

JULY



10¢ DIME

MYSTERY

MAGAZINE



*THREE LONG
NOVELETTES
OF SPINE-
TINGLING
MYSTERY*

**BEAUTY
TREATMENT
FOR CORPSES**
by RALPH OPPENHEIM

DEATH'S GRAY SISTERS
by RUSSELL GRAY
+ + +
ASYLUM FOR MURDER
by W. WAYNE ROBBINS

S.W. Sweet

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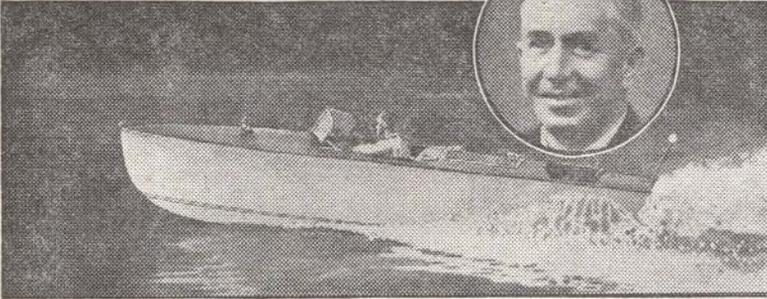
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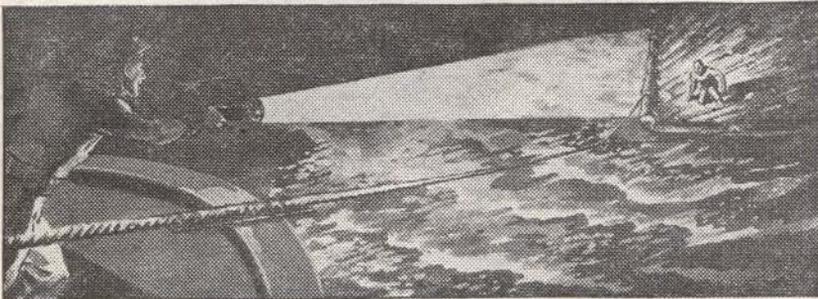
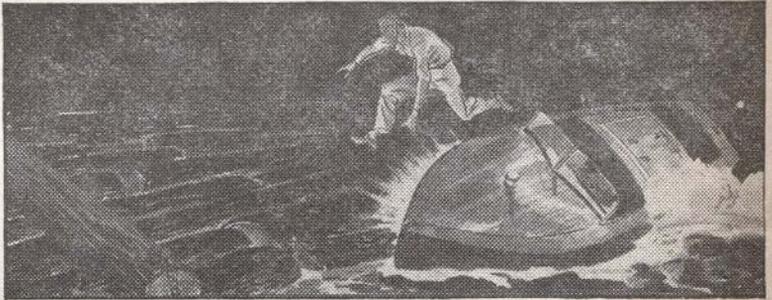
TERROR STRICKEN, I LEAPT TOWARD THE SINISTER SHAPE!

A true experience of J. H. WILLIAMS, Victoria, B. C.



"ONE BLACK NIGHT I was returning to Vancouver, in my 15-foot inboard motorboat," writes Mr. Williams. "Suddenly, a dark and sinister shape loomed up directly ahead. There was no time to avoid it.

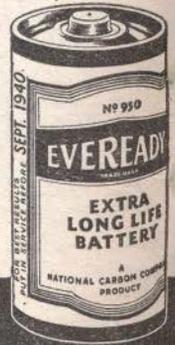
"I LEAPT as the boat crashed into the object—and found myself sitting on a crossbeam of a huge log boom that was being towed by a distant tug. My boat was gone. Shivering with cold, I shouted in vain—the tug was too far away for my voice to reach it.



"AFTER HOURS OF TORTURE, the night became stormy and the tug skipper shortened his line. Again I shouted—and this time a flashlight on the tug picked me out with its powerful beam. To the 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries in that flashlight I probably owe my life—and you can take it from me, I am an 'Eveready' convert now.

(Signed) *J. H. Williams*

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MYSTERY
MAGAZINE

Volume 23

July, 1940

Number 3

FIVE LONG NOVELETTES OF WEIRD MYSTERY

BEAUTY TREATMENTS FOR CORPSES.....Ralph Oppenheim 6

It seemed to Daniel Craig, known as the Bystander, that wherever he went, Death was just one step ahead of him—for Craig was following the trail of the mad master of rotting flesh and he knew it was only a question of time before he, too, would become eligible for a slab in the morgue!

THE DOCTOR SAYS—DIE!.....Wyatt Blassingame 28

Only lovely Nancy Ryan could supply Detective Joe Gee with a clue to the fantastic monarch of murder whose weird, half-human beasts were filling the shadowed streets of the city with mutilated bodies!

BODIES TO BURN.....Stewart Sterling 46

I found all that was left of old Mr. Efridge in a tub full of acid. The cops said Nona Larson did it, but I don't agree—so I stick my chin out, and pretty soon it looks as though Mona and I are due to get special attention from another old gent . . . the one with a scythe!

DEATH'S GRAY SISTERS.....Russell Gray 70

Had those two women some strange power denied to ordinary mortals? For inevitably and quickly, death came to those who saw them the third time! Already Niles Kent had seen them twice and lived. But now it was lovely Daphne who was marked as the next victim of the two she-devils, and cheerfully Niles went to face them for the third—and fatal—time!

ASYLUM FOR MURDER.....W. Wayne Robbins 88

If mad Ursula Van Wyck were innocent of those horrible butcheries, as Glenda, her young and beautiful sister, tried to persuade Jack Lambert, then Glenda, herself, was a bloody killer!

A SHORT STORY OF EERIE DOOM

SATAN'S BROILER.....Costa Carouso 65

How could Bill Bainton and Gunner Gray, alone and in the dead of night, hope to compete with that sinister and evil force which had sent fourteen strong men plunging to their death from the top of the huge funnel?

—AND—

VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE.....The Editor 4

Readers from afar.

THE RIVER STYX.....A Department 111

Murder is no coincidence. . . .

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

Variety Is the Spice of Life

EVERY now and then as we sit at our desk tapping out this column on our typewriter, we pause to consider some of the strange and far-away places that these words will eventually reach. We have received letters from readers from all over the world—from Alaska to the southernmost tip of South America, from the middle of China and the darkest part of Dark Africa. It all makes us feel strange and somehow slightly uncomfortable to think that the words which we utter in confidence to the typewriter have the strength to carry over such vast reaches to places we ourselves know practically nothing about. The immediate cause of these random thoughts is a letter we received this morning from a reader in Baghdad, the magical city of the Arabian Nights. It might have been written by a man who lived in the next block instead of many thousands of miles away. However we will yield the floor to Mr. James Ledyard of Baghdad.

Baghdad, Iran

Gentlemen:

I have just finished reading the last issue of Dime Mystery and I noticed that you printed a letter from a Mr. Peterson in which he says that the plots of your stories are entirely incredible. Well, all I've got to say is that Mr. Peterson certainly doesn't seem to get around much. The plots, to be sure, are mostly not concerned with ordinary people and events, but that's what makes them interesting to read. Anyone who has read a newspaper knows that there is very little anyone can think of that hasn't happened at some time. I, myself, during the many years I have spent working in the oil fields out here, I have seen many things far stranger and more incredible than many of the things you have printed.

I suppose that Mr. Peterson will object to the story, "Hideout for the Damned," which you printed in your May issue. If he does, you may refer him to me as I know for a fact that there is a similar "hideout" not many miles from here.

Well, that's enough for Mr. Peterson. But before I close, there are some other things I want to say. I have noticed lately that your policy seems to be veering from the straight mystery-terror stories you used to print. I think that is a good idea, but I

also think that possibly you may have gone too far in the other direction. I, myself, would like to read some of the old style stories every now and then. And why all of the heroes have to be private detectives? Wouldn't more variety in the heroes' professions and characters make for more interesting stories? I would like to read a story or two about an engineer like myself. I think our likes are just as interesting and exciting as many private detectives.

Sincerely yours,
James Ledyard

Thank you, Mr. Ledyard, for your letter. We, too, agree with you that the old saw, "Truth is stranger than fiction," still holds good. In fact your letter is particularly welcome at the present time, as it leads us on to something we want to say. We have just been looking over the contents page of this issue, and we think that we have an exceptional collection of stories, with the variety that we always strive for. Sometimes it is difficult to obtain just exactly the kind of stories we want, but we always try to keep similar stories out of the same issue. But as time goes on and writers become more and more familiar with our policy, it is easier for us to find the proper stories to fill an issue and keep the proper balance. Nothing is ever perfect of course, but we think in this issue we have come closer to the attainment of our ideal than at any time previously. We beg of you, readers, to let us know what you think of these stories. If they meet with your approval, we shall feel that we are really getting someplace, and if they do not, then we want to know what you would rather have. . . .

The Editor



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Learn About My Perfected RUPTURE INVENTION!

WHY worry and suffer any longer? Learn now about my perfected invention for all forms of reducible rupture. It has brought ease, comfort and happiness to thousands of men, women and children. You can imagine how happy many of these rupture sufferers were when they wrote to me that they had no further use for any kind of support. How would YOU like to be able to experience that same happiness? The only way to find out is to actually try this remarkable appliance. I guarantee it to fit properly and to hold comfortably . . . or it costs you nothing. Hurry—send coupon quick for Free Rupture Book, easy measuring chart, and PROOF of results.

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Surprisingly—continually—my perfected Automatic Air Cushion supports the weakened parts allowing Nature, the Great Healer, to swing into action! All the while you should experience the most heavenly comfort and security. No obnoxious springs, metal girdles or hard pads. No salves or plasters. My complete Appliance weighs but a few ounces, is durable, inconspicuous, sanitary and cheap in price. Wouldn't you like to say "goodbye" to rupture worries and "hello" to NEW freedom . . . NEW glory in living . . . NEW happiness with the help of Mother Nature and my perfected Air Cushion Appliance?

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If your doctor says you have reducible rupture, and advises a proper-fitting support, don't delay but get free details about the Brooks at once. It will be sent on trial to prove its merits. In trying it you risk no money—and if it doesn't "work"—if it fails to completely satisfy you or your doctor—you return it and the trial costs you nothing. Beware of imitations! The genuine Brooks is not sold in stores or through mail order houses. Stop Your Rupture Worries—send coupon now! All correspondence treated as strictly confidential.

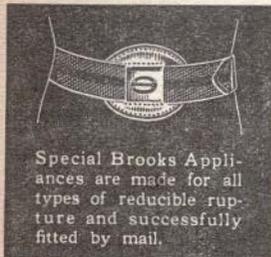
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(In our files at Marshall, Michigan, we have over 33,000 g ateeful letters which have come to us entirely unsolicited and without any sort of payment.)

"Doctor Says Cured"

"My son, Ivan, wore your Appliance until three years ago. The doctor pronounced him cured a year or two before that time. He is now on the Rice Institute track team of Houston, Texas, is a dash and relay man. He participated in track meets at Milwaukee and in the National A. A. U. at Buffalo this past June."—Mrs. Wm. H. Jones, Box 802, Hedley, Tex.

"Gymnasium Instructor at 54"

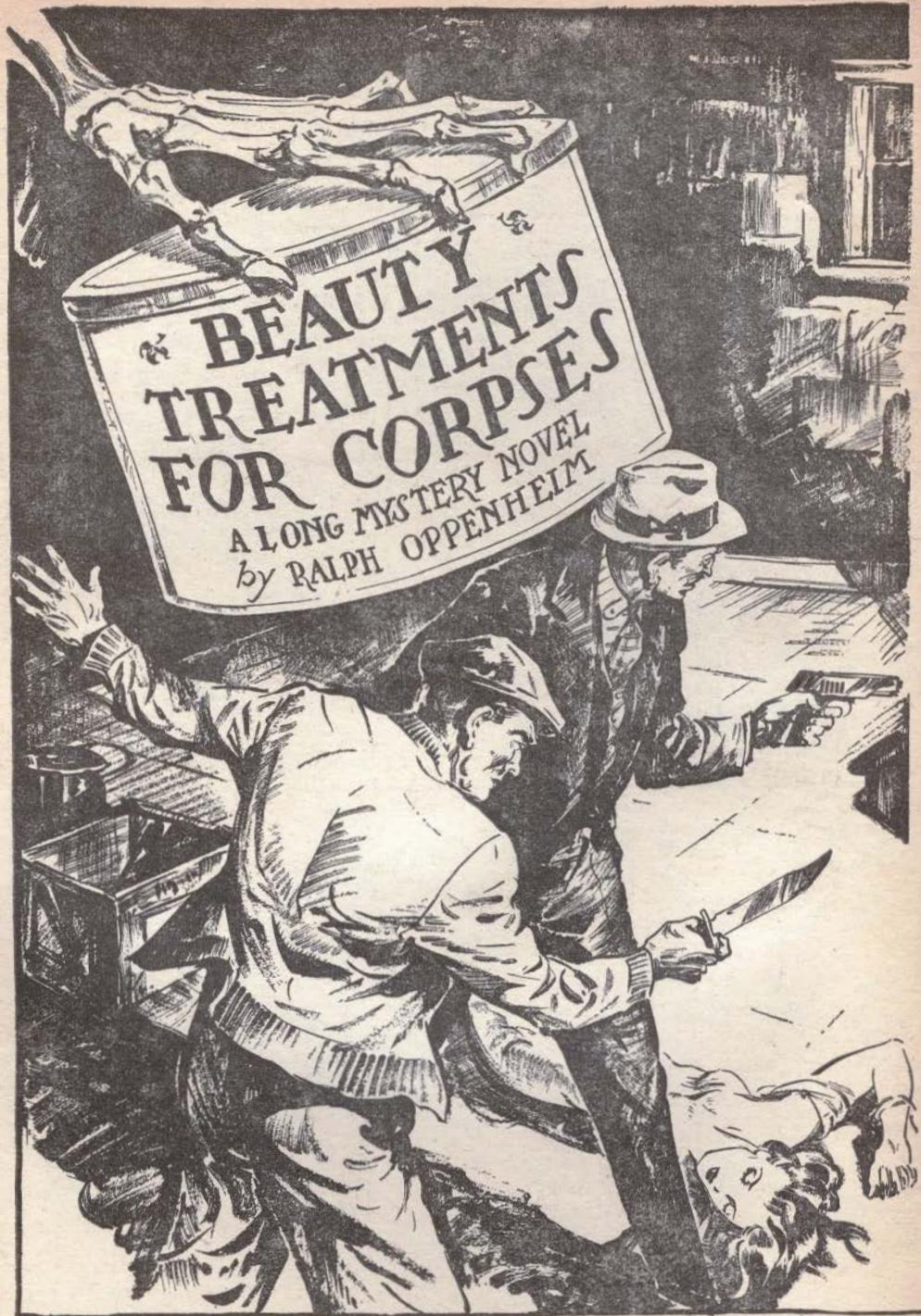
"My rupture is greatly reduced after wearing your Appliance for a year. I have taken up my old work as gymnasium instructor for Stanton Park Baptist Church, and in showing the boys all the stunts, I have felt no ill-effects. Remember—I am 54 years of age, and I think it is very unusual for a man of my age doing hand-balance, especially with a double rupture, that the Brooks Appliance held me in. The above statement is true and correct."—Wm. H. Robertson, 1829 17th St., Detroit, Mich.

