Craig knew he could not be stalled any longer. The turbaned Hindu, crossing the cellar, lifted a tiny cup from an alcove shelf.

Carrying the cup carefully, he strode to the girl, his dark eyes lambent. He stooped—with his left browned hand he caught the back of the girl's golden head, lifted it. “Here, my dear; this coffee will brace you. . . .”

“Don't drink it, Evelyn!” Craig rasped out almost insanely. His body lurched and threshed now under the stout leather cords. The rusty pipe creaked, but the bonds dug excruciatingly tighter. He heard the girl moan, saw her try to jerk back—as Ahmed Bey moved that cup, *that cup which Craig knew contained the dread, stiffening Purple Death*, closer to her lips.

“Drink!” the Hindu commanded. “I shall only force it down your throat otherwise!”

THE Bystander's heart went sick with utter horror as he saw her go passive now; then hope leaped again in him as bravely her head made a violent motion—knocking against the cup, spilling its brown contents over the brown hand that

held it. Ahmed Bey swore with surprising shrillness. Viciously, with his free hand, he slapped the girl across the face.

"You little devil! There is plenty more on hand—ready for you! This time you shall have no chance to resist!" He straightened to his feet, his voice shriller, coming more rapid now. "I shall give you no time. The scopolamine ingredient will doom you like it doomed the rest! I can get plenty of the drug—" the flawless voice had a coarse quality now. "I know where I can get all I need to go on with this racket forever!"

Omar's scowling face showed surprise. But the faces of the two white thugs showed something else. "Hey!" the big burly one with the broken nose moved towards the fortune-teller, "cut that talk, Ahmed Bey! Listen to him, Lou!"

The hatchet-faced, wiry thug snarled: "I'm listening and I don't like it. Even with the dame and that dick as good as finished, I don't like it."

Ahmed Bey didn't even seem to hear them. "I was just a foreigner, a cheap dirty beggar on the streets of this land of opportunity! But now I'm no beggar—Ahmed Bey is going to be worth a fortune, and he is going to have that fortune for himself—"

"Say, Maxie," the hatchet-faced Lou snapped at the other thug, "what the hell's the matter with Ahmed Bey?"

Daniel Craig knew what was the matter. He had half-expected this, yet not been sure. When he and Harris had been served that coffee over this cellar—when he had taken his coffee to a light to examine it, he had slipped into it a pinch of the whitish powder from his own hoarded envelope of it! A pinch—the chemist had said that would leave few ill effects; and Craig had not then been sure about Ahmed Bey, didn't want to commit murder. His idea then had been to make Ahmed Bey tell the truth concerning Evelyn's whereabouts. Now, ironically, with Craig and

Evelyn both captured and doomed—Ahmed Bey was blabbing under the drug's influence.

The two thugs, Lou and Maxie, were moving towards Ahmed Bey threateningly. Omar turned away from Craig, confusedly: "Wait," he growled. "You will not harm my master!" All of them made a frozen tableau now, with Ahmed Bey smiling foolishly, vacantly amid them. And Daniel Craig, with no eyes on him save perhaps the girl's, was struggling like a demon. For he had discovered, with wild hope, that the pipe—that rusty old pipe, was cracking from the weight of his threshing body! Decayed, it was beginning to break close to one of his wrist-bonds!

"You're getting too big shot with your ideas, you cheap Hindu punk!" Maxie was growling at Ahmed Bey, his flat-nosed face worried. But Ahmed Bey kept babbling his innermost true thoughts.

The crack of the pipe itself sounded like a pistol shot! As it severed close to one of Craig's wrists, bending down as his feet sagged to the floor—the thug, Lou, was the first to move. Before Craig could slip the leather wrist-bonds over the broken pipe-end, the hatchet-faced gunman was leaping, drawing his gun with a cry—

The Bystander, still tied to the broken, bent pipe, gathered muscles and sent his legs catapulting all the way out. Both his shoes landed flush to the wiry thug's stomach; with a groan the man went down, his gun flying from him. But now Omar and Maxie, their quarrel forgotten, turned as one to attack Craig. In the same instant, the Bystander freed his wrists, dashed forward, stooped to retrieve the fallen gun. Omar was taking a stance across the floor, his knife poisoning—Craig, lifting the gun, fired; the big Hindu servant staggered back, dropping the knife, screaming as his hand became a bloody claw against a shoulder wound.

The burly gunman named Maxie was as yet unable to fire, for the dazed, babbling Ahmed Bey now stood in his way. The Bystander, an almost joyous rage released in his pent-up frame, was going for them both, when the ceiling overhead seemed to shake under a regiment of pounding feet—the trap door flung open—and down into the cellar poured blue-coats and detectives, with leveling guns! In their lead were Inspector Rawlings and—Charles Harris! Harris who even now was cursing, raising a gun—

CRAIG stepped up to him, and the assistant D. A. reluctantly lowered the gun, exclaiming: "I was knocked cold—but they left me for dead. When I came out of it I phoned Rawlings—looks like we just got here in time!"

"It looks more," Rawlings amended, "as if we didn't need to get here at all." His men were capturing the wounded Omar and the thugs—surrounding Ahmed Bey. Craig hurried over to the girl, unbound her, his strong arm half-lifting her to her feet—and even in her disheveled, shocked state her smile of gratitude warmed him.

"Bring that Ahmed Bey here! Harris says he's the devil we want—!" Rawlings crisped.

"Yes. These two underworld thugs are just hirelings; we can't pin any murder rap on them!" Harris said. "But this damned Bey—" Fury came into his voice as the Hindu was being pushed forward. "Killing these women—with the ghastly purple death! The fiend—" As if the temper which in the old days had made him so rough on criminals seemed to utterly possess him, Harris raised his gun, aimed it at Ahmed Bey—"You dirty, murdering Hindu butcher—"

"No you don't, Harris!" Craig grated, leaving the girl now to whirl upon the assistant D. A. and snatch the gun from his hand! "You tried to fire at him when

you came in; I stood in the way. Now you tried again. You see, Harris," the Bystander said in a clear ringing voice, "you've overplayed your hand! Put the cuffs on him, Rawlings! He's the big shot behind the Purple Death!"

"Big shot!" It was Ahmed Bey's babbling voice that came now, as he confronted the bushy-haired assistant D. A. whose face was ashen. "Harris is the big-shot . . . he had the drug because he had once thought of using it when he was District Attorney who made many criminals confess by torture. . . . He was angry when he was no longer District Attorney; he was bitter and that is why he turned to crime. He was only a humble assistant who looked for confidence men, and he came upon me as I told fortunes to make my living. He could have arrested me . . . he said . . . but instead he made me the great Ahmed Bey . . . we would make millions, he promised—but he has kept most of the profits! His two gangmen—men he has under his power from former days—helped him!" On and on went that babbling voice, as the drug that had doomed five victims to the Purple Death now, through the mouth of his accomplice, doomed Charles Harris to the electric chair. . . .

* * *

"I should have suspected him sooner," Daniel Craig said. He was sitting once more in the Prescott house, and now somehow it did not seem so gloomy. Even Paul Prescott was sobered by the events that had happened; and Evelyn Prescott, seated on the divan next to Craig, again had her gold-tinted hair wound in neat braids. . . . "When I saw him at headquarters after the Carstairs girl died, he begged me to drop your case, Evelyn. Of course he knew, through watching Martha Prescott, that you were calling me here, and I'd link things up. He tried to ambush me with a silenced gun when I came here anyway. And when he knew I suspected

Ahmed Bey was using the drug—he accompanied me, first having tipped off Bey and Omar. They weren't to do anything. Harris' thugs would be on hand to do it if I really got wise. Of course he was secretly witnessing the whole scene in the cellar. He heard Ahmed Bey start to babble, saw there might be trouble—a fight perhaps between the thugs and Omar, during which I might get free. So he called Rawlings—tried to kill Ahmed Bey and presumably save us!"

"But how about that record of Aunt Martha's voice—?" The girl's face was haunted again. "You never explained just what they were blackmailing her for."

"Some trivial matter your poor Aunt took seriously," Craig lied: he wasn't going to tell these two kids that their own ailing father had been killed by the Aunt in a mercy-killing.

The boy spoke now. "I—I've acted like a louse, Craig. Now I want to say, both

for my sister and myself, that when our inheritance comes we want you to name a good fee. We're grateful to you—for finding the devil who—who murdered Aunt Martha."

Craig stood up. "I didn't earn any fee," he said softly, "and that inheritance isn't so much that you can start wasting it—Harris got most of it, and spent it. Besides, just as Harris predicted, the city is giving some sort of reward, so I'll be amply paid."

At the door the girl held his hand, lingeringly. "You will come and see us—?" Her hazel eyes were almost a plea.

Craig smiled at her. His hard, mask-like face softened, as it so rarely had since that day when the woman he loved had died. . . .

"Of course I will, Evelyn," he promised. "After all, someone ought to see that that brother of yours behaves now."

THE END



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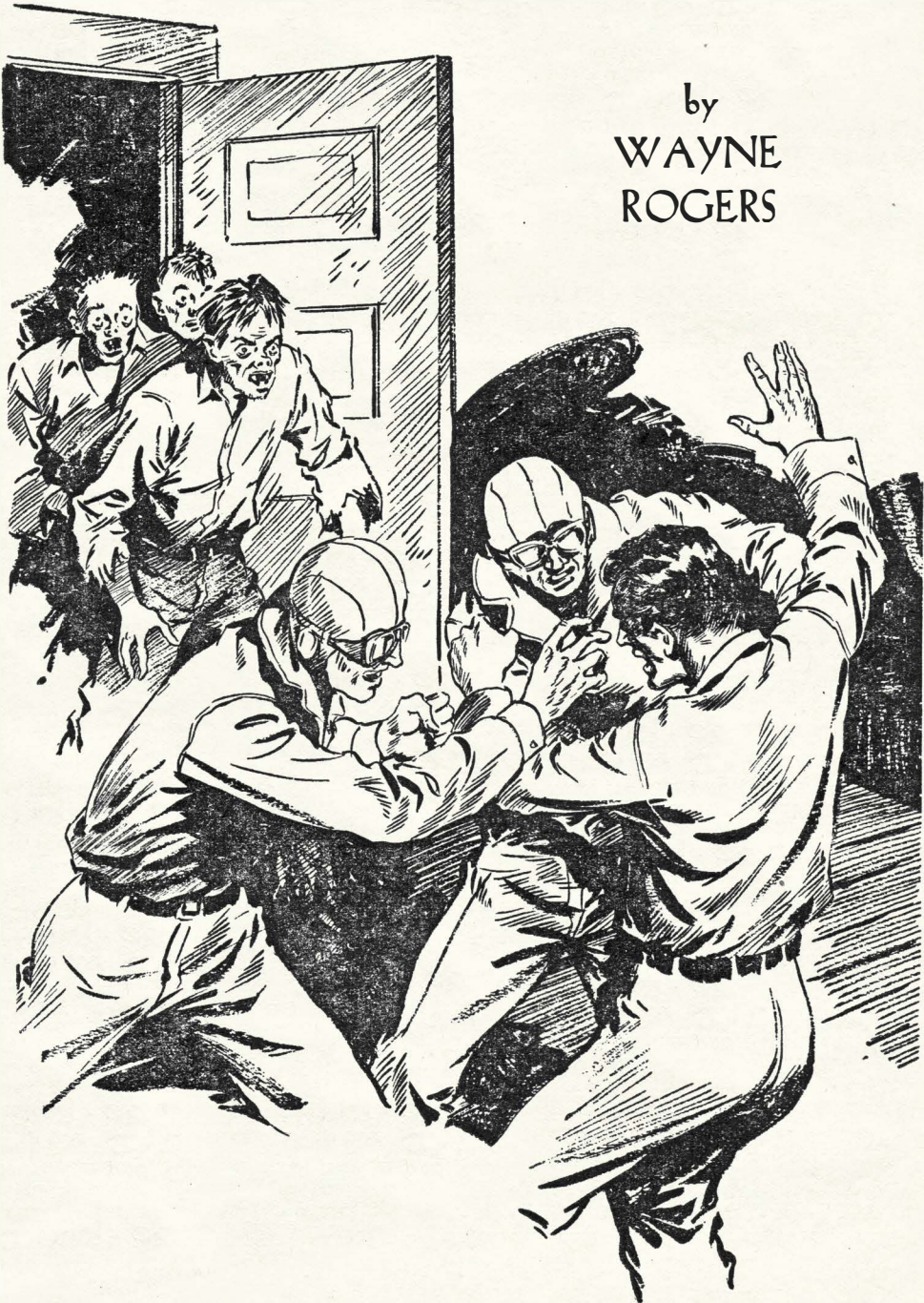
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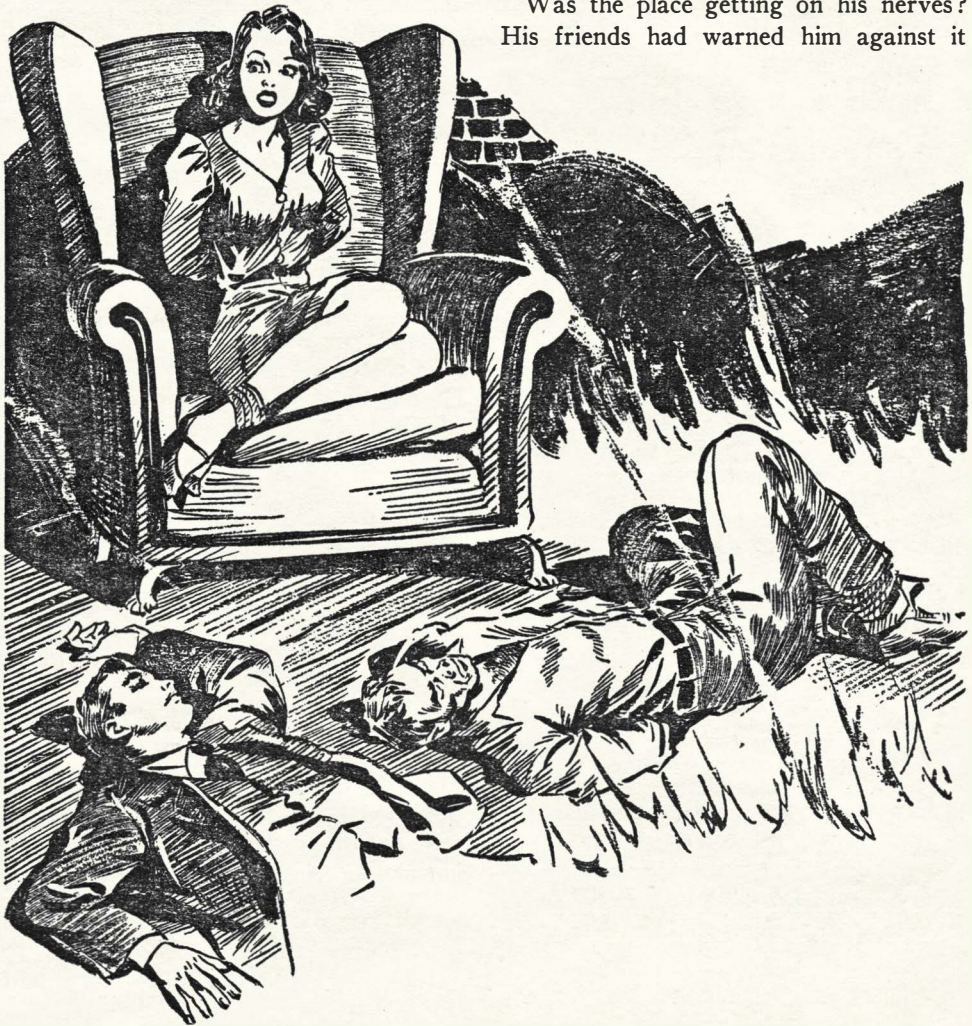
CHAPTER ONE

Welcome Murder

It was horrible enough to live and work in that city of the living dead, but when that plague of deliberate and brutal murder spread among the scabrous lepers, Tom Herrick knew that it was a battle to the death between himself and a power-mad criminal genius!

THERE WAS something wrong, something definitely wrong, in that isolated world of the living dead. Tom Herrick had sensed it for a week or more, had cast about him vainly for an explanation like a worried hound following a persistent but bafflingly elusive scent. There was a tensivity, a restless expectancy that was almost palpable. He felt it all around him; revealed perhaps by nothing more than a swiftly veiled gleam of anticipation in eyes from which all hope had long since faded—and yet he *knew* that it was there.

Was the place getting on his nerves? His friends had warned him against it



when he sailed up-river from New Orleans, three months ago, to accept this leprosarium appointment; but he had soon accustomed himself to the imminence of death, the aura of unescapable doom, that pervaded the big hospital.

No, it was not his imagination. Dorothy Wheeler, the night nurse, felt it too. He had been watching her covertly ever since he came on duty at ten o'clock, and her nervousness was unmistakable. She was on edge—she was afraid.

The low buzz of the indicator signal brought her up from her desk with such a start that a sheaf of reports dropped scattering to the floor. Herrick sped across the office. His hands closed over hers—over icy cold fingers. His eyes looked deep into hers; into troubled blue eyes that peered up at him from a delicately featured, frightened face as she bit her lower lip.

"What is it, Dorothy?" he demanded softly, insistently. "There's something on your mind. You're letting it play havoc with your nerves."

"Oh, I know, I know—but I *don't* know, that's the trouble!" She was almost incoherent. "I can't tell what it is, but I *feel* it. It's the way they look at me. Not the way they used to—with dull, apathetic eyes. Lately they have been like watching animals—like animals waiting for a chance to spring at me. And tonight one of them did."

"One of them attacked you!" Herrick's blood chilled, and then pounded through his veins as swift anger swept him. "Who—"

"It was Taniki, the Malay." She shuddered at the memory. "He tried to kill me, but I screamed and fought him off. Price, the new orderly, heard me and came running, but he had all he could do to get Taniki back into bed. No—no, you mustn't try to do anything about it!" She barred his way as he started toward the door. "You can't do anything. He's

sleeping. Dr. Millikan gave him a hypo. Please—you mustn't look like that."

Herrick caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror and did not blame her for protesting. His face was ashen, his wide mouth clamped into a colorless line, his gray eyes narrowed and flint-hard.

Now that she had put it into words he realized what it was he had sensed instinctively. It was madness, kill-crazy madness, he had glimpsed in some of those doomed faces—and yet that was more than strange in this place where passion was a thing of the past, a thing taboo.

Dr. Arnold Millikan was strict about that. He carefully controlled his patients through their diet, and his watchfulness extended to the members of his staff as well. He had made that clear to Herrick on the day he arrived.

"A leprosarium is no place for romance, doctor," he had eyed his new assistant severely; "no place for flirtations or philandering. Our patients have sharp eyes, and I want nothing to disturb them. You have come here to replace Dr. Myron Swope. I was forced to dismiss him for molesting one of the nurses. I trust we shall have no such difficulty."