"Appliance Discarded"

"I discarded your Appliance about three months ago, having no further need for it. By that I mean I am perfectly cured and have no discomfort whatever after lifting pianos, etc., at my work."—G. Swindells, Long Beach, Miss.

"Brooks Holds"

"I can't tell you how much I think of your truss, it sure has done me worlds of good, I have hard work mining and so much lifting, but the truss held me and I never was bothered a bit with my rupture."—Joe Thumerelle, R. R. 2, Peoria, Ill., c/o Big Bear Coal Co.



On four slabs in the morgue lay the girls who had fallen victim to the mad master of rotting flesh. But to Daniel Craig they marked only the beginning of a murder plague which was to bring him within the very jaws of hell!



With the strength of desperation, Craig sent the chair toppling over backward. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Flesh That Rots

THE NIGHT Daniel Craig saw the girl die, was dark and chill with a knife-like drizzle that turned the pavements of Narick Street, to black mirrors. Few people were about; but Craig, known as the *Bystander*, was roaming the streets as was his nightly wont. . . .

Chance brought Craig's steps to the lonely swathe Narick Street cut through

the slums, just as the girl came from the opposite direction. A street-lamp dimly revealed her fur-coated figure, her hatless head with the hair tumbled mist jeweled by rain-drops. She was staggering, tripping over high-heels which clicked and skittered on the wet pavement.

"She's drunk," thought the Bystander. Perhaps she'd come out of the bar whose window was a fogged square of light—but, no, Craig remembered seeing her ap-

pear further up the block, and now, as she passed the swing-doors of the bar, two lushes swaying in the doorway greeted her alcoholically: "Hi, sweetie! Come on in for a drink!"

The girl's faltering steps tried to quicken, and that was when prescience came to the Bystander. He no longer thought her drunk; nor did she fit into this neighborhood. That fur coat was mink.

As the two lushes staggered towards her, Craig's long-legged strides brought him quickly between them and the girl, and he said succinctly: "Lay off!" The drunks turned to Craig with alcoholic belligerence—and then in the light of the bar window they saw his hard, keen face, his agate eyes, under the brim of his hat. They retreated.

Daniel Craig caught up with the girl who had staggered right on. He spoke gently now: "If you're in trouble, perhaps I can help."

As his voice penetrated her daze, she turned to Craig a face white and haggard, yet of an almost classic beauty.

"Marvelous," she said. And then she died!

Craig's long arms had no chance to catch her, she fell so swiftly, collapsing like a rag-doll to the wet pavement where she lay still, her eyes glazing.

The Bystander bent over her, his face a cold mask the sight of death had put there before. There was an ugly welt on her scalp, where the tumbled blonde hair was dark and matted. That must have caused a concussion, bringing delayed death.

But as he pulled her fur-coat open, he could distinguish cruel marks on her white throat: finger-marks. Someone must have tried to choke her, too. . . .

Over his shoulder Craig heard the two drunks. "Ish she fainted?" the fat one wheezed. But the other one screamed, sheer revulsive horror driving all drunk-

eness from him: "Gawd! Look—*look at her!*"

Craig's own eyes had gone wide. The dead woman's dress, under the opened fur coat, was torn—as he'd examined the marked throat the bodice had slipped from one shoulder. And the flesh of that shoulder—flesh that should have been satiny white like the neck and face—*was blotched and livid, with decay!*

"She's rotting!" sobbed the grizzled drunk. "Rotting like she's been dead months, and she was walkin' a minute ago! She—"

"Shut up!" Craig grated. "Go and call the police!"

The authority in his voice and their own sobering terror sent both men scampering, the fat one wheezing: "Maybe it's some plague—contagious!"

If it was, Daniel Craig risked his own skin as he searched the dead woman for some sign of identification. He found none. Knowing the police would soon arrive to take command, the Bystander left the corpse with the rotted flesh, slipped off into the rainy murk. . . .

"**Y**ES, Mister," the lean-faced morgue attendant pocketed the ten-dollar-bill gratefully. "I'm glad for you none of these is your missing relative. Seen some messes here, but these—ugh!"

It was cold in the big white disinfectant-smelling room. Daniel Craig, who had invented the missing relative, still gazed grimly from one to another of the four marble slabs pulled like drawers from the huge ice-box of the city dead.

All four cadavers were women's; one the woman Craig had seen die two nights ago. The others had been found, before and since, in the city's south side 'dump'—a section cleared in boom times for developments the depression prevented; now a blight, garbage-littered.

The women had all been murdered. Strangulation had killed the three found

in the dump—finger-marks were on their throats. At first it was taken for granted all had been dead for weeks, because all were in stages of decomposition that would take weeks, even in abnormal conditions, to arrive! Nor did the police believe two drunks who had claimed to see the woman found on Narick Street actually alive, a moment before *she* was found rotting!

Yet other evidence—internal organs, blood, and more, indicated that the deaths had all been recent! And even in the cold storage of the morgue the awful deterioration of flesh had continued. Craig saw that now, just before the attendant covered the cadavers again. The bodies were entirely decomposed, the flesh falling away in rotted shreds; faces almost reduced to grinning skulls.

"You say two have been identified?" Craig asked.

"Yes, Mister." The attendant's lean finger indicated the second and third cadaver. "Families identified 'em—before their faces went. Well-to-do folks. That one was Mrs. Barclay, society matron, whose two sons swear she was missing only a day before we got her. Other one's a Miss Hamilton."

"Younger woman?"

"Not much. Around forty. Other two are between thirty and forty. They can tell from the teeth and other signs."

Craig's eyes returned to the now-covered corpse of the woman from Narick Street. She'd looked about twenty-two or three. For a woman of over thirty she'd certainly been well-preserved—an ironic thought!

"Police made any arrests yet?"

"Nope. First off they suspected the families, wills and all that. But now they see all the deaths are linked, and they're stymied—especially with this rotting business!"

Craig thanked him and went out into the gray morning—for the bad weather had clung to the city. The Bystander

drove his little coupe to the Franklyn Building, midtown, where by day he kept office hours. As he entered the building's chrome and onyx lobby, his glance was drawn involuntarily to two women, apparently arguing with one another.

Both were good looking, but though there seemed a resemblance between them, they were different types. One was tall, stately, her figure in a half-length leopard coat suggestive of voluptuous curves. The other—and it was on her that Craig's eyes lingered—was small, delicate, in a neat-tailored suit revealing a slim but perfect body. Under a modernistic hat, her hair fell to her shoulders like two sheets of shining copper leaf—unlike the garish red of her tall companion's hair.

The tall one was talking, gesturing, pulling nervously at her purse, while the smaller girl seemed to be pleading with her. Craig could not hear their words as he passed, but he caught the faintest aroma of perfume which seemed to emanate from the slim, delicate girl. As the closing elevator doors shut both of them from view, Craig's hard eyes went momentarily soft, misty with a memory the sight of a truly beautiful girl always brought back, with all its vivid pain.

HE COULD see himself, young Daniel Craig, then a humble clerk, walking proudly to the marriage-license bureau with the lovely girl who had consented to be his bride. They had been strolling past a bank when the hold-up gang had barged out with their loot, guns blazing a thoughtless swathe. Craig and his fiancée had been what the newspapers called "innocent bystanders." Craig had only been wounded, but the slug that hit the girl had ripped the life from her; she had died in Craig's arms.

Daniel Craig had left all vestige of humble, happy youth in the hospital; he'd come out like tempered steel. In a month he'd hunted down that bank-gang, and killed

the man whose thoughtless slugs had slain his fiancée. After that, giving up clerking, Craig had opened this office—into which he now strode—as a private detective. But rarely did a case come whose storm-signals he had not seen beforehand; for as the Bystander, no longer an innocent one, he roamed the streets looking for crime. . . .

At his desk, Craig thrust from his mind the memory the sight of the girl in the lobby had revived, gave his mind to the mystery of the premature rotting corpses. The police might be skeptical, but Craig had seen, with sober eyes, the death of the woman on Narick Street after she had said, strangely: "Marvelous." She must have gotten away from her killer or killers even though they'd smashed her skull after strangling her and—

The Bystander's conjectures were cut short by the opening of the door, and he looked up to see the tall, stately woman from the lobby! She was alone; her companion, to whom Craig had felt strangely drawn, was not with her now.

"Mr. Craig?" her voice was husky as she stood before him.

"I'm Craig, yes."

"I've heard you can be trusted." She put her purse on his desk, took off her hat and leopard coat and put them on a chair. Her tight blue dress had full, long sleeves. "I'm Helen Gifford — Mrs. Charles Gifford, that is." She moved red-lacquer-nailed hands nervously. "Perhaps you've heard of my husband."

"The lawyer?"

She nodded. "He—he mustn't know I came here, though. He wouldn't like it. But I had to come to someone, I just had to. . . ." Her voice had risen sharply, and looking at her burning eyes now Craig thought suddenly: she's almost insane with fear!

"Look!" she cried wildly. "Look!"

With a sudden, swift movement, she ripped at the sleeve of her dress, tearing

the fragile cloth almost up to her shoulder. For a moment, Craig stared at her in amazement—and then the amazement turned to revulsion and shock!

There on the creamy whiteness of her arm, a strip of livid gray extended from just below her shoulder down to her elbow. *A strip of rotting flesh!*

CHAPTER TWO

Murder Awaits You!

DANIEL CRAIG was on his feet, all previous conjectures scattering from his mind. "How did you get *that*?"

His harsh voice shocked her into a semblance of sanity, "Oh God!" she sobbed. "What am I going to do? It keeps on spreading, faster and faster!"

Craig had regained his own calm. Gently but firmly he guided her to a chair. "It's all right, Mrs. Gifford," he reassured her. "Suppose you tell me what you came here to tell."

"Yes." She spoke like an obedient, frightened child. "But I hardly know where to begin."

"Have you seen a doctor—?"

"No!" Her eyes were wide with dread again. "I haven't dared to tell a soul except my husband. . . he had to know of course," she added ashamedly. "But I've told no one else because I'm afraid. . . I'm afraid!" She was glancing nervously about the room.

The contagion of her terror caused Craig to stride to the door and turn the key in it. As he came back to his desk, he casually loosened the Colt .45 in his coat holster. "You needn't be afraid here," he said.

"I didn't even tell Janet—my sister—though she does know I came to you!" Mrs. Gifford went on. "I wouldn't tell her why. Good God," it was as if a new dread thought had struck her, "maybe *she's* in danger of—but even if she isn't,

knowing about me would spoil everything for her! She'd refuse to announce her engagement to Vincent Travers. . . ."

Craig, his reactions masked, knew of Vincent Travers—a wealthy socialite play-boy who, though he'd aged so he no longer played so hard, would be a 'catch' for any girl.

Mrs. Gifford now reached for her purse, opened it, took out a wad of bills that made Craig's eyes bulge. She slid them across his desk. "You—you must help me, Mr. Craig! So that I won't be afraid, so that I can go to a doctor!" She leaned over the desk, put all the appeal she could in her harassed eyes. "I know I can trust you, so I'll tell you everything I know about—"

She broke off with a gasp, and Craig almost jumped from his chair at the harsh jangle of the telephone. Cursing himself for his own jitteryness, the Bystander lifted the handset. "Craig speaking."

A harsh voice came through the receiver. "Craig, eh? Is Mrs. Gifford still there?"

"Who?" asked Craig, stalling.

"I said is my wife, Mrs. Gifford, still there? If she is, put her on the wire!" The harsh tones were a command, if not a threat. Covering the mouthpiece, Craig turned to the woman: "It's a man says he's your husband. Seems to know you came here."

Her face drained still more under its make-up. "But how—how can he know? Wait: I'd better speak to him." Craig passed the phone to her, saw it tremble in her hands. He could hear the harsh voice of the caller, but not the words—only the woman's half of the conversation: "Yes, Charles. . . . But how did you know? . . . What? . . . Then—then—but are you telling me the truth, Charles? Of course, I take your word, darling, but I—all right, dear. I'll do just as you say. Goodbye. . . ."

She hung up, and she was a different

woman as now she stood to face Craig. Dignity had returned to her. "I'm sorry, Mr. Craig. This has all been a ghastly mistake." She picked up her leopard coat, reached for her hat. "Can you be chivalrous enough to forget what I said?"

It was hard to say anything to that, and in the next moment Mrs. Gifford had unlocked the office door. She closed it behind her, and her heels clicked down the corridor.

THE Bystander sat, undecided. Then he saw the fat roll of bills—still on his desk! Had Helen Gifford forgotten them; or had she left them purposely? Her own husband had sealed her lips and yet . . . did she still inwardly want Craig's help?

He put the money in his wallet, grabbed hat and coat, and hurried out. He caught the next elevator down, and when he reached the main lobby he saw no sign of his visitor. He ran out to the street, but she was gone. His hard eyes narrowed. Whether she'd left the money purposely or not, the Bystander had felt himself involved in the case of the rotting corpses; and now he had seen a woman alive, yet with *her* flesh starting to rot, to decompose!

Ten minutes later, having consulted a directory, Daniel Craig was entering another modern office building not far from his own. He rode up to the eleventh floor, strode hurriedly to a frost-glass door marked: *Gifford and Waldron, Attorneys-at-Law*.

The door was unlocked, but the ornate, carpeted reception room was empty; a switchboard near the door deserted. On the right an open door bearing the name Mortimer Waldron, revealed an empty office. Diagonally across from it was a closed door, which said: Charles B. Gifford.

Craig, with a feeling that the whole place was empty, tried the door. It opened, and as he walked into a spacious office

whose dark-draped windows let in only the gray light of the dismal day, he saw a gray-haired man seated at a big mahogany desk, facing him as he came in.

The Bystander walked towards him. "I'm Daniel Craig, Mr. Gifford." He had recognized the lawyer. "I came here to find out just why you stopped your wife from giving me her case. . . ."

Even as he was speaking, Craig's own voice sounded strange to him, loud, and the utter silence that followed his words sent him forward to the desk with the hackles prickling his scalp. He saw Charles Gifford clearly then, saw Gifford's eyes staring at him sightless and glazed, saw blood drooling from a corner of the gaping mouth, blood oozing from the man's back, where the haft of a large knife protruded!

Then, perhaps due to Craig's own tread or some vibration in the building, the body toppled grotesquely sidewise, lolling over the chair. Craig touched it. It was still warm. Straightening, the Bystander tried to get his bearings. Gifford had silenced his wife, and then he had been killed! Why—?