That nurse, Herrick had learned, was Dorothy Wheeler. At first he had eyed her askance. She was pretty. Her blonde loveliness was radiant, magnetic, in that blighted world. She was dangerous, he told himself; but as the weeks passed and he came to know her better he realized that the fault had been entirely Swope's. Dorothy Wheeler was fine and wholesome, and Swope's reputation as a roué was long established.

Herrick had no intention of following in Swope's footsteps. He had carefully concealed his feelings—until now, when the thought of her in that noisome leper's arms had snapped his self-control. Now her hands were gripping his arm, her face was turned up to him appealingly. In the depths of her lovely eyes he read

trust—and something more that made his heart leap exultantly.

"You must be careful—very careful every moment you are with them," he worried. "This is no place for you, Dorothy, no place—"

Suddenly he stopped, his anxious warning stifled on his lips as he heard a noise that was coming from outside the office, from somewhere down the long white-walled corridor.

Strangling, gasping sounds from somewhere on that upper floor of the big hospital building where the most advanced cases of the dread malady were domiciled. A half-uttered scream that was choked off in a blood-chilling gurgle!

DOROTHY WHEELER was close at his heels when he sprang out into the corridor and swept his eyes down the long row of screen doors that lined it on each side. The horrible strangling gurgle had stopped, but not before he had spotted its approximate location. Swiftly he ran to a door half-way down the line, pushed it open and stabbed the beam of his night-light inside. Three rooms he peered into in rapid succession—and then he stopped, momentarily frozen where he stood with horror.

There, half out of bed, sprawled a twisted figure, its head bent backward at a curious angle, its tongue lolling from the gaping mouth!

Herrick switched on the overhead light and stepped to the side of the bed. The man was dead, but even in death his disease-ravaged face was a frightful travesty of anything human. He was Minoru, a Hawaiian, one of the most horribly mutilated of the sufferers but one of the most patient and uncomplaining. Minoru had no enemies—but he had been deliberately murdered.

Yes, there was no question about that. He had been choked and bludgeoned to death; gripped helplessly by the throat

while his skull was bashed in. The hands of a bloody murderer had brought him the surcease from misery that modern science could not give him.

But why? Why should anyone want to murder a doomed leper? He had had nothing to steal, nothing that could be wrested from him. He had rarely left his room, rarely mixed with the other patients, so there was little chance for jealousy or personal animosity. . . .

Those puzzling thoughts flashed through Herrick's mind as he stared at the torn skin on the twisted neck. The fingers of the killer's left hand had gripped Minoru's throat so savagely that they had ripped through the skin. There on one side was the spot where the thumb had gouged deep; on the other, three livid impressions.

"Oh!" Dorothy Wheeler's gasp whirled him around.

He had forgotten about her, forgotten to bar her from this horrible sight. She was right there beside him, staring at the corpse with popping eyes, the back of one hand pressed against her open mouth as if to hold back the scream that must be welling up in her throat. But it was the expression in her eyes that caught his attention. Her gaze was fastened on the livid finger marks; a gaze filled with shocked surprise—with incredible understanding.

"What is it, Dorothy?" he demanded. "You know who did this?" He gripped her shoulders, forced her to meet his eyes. "Tell me."

"No—no, I don't know," she mumbled. "Only—seeing those finger marks—Dr. Swope has only three fingers on his left hand. Oh, I shouldn't have said that!" she gasped contritely the moment the words left her lips. "That can have nothing to do with *this*—oh, it was terrible of me to say it! Please don't think anything more of it! Please forget that you heard me say it!"

FOR an instant suspicion leaped high in Herrick's mind. Then he dismissed it. Myron Swope had not been within the leprosarium's guarded walls for more than three months. At that moment he was probably enjoying himself in some New Orleans hot-spot. It was a coincidence that his left hand was three-fingered—and, for that matter, it was possible that a perfectly normal hand had made those marks on Minoru's throat and had failed to grip quite so tightly with the little finger.

The nurse's startling reaction was understandable, but it betrayed how close she was to the breaking point.

"It's nothing," Herrick dismissed as if he had hardly noticed what she said.

While she went to summon the hospital head, he stepped back into the corridor and made a quick check of the rooms on both sides. Everything was in order. Every bed was occupied, the patients asleep or turning blinking eyes to the door when his flash centered upon them. That was as he expected, for he had seen the unfastened screen on Minoru's window and thought he knew how the murderer had made his escape.

Back once more in the dead man's room, he examined the window sill and found two sets of marks on the stone where something had been fastened upon it. Beyond was darkness. The night was moonless. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness he picked out the roofs of the line of little bungalows below, where the less advanced cases were quartered. A short distance beyond them was the high leprosarium wall, and still farther the broad expanse of the Mississippi gleaming dully in the dim moonlight. Somewhere down there the killer was scurrying to safety. . . .

Herrick turned back to the bed when Dr. Millikan's brisk footsteps sounded in the corridor. The screen door opened and he stepped inside, to stiffen for a mo-

ment as he stared at the bed. Grimly he advanced toward it, his white brows puckered in a frown, his keen probing eyes taking in the corpse at a glance and then darting around the room.

A man in his late fifties, Dr. Arnold Millikan was very well preserved. His hair was almost white, but his figure was straight and trim. His strong-featured, handsome face had become more stern, more severe with age, the face of a military man rather than a physician.

With a few quick questions he learned all that Herrick could tell him. He nodded his head slowly, pulled the bedsheet over the horrible dead face, and started toward the door.

"This will have to be reported to the sheriff, of course," he turned at the threshold, "but his investigation will be perfunctory. If this murderer is to be apprehended we will have to catch him ourselves—but I want no alarm raised, remember that. No panic. The murderer must be here somewhere on the grounds. I shall give orders now for a search."

AS SOON as Millikan had left, Herrick hurried to a stairway at the rear of the building. Before the guards started searching he wanted to have a look at the ground beneath Minoru's window, wanted to investigate the meaning of those marks on the windowsill.

It was dark and still when he stepped out into the night. Not a sound but the drone of insects. Apparently he was alone, but the murderer might be lurking anywhere in the stygian shadows. Carefully he picked his way along, clinging as close as possible to the bushes—and then suddenly he drew back, thrust himself deep into the foliage.

There, darting along a path some distance from him, was an unrecognizable figure, merely a deeper blob of darkness. It flitted past, went on beyond the hospital, along the path that skirted a line of bunga-

lows. Herrick took after it, followed it at a discreet distance, and was almost certain that he saw it disappear into the looming blackness of one of the low buildings. Captain Basil La Fetra's bungalow, he checked.

The place was in utter darkness. Not a sound came from it—and yet he was sure that he could not have been mistaken. Had the bungalow been occupied by anyone else he might have investigated farther, but he remembered Dr. Millikan's warning and he knew what a storm the crabbed La Fetra would raise if he were disturbed. That would have to wait until morning, until—

Out of the night in front of him another figure suddenly loomed. So unexpectedly that he almost crashed into it as he stepped from the thick brush where he had been crouching. In a moment the fellow was past, taking swiftly to his heels, but in that split-second Herrick's light had flashed on. He had caught a half-glimpse of a face and was almost sure that he recognized William Price, an orderly who had come to the hospital about a week ago.

"Price!" he called sharply. "Wait. This is Doctor Herrick—"

But the fleeing figure waited for nothing. The darkness swallowed him up, and the stillness muted the sound of his footsteps.

Price—he was the orderly who had come to Dorothy Wheeler's rescue, Herrick remembered. But what was he doing prowling around out there in the darkness? And why hadn't he stopped when Herrick identified himself? Surely he must have heard. . . .

Puzzling over that strange conduct, Tom Herrick made his way along the side of the hospital building until he was directly beneath Minoru's window. The ground was soft and freshly raked there behind a border of oleanders, and plainly marked in it were the prints of a man's

shoes; prints that milled around beneath the window and then led off through the bushes.

Herrick bent over them, holding his flashlight close to the freshly made indentations—and with only the faintest rustle of warning something came crashing down on his head! Suddenly the blackness of the night dissolved in a burst of blinding light! Excruciating agony stabbed through his skull, and he pitched forward into a swirling abyss that enveloped him and blotted out his consciousness. . . .

When Herrick struggled up from that abyss the sickening agony came with him. His head ached intolerably. Waves of nausea swept over him when he got to his knees and groped for his flashlight. At first he thought he could not see when the light switched on—and then he would not believe the evidence of his staring eyes.

The footprints were gone, every one of them! Not a trace of them remained in the soft, freshly raked ground! They had disappeared as completely as if they had never been there—and only the thumping welt on his head remained to assure him that he had not been dreaming. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Horror's Wake

IT WAS some time after noon the next day before Sheriff Sam Ladue arrived to investigate the leprosarium murder. He climbed out of his automobile and hurried into Dr. Millikan's office as if he ran a terrifying gauntlet every foot of the way. Even in the elaborately safeguarded office he was visibly uncomfortable, obviously anxious to get finished with the distasteful business as quickly as possible and get away from there.

But when Tom Herrick came in response to Millikan's summons, he saw at once that the sheriff's nervousness was

not due entirely to fear of the dread disease that dominated those isolated acres. Ladue's tanned face was haggard and pouchy. His eyes were red-rimmed and tired. Even his flaring mustache drooped listlessly as he sat in the chair beside Millikan's desk, supporting his slumped weight on his elbows on the chair arms.

Sam Ladue was weary, physically and mentally.

"Grosse Tete—that's way up the north end of the parish," he was saying. "The whole town's in an uproar. Gra'ma Beauvais was a harmless old woman. She lived in a little place on the edge of town—lived with Eulie, her granddaughter. A nice girl, Eulie; I was up there last year when she graduated from high school, and I helped the old lady up the steps to the auditorium for the ceremonies.

"She was tied up pretty bad with rheumatism, Gra'ma was; hardly could get around—but the devil who got at her last night ripped her most to pieces. The place was like a slaughter-house when I got there this morning. Blood all over everything—and Eulie was gone. Not a trace of her anywhere—her nor the murderin' devil that did for Gra'ma.

"I hardly been asleep for the past two days, so when I come home an hour ago I was ready to drop into bed—and there was your call. More murder!" he groaned. "I been sheriff of this parish twenty years, and I never knew anything like it. Two girls snatched up like the earth had opened and swallowed them—and three women ripped to pieces like a wild beast had been at them. All in a week's time.

"First I said to myself, 'There's a murderin' madman—a ripper—loose in Iberville Parish.' But it's more than that. Murderin' madmen don't rob banks, nor they don't make respectable bankers loot their own safes and then commit suicide. Yeh," he nodded dolefully, "they both happened here in this parish during the past week."

"Why, this seems to be a veritable crime wave." Millikan's bushy brows rose in surprise. "And you have no idea who may be responsible? No arrests—or even suspects?"

The sheriff's reply was a dismal grunt of admission, but then he rallied and eyed Millikan defiantly.

"We ain't alone in gettin' nowhere, don't think that," he shook his big head. "A crime wave is right. Not only here in Iberville but all over Louisiana and 'cross the river in Mississippi. Even up in Arkansas and in East Texas. I got reports in my office about more than a dozen banks that have been robbed—inside jobs all of them, it seems like. It's this administration, I tell you, Doctor," he leaned forward and gave himself to his theme. "It's made things so bad a banker can't make an honest livin'—"

"But that would hardly account for the ripper murders—and for Minoru, here in the hospital," Millikan interposed before the sheriff's tirade was fairly launched. "We have no bank here to loot, and this poor Hawaiian hadn't a thing in the world worth stealing."

That brought Sam Ladue back to the case in hand—and to his own precarious situation in the plague settlement. He questioned Herrick and Dorothy Wheeler briefly, promised to assign one of his best men to the case, and made a swift exit. That was the last they would see of him, Tom Herrick knew, as he watched the sheriff's automobile head for the gates. Of what importance was the death of a friendless leper whose days were numbered anyway? Ladue had ample excuse for steering clear of such dangerous territory, and he would be sure to take advantage of it.

Dr. Millikan had been right. If Minoru's murderer was to be apprehended they would have to capture him themselves. The Law had effectively washed its hands of the leper world—but *had it?*

PERHAPS he was letting his imagination run away with him, but Herrick thought he sensed a connection between Minoru's murder and the lawlessness that was spreading out like a fan over Louisiana and the neighboring states. And yet, what possible connection could there be between the killing of the leprous Hawaiian and the brutal slaying of an old woman nearly fifty miles away?

Herrick's thoughts flashed back to the past night. Before going back into the hospital building after being knocked out he had checked on William Price, the orderly, and discovered that he was off-duty and asleep in his room. Apparently he had retired more than an hour before the murder was committed—so that seemed to put him in the clear so far as prowling the grounds was concerned.

Mentally Herrick checked off Price—and then brought up Captain La Fetra.

La Fetra was a Creole, the owner of a plantation some ten miles up the Mississippi. He had been an officer in the regular army during the occupation of the Philippines and while there had contracted leprosy. When he discovered his plight he had resigned his commission and come home, to reopen his closed plantation house and live the life of a hermit. It was only by accident that his condition had been discovered by a visiting nurse who happened onto the place.

He had bitterly resented being removed to the leprosarium and had stubbornly op-

posed every fancied infringement of his rights. To allow him as much freedom as possible, he had been given sole occupancy of one of the bungalows—and it was there that Herrick had lost track of the shadowy prowler last night.

Could that prowler have been La Fetra? If not, it must have been someone whom the captain knew and was aiding. Whether he could be induced to talk was doubtful, but Herrick decided to try it. He went to the bungalow on a pretended tour of inspection—and found it empty.

For a moment he considered. To be discovered inside during La Fetra's absence would precipitate a fine row, but that was a chance he had to run. He opened the unlocked screen door and stepped in. The bungalow differed little from dozens of others. It contained a living room, bedroom and a small kitchen.

Herrick searched the place thoroughly and then gave it up. He had drawn two blanks in Price and La Fetra. But where else should he turn? Again he reviewed everything Sheriff Ladue had said—and suddenly another possibility flashed into his mind.

Those bank robberies—they reminded him of Henry Cole, who had been brought to the leper colony some six weeks ago. Cole was a former bank examiner who had been convicted of accepting bribes and been sent to jail. While there he had developed leprosy and had been removed to the colony.



Meet Roger Harris, the man who incubated a nebula! But when the egg from the Pleiades finally hatched into an animate hell-bender of radiant fire, whose greatest joy was to eat—

anything!—even the sacred cause of science couldn't keep Harris' irate room-mate from trying to kill it. But "The Pet Nebula" didn't *want* to be killed, and it had some very potent weapons of defense! (The story is by Alfred Bester.)

The six other science fiction stories in the issue include "Magnus' Disintegrator" by Ray Cummings, "The Professor Splits" by J. Harvey Haggard, "Cosmic Derelict" by Neil R. Jones, and "The King's Eye" by James MacCreigh. You won't want to miss any of these top-notch future science tales; read them complete in the February issue of



On Sale Now!

Herrick's pulses pounded. Again premonition whispered to him.

Cole, too, was quartered in one of the bungalows, but before reaching it, Herrick knew that it would be empty. On the way he spied the ex-bank examiner sitting on a stool, posing for Oreste Gianni, a fairly talented sculptor who amused himself by making busts of his fellow-sufferers.

That was excellent. Skirting the little group of onlookers, Herrick went on to the bungalow and stepped inside. It, too, seemed devoid of anything significant—until he found a waste basket half-filled with newspapers. Newspapers from half a dozen Southern cities. Papers from which news items had been clipped. And in a desk drawer he found the clipped items, carefully fastened together—a file of news stories covering recent bank defalcations and suicides!

A CHILL trickled slowly down Tom Herrick's spine as he glanced through those clippings. The amazing web of crime extended even farther than he had supposed. And one of its tentacles—if not its evil head—was right there in that isolated world of forgotten men! Henry Cole undoubtedly could throw light on those crimes—but it would take more than this collection of significant clippings to prove anything against him or make him talk. He would have to be watched, would have to be—

And then he was just outside, stepping up onto the porch!

Swiftly Herrick thrust the clippings back into the drawer and darted into the little kitchen, through it to the back door. Barely in time he slipped out. Cole's voice rang in his ears as he circled the bungalow and made his way back to the road—and it rang in his ears an hour later as he lay tossing in bed, vainly trying to fall asleep so that he would be fit for the night's work—and vigil. . . .

This was Dorothy Wheeler's night off,

Herrick remembered as he finished dressing and started toward the hospital. He would not see her, would not be able to watch over her and know that she was safe . . . But she would be perfectly safe in the nurses' building, he rebuked himself—and yet a vague uneasiness took hold of him as he stepped into the office and saw her relief in her regular place. Do as he would, he could not keep his mind off her—and off Henry Cole and Basil La Fetra and William Price.

Instead of concentrating on the work in hand his thoughts kept returning to the events of the past night. Again he could hear those gasping sounds in the corridor, could hear Minoru's strangling gurgle . . . Subconsciously he noticed the indicator signaling, saw the white-clad nurse rise and go to answer the summons.

This girl, Irene Doty, was a stolid, phlegmatic sort of person. She was quite impervious to the lurking menace Dorothy had sensed. The summons of the buzzer did not bring her to her feet with a start. She went about her duties calmly, almost automatically—but suddenly her terrified scream knifed shrilly through the hushed building!

Instinctively Tom Herrick's eyes flashed to the indicator. Number 74 was still visible. Seventy-four — Taniki's room!

Cold sweat stood out on his forehead as he leaped from his desk and ran across the office. The shrill scream had dwindled to a moan of agony, to a convulsive gasp, when he reached the corridor and raced to the farther end. A spine-prickling gasp—and then horrible silence!

Herrick was prepared for tragedy but not for the ghastly horror that confronted him when he reached the Malay's room. There on the floor lay a blood-drenched abomination. Irene Doty's face and throat were a welter of torn flesh and spurting blood that had splattered over everything. And over the mangled corpse crouched

Taniki, his leprosy-rotted hands dyed crimson. Like a huge vulture he hovered over the hapless, dead victim of his insensate fury.

For a long moment Herrick stood there, rooted to the floor by the fearful spectacle. Then he sprang, his fists driving into the Malay's nightmare face with berserk fury. Taniki fell back from that charge. He lost his footing and tumbled to the floor, but he was up again in an instant, his clawing hands grabbing for Herrick's throat, swiping at his eyes. He battled with the wild frenzy of a madman—

No, with the frenzy of a drug addict!

Herrick caught a glimpse of the pinpointed pupils of his eyes, twin pools of savage, unreasoning frenzy—and then he swept the Malay off his feet and landed on top of him with breath-taking force. Helplessly he pinned the fellow to the floor beneath him, while his fists drove into the snarling face with cold deliberation.

Drugged lepers! He was stunned by the hellish possibilities he envisioned. What inhuman fiend could have conceived such devilry?

"Where did you get the drug, Taniki?" he hammered home his demand mercilessly. "Who gave you the dope?"

Taniki winced, groaned. His head rocked from side to side, and the madness began to fade from his eyes.