Craig's nostrils twitched. He had noticed it vaguely when he first came in; now he was sure he detected, in this room of blood, the odor of a faint perfume. As he brooded on this, his attention was caught by a memorandum book on the desk; on it a notation scrawled in still-damp ink, evidently by Gifford: "*Tune in on radio station, 5:30 P.M. today.*" What—? His eyes jerked up sudden, tense, as once more prescience came to him. Had he imagined it, or had one of those window drapes moved? The Bystander, whirling in its direction, reached for his gun.

Before he got the weapon out, he heard movement—behind him! Only the sudden *swish* of air warned him to duck, and perhaps that saved his skull from being split like an egg-shell. As it was, the heavy

sap smashed through his soft hat, detonated on his head like a bass-drum. As his knees gave, as blackness was enveloping him, he had a hazed glimpse of two figures—one, a huge hulk of a man emerging from the draperies, the other wiry, smaller, carrying the vicious sap. Craig's brain tried to make his muscles use his gun, but the blackness blanketed him; there was a long moment before he came out of it.

When he did, struggling to his feet with his head throbbing, he was alone in the office with the slumped body of Gifford. Knowing the two men would have had plenty of time to get out of the building and safely away, Craig grimly picked up a telephone. He called police headquarters and asked for Inspector Rawlings, of Homicide.

"**B**BETTER come right over here, Inspector," he said, giving the address. "Charles B. Gifford, the lawyer, has been murdered. Two hoodlums must have just knifed him when I came in—" He described them as best he could.

"Gifford—murdered?" Rawlings was barking. "Say, who are *you*?"

"Just a bystander."

"Bystander!" Rawlings' voice held recognition. "So it's you again, Craig! What—?"

"I'm in a hurry," Craig snapped, deciding he must know much more before he could confide in the police, who sometimes resented his private crime-war. "Just wanted to tip you off, and tell you not to worry if I'm not here when you come." And he hung up on Rawlings' sputtering protests and questions.

The Gifford residence, Craig had learned previously from the directory, was in the fashionable North Side section. Craig sped there in his coupe. On his way from Gifford's office building he had made casual inquiries—but the elevator men had not remembered the two thugs who must

have been their passengers. Also, Craig had bought a paper and scanned the radio page. Seven local stations were slated for air-time at 5:30 p. m. None of the listed programs seemed to have even remote bearing on the case.

Now Craig was slowing the coupe before an expansive stucco house which even in the chill air held an opulent and shining look. He parked, glancing behind him down the block. The possibility that he might have been followed had made him take devious routes. Every instinct told him that danger would stalk him now. His head still throbbled; and next time he mightn't be so lucky!

A liveried butler opened the large oaken door at his ring, answered his inquiry politely. "Mrs. Gifford, sir? She isn't at home just now."

"What is it, Prout?" came a soft, musical voice—and once more Daniel Craig became aware, as he stepped into the foyer, of a faint perfume. He was looking again at the other girl from the lobby, the small, delicate girl with the glossy copper hair. She was dressed in jodhpurs now, a trim leather jacket around her slender waist.

"I'm Janet Russell—Mrs. Gifford's sister," she said. "Was she expecting you?"

"My name is Daniel Craig. Your sister hired me to do some investigating." After all he still had the money.

"Oh." A shadow seemed to darken the girl's lovely hazel eyes. "Well—won't you come in, Mr. Craig?"

The butler took his things, and Craig followed the girl, noticing her firm yet graceful carriage, the more feminine in jodhpurs. She led him into a vast, oak-paneled living room, and a man, also in riding habit, looked up with wearied interest from the highball he was stirring with a glass spoon. Craig knew from countless news photos that this was Vincent Travers, the playboy.

"Craig, eh?" the man repeated after

Janet's introduction. "The detective called the Bystander. . . ." His voice was languid. "Must be excitin'—wish I could find somethin' excitin'."

His hair was grayed, and a face once handsome was deep-lined with dark pockets under weary eyes. Craig thought of the many legends of how the playboy threw around the money left him by his father, the lumber king; how he'd started a whole number of careers, from medicine to art, but always ended up by playing again. Now evidently he'd decided to settle down, and vague unreasoning resentment stirred Craig as he remembered Mrs. Gifford saying the engagement of this jaded playboy and her slim lovely sister was soon to be announced.

PERHAPS that resentment gave added harshness to Craig's words: "I came here quickly because the police will be here soon. Charles Gifford has been murdered."

Janet Russell's hazel eyes were large pools before him: Travers slowly put down his high-ball glass with a large capable hand which could still swing a polo mallet. But Craig kept watching the girl; her surprise and shock seemed genuine, yet that faint perfume—

"I—I can't believe it," she whispered. "Who—"

"I think the killers were hirelings, thugs," Craig said.

"But why—Poor Helen!" The hazel eyes were filled now.

"Where is she—do you know?" Craig demanded.

Janet seemed to pull herself together, looked at the clock across the room. It showed a little past two. "She left here over half an hour ago—took the Mercedes. She said she was going downtown to do some shopping, stop at the beauty parlor, and then call for her husband. By now she should be at the beauty parlor."

Craig's eyes hid grim puzzlement. Ironic

for Mrs. Gifford to go to a beauty parlor—unless with some pitiful idea of having that disfigurement covered, hidden. “You say she came home first. Did she seem in good spirits?”

“Oh yes,” the girl replied. “I’d been so worried about her—she’d refused to tell me why she was going to you. But now she said she wasn’t worried any more; Charles would take care of everything. And now Charles. . . .” she steadied her voice. “I’ll go and meet her at the beauty parlor, Mr. Craig—I want to be with her when she learns. . . . I can phone you then, at your office.” She turned to Vincent Travers. “You’ll—you’ll have to excuse me from that ride.”

“Of course, darling,” came his languid drawl. He had risen, a big figure though a wasted one. “Want me to take you to the beauty parlor?”

“No, Vincent. I’ll take a cab—you must go for your ride as if nothing has happened.”

“Well, all right,” he said dubiously. He put one arm around her, drew her to him as she stood passive, kissed her cheek—and Craig wondered why such an innocuous kiss should disturb him so.

Excusing herself, Janet Russell went upstairs to change from her riding habit. The playboy turned to the Bystander: “Coming along, Craig?”

“I have a few questions I’d like to ask Miss Russell first.”

“I see. I’ll toddle off then. . . . Janet needn’t worry about the police; I’ll call headquarters and tell them not to turn this house into an inquisition.” The lines seemed to deepen on his face. “Bad enough, the way it’s been around here—”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t know, but something’s been going on—tension, secrets, intrigue. But I can’t see why anyone would want to kill poor Charlie Gifford—he’s not a criminal lawyer. Of course he had that quarrel with Waldron, his business partner—but

Waldron’s in Florida now, I hear.”
“What was the quarrel about?”

“Oh, some argument over a case—graft rearing its ugly head. Don’t know. I should be more upset, I suppose—but even murder doesn’t get a rise out of me.” For a moment he spoke with a frankness Craig could admire. “Truth is, I’m burned out—seen too much, played too hard. But,” he added with a sly, suggestive wink, “maybe a lovely young bride will fan back some of the old spark, eh?” And Craig disliked him again.

A few minutes after Travers took his departure, Janet Russell came downstairs, a sheered off fur-piece around a heather-skirted street dress, her slim legs showing now over suede, high-heeled shoes. Craig met her surprised look with: “My car’s outside. I’ll drive you to that beauty parlor, Miss Russell.” He had decided while waiting that he must get to Mrs. Gifford without delay. Now he felt a strange inner thrill when Janet Russell made no objections—and she had refused the more weakly-proffered company of her fiance.

They went out together, towards Craig’s parked coupe. And the Bystander could never understand what prompted his sixth sense then. Certainly there was no visible sign. There was the coupe, exactly as he had left it at the curb, and yet—

“Wait!” he ordered the girl, and leaving her in the middle of the sidewalk, he approached the coupe cautiously. He looked it over from rear to front. When he lifted the engine cowl, his eyes went to slits. A gas odor too-pungent had met his nose, and he saw the splash of gasoline in the engine pan, saw the disconnected ignition wire trailing in it . . . an old underworld trick!

Breathing hard, he quickly repaired the damage. He turned to the girl. “Maybe you’d better go in a cab after all.”

“But why?” Her appealing eyes were wide, bewildered.

He didn't want to tell her and thinking, lightning shouldn't try to strike twice in the same place—he helped her into the coupe, but his foot actually shook as he pressed the starter. Had he pressed it before looking into that engine, he and this lovely girl would have been blown to kingdom come—the spark from the disconnected wire would have set off that pan of gasoline! He drove fast, took several corners and turns. He must have been tailed before, as he'd feared, despite his precautions.

CHAPTER THREE

Death on the Air-Waves

CRAIG felt the girl's slim body nestled against his, breathed that fragrant perfume, as now he drove at her directions. He thought fearfully that Mrs. Gifford had said danger might menace her sister, too. . . .

"I've heard of you often, Mr. Craig." She was looking at the hard, uncompromising profile of his face as if trying to probe that mask. "Why do you call yourself the Bystander?"

"I like it, that's all." Having looked back to see that they weren't being followed, he framed the question he must ask. "I like that perfume you use, too—only maybe you'd better change to another now."

"Why?" she asked, but he caught the note of apprehension.

"The police have noses, and the odor might still linger in Charles Gifford's office."

He felt her body tense. Her voice came small: "You don't think that I—"

"You went to Gifford's office and told him his wife came to see me," he stated rather than asked. "You were the only one who knew that."

He felt her relax a little. "All right . . . that's true. I was worried about Helen.

But Charles was alive and healthy when I left."

"Was he alone? Where was the office staff?"

"He said he'd dismissed them for the day. He didn't say why—" Sudden passion came into her voice. "Did Helen tell you something nasty, Mr. Craig?"

Craig was silent, so she would continue in her anger.

"It's her silly imagination, of course!" came her next words. "Her thinking there was something between Charles and—and me. She had the idea she was getting too old for him—even though she doesn't show her age at all . . . and she's really not much older than me."

Craig, recalling what he'd learned in the city morgue, wished he could learn the ages of both, but held his tongue. . . .

"I thought when I became engaged to Vincent—Mr. Travers, Helen would get over her suspicions. But she began acting more strangely than ever. I thought she might be going to you with this imagined intrigue—that's why I went straight to Charles."

Craig negotiated another turn, then spoke quietly. "Funny her still being suspicious of you after you accepted Travers. Unless she didn't think you really loved him. . . ." There was more in the words than he'd intended.

Her chin set stubbornly. "Of course she knows I love the man I'm going to marry."

Craig changed the subject. "Know anything about Gifford's will? I suppose all his money goes to Mrs. Gifford?"

"Yes, what there is of it," the girl gave a rueful laugh. "He's made some unfortunate investments, Helen tells me—and he and Waldron haven't been doing so well. We had to sell one of the cars, and Charles had been scolding Helen for her extravagance—she used to be thrifty, but lately she ran through her entire savings."

Could she be as naive as she sounded?

From her own words, her marriage to a wealthy playboy would be most convenient—

But now she was pointing out a square, modern three-story building from which hung the sign: *Madame Sari's Beauty Salon*. Craig parked the coupe a few blocks away, lest they'd been followed—and he and Janet walked to the establishment. It was swank in every sense of the word. The reception room, where a few other men waited, was done in gleaming modernistic style.

A pretty brunette secretary looked up at Janet's inquiry: "Mrs. Gifford hasn't shown up yet. She did have an appointment for two, and it's almost three now."

"She's always punctual," Janet insisted. "Perhaps you just didn't see her come in. . . ."

"Madame Sari will know for sure; she'll be down presently." The girl spoke into an intercommunicating phone.

CRAIG and Janet waited. Presently a black door opened, and from an oval aperture came sounds of vibrators, odors of perfume—and through it walked a tall woman, exotic even in a white smock. She had raven black hair, coifed like a tight helmet around a perfect-moulded head. Her face was fine-chiseled, with a slight suggestion of the oriental in its cast. Madame Sari, thought the Bystander, was a good ad for her establishment.

"Miss Russell, what's this about your sister?" A faint foreign accent threaded the low, musical voice. "She has not yet come."

"She wouldn't miss an appointment; she must have been delayed," Janet said, turning to Craig. "I'll wait here—she's sure to show up." She felt the glossy copper hair under her hat. "I could use a fingerwave," she told Madame Sari, "and perhaps a facial."

"You may have to wait, but I think it can be arranged before closing time—we

close for the day, at five you know."

But Daniel Craig did not tarry here, for another hunch had prodded him. Telling Janet Russell he'd either come back for her or get in touch with her at her home, he left the swank, crowded premises, hastened back to his coupe which he found intact this time.

It had started to rain again. Craig set the windshield wipers going as he drove—southward.

The odor of it came to him when he was still blocks away; the odor of fetid garbage and decay—an odor that fitted well with his grim thoughts. He turned a corner, and again parked in an unobtrusive spot. A short walk—and the city's blight, the 'dump', spread out before him in the rainy grayness; acres of ripped-up dirt, spewed with garbage, wrecked jalopies, tin cans. . . .

The Bystander climbed over a rickety fence, and descended a steep incline, his feet slogging in mud. Then he commenced a grim reconnoiter. Soon the hat on his head, still wrinkled over the egg left by the thug's sap, was soggy and dripping; his coat was soaked through. A squeaking furry shape slithered past his mud-covered shoes; a swamp-rat. He came across some stray cats too, eating of fetid garbage.

When, after a long fruitless search, he saw the beat-cop, hooded and raincoated, walking out of the opposite end of the dump, he felt his hunch must have been wrong—and some fleeting hope returned. The cop had doubtless looked to see if any more bodies were here; he was leaving, disappearing in the rain.

Craig flicked up a wrist-watch. It was past five! The beauty parlor would have closed; Janet must have gone home. Perhaps Mrs. Gifford had shown up after all, and both would be home. Craig started for the incline to climb out of the dump—

Abruptly he halted, as the normal city sound of a purring motor on the street

above changed to a bedlam of groaning springs and screeching joints! He saw it then—a car, plunging down the embankment of the dump! A long, sleek Mercedes! Running forward, Craig watched it hurtling past—glimpsed a woman at its wheel. But her figure was jouncing limply with the vehicle's lurching descent. *A dead woman was the occupant of that car!* Another instant and there was a rending crash as the Mercedes struck a hillock of mud and rocks—came to a stop.

Craig whirled, started running there.

Two shots rang out in the deepening gloom, blurring almost into one detonation. A slug whined past his face. The Bystander crouched, dragging out his own Colt and thumbing back the catch. He waited until he saw a flame-stab in the murk, from behind refuse on the incline. He fired at it. A second flame-stab tongued from another pile of refuse, and again Craig fired. This time the roar of his Colt was followed by a cry of pain. . . . A man's figure came into blurred view, fleeing up the incline, clutching a wounded shoulder. Craig was sure he was the wiry thug who had sapped him in Gifford's office. He would have hurled after him, but the second gun still blazed in his direction until, as Craig kept ducking, firing—he saw the second man in retreat. The big hulking one!

Both had vanished when Craig reached the top of the incline—doubtless they were mingling with city crowds so near by. Nor, with the beat cop gone, had the shots in this dismal dump been heard. . . .

CRAIG swore grimly, and made his way back to the wrecked Mercedes. He got a door open, and looked in by the gray twilight.

Helen Gifford's body had ironically escaped any further damage from the crash itself—it lolled there in the seat. But the leopard coat was askew, and over the low-necked blue dress the shapely neck showed

the cruel, ugly fingermarks of the strangler of women!

Lines of defeat etched Craig's face. Yet he knew Helen Gifford must have been dead some time—the thugs had probably driven her car here with her corpse in it, sent it plunging down . . . and somehow he couldn't associate the strangle-marks with them; the gun or knife would be their way, as with Gifford. . . . Sudden remembrance made the Bystander glance hurriedly at his watch. It was five thirty-one! Gifford's memo: tune in radio, 5:30. . . . And here Craig was, stranded in this dismal dump—

Then he saw the radio in the Mercedes. Though instruments on the panel had been broken, the set seemed intact. Craig tried the switch, and the set came to life. He had no idea what station to listen for, nor whether he'd even know if he got the station Gifford meant. . . .

From the car with its gruesome, rotted corpse, came gay jazz, giving way to an advertisement for breakfast cereal, then to a foreign news broadcast, a piano concerto, and an unctuous voice announcing that this was Your Personality half-hour. . . . Craig started to turn the dial again when the same unctuous voice said: "*And as our very special guest, may we present Madame Sari, well-known beautician, who will talk to our women listeners on the secrets of beauty she learned in her native Tibet.*"

Craig's hand froze on the tuned-in dial, as the faint-accented voice of Madame Sari came liquidly through the set of the wrecked car:

"Ladies, it is true I am Tibetan, but I am of the Western type—that is why you will want to know how you too can remain, like me, everlastingly young. To those of you who view with misgivings the coming wrinkles of age, my message will bring new hope, new life. For I can help restore you to youth—to glorious, irresistible beauty. Come to my salon, and

ask for my personal treatment—administered only by me. Not for sale in any store is the beauty cream I use—the cream compounded of secret ingredients of Tibet—the cream which I have called, so appropriately, by the name: *Marvelous*.”

Something colder than the presence of death seeped into Daniel Craig's being. It was as if the exotic voice from the radio had blended with a voice in his memory, a voice uttering with dying breath on Narick Street that single word, “*Marvelous*.” Now Madame Sari's persuasive words continued . . . words poor Helen Gifford, her glorious flesh rotting, could not hear. But had she heard them before? Baffling though the mystery still was, a vague light was dawning on the Bystander. Had Janet taken the ‘*Marvelous*’ cure—Janet whom he'd innocently left at that beauty parlor—?

He was stunned to find himself feeling panic over a girl he hardly knew, who was engaged—yet who had reminded him of that other girl in the past. He must think clearly now. Janet had left the beauty parlor long ago; it was closed; its proprietress was talking from Station WXRU, would be talking for some time yet. . . .

Daniel Craig snapped off the seductive voice. He turned away from the wrecked Mercedes, leaving Helen Gifford's awful decomposing body to the deepening rainy gloom; nothing could be done for her now. Craig climbed out of the dump and hurried to his coupe.

MINUTES later he parked around the corner from the towering skyscraper whose antenna-topped roof held the studios of station WXRU. Though he had no radio in his car, he felt the program must still be on. He strode to the street opposite the building entrance. In a small cigar store he found a phone-booth from which he could still command a view of that entrance. He called the Gifford residence—spoke impatiently to the butler,

and somehow felt a surge of relief when Janet Russell's musical voice slid into the receiver.

“Mr. Craig? My sister didn't show up. . . . I haven't heard—”

He broke in, harshly. “Listen, Janet—Miss Russell! Did Madame Sari use ‘*Marvelous*’ cream on you—did you ever use it?”

“You mean her special treatment?” the girl asked in surprise. “I think that's just publicity—probably the same routine treatment used for young and old, only she's given it this new name.”

“But did she use it—?”

“I never notice what she uses. I had a facial today. . . .”

He tried to quell the panic in him. The doomed woman on Narick Street had known the name well enough!

“Listen, Miss—Janet. I think it's safest for you to remain at home until I see you. Is someone there with you now?”

“I expect Mr. Travers. But the servants are here. . . .”

“You can trust them?”

“Of course. Prout's been here for years, and so have the cook and maid. Why—?”

“You stay home. If I don't call you back in about an hour.” He looked at his watch. “Say around seven, you must do something for me. . . .” That fur-swathed figure coming from the studio building now, was it—? He speeded his words. “If you don't hear, call the police, ask for Inspector Rawlings. . . .”

“That's the detective who was here when I got home—asking questions! He left some time ago.”

“Tell him,” Craig hurriedly finished, “to raid Madame Sari's beauty parlor. And to be careful what they handle—to take chemical experts and make a thorough search. But only if I don't call. . . .”

“I'll do it, but I can't understand. My sister—?”

He couldn't have got himself to tell her now, even if he'd had more time. “You

must trust me," he said grimly, and hung up, still feeling that panic, thinking of her slim beauty. . . .

Telling himself he was shooting in the dark, he strode from the cigar store—his eyes still on the fur-swathed figure he had spotted from the booth. She was walking slowly down the block. He crossed the street, diagonally, first ascertaining that no one suspicious-looking was about. When he reached the woman's side, he saw she was Madame Sari.

"May I offer you my car?" Craig said softly.

In the rainy gloom she saw at first only his straight bearing, and she raised her exotic face archly, as if this were nothing new to her. "Thank you, but just now I prefer walking . . . alone."

Thought that she might have friends nearby prodded Craig to haste. "I have a gun in my pocket," he said in the same soft tone. "I'm the Bystander, if that means anything to you. Coming my way?"

She didn't even flinch, and he had to admire her nerve as she said coolly: "If you insist."

CHAPTER FOUR

Haunt of the Strangler

SHE stayed at his side, and he guided her round the corner. A traffic cop shaking rain from his coat saw them both,

but the woman did not try to get his aid. They reached the coupe.

"Can you drive?" Craig asked.

"And if I say no. . . ?"

"Then I'll have to knock you out or tie you up. I like to keep both hands on the wheel."

She slid into the driver's seat. "I hold a license," she said. Getting in beside her, Craig put the gun across his lap. He was wary.

This exotic, cool woman was, his instincts told him, as safe as a coiled cobra.

"Where to, Mr. Bystander?" the woman asked casually.

"Your beauty salon."

"It's closed now—everyone gone home."

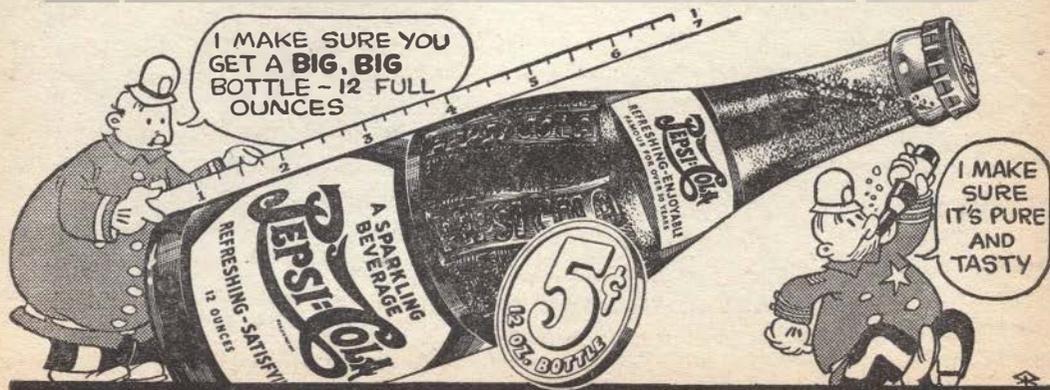
"Then we'll have privacy."

She didn't try any tricks on the way, and she only spoke once: "Isn't there a law against kidnapping?"

"Yes, but this state doesn't burn you for it—like they do for murder." She became silent.

He made her park a block away, still playing safe with his known coupe. Presently she fitted a key into the locked door of the dark beauty parlor, and inside he kept his gun on her as she pressed light buttons.

They had come into the reception room, and it was stuffy with the windows closed. Craig watched her take off her coat. Beneath it she was wearing an evening gown, despite the early hour—a strapless vivid



red gown; her shoulders, white as any western woman's, tapered gloriously from her slender columnar neck, and the startling whiteness of her face contrasted sharply with her coal-black eyes and hair.

Then Craig noticed she still clung to her hand-bag. He took it from her, opened it, and removed a dangerous little pearl-handled .22 revolver, fully loaded. He pocketed it.

"Let's see a jar of *Marvelous*," he said.

The smile which had been on her face remained fixed. "But certainly. You speak like a drug or food inspector. An advertised product like *Marvelous* is open for inspection any time."

"Guess I'll have to find the *right* jar myself," Craig said, wishing he were as confident as he made his voice. "Lead the way: We go through the premises. And if anything happens to me—at least I'll have a lovely companion to go to hell with."

"You're flattering, Mr. Bystander." She conducted him through the first floor, turning on indirect lights on the way. Wave-instruments, coils, reducing apparatus made a ghostly, sur-realist array in the deserted place. The second floor, to which they ascended in a self-operating elevator, was completely a gymnasium. The third and top floor held a door saying: *Madame Sari's Private Treatments*.

They entered a reception room here. On a table were a display of hexagonal opaque white jars, with embossed labels saying: *Marvelous*.

"Those are for drug inspectors, eh?" Craig said. "Where are the *others*?"

She denied there were others, so he had to search the room and then the only other room on the floor—a white room with a massage-table, sun-lamps, cabinets. It was not until he came to one paneled locked door that he saw the woman flinch almost imperceptibly.

"Open it," he commanded, waving the gun at her.

"It only contains smocks," came her faint-accented voice.

"I'll look at smocks then. Open it; or shall I smash it?"

She stood between him and the door, her voice icy:

"Before you make yourself ridiculous, let me ask you, do you believe that I, Madame Sari, known to the beauty public for years, would jeopardize my reputation by anything illegal—as you seem to suspect I do. You see my place; I am a rich woman: hundreds come here for treatments. Now why do you not go, and I promise to forget your foolhardiness."

The Bystander hesitated. She sounded convincing, this woman who ran a swank parlor, advertised on the radio; and yet—"Open that closet!" he repeated.

SHE sighed, fetched a key from a drawer, and opened it. There was a smock, but it was rubber; with it were rubber gloves, a rubber mask. The rest of the space was filled with jars of *Marvelous*.

Craig, feeling a strange chill seeping through him, took out a jar with one hand, kept his gun on her with the other. "Now open *this*."

Either she still had nerve or she had nothing to fear; she put the jar on the table, unscrewed the cap and laid it aside. Craig looked at a cream like cold-cream, but giving forth an exotic, heady scent. "Satisfied?" came her voice, faintly mocking now.

"Scoop out a handful of the stuff."

"Uncovered hands carry germs. I shall get my rubber gloves."

"No you won't. I'll pay for the cream. Scoop it out."

A stubborn look came over her exotic face.

"I shall not do it," she said coolly. Craig's eyes slitted; his free hand reached and caught her shapely right hand like a vise. She began to struggle. He pushed

her fingers towards the cream with slow relentless strength. Closer, an inch away, half an inch—

She broke then. "Stop!" she cried suddenly, shrilly, her exotic accent gone. "Stop, you fool—you damn meddling fool!"

Craig gave a harsh, mirthless laugh. "So I was right!" He pushed her brutally to the wall, and she stood panting. "Your reputation, eh? Why you—"

"Wait," she cried. "You're wrong, whatever you think! Listen to me—!"

"Where's your Tibetan accent now?"

"Oh, I'm not trying to fool you—you're too clever. I never saw Tibet, I'm not married and my name isn't Madame Sari! But you've got to give me a break—this thing's bigger than I am. Please. . . ." She flung herself impulsively at him, her arms coiling around his neck.

He pushed her away and when she saw the set of his face she screamed shrilly. He still had the gun, but at the moment it wasn't trained on her. . . . With a move swift as a tigress' she snatched that open cream jar and—Craig ducked sidewise as the jar, spewing cream, came through the air, missed him by inches. It shattered against the wall, leaving a great white blob of dripping cream and broken glass.

Craig, his nerves grating as if they'd been filed, grabbed her arm, twisted it until she moaned. "You hell-cat!" he rapped. "Try anything like that again and I'll break your neck!" He got a grip on her, menacing her with the gun in his other hand. He managed to see his wrist-watch: it was ten after seven. Perhaps Janet had already called the police.

Again the panic was in him, as now he was sure of his surmise about this cream. He must get to her again. And just to play safe, he'd call the police himself. There was a telephone in the next room. He forced 'Madame Sari' in there. He dialed police headquarters, asked for Inspector Rawlings.

"No," the woman moaned now, pleading again. "Don't have me arrested—please—" He still held her arm tightly, taking no chances.

"Hello," came Rawlings' voice.

"You probably got a call on this already," Craig said. "But about those rotting corpses, there's a beauty parlor—"

He'd got only that far when he saw a sudden light as of surprised triumph come into the woman's eyes. And two things happened at once. A huge paw-like hand snatched the phone from him—from its very wires in fact. And into the small of Craig's back jabbed something hard and cold!

"Reach, Mister Craig! Reach, you dirty—"

THERE was murder in that voice, and the Bystander reached. In front of him now, as the woman had stepped aside, stood the hulking thug from Gifford's office and the dump—huge in a leather jacket and a cap, with a simean, flat-nosed face. He was holding the ripped-out phone, saying easily: "Don't get noivous, Blackie."

Behind Craig the man jabbing the blue-steel automatic into the Bystander's back—a smaller, wiry man with hate writhing his face, rasped: "I could give it to him right now, way I feel. I could pay him right now. . . ." His left shoulder, Craig saw in a brief backward glance, showed the bulge of bandages; the wound, though not serious, probably hurt.

'Madame Sari'—still looking strangely surprised, a little frightened, said: "Get him out of here!" She moved into the room of the real Marvelous, evidently to clean up the mess. The big simean-faced thug frisked Craig, took his .45. And Craig thought: Janet surely must have called the police by now—her call, and Craig's own broken off message before he could say anything vital, should bring the coppers in a rush. . . . any moment, any

second. His only real suspense was about Janet's—flesh. He still didn't know. . . .