"No, doctor—no!" he mumbled a plea. "Taniki talk. Taniki tell you anything. Taniki tell—"

But what Taniki intended to tell was never to be heard. His parted lips suddenly froze, writhed in agony, and a thin, high-pitched scream keened from his straining throat. His body arced up from the floor in a taut bow and then collapsed limply.

Faster than the eye could see, something had streaked across the room from the window—a six-inch, feathered steel dart that stood quivering in the Malay's right temple, deeply imbedded in his brain!

CHAPTER THREE

Deadly Darkness

TOM HERRICK'S eyes were riveted unbelievably on that fantastic death missile. An ordinary, feathered throwing dart such as could be found in any English pub—but the steel shaft was stained a dark brown. Stained with poison! That fiendish weapon was double-edged. Had the needle-sharp point missed a vital spot the lethal coating would have accomplished its purpose swiftly!

How long Herrick crouched there in paralyzing astonishment he did not know. Momentarily time stopped for him. Then he was on his feet, running to the window, just as a pair of stout metal jaws released their grip on the sill. Down into the darkness telescoped a light metallic ladder, and up from the ground came the sound of running feet as someone scurried through the oleander border.

It was too late to overtake the darter, but Herrick sped to the end of the corridor and down the rear stairs. Outside not a sound broke the stillness, but he needed nothing to guide him. In his mind's eye was a large bull's-eye target with a dozen darts sticking in it—a target he had seen attached to the wall of Basil La Fetra's living room!

That was where the silencing murder weapon had come from—out of Captain La Fetra's bungalow!

This time Herrick did not hesitate in front of the building. He ran up on the porch and pounded lustily. Again and again—but not a sound came from the dark interior. Not a sound, until he pressed his ear close to the screen door and caught the low rumble of heavy breathing. La Fetra was asleep—or pretending to be.

Herrick grasped the doorknob, turned it, and the latch clicked. Cautiously he stepped inside and cast the beam of his

night-light around the room. Yes, there on the wall was the bull-eye, studded with darts identical with the murder missile. Through the living room and into the bedroom—and now the light centered on a figure beneath the thin blanket, on Basil La Fetra's closed eyes and half-open mouth.

The light had no effect upon him, even when Herrick stood beside the bed and held the flash close to his face. La Fetra slept on—until Herrick reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder, shook him. A sleepy groan was his only response. Snapping on the overhead light, Herrick grabbed the man beneath the arms and pulled him up to a sitting position, shook him and slapped his cheeks.

"Wake up, La Fetra!" he shouted in the sleeper's ear—and at last La Fetra opened his eyes. Glassy eyes that stared vacantly.

The man was drugged! Not with one of the inflammatory drugs such as had been given Taniki. La Fetra had been doped with a sedative so that he would sleep soundly no matter what went on around him. So it could not have been he who hurled the murder dart. . . .

The double slaying had been discovered by the time Herrick got back to the hospital building. Dr. Millikan was in the death-room, and Price, the orderly, was stationed in the hall to keep the other patients, aroused by the screams, in their rooms. Price—on hand again so opportunely . . . Millikan looked up when Herrick entered, and his stern face was even more severe now that it was lined with anxiety.

"Where have you been, doctor?" he snapped accusingly. "You are not supposed to leave this floor while you are on duty. If you had been on hand you might have saved this poor girl's life. You—"

"I tried to do that, Dr. Millikan, but before I reached her it was too late," Herrick interrupted. "Taniki had already

killed her. I left the floor in an effort to catch the man who threw that—" he pointed to the dart. "He had too big a start; he got away."

Before he had finished Millikan's face softened. He raised his hand in silent protest.

"Excuse me, Herrick," he apologized. "This has rather taken me off my feet. Three murders in twenty-four hours! What does it mean? What sort of explanation can we make?"

"It means that someone has been supplying the patients with drugs—hasheesh, probably," Herrick clipped grimly. "That accounts for Doty's death and for the attack on Wheeler last night. It means also that we have a murderer—perhaps several of them—running loose within the walls."

"Drugs—*here!* And murderers!" Millikan groaned. "Then we are all in danger. The nurses aren't safe—nor the patients. But why should anyone want to murder lepers—two of them in as many days?"

"Taniki was killed to shut his mouth," Herrick supplied one motive. "He was about to tell me something when he died."

"What did you learn?" Millikan leaned forward eagerly. "Did he have time to speak? Did he give you any worth-while inkling—"

Herrick shook his head.

"And you discovered nothing outdoors?" the leprosarium head persisted. "What took you out there? What did you see?"

PATIENTLY Herrick related all that had happened, but even with that Millikan was not satisfied. He asked a dozen probing, insinuating questions that made it evident he thought Herrick was holding something back.

"That's all there is to tell you, sir," Herrick concluded. "But how did you learn of this?"

"Price called me." Millikan looked up in surprise.

"And how did he happen to be on hand so quickly?"

"Why, where else should he be?" Millikan's eyes opened even more widely. "This is his night on duty."

So William Price had an alibi. And so did Basil La Fetra . . . But somewhere in the leprosarium grounds a cunning, cold-blooded murderer was watching and waiting, ready to strike down anyone who crossed his path. A man who could be faced and fought was one thing, but this lurking menace was unnerving, morale-corroding.

Terror gripped Tom Herrick at that moment, terror that tightened icy fingers around his heart. Not terror for himself, but for Dorothy Wheeler. Now he knew that the girl was in appalling danger. It was only an accident that had saved her tonight. But for the fact that Irene Doty had been relieving her, Dorothy would now be lying there in Taniki's room.

Dorothy was in appalling danger, and the only way to save her from it was to round up this bestial murderer.

But who could he be? Henry Cole? Cole probably was tied up with the bank lootings—but why should he want to dope his fellow-lepers? What could *anyone* gain by turning these poor doomed sufferers into hellish beasts?

All night Herrick wrestled with that problem, and by morning he was no nearer to a solution. For hours after he went off duty he searched the leprosarium grounds, but nowhere could he find anything to help him. By day the leper colony was deceptively peaceful, a haven of lost souls who were no longer interested in the passions and struggles of the outside world—but at night it became a place of stalking horror. . . .

Night came down again all too swiftly, and with it Tom Herrick's fears began to rise. Every patch of deeper darkness seemed studded with watching eyes as he made his way across the grounds to the

hospital; malignant eyes that followed him with cynical amusement as he walked into the waiting trap.

Two nights ago it had been Minoru; last night it was Irene Doty and Taniki—and tonight who would it be? As he stepped into the office the answer he dreaded forced its way into his mind. Instinctively his eyes swiveled to Dorothy's blonde head as she bent over her desk, and when she looked up and smiled terror clutched at his throat.

He was a fool to have let her stay there another night, he upbraided himself. He should have insisted that she leave, that she go back to New Orleans with him. But she would not have done that, he admitted miserably; she would not have let Dr. Millikan down by deserting her post. No matter how frightened she might be, she would insist on going through with the job.

Tonight it was Herrick who fairly jumped each time the indicator buzzed. Each time she answered the summons his nerves tightened, his ears strained to catch the alarm he feared.

And then it came!

Dorothy's scream—there was no mistaking it. She had gone to answer a patient's ring. Subconsciously Herrick had heard a screen door close far down the hall as she came back into the corridor; subconsciously his tension had relaxed with the knowledge that she was on her way back to the office—and then her frightened cry rang in his ears!

"Dorothy!" He yelled her name wildly as he flung across the office and dived through the doorway.

FEAR was freezing his blood, numbing his brain, as he raced toward the rear of the building.

"Dorothy!"

Why didn't she answer? Was he already too late? Had that lone scream been her death-cry? Was she lying be-

hind one of those closed doors, a ghastly mangled corpse?

Herrick's heart was in his mouth as he yanked open door after door, to peer inside with burning eyes—and give fervid thanks each time that he did not find her as he dreaded he would. And then he reached her—found her standing at a window and staring out into the night.

When she turned to face him her eyes were wide with mystification. As if she could not believe what they revealed, she stared at the blanket-covered figure on the bed.

"Perillo—" she gestured toward the sleeping man—"I just saw him climb out of the window—but there he is in bed! I heard a noise in here as I came along the corridor—heard the window screen being opened—so I came in and switched on the light. He already had one leg over the sill, but I saw his face plainly. It was Perillo—I *know* it was. I saw him climb down to the ground and run off in the darkness—and yet—"

Incredulously she stepped toward the bed, but Herrick reached it before her. Quickly he bent over the still figure, peered closely at the rot-pocked face turned toward the wall—and then unceremoniously pulled the blanket away. Beneath it lay a crudely constructed dummy; a dummy with a sculptured and cleverly painted model of Ugo Perillo's head!

"A dummy!" Dorothy gasped. "Then that was—that *was* Perillo!" Suddenly her eyes filled with terror. "Then *he* is the murderer—and he's running loose somewhere out there in the darkness!"

"Perhaps—but I doubt it," Herrick clipped, as his mind worked at top speed. "Go back to the office, Dorothy—and stay there. Call Dr. Millikan. I'll join you there in a few minutes."

But before he returned to the office Herrick wanted to have a look at the other rooms on that floor. One after the

other, he opened the doors and stepped inside, to turn his light on the sleeping patient—and when he was finished he had discovered five other outstretched dummies with cleverly counterparted artificial heads!

Six of those lepers, six of the most advanced and contagious cases, were outside there, running loose somewhere in the darkness! Six dope-crazed lepers capable of any criminal abomination! Not one potential murderer, but half a dozen of them!

Goose pimples sheathed Tom Herrick's skin as he turned to meet Dr. Millikan coming upstairs from the floor below. Millikan's eyes were wide with alarm. A dozen impatient questions poured from his lips before Herrick could tell him what had happened and take him to one of the realistic-headed dummies.