"Come on, Mr. Bystander," the big simean man said. "We're goin' places . . . and you better behave. You can see Blackie's sore."

The gun twisted, dug painfully into Craig's spine as if in corroboration. His face a mask, Craig went with them. He was curious. He was thinking of what 'Madame Sari' had said about this being bigger than herself . . . besides the police must come here soon. Janet wouldn't have failed him. He'd go with these thugs instead of trying to make a fight of it here; he'd see where they meant to take him. . . .

They took him down in the automatic elevator to the street. Rain met him again, and night gloom, as they emerged at a side-entrance. A dark sedan was parked there. They shoved him into the rear, made him squat on the floor, and the small, wounded thug sat over him, his good arm keeping the gun trained unwaveringly. . . .

The simean hulk drove. Craig could not see where they were going. Once he tried to lift his head to look. The gunman kicked his head viciously, and Craig ducked back to the floorboards, his eyes burning slits. If he weren't so curious, he'd—

Minutes, and then the car slowed, turned. Gravel crunched under its tires; it stopped. "Out, shamus!" snarled Blackie, and Craig crawled out—the simean man joining them on the graveled private roadway. In the gloom beside the road reared a house whose Gothic magnitude looked vaguely familiar, though Craig knew he'd never been in it. Windows were dark. But Craig's two captors marched him to a side door leading down steps to a cellar; they passed through a dim-lit furnace room, into another chamber, bare-walled and bright-lit. Craig was ready now. If this was where they meant to finish him they'd get a fight first, and—

He could feel his blood slowly con-

geal, feel his skin literally shrink. For now as his eyes had stopped blinking in the light, they had focussed on the one ornate piece of furniture in the room—a huge plush couch of maroon velvet, bedecked with cushions. On it, the bound figure of a girl writhed faintly. She was making moaning sounds. She was Janet Russell. . . .

The Bystander lost his head at that moment. He forgot the move he had planned—whirled crazily towards the wiry man with the gun, his hand snatching at that automatic with the strength of frenzy. He almost got it, even as the big hulking man barged towards him—

And a languid, weary voice said: "Stop it, Craig. No use."

SURPRISE rather than the sense of new menace, did stop Craig's muscles—and then a sledge-hammer blow from the simean-faced man caught the side of his jaw, rocked his head on its neck. When he really came out of it, he was bound hand and foot to a straight-backed chair, facing that couch, and the dazed girl.

The small, wiry gunman, the homicide light again in his eyes, stood close with his automatic. The bigger thug was running a calloused thumb along the blade of a glittering knife—a knife such as had been plunged into Charles B. Gifford.

But Craig's eyes were on the third man coming across the floor. At the sound of that man's voice, the Bystander had felt a sense of utter defeat, yet at the same time one fleeting hope. The hope was for Janet's flesh! When he'd first seen her, his instant thought was that she was doomed like the others whose flesh . . . but now that still might not be true. What was true, he was sure, was that Janet had never had a chance to call the police, and that with his own call stopped at its vital point, there would probably be no raid on that beauty parlor; the police would remain ignorant. . . .

"Really, Craig," drawled the man who had brought these conclusions home, "you must bear a charmed life, and until I see your demise with these tired eyes. . . ."

Somehow he looked different now. Still the jaded, deep-lined face, the graying hair, as he stood in an ornate silk dressing gown, pocketing an automatic. But in the eyes a strange, avid glint, as of dead fires horribly rekindled.

Craig found his voice; they hadn't gaged him, and he knew this cellar room must be sound-proof. "I didn't figure you in this, Travers—though perhaps with more time, I would have. There were a few clues. . . . You wouldn't have had me brought to you if you didn't think I'd guess the truth, would you? Well, I guessed most everything else; but, after all, Janet's your fiancee. . . ."

Vincent Travers' smile was tired, like his face. "Please don't misunderstand my sentiments, Craig; in my way I love Janet." A dazed moan from the couch showed that the girl heard even though she was too stunned to speak. "But, as I told you, I'm burned out. When it was a choice between letting her convey your message to the gendarmes . . . but don't blame yourself for her plight. In time, she too would have guessed. . . ." Then he lifted his two hands, those two strong polo-playing hands and looked at them.

"I'm afraid that sooner or later, Janet would have had to die anyway. . . . I wonder, Craig, how much you know?"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Devil in His Den

ANYTHING to delay him, Craig thought—until he himself could regain some strength, try despite his bonds. . . . His eyes were on the moaning figure of Janet.

"I can guess most of it," the Bystander said, while the glaring Blackie kept the

gun on him, and the simean-faced man stolidly kept toying with that evil knife. "You're the real brains behind this rejuvenating racket of Madame Sari's—or whatever her name is. Though why a play-boy who always hated work should go in for—"

"It would be a shame, really, to let you die with that one trivial piece missing from your brilliant solution of the case. So before I let Monk use his handy knife on you—you see, man-killing doesn't appeal to my finer instincts—I'll help you complete your case. The answer to that one moot point is really mundane and obvious—money. You see, in time even a few millions can disappear, if you let them run through your fingers like sand. The thought of poverty appals me, Craig, even more than the thought of work. Sarah Porter—you might as well know her name—owed me a sort of debt ever since, in an impulsive moment, I'd taken her out of the south side where she was just a little tart, and set her up in the beauty business. I decided now to become her silent partner. She told me that if she had a rejuvenation cream that would really work, there would be a million in it. . . ."

"In my sporadic interludes, I've puttered with medicine and science. I'm really quite brilliant, Craig. I turned part of this basement into a laboratory. I studied and worked, and gave Sarah cream after cream; she tried them, and to our mutual surprise, one of them actually worked! Applications of it restored youthful lustre to matronly skins . . . and we went to town, Craig. We advertised, used radio, made up our Tibetanian hokum—Sarah had already started that when she made-up herself to look vaguely oriental. I spent what was left of my waning fortune developing a clientele whom dear Sarah soaked heavily. And then. . . ." He sighed, wearily.

"Then," said Craig, "you found out this cream of yours rotted the flesh it restored."

"You put it picturesquely, Craig. Sounds almost like retribution, what?—as if the flesh must pay the piper. Yes, it's true. A certain bacteria in the cream—I shall not bore you with scientific detail—virtually fed on the flesh after a number of applications, and the decay spread with hopeless, irreparable rapidity. Of course Sarah was in a panic—not that she felt the cream had endangered her person: from the start she'd used rubber gloves, knowing the dangerous substances any cream might contain; and she had not let her honest staff use the stuff. . . . But she too had always been honest at heart. Now . . . well, I had to point out to her that we were already in this thing up to our neck, we had spent a fortune—we were in a position to clean up. . . ."

"So," said Craig, "you decided to kill the women when they started to rot, and go right on using the cream. Now that I think of it, it all fits you, Travers. Like any 'work' you've done, you bungled this from the start. You bungled on the cream; you bungled on your cover-up kills. The dump was a good idea—putting corpses there so that when they were found rotting it would seem natural. Only you didn't hide them so they were found after a reasonable length of time. And one victim you even let get away. . . ."

"So you know that, too—really, Craig, you're uncanny the way you get around. The woman in question—I made the mistake of trying to kill her on a lonely street where my men here waylaid her." He nodded at the two waiting thugs, who were beginning to shift impatiently. "Incidentally, both these boys are old friends of mine. They have co-operated handsomely. . . . Yes, we did bungle on that one woman. The others were all brought here where I could make sure of them. Meanwhile, there was Mrs. Gifford—promoting that match between me and her sister." Again Janet moaned on the couch, but Travers went on languidly. "The Giffords

thought I had money: I thought *they* had it—our motives were the same, and so was our error. And all the time, Mrs. Gifford, worried about keeping her husband's love, was taking Sarah's little rejuvenation treatment. . . ."

"You bungled on her, too. She came to me when she discovered that rotting flesh."

"**Y**ES, but her husband, when she told him about it, suspected its source—came unwittingly to our aid. As a lawyer, he saw the legal stink he could raise about it all. He dismissed his staff, called Sarah, and told her what he meant to do."

"And she managed to stall him off with her clever spiel," Craig's head, the only part of him he could move, nodded. "Told him that a big reputable firm like hers could naturally not be running risks. . . ."

"Precisely. Before she was through he was practically convinced that the blight on his wife was not serious . . . just an allergic reaction—for he hadn't been brainy enough to associate it with the bodies found in the dump, owing to the insistence of the police that they must have rotted naturally. His legalistic mind swallowed the bait, especially when Sarah told him that this very day she was going to advertise her cream openly on the radio—would she do that if it was dishonest? Of course, having started to publicize the cream we couldn't suddenly stop—that *would* have been suspicious. Gifford was temporarily stalled, and Monk here, with his knife, made it—ah, permanent. Mrs. Gifford was captured in her car when she next left her home . . . she was a prisoner here when you arrived at the Gifford house, Craig—and I came here and made sure she'd do no more talking. . . ." Janet's torn-clothed figure writhed in revulsion on that couch. . . . "Meanwhile, there was you, Craig. Your ubiquity was getting alarming—my men had reported that you turned up at Gifford's office—we

didn't know how much you knew, and so—"

"You fixed my coupe when you left the Gifford home. That's one clue I should have seen pointed to you—for I'd taken pains not to be followed by anyone. You didn't know, of course, that Janet was going to accompany me in the coupe—that was decided after you'd left. Not that it would have mattered—"

"Ah, but it would. I didn't want to hurt Janet until at seven I found her phoning the police. I told her you were outside—in person. She must be rather fond of you—for believing it was your say-so, she voluntarily stopped her call, and the servants were none the wiser. . . . By then, Monk and Blackie had seen you at the dump, tried once more to eliminate you—and I realized you'd probably head for the beauty parlor, so I sent them there. Now," he finished wearily, "I think we'll attend to you—first. You're dangerous alive, Craig. And—"

Blackie spoke for the first time. "Let me plug him, Mister Travers!"

"There's no use making unnecessary noise, Blackie," drawled Travers. "I think we'll let Monk attend to Mr. Craig."

Craig was just beginning to test his muscles against the bonds. With his death and Janet's, Travers could safely go on with his hideous game, using the cream, killing off the clients! . . . Craig was still unable to move when Monk, at a weary nod from Travers, took a step forward, gripping the haft of the knife now. The long blade gleamed. Monk's left paw brutally pushed Craig's head back. . . .

There came the sound of sudden rapid steps, descending the stairs. Monk stopped, whirling apprehensively with the rest. Into the cellar came the breathless but beautiful figure of Madame Sari—or Sarah Porter. Craig, who had felt some unreasoning hope at the interruption, felt frustration again at the sight of Travers' partner in crime.

"Vince!" the dark-haired woman cried. She was panting; and she wore neither hat nor coat—but stood in that strapless red gown. "Vince, something terrible has—" She stopped as she saw the slim bound figure on the couch. "Why that's the Russell girl! Why have you got *her*? We didn't use the cream on her!"

A flood of half-relief surged through Craig. Not *her* flesh then, not—

SARAH PORTER spoke again, without waiting for answer. "The police, Vince. They raided the parlor! I just slipped out in time—no, don't worry; no one followed me. I was careful . . . but they're in that place; they'll find the cream."

Craig laughed aloud then. "You get that, Travers? More bungling. You must have let Janet say something when she called the police—what did she say?"

"I said," suddenly Janet's voice came now, alive with game hope, "I said 'You must make a raid, but be careful what you touch.' I started to give the name of Madame Sari when Vincent—"

"And I mentioned a beauty parlor, rotting corpses when I phoned the police," Craig said. "From the two calls, Rawlings must have been smart enough to figure where to go. Your game is finished."

Travers was silent. But Sarah spoke wildly. "Vince, what about *me*? They'll be after me—that's why I came to the one place they'll never think of looking. You're covered, you've kept your name out of this—but you've got to get me safely away, Vince . . . Vince!"

"Don't try anything rash, Sarah," drawled Vincent Travers. "Blackie could shoot you first." He was looking at her shapely body, which terror and panic seemed to make the more appealing. "Do you think, dear, you'd enjoy being a fugitive, especially when your gorgeous beauty . . . I thought I'd noticed it earlier today; now it's quite distinctive. Your hands, I mean—the backs of them. . . ."

Sarah Porter jerked up her tapering white hands whose softness Craig himself had felt. She looked at them. She kept looking at them as her face turned to the color of dead ashes.

"Oh God, you devil! You said rubber gloves would prevent—but somehow it got through the gloves! And I was afraid to touch it only once when Craig tried to make me—as if that would have hurt! You must have known, Vince, yet you let me go on—you knew in the end I'd—I'd *rot like the rest!* Rot!" she screamed.

"I knew our game could not go on forever, dear," Travers said. "Though I did think the gloves would protect you, I knew that possibly when the game was up and your name involved, you might be inclined to talk . . . so in any event. . . ." His voice had become a trifle hoarse, a strange thread in it.

"Vince! Vince, what are you going to do?" Sarah shrilled, trying to back away. "Your eyes, Vince. . . ! Stay away from me—keep your dirty foul hands off me—Vince, no, *no!*" She screamed—but her scream was choked off. . . .

VINCENT TRAVERS turned. His face was no longer weary; it was the face of a man gone insane. His big hands were still held before him, like claws. His voice came thick. "Craig can wait . . . Janet now . . . Janet."

Craig was no longer even trying to hide his own efforts to fight off his bonds. He had been working at them all this time, with the two thugs' attention held by Travers' actions. The Bystander had succeeded in partially loosening his right hand, tied behind the chair . . . was trying to use its fingers to undo knots. But now, already, Travers was bending over Janet his hands reaching for her throat—and Craig knew with despair he himself was still powerless to stop them. . . .

And then, suddenly, Blackie's gun swiveled from Craig to the playboy.

"Hold it, Mister Travers. You double-crossed that Sarah dame." He nodded toward the pitiful corpse. "How do we know you won't cross us? When are we going to get all that dough you've been promising. We'll kill the shamus, but that girl's going to stay alive until we get paid. We're top men in this game now."

Travers straightened up. He looked frightened. "You'll get your money."

Blackie stepped forward and Travers backed away from Janet. He was trembling. "Yeah?" snarled Blackie. "When? Don't lie, Travers. You were planning to kill the girl and Craig and then beat it with all the dough—leaving us to hold the bag. Well, it won't wash. When we leave here, the girl goes with us . . . and if we don't get our cut very quick, she might have an interesting story to tell the police. Maybe you think you've been pretty clever covering your tracks. Maybe you figure the police never'd believe any story we told them—but they'll believe *her!*"

Travers was silent. Blackie turned to Monk. "Untie the girl," he ordered. "We're getting out, now."