"That work is excellent," Millikan marveled. "It's amazing that he was able to accomplish it—"

"He didn't," Herrick corrected swiftly. "Oreste Gianni, the sculptor, made this head and the others as well. He's been making them right under our noses, sitting on the porch of his bungalow."

"Gianni!" Millikan exclaimed. "I want to have a talk with that man—right now!"

PURPOSEFULLY he started for the stairs, but Herrick hurried first to the office—and stood gaping in the doorway. It was empty. Dorothy Wheeler was not there! He could feel his scalp tightening as he stood there in the doorway, could feel his heart sinking through his body even before he reached Millikan and had his fears confirmed.

Millikan had not seen her. She had merely called him on the house 'phone, and then she had gone—where? Not anywhere in the building. A swift search failed to discover her anywhere—and Herrick knew that she was out there

(Continued on page 96)

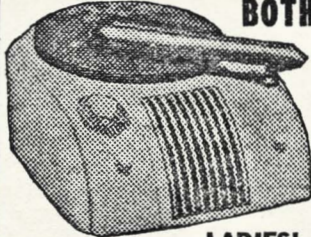
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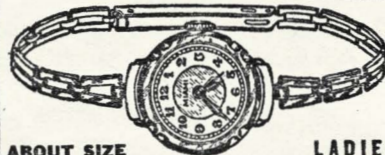
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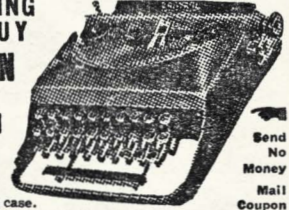
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(Continued from page 94)

somewhere in the darkness that cloaked half a dozen rabid lepers!

He would have run all the way to Gianni's bungalow, would have burst in and hauled the sculptor out of bed, had it not been for Millikan. The leprosarium head restrained him, cautioned him; but at the porch steps Herrick slipped the leash. Up to the dark doorway he strode and banged peremptorily. Again, harder, and then he seized the knob, flung the door wide and strode in—to be met by a bath of liquid fire!

An almost imperceptible movement as his flashlight stabbed into the blackness was all that saved him. Instinctively his arm darted up to guard his face, to cover his eyes—and hell-fire doused him. His forehead, his wrist and hand, his chin—all were seared with the burning liquid.

Herrick gasped and staggered back. The flashlight fell from his hand, but Millikan leaped past him and found the wall switch. When light flooded the room it was empty, but Millikan paid no attention to that. His breath sucked through his teeth as he saw what had happened to Herrick, and then he ran to the kitchen for water and cloths. Swiftly he bathed and poulticed the acid burns as he ripped off Herrick's soaked jacket and shirt.

That fiery greeting had not doused Herrick alone. He saw that it had splashed on Millikan's clothing as well. It had spilled over his left wrist and the back of his hand, but the old man paid no attention to the reddening burn until Herrick insisted that he treat it.

Once more the fiendish devil had laughed at them, had swooped out of the darkness to set them back on their heels, Herrick admitted bitterly—but he did not realize how completely they had been played with until he searched the bungalow. There in bed lay Oreste Gianni, deep in a drugged sleep. The acid-throwing

Murder in Hell

had been none of his doing. The murderer had been there waiting for them—and now he was gone.

Gone to seize Dorothy Wheeler, if she had not already walked into his trap!

CHAPTER FOUR

Door of Doom

TOM HERRICK paid no attention to the smarting of his burns as he led the way out into the moonless night. Dorothy was out there somewhere in the darkness, and every passing moment might seal her doom! She was out there—and they must find her before that inhuman monster was able to reach her!

With Millikan close at his heels, he scouted cautiously back to the hospital building. Carefully they reconnoitered all along one side, passed around to the rear, turned the corner—and the old man grabbed his arm, tugged him back into the bushes.

There, a short distance ahead, a shadowy figure was hurrying along the path. One, and then another—two more. They were headed toward a line of bungalows—the line in which Basil La Petra's house was located! Warily Herrick started after them. Now he could see them quite plainly in the dim starlight—and then his heart leaped into his mouth.

He and Millikan were not the only ones trailing those slinking shadows. There, coming toward them from a converging path, was someone else—a slim, dark figure whose identity was betrayed when the long cloak she wore flapped open momentarily to reveal the white uniform it covered.

Dorothy Wheeler! She was out there trying to find Ugo Perillo!

Herrick's nerves were screwed up to the last notch as he watched her. What could he do? If he called out he would

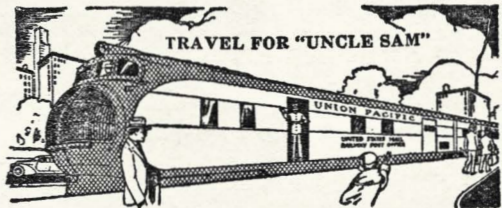


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betray her presence as well as his own. An attempt to rush to her would have the same disastrous result. He could only crouch there and watch her, with a prayer on his lips. Watch her as she backed away before two new arrivals, backed into a doorway to let them pass.

Into Basil La Fetra's doorway! For an instant horror held Tom Herrick transfixed. Then he mastered his paralyzed vocal cords, started to cry a warning—but Millikan was too quick for him. Clapping a hand over his mouth, the old man thrust him back into the bushes—and then it was too late.

Herrick heard her scream. One scream that was chopped off in full-cry. Frantically he tore loose and leaped into the roadway, started racing toward the bungalow; but she was gone. She had been seized and dragged inside.

Like a madman Herrick charged across the porch and yanked the door open. Millikan was close behind him as he flung himself into the stygian interior, groping for the wall switch. His fingers touched the plate, but before he could press the button he was hurled aside. Out of the darkness a score of men seemed to leap upon him. Fists rocked his head, smashed into his face; arms wrapped around his knees, his chest, his waist. Swept off his feet, he went down.

Now a light dispelled the gloom. A flashlight beam reflected weakly from the ceiling. In its dim radiance he could see the grotesque forms of the milling lepers, could see that he was not alone in the furious melee. Millikan was surrounded, was being dragged down. He gasped weakly as a club beat down at his head—a club that was red and dripping with blood when it whipped up again!

In sheer desperation Herrick got to his knees, almost to his feet, but the frenzied lepers swarmed over him and beat him to the floor. Savage blows rocked his

Murder in Hell

head, made his senses reel—and then something hit him with tremendous force; something that exploded a bombshell inside his tortured skull—and he knew no more. . . .

The furious battle was all over when he opened his eyes and stirred painfully. The bungalow was dark and utterly silent. Shakily he got to his feet and groped for the light switch, pressed the button, and stared ruefully at the tatters of his undershirt hanging in ribbons from his waist. He felt as if he had been through a cement mixer, sore and battered in every muscle—

And then he saw the reddish brown stains on the floor. Blood. Dr. Millikan's blood! The devils had killed him!

But where had they taken his body? Swiftly he investigated the other rooms. Nobody there. Returned to the living room, he stared down at those bloodstains and saw that the red drops formed a trail; a trail that led up to one of the built-in bookcases against the wall. In fact, one of those red splashes was halfway under the bookcase edge. . . .

TINGLING with excitement, he dropped to his knees and studied the bookcase carefully, pressed against it, tried to move it outward. Impatiently he started to tumble the books from it when he noticed that one was tilted forward, as if it had been thrust back carelessly between its companions. He reached for it, started to pull it out—and the whole bookcase moved backward into what once must have been a bedroom closet!

There, behind where it had stood, was an opening in the floor, a black rectangle with a ladder leading down into it. Herick glanced around him, recovered his flashlight from where it had dropped to the floor, turned its beam down into the hole and set his foot on the ladder. It was about fifteen feet long and brought him to a low, timber-supported tunnel; a

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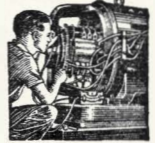
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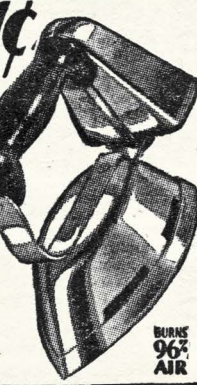
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So this was where La Petra's nocturnal visitors had disappeared. This was the route by which the settlement's drug-crazed lepers were turned loose to prey upon the countryside. And this was the way Dorothy had been taken by her kidnapers!

Spurred by the thought of her peril, Herrick strode forward, counting yard after yard, until he knew that he had passed beneath the wall. Beyond that was a slight bluff leading down to the river—and there ahead of him his light picked out what looked like leaves. Warily he approached and saw that the tunnel came out near the base of the bluff, its terminus in a little thicket that ran almost to the water's edge. There was a path beaten through the low trees and shrubs.

Hardly had he stepped into it when he heard a noise just ahead of him. A man's voice! Swiftly he groped his way forward, his light extinguished, and reached the shore of the Mississippi just as a man was about to push a motorboat's prow out of the soft mud. A leper! And there was another sitting at the tiller in the rear.

Two against one—but Herrick had the advantage of surprise. Tensing his muscles, he leaped and landed on the fellow's back, sent him spinning away from the boat and brought the flashlight down ruinously over his skull. That one was out cold, but the one in the boat must not be allowed to get away. Herrick whirled and sprang to grab the bow before it could slip out into the stream, and then he saw that the cowering figure in the stern was making no effort to escape.

He was a young negro, probably still in his teens. Now he sat like one petrified, staring with round eyes.

"Not me, boss!" he begged as Herrick made as if to move toward him. "I ain't

Murder in Hell

done nothin'. I won't do nothin', boss. I—"

Making sure that the boat was securely grounded, Herrick turned to the fellow he had knocked out. Yes, he was a hideous-faced leper, but his disease-ravaged features were not familiar. Herrick bent over him—and gaped in amazement. That was no human face—it was a mask! A close-fitting rubber mask that was amazingly realistic.

He ran his fingers around its edges, found the fastenings and stripped it off—and exposed the face of William Price!

What was Price doing out there beyond the walls at that time of night? And what could be the meaning of this gruesome masquerade? Herrick did not know—but he meant to find out. Quickly he fastened the rubber mask in place over his own face, pulled the ragged felt hat over his head, stripped off Price's rough costume and donned it himself—and turned to the quaking negro.

"All right—head up-stream," he commanded. "You know where you are to go—to the La Fetra plantation. You've just changed passengers, that's all—but don't try to tell anybody else that."

"I won't tell nothin', boss; I won't tell nothin'," the negro vowed fervently, and the motor came to life as Herrick shoved off and climbed into the prow.

The night was so dark that he could barely distinguish objects along the shore; but, for that matter, he had to trust the negro for he had no way of recognizing the La Fetra place. It was about ten miles up the river, that was all he knew—and yet they seemed to take an intolerably long time. More than half an hour, he judged—but at last the boat turned in and wended its way into a bayou. Deeper and deeper, past shrub-choked hummocks and islands, beneath tall oaks and cypress draped with Spanish moss that reached to the surface of the water, into a place of

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such Cimmerian gloom that it was a marvel the negro could find his way.

“This doesn't seem like the La Fetra plantation,” Herrick worried uneasily. “You sure you know where you're going, boy?”

“I dunno no names,” came from the stern. “I on'y know where I's goin'—where I's s'posed to take you. There 'tis now.”

HERRICK peered into the solid black wall ahead of them, and through a break in the low-hanging moss he caught a glimpse of a light. Lanterns on the shore, evidently. So this was the rendezvous—and this was as far as he and his guide could go together.

“Cut down your speed,” he ordered as they came out into a wider stretch of water and the lights ahead revealed a building back among the trees. “Turn into the shore.”

Noiselessly the boat nosed into the tall grass, and Herrick jumped out to pull it up farther. Then he turned to the negro, assured him that he was not going to be hurt, and proceeded to bind and gag him securely. Satisfied that it would be some hours at best before the fellow would be able to give an alarm, he waded through the reeds up onto firmer ground. Armed with a wrench from the boat, he started toward the building.

It had once been a fashionable plantation house, he saw as he crept closer, but now it was almost tumbled in. Its porch sagged and two of the once-white front columns had fallen to the ground. Vines rioted in a wild tangle over it and brush grew window-high on every side. Apparently it had not been occupied for years, but now there were men in it—if those weird-looking creatures coming from it were men!

They looked more like denizens of another world. The one in the lead, carrying

Murder in Hell

a lantern, wore what seemed to be a one-piece outfit surmounted by a fantastic looking head that was all eyes and nose. Behind him came half a dozen figures clad in ragged robes with cowls over their heads.

Herrick moved quickly. Scurrying noiselessly through the brush, he reached a point where they would have to pass him. Now, as they came abreast of him, he saw that the leader wore a flying suit and a gas-mask, and those weird gravelings who followed him were the lepers. One by one they passed—all except the last.

Before he could get by, Herrick rose up and brought the wrench down over his head. Catching the sagging body before it fell, he eased it to the ground and stripped off the cowl'd robe. In a moment he had wrapped it around himself, pulled the cowl down low over his face, and was hurrying along the path to take his place at the end of the line.

Now they had reached an open field, a small field that had been mowed flat. Out in the middle of it was a plane—a helicopter plane!—which two men were readying. The door of the cabin was open when they reached it. Without a word the spectral-looking lepers climbed into it—and Tom Herrick went with them.

Silently they dropped into seats. After them came the pilot. Without so much as a glance at them he took his place at the controls, the motor roared, the strange craft started to rise—and Herrick wondered on what sinister devils' business he was embarked.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Dead Go Forth

SQUATTING silently in a corner of that speeding plane, Tom Herrick had no faintest idea of where he was being



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borne or how long they had been on the way, but at last he felt the machine descending. Gently it bellied to the ground and the motor stopped. Out the pilot stepped into what seemed to be a meadow, and after him came the cowed lepers. With no more than a signal of his hand they followed him; followed him like wraiths into the deserted street of a small country town.

Keeping close in the darkness, he led the way to a large wooden residence set back in well kept grounds. Ghost-like they flitted across the wide lawns and were at his back when he reached the porch and stepped to the front door. A few moments he worked at the lock—and the way was open for them to take possession of the house.

Silently they huddled in the hall while the pilot explored the lower floor. Then, gun in hand, he led the way upstairs, to thrust open the first door he reached. A bedroom door. Herrick heard a girl's frightened scream—and then the terrified figure, clad only in her nightgown, was thrust out into the hands of the waiting lepers.

That shrill scream sounded the alarm. Quickly another door opened, and a portly, gray-haired man stood framed in it. Open-mouthed, he blinked at that weird devil's company in his home; and then he was in their grasp, was held helpless while his wife was aroused and dragged from her bed. One more captive the upper floor yielded, a maid servant, and then the silent specters stalked downstairs into the living room with their trembling, sobbing prisoners.

A single lamp the pilot turned on before he faced them, and now his voice, deep and sepulchral, came from behind the mask.

"This is no masquerade, Joel Talmage," he told the quaking old man. "You have to choose between life and death

Murder in Hell

tonight, and you must make your decision quickly—now! If you want to condemn your daughter and your wife to a living death you will disobey me. In that case they will be carried off—carried back to the grave by those who hold them. Look—” he pointed to where the leper who held the girl had drawn back his cowl to reveal his hideous, disease-rotted face—“there is your daughter’s fate unless you do exactly as you are told!”

“Leona!” the older woman screamed and sagged forward in a faint, but they paid no attention to her.

“What must I do? What must I do?” the father quavered through bloodless lips, as his horrified eyes turned from one of those nightmare faces to another. “Tell me—what must I do?”

“You must get dressed, quickly,” the answer came from within the mask. “You are going to the bank with me. You are going to open the safe, and then we will arrange the details of the ransom.

“You want me to rob my own bank!” Talmage gasped. “You can’t get away with this, I warn you. You can’t—”

But the arms of the leper crept around the girl. Despite her horrified screams he drew her closer to him—and Joel Talmage capitulated. With tears running down his face he went upstairs with his watchful captor to dress. A few minutes later they came down. The front door opened and closed—and Tom Herrick knew that another bank was to be looted.

The merciless, cold-blooded beast! He wanted to beat that Machiavellian fiend to a pulp; he wanted to run from that house and shout the alarm so that these disease-ridden hulks and their diabolical master would be captured. But he could do nothing—nothing but stand there and watch the agony on the faces of those horror-racked women.

If he succeeded in giving the alarm it would mean doom for Dorothy Wheeler.

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No, to make a break now would be useless; might not even succeed in snaring the pilot before he got away. Herrick could not risk it. There was nothing for him to do but bide his time, nothing but wait until the plane was back at its base.

Then he would have a showdown with this inhuman monster. Then—

BUT there was the sound of footsteps on the porch. The door was opening, and in came Joel Talmage and his captor. A haggard, broken old man whose eyes turned pleadingly for understanding to his wife and his daughter. In one gloved hand the pilot carried a leather satchel.

At last this unholy ordeal was to end. Herrick breathed with relief—but in the next moment he knew that he had underestimated the cruelty of this fiend.

"Unfortunately this payment is not sufficient, Mr. Talmadge," the deep voice came from behind the mask. "We require another fifty thousand dollars from you. What I have here will be accepted as a token of your good faith, but to insure your payment of the remainder it will be necessary for me to take your daughter with me. She will be entirely safe and unmolested—unless you find it impossible to comply promptly with our terms."

Only then did Tom Herrick realize the full purpose of that diabolical extortion scheme. This poor girl was to be kidnaped and held as a hostage, her fate dependent upon her father's ability to raise fifty thousand dollars for her ransom! Was to be held in horrible captivity while Talmage was milked dry of every dollar he could lay his hands upon! That was the secret of these wide-spread bank lootings, and that was the secret of the heartbroken suicides that ran hand in glove with them!

Aghast at the appalling prospect that confronted her, Leona Talmadge suddenly tore herself free of the leprous hands that clutched her. Wildly she ran toward the

Murder in Hell

door, but before she reached it the masked pilot was ahead of her. His left hand darted out and grabbed her arm, pulled her back despite her hysterical struggling.

Herrick watched that struggle with bleak eyes; watched the pilot's gloved fingers sink deep into her soft arm—and saw the little finger of the glove turn backward limply. . . .

That glove finger was empty! The pilot was the three-fingered killer who had murdered Minoru! No leper, no uncouth hoodlum, this fellow was a man of education and culture—and in that moment Herrick knew for a certainty that he was staring at his predecessor in the leprosarium, Dr. Myron Swope!

Swope—the discharged doctor who had made life miserable for Dorothy Wheeler!

Red rage surged in Herrick's brain as he plodded back to the plane with the lepers and their prisoners. Not satisfied with Leona Talmadge, they had taken the maid as well.

But here were two girls they would not murder, he vowed grimly, as the plane sped through the night. Carefully he made his desperate plans. He would have to wait until the machine was on the ground, would wait until Swope was stepping out. Then he would leap and bring his wrench down upon the fellow's head. With Swope's gun he would handle the lepers.

Step by step he reviewed his plan, until the ship's forward motion stopped and it began to descend. Now! His fingers closed on the handle of the wrench—but the moment the plane settled in the flare-lit field two men came running toward it.