CRAIG now had part of that right wrist loosened, too—his hand had more play. He was watching Monk unfasten Janet's bonds with a fury that goaded his every muscle. Travers stood, weary again, held at bay by Blackie. Unless Craig could do something, the outcome must be hellish, no matter what it was. If Travers had his way, the girl would be horribly murdered; if not, Monk and Blackie would take her with them.

At last the ropes that had bound Janet came free and Monk pulled her roughly to her feet. "Come on, baby," he said. "We're leaving this dump. An' maybe if you're nice to Blackie an' me, we'll treat you right."

The girl's hand slid down Monk's coat, under it. But Monk playfully pushed it away. "Naw, you don't want that knife

now, kid. You know you don't. . . ."

Craig's right hand came free. Revulsion and rage made him desperate. With all eyes off him, he sent his chair crashing over backwards, with a force that splintered it. Still, as he'd feared, some of the ropes held—but his right hand was free—

Blackie whirled at the sound of the crashing chair. His automatic swiveled from Travers to Craig—

There was a sharp report—a report too high in pitch to be made by that big automatic! It was the report of a spitting little pearl-handled .22—the .22 of the hapless, dead Madame Sari, who had failed to tell the thugs Daniel Craig had that gun on him—so they had not looked for it when they'd taken his .45. Now the Bystander's right hand had whipped out that little gun; and the .22 slug proved more serious for Blackie than had the wound made by the .45 before—Blackie fell, writhing, spitting blood.

It had taken all this time for Monk to shove the girl from him, for she'd clung to him tightly to delay his getting into action. But now Monk charged towards Craig, knife upraised. And the girl flung herself upon Travers, who was trying to aim his automatic. . . .

Craig in that instant had extricated himself from the bonds of his broken chair; he was on his feet just as Monk loomed with the knife. This time Craig used the small but heavy .22 like a club—swinging it to that simean jaw with a crunching impact. Monk went down like a heavy tree.

"Look out, *Dan!*" the girl cried then, and at her own shortened cry of his first name, Craig felt a fiercely joyous thrill—rather than alarm at the sight of Vincent Travers, who had flung the girl aside, and was leveling his automatic.

Craig fired two shots from the .22—both of them almost drowned out in the

almost simultaneous roar of Travers' larger gun. But Travers' slug dug harmlessly into the ceiling . . . as two neat holes, close together, appeared in the play-boy's forehead. His face went weary as it went blank: he fell slowly, languidly, it seemed. And Craig felt no regret.

"So you've beaten us to it again, Bystander." Twenty minutes later, Inspector Rawlings, grizzled Homicide chief, whom a phone-call from the upper part of Travers' house had summoned here with his men, spoke in his crisp voice. Daniel Craig was standing there close to Janet. "The two hoods are talking plenty . . . and we've found cream and chemicals in this cellar—enough to see you're right about Travers being the man. You're in the clear, as usual, Bystander."

But the Bystander wasn't listening. He was taking Janet Russell out of there . . . and then he was driving her home in his coupe. When he stopped before the Gifford residence, he knew lots about this lovely girl . . . knew that from the moment she'd learned the truth, she had loathed Vincent Travers, and that she hadn't really loved him anyway—

Now Craig handed the girl a roll of bills—for he'd got back his wallet. "This belonged to your sister," he said.

"She would have wanted you to keep it," the girl replied. "You earned it—Mr. Craig." But he remembered she had called him 'Dan' in that moment of stress—this girl who reminded him so much of another girl of long ago. . . .

He forced the money into her small hand. "Goodbye, Janet."

"I—I hate to go in. Charles, Helen—both gone." She didn't mention Vincent. "I wonder how one can stand it."

"One can," Craig said, but the mask wasn't on his face. "But maybe one doesn't have to. . . . Shall we talk that over some time?"

"If," her hazel eyes met his, "sometime means—soon."

THE DOCTOR SAYS—DIE!

Did the missing girls from the French Quarter have any connection with those half-human monsters who filled the darkened streets with mutilated bodies? Only lovely Nancy Ryan could give Detective Joe Gee the answer—if Joe could reach her before the madman's finger pointed!



A novelette of a man whose mad dream terrorized an entire city

by

WYATT BLASSINGAME

CHAPTER ONE

Horror House

I WAS a little after three a.m. when Evelyn Marshall finished her last song, bowed to the scattering of applause, and went back to the small dressing room in the rear of the night club. She had just finished changing to a street dress when the waiter knocked and stuck his head inside the door.

"There's a guy at one of the tables

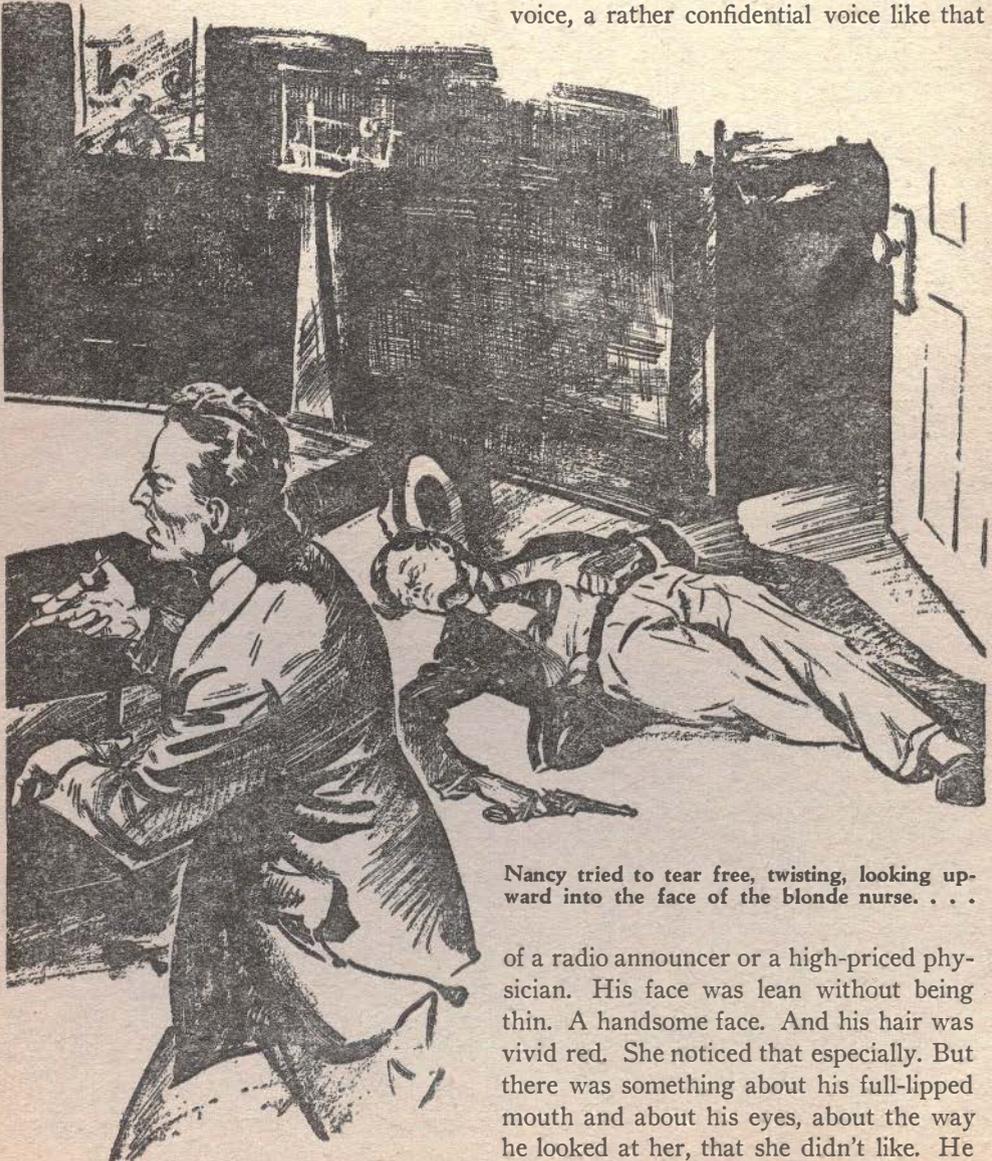
who wants to see you," he announced.

"There generally is," she said. "Tell him I've gone home."

"This fellow claims he knew an uncle of yours, a uncle Max Bronson, or some such name."

Evelyn said, "That's different. I better see him if he was a friend of Uncle Max."

The man stood and bowed when she approached his table. "My name's Harker," he said, "and I'm awfully glad to meet you. I've wanted to, ever since Max told me about you." He had a deep, cultured voice, a rather confidential voice like that



Nancy tried to tear free, twisting, looking upward into the face of the blonde nurse. . . .

of a radio announcer or a high-priced physician. His face was lean without being thin. A handsome face. And his hair was vivid red. She noticed that especially. But there was something about his full-lipped mouth and about his eyes, about the way he looked at her, that she didn't like. He

didn't seem quite as handsome after a second glance.

She said, politely, "I'm always glad to know a friend of Uncle Max. He was the only relative I had after mother died several years ago. And Uncle Max is dead now. You knew that, I imagine?"

"Of course." She thought for an instant that a queer light had glowed in his eyes when she mentioned being without relatives, but probably she was wrong. . . .

The waiter came and she noticed, without paying attention to the fact, that the redhaired man kept his back half-turned while ordering. Then he was leaning toward her across the table. "You're as pretty as Max said you were."

"Thank you." She liked compliments, as all women do, but there was something about this man that made her instinctively distrust him, a purely feminine dislike that was almost revulsion. "I really have to hurry along," she said. "I'm very tired tonight."

"You can have one drink with me. The waiter's bringing them now." Again the man had his back half turned, his head slightly bowed while the waiter was near. Then, the waiter gone again, he leaned across the table and touched his glass to hers, "Cherio!"

It was a sidecar, and not a particularly strong one, that he had ordered, but as she drank it a queer, sleepy numbness stole through her body. She thought, *I hadn't realized how tired I was*. Even her hands felt heavy, resting on the table, and it required an actual effort to lift her glass. Her eyes ached, too, but she could clearly see the man across the table. He was leaning forward and smiling at her.

THE man said, "Tap the edge of your glass and see how it rings." And a moment later she was surprised to see that she was tapping her glass with her fingernail. She hadn't really intended to do it—it was a silly thing to do, because the glass

was cheap and not the kind which rings clearly. Then her eyes lifted and she saw Harker was smiling at her, an ugly, confident, knowing smile.

A slow, unreasoning fear stirred within her. "I—I have to be going," she said, and started to stand up.

He said, "Sit down. Keep quiet."

She didn't realize that she had obeyed—but she was sitting there again, facing him across the table. She was trembling and wanted to scream but the muscles of her mouth seemed frozen.

"Finish your drink," the man said.

Her hand did not seem to belong to her. She wanted to stop it and couldn't. It might as well have been the hand of some other person who lifted the glass and put it to her lips. The liquor ran coolly down her throat. She knew now that the liquor was doped (thinking, *He did it when he touched his glass to mine*) and yet she could not stop drinking until the glass was empty.

The man dropped a bill on the table, stood up, and held out his hand to her. "Come on," he said. "My car is outside."

She was like a person in a nightmare who sees herself walking toward the edge of a cliff and cannot stop. She was trembling, so afraid that her knees almost gave under her as she stood up. But the hypnotic drug in her veins was stronger than her will. She took the man's hand and walked with him across the small dance floor and out a side door.

It was while he was closing the door after them that he saw the other girl. She was on the other side of the dance floor, staring after them. Quickly he jerked back into darkness, and for an instant his face was contorted, savage—the face of a madman. He moved hurriedly alongside the building to a window through which he could see.

The girl inside had turned away and was talking to somebody else.

The redhaired man smiled then and

turned to Evelyn Marshall again. "Here's the car," he said.

They drove swiftly but inside the speed limit until the city fell behind them. The moonlight lay misty upon the flat country, on the tall, moss-hung oaks, on the dark canals crowded with water iris. The car began to move faster now.

Evelyn Marshall sat very still and rigid upon the front seat. She could feel the black terror against her heart—but her brain was detached, numb. Her muscles were like wood and she could not move them except at the command of the man beside her.

The road forked and they turned to the left. This was a small shell road now with trees thick on either side and the smell of swamp water upon the air. Then the headlights picked up a high, iron fence and the car came to a stop.

The redhaired man got out, unlocked the gate, and at his command Evelyn drove through, stopped again until the man had relocked the gates and got into the car. They drove on. Ahead of them buildings began to loom in the moonlight.

A little of the drug had worn off now. Evelyn felt her mouth moving mechanically, heard herself saying, "I think I know where we are. This is the Harker Sanatorium, isn't it? Do you work here?"

The redhaired man looked down at her and his eyes gleamed in the light of the dash. "I am Dr. Harker," he said.

They parked and entered one of the buildings through a side door, Evelyn moving like a robot at the man's commands. "Through here," he said. "The first door on the right." He opened the door and she stepped over the sill, walking rigidly and looking neither to right nor left.

"I'm going to leave you here for awhile," the man said. "Turn around." She did and he raised her right eyelid slightly with his thumb and forefinger. "You'll last a little while," he said.

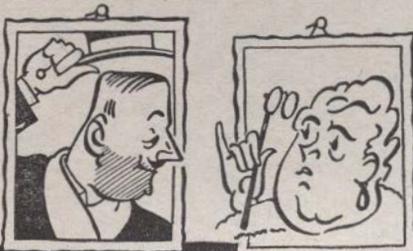
SHE heard the sharp click of steps in the hall and a woman in a nurse's uniform came running into the room. She grabbed Dr. Harker by the shoulder and shook him. "Two of them have escaped!" she cried. "Two of them while you were gone!" She was a tall, golden haired woman. Her face was strong, beautifully molded, and yet, somehow, it was hideous.

Harker asked hoarsely, "Who escaped?"

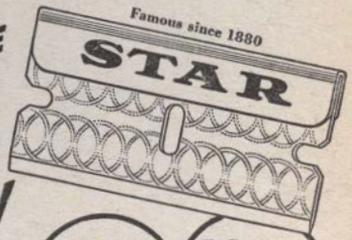
"The goat monster and that half-snake freak of yours! One of these fool interns left a door unlocked—while you were out playing around!"

"But I had to get somebody! With the girl who got an overdose, and after the operation today, we didn't have anybody!"

"All right! But we've got to find those freaks before hell explodes! Come on!"



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The door closed softly behind them.

In the center of the room Evelyn stood gaping, numb. A slow, instinctive physical fear throbbed in her body, but she couldn't think coherently; she knew that she *must* think. She had to think! But her brain was dull clay within her skull.

Gradually that feeling left her and her mind began to clear—and her fear became acute then, so sharp it was like a knifeblade. For the first time she noticed how strange was the room in which she stood. There was no furniture of any kind except for scarlet satin cushions about the floor. All four walls were hung with scarlet curtains, a slit in one of the curtains marking where the door must be.

She ran across the room, parted the curtains, twisted at the doorknob. The door was locked.

She had to struggle now to keep from screaming insanely. She forced herself to move slowly, carefully. There must be some way out! She found another door, but it, too, was locked. Then she parted another slit in the curtains and found the window. She could see the clear white moonlight beyond and for an instant her heart leaped with hope—leaped, and turned to black stone within her breast.

Iron bars criss-crossed the window. And peering out she saw that even if she could have escaped she would have been in a courtyard blocked in on all four sides by the high walls of the building.

She let the curtain fall and stepped back into the center of the room. She stood there with the blood-colored cushions about her feet, the blood-colored walls around her, her hands clenched until the nails brought warm, sleek blood from her palms. Her throat muscles knotted. But she fought her jangling nerves into a kind of calmness; she forced her brain to work.

"I have nothing to be afraid of." She spoke the words aloud. "This is a sanatorium, and I came here with the doctor

who owns the place. Something has happened to some of the inmates and Dr. Harker had to go away, but he'll be back soon." She looked around at the crimson walls, the cushion spattered floor. "Maybe he uses this room in treating some of his patients; I don't know anything about medicine. There's nothing to be so—so terribly frightened of."

She said those words over and over, taking comfort from them—yet in the core of her brain she seemed to keep hearing Dr. Harker saying to the nurse, *I had to get somebody. With the girl who got an overdose and the operation today we didn't have anybody left.*

CHAPTER TWO

The Spread of Terror

NO WIDESPREAD publicity was given the first incidents. It was only in retrospect that anyone realized these first happenings were connected with the gruesome and horrible deaths which followed.

On the morning of April 12th, a Mr. Pete LeBlanc found that his goat had been killed on the vacant lot where he had left it tethered. The goat's throat had been slit and the long, proud horns cut away. The LeBlanc children had been very fond of their goat and its senseless destruction angered Mr. LeBlanc. He reported to the police, and the police said yes, they would investigate, and shrugged and forgot the incident. They had more important things to worry about than a murdered goat.

The previous night a woman had reported seeing a wolf on the outskirts of the city. Such reports are fairly common. Somebody sees a large dog and gets excited. On the night of the 12th there was a similar report: a man claimed to have seen a bear. He knew it was a bear because it walked upright and was covered by hair. When another man made the same report a few hours later the

police would have investigated—if the man had not insisted that the bear he saw had horns. This was carrying the thing a little too far. It was obvious that the man was drunk, had seen a cow and imagined it was something else.

And on the night of April 14th, Sam Mangello got drunk and brutally murdered his wife—or so the police said. It was one of the most ghastly crimes in the history of New Orleans, where crime has a long and amazing record.

Sam Mangello was twenty-three and had been married for ten months. His wife was pregnant. Sam Mangello made fifteen dollars a week. On his way home from work, at twilight on April 14th, Mangello stopped in a neighborhood bar. He got a little drunk, and went home, and—his mind must have snapped. A neighbor heard the screams and reported to police. They found Sam Mangello kneeling on the floor beside the mutilated body of his wife.

The policemen who investigated were not kids; they had seen a lot. But they couldn't stand looking at this. They spread a sheet over the body, and went outside to wait for the coroner. Only Sam Mangello knelt there, bloodstained, eyes open but blank, and said nothing. Later, at the police station he told some fantastic story about entering his home and finding a monster there. The thing had killed his wife, slugged him, and escaped. It was obvious to the police that he was lying.

They were puzzled, however, at the suddenness with which his mind must have snapped. Persons who had been in the bar with Sam Mangello said he had seemed very happy. He had bragged about the coming child. He had sworn it would be a boy. "Mine!" he had said, expanding his chest. "Mine and Marda's!" It would be the greatest thing he had ever owned, a thing he himself had created, a living creature in the image of Marda and

himself. He had told them he would name the boy Domonic after its grandfather. He was already saving money for the celebration, half a dollar a week out of the fifteen that he made. He had been building up an alibi the police said. . . . And he had hidden the things he had killed her with, one of them a round, pointed, horn-shaped instrument, to judge by the wounds.

One other thing puzzled the police. Clutched in the dead woman's hand were a half dozen coarse hairs. The coroner had said they were the hairs of an animal, but no one knew what kind of animal. They were sent to the F. B. I. laboratories in Washington for examination.

FROM this point on the pace accelerated. The Juggernaut of death was rolling down hill, gaining speed. . . .

Bobby Clark knew that he should go home. His mother had told him that he *had* to be home by six-fifteen. But it was the ninth inning and the score was tied and a fellow who was playing the entire outfield for the Oak Street Bearcats couldn't go off now and break up the game. Mom would certainly understand that—he hoped. The game was being played on one of the vacant fields in City Park, only a couple of blocks from where Bobby lived, and he could get home in a few minutes once the game was over.

At this point the second baseman for the Tigers really laid into one, knocking it over Bobby's head and into the reeds along the bayou in left field. Bobby lit after it, his stubby legs churning the ground. There was nobody on base and if he could just get the ball back in time to cut off a home run. . . .

He went plunging into the reeds at the point where the ball had disappeared.

It was semi-dark here. He didn't see the ball right away. It must have rolled farther—almost to the edge of the bayou. He took another hurried step, pushing the

reeds aside, looking frantically for the ball. And it was then he saw the foot. A huge, bestial foot covered with hair.

Slowly, as if a hand was pushing beneath his chin, his head tilted upward. His gaze slid up along gigantic, naked, hairy legs; over hands that reached down to the thing's knees; long, gangling arms that swung from monstrous hair-covered shoulders. And then he was looking at the thing's face where teeth gleamed in the dull light and blood-flecked saliva ran down to splash on its ape-like chest.

From miles and miles away, from the world outside the thicket of reeds, his friends were calling, shouting for him to hurry. He heard their voices and understood them, but he could not answer. He wanted to scream, but there was no air in his lungs.

The monster reached for him. It did not hurry. And only when the fingers touched Bobby Clark's throat did the rope of terror which had held him break—and then it was too late. His scream was cut short in the same instant that it began.

A few minutes later some of the other players came to help Bobby look for the ball. They found his body, curiously bent and still. The spine had been snapped like a stick in two places.

But the thing which had killed the child was gone.

ON April 18th the police released Sam Mangello. Since his arrest four other women had been murdered as his wife had been. Two of them had clutched little tufts of hair when they were found.

And the efforts of the F. B. I. laboratories to identify the hair sent to them had been unavailing. They had been unable even to tell if it was the hair of an animal or a human being. "An unidentified type. . ."

A vacant house on Carrolton Avenue had burned and neighbors swore they had seen a huge creature that was neither

man nor animal come rushing out of the flames, howling—but no one claimed to have run after it.

A girl crossing Audubon Park after dark had felt something clutch at her ankle and looking down gazed into a face with bulging, lidless eyes and with a tongue that flickered soundlessly in and out between toothless gums unprotected by lips.

She had torn away, screaming. And later the police had found the thing coiled like a snake inside a clump of bamboo. It was a monster, formed by some horrible blunder of nature and later worked on by a fiend with knives and drugs. It had no brain. It could not talk or understand what was said to it. But it tried to kill any living thing that came within its reach.

For a few hours the police hoped against hope that this was the thing which had committed all the crimes of the past few days. Then another woman was murdered in an alley of the Veaux Carré.

Terror, like some vast octopus, wrapped its tentacles around the city. In the elevators of downtown office buildings, strangers spoke to one another in hushed, awed voices about the latest discovery. They looked at one another with fear in their eyes for no man knew who or what committed these crimes. The streets after nightfall were almost deserted. In the French Quarter the bars were brightly lighted and the nickelodions played with loud yet empty sound—and the bartenders looked at the few customers who entered with fear, and there was little laughter. In the residential sections houses were locked and blinds were drawn so that the streets seemed darker than usual. Neighborhood stores closed early and the employees walked swiftly along the dark streets, listening for something beside the sound of their own steps, afraid.

At police headquarters, detectives went over and over the few available facts.

"There's a madman, or madmen. . . ."

"There's monsters, something that ain't human."

"What did those women get that hair off of? Nearly all of 'em had some of it beneath their fingernails. And that kid in City Park too. What did it come off of, that's what I want to know?"

"I don't," one of them said honestly. "I'm afraid to know." And there was no laughter when he spoke.

One of them said, "These last few days I been checking every record we got. There've been quite a few girls disappeared out of the French Quarter during the last six months. I wonder. . . ."

"Those girls are always coming and going."

"I know," the other cop said. "I just wondered."

A reporter who had been listening to the conversation got up and went out to a telephone and dialed a number.

IT WAS ten minutes after one a. m. of April 20th and Joe Gee paced restlessly back and forth across his office. His brown hair looked as if it hadn't been combed in a week; his spring suit of a lightweight, expensive gray cloth was baggy and powdered with cigarette ashes. His face was drawn and sour and haggard; his eyes were criss-crossed by red veins. He muttered to himself as he walked.

"Why the hell didn't I leave town a month ago? Why did I ever get mixed up in this thing? Why did I let that paper suck me into taking this case? How the hell can I think when I haven't had any sleep for three nights—and how the hell can I get any sleep until this thing is settled?"

The phone rang and he snatched it up savagely. "Hello!" he yelled.

"This is Bud Tinkler, police reporter for the *Democrat*."

"I haven't got a damn thing for you!"

Gee snarled. "I wish to God I'd never heard of your paper! I—"

"I know you suffer from insomnia," the reporter said. "I know you can't sleep when you're working on a case. But don't bite me. I've got a lead for you."

"A what?"

"I was just listening to some of the cops chewing the rag, and Murdock said that during the last few months an unusual number of girls had disappeared from the Veaux Carré. I don't know whether or not it's got any bearing on this case, but if you could find some kind of a tie-up it would make damn good reading."

Gee said, "What you reporters can think of!" But after he had hung up he stood for a long while scratching at his bony chin. Then, abruptly, he snatched up his hat.

"I can't sleep anyhow," he growled aloud. "I might just as well make a tour of the bars."

CHAPTER THREE

Return of a Monster

THE clock back of the bar said five after two when Gee entered the Blue India Club. He took whiskey and soda, downed half of it in one gulp, then asked, "Where can I see Nancy Ryan?"

The bartender looked him over slowly, changed expression after a moment, and said, "You're Joe Gee, ain't you? I've seen your picture in the papers."

Gee nodded, looking sourer and bitterer than ever, and finished the rest of his drink. The bartender was saying, "What's your idea about all these killings, Mr. Gee? You think a whole batch of folks have broke loose from a nut house, or it's some kind of monster, or . . . ?"

"If I knew," Gee said, "I'd settle the damn thing and go home and to bed. I'm just asking to see Nancy Ryan."

"She dances in the floor show. Ask one of the waiters back there."

"Thanks."

He circled the small dance floor, almost empty now, and took a table. He told the waiter he wanted Scotch and soda and Nancy Ryan; and a few minutes later he saw the girl coming toward him through the tables.

She was pretty. Her face had a natural freshness, her hair was thick and black and cut in a long bob. Her eyes were black, widely spaced, and quite level in her face. She wore a white evening dress which showed that she had an excellent figure. Gee stood up and bowed and she took the chair opposite him.

He said, "You roomed with a girl named Evelyn Marshall and a few days ago you reported to the police that she was missing?"

Her eyes widened a little. "Yes. Are you—a policeman?"

"Private detective. My name's Joe Gee."

"Oh! I've heard about you." She smiled with her dark, level eyes. "You're quite famous."

Gee made a grunting noise. "Had Miss Marshall been planning to leave town?"

"She hadn't mentioned it to me. I don't know why she should have decided so suddenly—unless it was the man she left here with that night. . . ."

"What man?"

"I don't know who he was. A red-haired man. I saw them just as they were going out of the door. The man saw me looking after them and he—he looked startled, or frightened, or angry. That was one reason I worried so when she didn't come home."

Gee rubbed at his bony chin. "If you can take a half-hour off from this place, let's go have a look at the things Miss Marshall left."

It was a vast, drafty old house on Ursaline Street. Ten years before the

Civil War it had been a beautiful home; now it was a cheap boarding house. The downstairs hallway was broad and empty and dimly lighted. They went up a mahogany spiral staircase that was graceful as rising smoke, but with half the supports gone from the bannister now and the steps worn and dusty.

The upper hall had only one small light and the wide balcony that overlooked the rear courtyard showed no lights at all. They went along this balcony to the room at the end and Nancy Ryan opened the door. "Just a moment," she said, "I'll turn on the light."

SHE stepped over the sill into the room, Gee waiting a step behind her on the balcony. And it was then they heard the noise from within the pitchdark room.

Nancy Ryan's fingertips were six inches from the light switch; yet she did not touch it. She couldn't. Her veins were thin icy spikes within frozen muscles.

Something stirred and moved there in the darkness. She could hear it, sense its movement rather than see it. She heard the whisper of bare feet creeping toward her. From the balcony came Gee's hoarse cry, "For God's sake turn on the light!" He was jerking his gun from its holster, but he could see nothing. He could not fire for fear of hitting the girl.

Then something moved against the black oblong of the doorway. A grotesque and hideous figure that swayed and lurched, a white blur upon the darkness. It moved through the doorway, making little whimpering sounds—came straight at Joe Gee.

It was a girl—or what had been a girl once. Clothes hung in tatters upon a distorted body, swollen at shoulders and elbows and knees, at fingertips and forehead, as though the bones had tried to grow again within their covering of skin, bulging the skin to the point of ripping. And the skin itself was covered by a foul

growth of white hair or fur. Her arms were outstretched toward Gee. In her right hand she held a long, keen-bladed knife.

Gee did not shoot. He backed away from her, the gun forgotten in his hand. And when he did, the girl's face contorted suddenly. With a low scream she launched herself at him.

It was instinct, as a man might strike at a snake to save himself—Gee raised the gun and struck. The blow knocked the girl face down upon the balcony floor. She lay there, her muscles twitching a little.

It seemed hours before Gee's gaze lifted from that hideous figure at his feet and he saw Nancy Ryan close beside him. Her face was bloodless, pale in the gloom.

"It's Evelyn!" she whispered. "Evelyn Marshall, my room-mate!"

A kind of terrible exhilaration filled Joe Gee then. His laughter was grating and harsh. It wasn't a sound of joy but

of relief. "It's over," he said. "Or it soon will be over. We'll make her talk, make her tell where this was done. And then. . . ."

He knelt beside the still, hideous body. He did not want to touch her and yet he knew that he must. He had the same repulsive feeling that a man might have if he found it necessary to put his hand upon the rotting flesh of a leper. He rolled the girl over on her back and prepared to lift her.

Her arms flopped limply. Her eyes, open and blank, stared dreadfully up at him. "My God!" Gee whispered. "She's. . . ."