"Look out!" one of them bellowed through a megaphone. "You have a spy on board! Herrick—a doctor from the leper joint!"

INSTANTLY Herrick knew what had happened. They had found the leper he had knocked out—but how did they

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know his identity? Desperately he leaped to his feet and raised the wrench, but before he could reach the front of the plane Swope had whirled and was facing him, the automatic leveled threateningly.

"Back up, Herrick!" rumbled from behind the mask. "Outside!" And there was no choice but to obey.

As he stepped to the ground strong hands seized him. Two burly thugs grabbed him and tore off his robe, pried loose his mask. They tied his hands together in front of him and marched him to the house.

From the outside that delapidated house looked deserted, but inside it was teeming with life; miserable, captive life. The moment Herrick stepped through the basement door he heard the sobbing and moaning and saw that he was in a veritable prison. The walls were lined with cells

Classified Advertising

(Continued)

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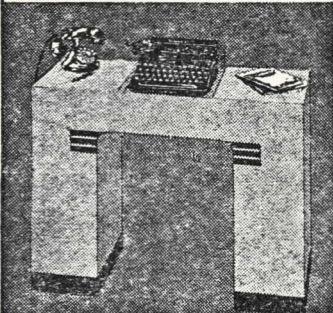
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in which wretched, haggard-eyed women and girls slumped despairingly. The hostages! There were nearly a score of them, but Dorothy did not seem to be among them.

Up a flight of stairs his captors marched him, into a sparsely furnished room on the main floor that seemed to be the guards' living quarters. There he found another gas-masked individual in an outfit that was a duplicate of Swope's.

"Where's the girl? What did you do with Wheeler?" Swope demanded of this fellow the moment he entered the room.

"She is perfectly safe, don't fret," came the answer in a voice that was strangely familiar despite its disguising muffle. "She is at La Fetra's, all set to bait the trap that our clever fox did not step into. Instead of going there, it seems he came straight to you. It appears we have not been quite as clever as we thought we were. Today I learned that messages have been going out of the leprosarium to the authorities.

An investigation has been started."

"Let it come," Swope snorted. "The sooner the better. We'll take our nosy friend here to La Fetra's place and pay him off for his smart work."

Tom Herrick realized that the sand was running low in the hour-glass for him. La Fetra's plantation could not be far off. Once they reached it his end would come quickly—and Dorothy's last slim hope would be gone. . . .

THE La Fetra plantation was even closer than he feared. It seemed that the motorboat into which they herded him had hardly swung out into the river when it turned into a branch and soon drew up at a dock. A few moments later he saw the house looming darkly ahead of him. Through a grove of fragrant magnolias they approached it, and suddenly he saw a light in one of the lower windows—a light that flickered and danced strangely.

Fire!

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His captors saw it too, and started forward on the run. Swope gripped his arm firmly so that he had no chance to escape, but the other gas-masked individual raced up the wide steps and unlocked the door, flung it wide and dashed into the smoke and flames recklessly.

At first glance the fire looked worse than it actually was. It was burning in the big central room of the place, but it had made little headway. Furiously the masked man hurled himself at it, beating it out with his gloved hands, and then discarding the gloves when they started to burn. Even without them he seized burning trash and rushed it outside!

He seemed to be impervious to fire—and suddenly Herrick remembered how Dr. Millikan had ignored the acid on his hands and wrist. Impervious to fire. . . . Impervious to searing acid. . . . With shocked comprehension he knew the answer—to many things.

This gas-masked individual with the hauntingly familiar voice was Dr. Arnold Millikan—and *Millikan was a leper! A leper far gone—in the numbing anaesthetic stage that made him insensible to pain!*

Sick with horror, his eyes turned away—to stare into Dorothy's despairing face, haggard and tear-stained in the murky lantern light. Tied hand and foot, she was propped up in a chair a short distance from where Basil La Fetra and William Price lay on the floor. La Fetra was securely tied up, but Price was unconscious, blood trickling from a gash in his forehead. His feet were tied but his hands were free—raw blistered hands and arms that were flame-seared almost up to his elbows.

Mutely they told their own story.

It must have been Price who started this fire in a desperate attempt to free himself.

Herrick's heart went out to those poor sufferers in the bitterness of their dis-

Murder in Hell

appointment. Savagely he cursed Millikan—and suddenly saw his opportunity to leap clear of the lepers who held him and fling himself on the traitorous hospital head. His rush took Millikan unawares, staggered him—and then his bound hands reached the doctor's gas-mask. His fingers fastened in it, ripped with all his strength—and Arnold Millikan stood bareheaded before him.

Then the deluge overwhelmed Herrick. The lepers swarmed over him, and Swope came charging across the room, to floor him with a vicious blow to the jaw that all but knocked him senseless.

But Millikan only smiled; the cold, glinting-eyed smile of a man whose mind was on the verge of utter collapse.

"So you know who I am, Herrick," he said softly. "It doesn't matter. Yes, you know that I am a leper—I can see it in your eyes, but that doesn't matter either. You will not betray my secret. All my life I have devoted to combatting this foul disease, and now it has laid hold of me—but I am not going to be confined in a living tomb for the rest of my days. My days are numbered—but I am going to enjoy them to the full! Now I am going to have everything I want—"

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SUDDENLY he whirled on Swope, and now there was an automatic in his hand—an automatic that was trained on Swope's heart.

"The game is up," he announced calmly. "We can't hope to go on any longer. This fellow Price is a G-man. He has been in touch with his office ever since they planted him on us, and his mates will be swarming around our ears at any moment. But I am not waiting to receive them. I am leaving—and I am taking Dorothy Wheeler with me. You will have to remain here, Swope. I am not fool enough to give you a chance to double-cross me. You will remain here—in the bonfire I am going to start. You—"

Swope had been standing there motionless, silent, as if he could not believe what he had heard—but suddenly he sprang; and the gun roared. Mercilessly Arnold Millikan drove two bullets into his heart.

Dazed by Swope's punch, sick and weak in every limb, Tom Herrick slumped against the wall and looked around him in the vain hope of finding some way of escape. There was nothing—until he met Basil La Fetra's imploring eyes and understood what the man was trying to tell him. At Herrick's feet was one of the broken chair rungs that still smoldered, its end a glowing ember. It was out of La Fetra's reach—until Herrick's bound feet sent it skidding across the floor.

Eagerly the captain nudged his way over to it, got it behind his back and gripped it in his bound hands. Herrick caught the stench of burning flesh, but he knew that La Fetra felt no pain.

Intuition must have warned Millikan at the last moment. He turned, and his eyes glinted. The gun roared—but La Fetra came up from the floor in a spring, catapulted himself squarely at his would-be executioner and sent him staggering, tumbling at Herrick's feet.

Tom Herrick summoned every ounce of

his depleted strength at that moment. Desperately he flung himself forward so that he pinned Millikan's gun-arm to the floor with his body—and then his bound hands fastened around the murderer's windpipe, sank deep into the yielding flesh and squeezed and squeezed and squeezed. . . .

His straining fingers were still locked in the dead man's throat when La Fetra bent over them and cut through the rope that bound his wrists: Dropping the penknife in Herrick's lap, the captain snatched up Millikan's gun and turned on the lepers, just organizing for a belated rush.

But Herrick had no time to watch him. Millikan would not have had to start the bonfire he threatened; the building was already on fire. The smoldering blaze had broken out anew. Clouds of smoke were filling the room and the ominous crackle of flames was becoming louder. Quickly Herrick freed his ankles and stumbled painfully to Dorothy, to saw through the ropes that held her while the blaze spread with amazing speed. They barely had time to reach Price and drag him outside before the big room became a roaring furnace.

Awed by the majesty of the hungry flames that so nearly had become their death pyre, they huddled together and looked up at the doomed building.

"The others—can't we do *something* for them?" Dorothy whispered as she clung tight to Herrick's arm. "Poor La Fetra—"

But Basil La Fetra made answer for himself. Above the roar of the flames a chorus of savage howls was borne to them; howls, and then the staccato thunder of an automatic. For a moment a square-shouldered figure appeared silhouetted against the yellow glare in an upstairs window—and then only the leaping flames remained. The maligned master of La Fetra plantation had cleared his name and found the freedom that only death could bring him.

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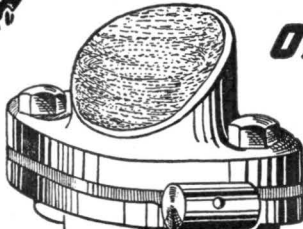
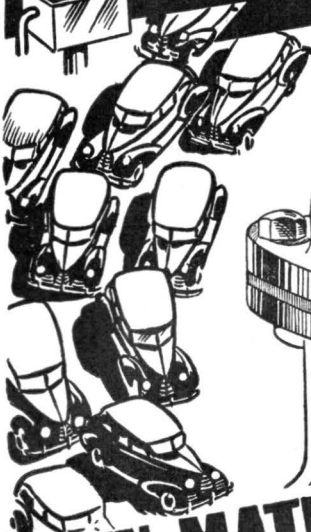
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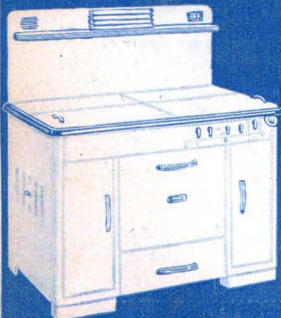
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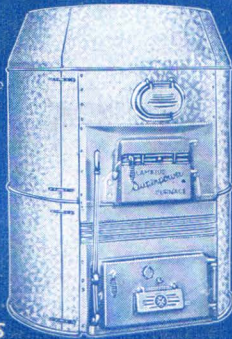
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