He was trembling again. He forced himself to put his ear close above her heart. Then, slowly, he moved away. He looked up at Nancy Ryan. "She's dead," he said. "Maybe I killed her, but I can't believe that. Maybe she was already dying."

Nancy Ryan looked at the body, and

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looked away. "It's better like this," she said softly. "She wouldn't want to live like—like that."

But Gee said, "If she had only lived a little while, and been sane. Now there is only one possible lead." He was looking at Nancy as he spoke.

"What's that?"

Gee shook his head. "We've got to call the cops."

THE police came and went, taking the body with them. She had not been killed by the blow of the gun, the coroner said. He didn't know what had killed her.

The little alarm clock ticking on the mantle showed five minutes after four. Gee paced back and forth across the room, his path blotched with cigarette ashes.

He stopped suddenly and turned and stared at Nancy Ryan who sat watching him. His face was haggard, his sleepless eyes blood-red. He said, "You didn't mention it to the cops. Maybe you don't realize it. But you're next in line for this thing—whatever it is. Next to disappear, or be murdered."

Her hands tightened on the chairarms. "What do you mean?"

He cursed bitterly. "I'm a fool," he said. "If you haven't got sense enough to see it for yourself, I should let you alone. Use you for bait, and maybe we would land this creature; and maybe. . . ." He hurled his cigarette into the fireplace, lighted another. "I'm getting soft and sentimental in my old age, I reckon. I can't bait a hook with you. Not for this thing. So I'm warning you: get out of town. Go a long way and don't tell anybody where you're going. And change your name."

Her lips were slightly parted, her level eyes wide and with fear in them. "You mean, because . . . ?"

"Because you saw the man Evelyn Marshall went away with. And that man

won't want you to identify him. You're the only person who can. I phoned the waiter who served him and Evelyn that night, but the waiter says the man never looked directly at him. All the waiter remembers, is he had red hair. *You* saw his face." He was quiet a moment, staring at her. "I have an idea that's why Evelyn Marshall was here tonight."

"You mean . . . ?"

"She was brought here—with orders to murder you."

"But Evelyn wouldn't do that!" she cried. "Evelyn was my friend! She—" Her voice broke then. She was remembering the hideous hair-covered creature with the knife. That had been an animal-thing, not the girl she had roomed with.

After a moment she said, "But she didn't attack me."

"That may have been because you were hidden in the dark and she saw me on the balcony. Whoever left her here didn't expect that."

It was a long while before Nancy Ryan spoke again. Her fingers were trembling but she locked them together and forced them to be still. Her breathing was deep and it hurt in her throat. She knew what she was going to say, what she must say, and she was afraid. Finally, "Do you think all these crimes the last few days are connected with what happened to Evelyn—the women who have been killed, that child in City Park . . . ?"

"I can't be sure; but I believe they are."

"And if I don't leave town, there is a chance I may help in solving these things?"

"And a chance you may wind up like that girl they found in the alley—or like Evelyn."

Her eyes looked squarely into his. Her face was pale but determined. "I'm not going to run away. I'm going to stay and help."

Gee knew that protesting would do

no good, so he only stood there and looked at her. She was very beautiful, he thought, with the black hair framing her face, the dark, level, honest eyes, the soft, full lips. And then in his imagination he saw her change, saw her body mutilated and horrible. . . .

He put one bony hand over his eyes as though to wipe the sight away.

"What is it?" the girl asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. My eyes hurt and I wish to God I could get some sleep. But I can't; I never can while I'm working on a case that excites me. So I'll hang around outside the rest of the night and watch this place, just to be sure. And in the morning we'll start working."

"How do you expect to look for the man?"

"He's a doctor," Gee said. "At least he has some knowledge of medicine. And maybe there are a thousand doctors in New Orleans, but eventually we'll look at them all."

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell's Hospital

IT WAS late afternoon. They had visited every hospital within the city limits; they had called on more than a hundred doctors. A few, whom Gee knew personally, he had asked about a handsome, redhaired young physician, or intern, or drugclerk. He had learned the names of a dozen, but none of them proved to be the man they sought.

"I've looked at too many," Nancy Ryan said, shaking her head. "And I only had a glimpse of that man. I feel all confused now. I'm not sure I can identify him."

Gee's eyes were like red flames. Even the lids were reddish from lack of sleep and there were hollows beneath his eyes, hollows between cheek and jawbones. "We'll work the offices in this building,"

he said, "then we can call it a day."

The name on the door read:

Harris Burks M. D.

The waiting room was empty except for a nurse. She was a tall, golden-haired woman with a face that was strong, beautiful, and yet somehow slightly evil.

She said, "Just a moment, I'll see if the doctor is busy." She went into the next room, closing the door behind her. A minute later she was back. "This way," she said.

Nancy went first, Gee close behind her. As he was passing the nurse, she leaned quickly forward, putting her hand on his, whispering, "Aren't you Joe Gee, the detective?"

Gee nodded.

The nurse whispered, "Come over here! I've something I must tell you!" She led him back across the room to the wicker sofa on which he and Nancy had been sitting. She sat very close beside him, leaned forward, and for an instant Gee thought she was going to whisper in his ear. Then her arms slid around his shoulders.

"Hey!" he said, in complete surprise. "What—?"

There was the sharp startling prick of the hypodermic needle just below his left shoulder blade—and he knew instantly he had been taken like an amateur. He hadn't expected so open a move in a downtown office building. With his left hand he shoved the blonde away from him; but she was a big woman and strong. She clung to him. She held to his right wrist as he fought for his gun. His hand was on the butt but he couldn't get the gun free. Something more than the blonde nurse was holding him now. His muscles grew cold, then watery.

He slumped slowly forward, struggling against the darkness that gathered around him, sinking deeper into it. . . .

The nurse stretched him out upon the

sofa. The whole thing had taken place in almost absolute silence.

NANCY RYAN had not noticed when Gee stopped at the door of the inner office. She went on into the white-walled consultation room. On the far side of the room a man, half hidden by a screen, was washing his hands at a small lavatory. He was a rather well-built man with black, curly hair. That was all she could see at first.

He said, "I'll be with you in just a moment. Have a seat."

Nancy Ryan sat down and for the first time realized that Gee was not with her. He had stopped in the other room to speak to the nurse probably. . . .

The doctor behind the screen was drying his hands on a towel now, saying, "It's been a beautiful day, hasn't it; but getting a bit hot. Summer'll be with us soon." He finished drying his hands and then lit a cigarette, still without turning to face her. But finally he turned and came forward to stand in front of her. He was smiling a little, a very handsome man, the cigarette smoke curling up past his face.

She stared at him. Her first sensation was one of numb disbelief. She had looked at too many men. She was confused. She couldn't be sure.

He kept smiling at her. His voice seemed to come from a long way off, "It's simply a matter of a red wig. I didn't want to take any more chances of being recognized than were necessary."

She felt the muscles of her throat cording, her eyes expanding, felt her mouth opening, ready to scream.

A hand was clapped hard over her mouth. The scream came muffled. She tried to tear free, twisting, looking upward into the face of the blonde nurse. Then the doctor was gripping her too. The hypodermic slid into her arm with a sharp stinging pain.

"I told you this dual personality would come in handy," the doctor said to the nurse a few minutes later. "I'm Dr. Burks here in the city; Dr. Harker, whom no one ever sees, at the Harker Sanatorium. And it was good luck one of the staff at Charity happened to mention that this fool detective and a girl were looking for a redheaded physician. It gave us a chance to get ready for them."

The nurse was breathing hard. "What do we do now?"

"We get them out to the sanatorium, where a little noise won't matter. It's getting close to the end of the game, I'm afraid. We'll have to take what we can, and get out."

The nurse glanced back toward the office where Gee lay stretched upon the sofa. "He's going to be angry when he wakes up. Why don't you give him a shot of the hypnotic, the same as you do the others? I don't think he'll be an easy man to force into anything the way he is."

"He wouldn't react. He's not the type; it'd just put him to sleep again. But at the sanatorium," the doctor said, "we have the means of persuading him."

"He'll know you're never going to turn him free, that you'll have to kill him and the girl after you get the money."

"There are ways of dying—and other ways. Some of them are worth money to avoid, even if you must die after all."

The nurse's breathing was hoarsely audible. "You baby-faced fiend!" she whispered.

ALL four walls were hung with scarlet satin. The floor was littered with scarlet pillows, but there was no other furniture. Joe Gee lay sprawled among the pillows. His left arm was taped to his side, his ankles were taped together, but his right arm was free. On the floor beside him was a fountain pen, a sheet of paper, and a blank check.

On the opposite side of the room, Dr.

Harker and the blonde nurse stood watching. Harker held an automatic in his right hand. He said pleasantly, "How're you feeling, Mr. Gee?"

"Splendid!" Gee said. "Better than I've felt in a week. I must have got six hours sleep."

"A little more than that. It's shortly after midnight now." The doctor glanced at his watch. "A quarter of one, in fact. It's time you made out that check beside you. Make it to 'Cash' for an even forty-three thousand dollars."

"Sure. And who's name do I sign?"

"Don't be facetious," the doctor said. "You have a bank balance of forty-three thousand, two hundred and twenty-three dollars. I'm leaving you the odd change. Just make the check for forty-three thousand, then write a note on that paper beside you to the bank saying the bearer is your personal representative and to cash the check for him."

Gee said, "You are quite thorough, aren't you?" He tried to keep his face completely emotionless. He tried to squeeze all feeling from his body, to stifle the fear that ate like rats through his stomach. He said, "And if I sign, you will let me and the girl go free?"

"Of course."

"Then turn me loose, take me back to my own apartment, and I'll sign—when Nancy Ryan's free, too. By the way, where is she?"

Dr. Harker's face contorted. "Let's quit the joking! I'm not going to let you go free, or the girl. You know that. But there are different ways to die. Since the money'll be of no use to you anyway, you'll pay it to die the easy way."

Gee's mouth got hard then. The jawbones showed clear against the skin. "Maybe I'll pay to die easy—but I'll be sure of what I'm getting. I'm not taking your word for it."

The nurse said, "I told you he wouldn't be easy to persuade."

"Shut up!" the doctor snarled. He moved forward as if to kick Gee in the ribs—and stopped. He was smiling again, and looking up into that handsome, smiling face Joe Gee knew terror as he had never known it before. His stomach seemed to crawl and then tighten inside him.

"I think I can persuade you," Dr. Harker said. His voice was very gentle and he was still smiling.

Gee's fingers were clenched, his muscles rigid and cold as he fought to keep them from trembling. "That sort of work takes time. And do you have that much time?"

The nurse said, "Maybe it would be better to do it his way, Harry. Let him make his own guarantee he'll die easy."

Harker kept leering down at Gee. "She's worried because tonight the police shot and killed one of the creatures which had escaped from here—the thing which murdered the women. He was one of the many freaks I brought here to study, and the work I'd done on him hadn't helped his looks. I actually put goat glands in him and the result was rather gruesome. The same thing goes for that snake-like freak who was captured several days ago. I didn't worry about him; there wasn't any way he could be traced to this sanatorium. It's just possible, however, the cops might trace my goat-man; but even so it will take a week at the least. That gives me plenty of time to work on you, several days if necessary, and still get away."

GEE lay very still among the crimson cushions. His throat was clogged with fear. But he kept it from his face. He would die, but he wouldn't let this man know he was afraid.

Dr. Harker said, "We'll start with your friend, Miss Ryan. You're tough, but I think this will soften you up a bit." He turned to the nurse. "Help him over to the window, Doll. I won't take any

chances on getting close to him with the gun—not while he's got one hand loose.”

“Wait a minute!” Gee said huskily. “The Ryan girl doesn't mean a damn to me. You're wasting your time. You might just as well bump her off quickly and be done with it.”

“We'll see. Help him up, Doll. Help him to the window.”

The nurse put her hands under Gee's arms, helped him stand erect. “Hop,” she said. “I'll balance you. Over there at the slit in the curtain.”

“Wait.” Gee looked past her at Dr. Harker. “I'm paying to take an easy way out, for me and Miss Ryan. You bring her in here, put a loaded gun in my pocket, and stand across the room with your own gun. I'll write out the check, and the note to the bank. You'll have your gun on me all the time. When the check's written you can leave Miss Ryan and me to do it ourselves, or you can shoot. But I want the gun so I'll know we have a quick method.”

The doctor laughed softly. “You forget: *I'm* making the terms. When I have the check and the note we'll discuss them.”

“To hell with you!”

Dr. Harker laughed again. “Pull the curtain aside for him, Doll. And you, Gee, watch the show. When you're ready to stop it, on my terms, just say so.”

Gee looked down into a grassy courtyard walled in on every side by the building. Pale, diffused light came from a full moon overhead. The shrubs growing in the courtyard made black, distorted shadows.

“Over there to the left,” the nurse said, pointing. “Can you see her?”

Gee could barely see the girl crouched in the shadow of an oleander, her white dress a blur in the darkness.

The nurse's breathing became suddenly louder. “There!” she whispered. “Over there!”

The doctor was watching from another window. “Here they come!” he said. “Stop us when you're ready to sign, Mr. Gee.”

“You're wasting your time.” He tried to make his voice casual. It was a desperate game, but it was his only chance and he had to play it through.

He was clinging to the bars with his free hand now. His heart seemed to have quit beating, his lungs to have ceased work. His eyes ached against their sockets as he stared.

From a door in the right wall of the courtyard had come three things that were neither men nor animals. One was no more than three feet high, its body as black and shiny as coal. Its little head rose into a point, and beneath this was a tiny, incredibly savage face. In the moonlight its long teeth gleamed and flecks of drooling saliva showed white against the black chin and chest. The creature which followed it was tall and thin with hideous sores pitting its body. And behind this came a huge, slow moving monster, hair covered, waddling, bent almost double, with its great, globe-like head pushed in front of it.

The three of them moved out into the clear moonlight, then paused. The pin-headed, black creature stood for an instant sniffing the wind like an animal. Then he started off toward the oleander behind which Nancy Ryan was crouched. Half way to the plant the thing pointed, sure of itself now, and the other two monsters spread out to each side.

The girl screamed. She leaped out into the moonlight, racing away across the courtyard. And with a howl the three creatures went after her.

THE dwarfed Negro was fastest. With a dozen bounds he was close behind her. She whirled and struck him, knocking him away. She had started to run again, with the tall, disease-eaten creature

close after her now and the huge monster lumbering behind. She whirled around a bush, gaining ground for a moment, but she was soon cornered again.

The three creatures formed a wall and sidled toward her—and slowly she backed away. Her black hair hung loose about her throat and shoulders. Her face was pale as the moonlight.

The doctor said, "They'll probably catch her this time, Mr. Gee." His voice had a tight note. "I think they'll kill her. They usually kill anyone they can lay hands on."

Gee had to fight the words out of his throat. "You're wasting your time. You're a damn fool."

Below them the pin-headed dwarf had leaped suddenly forward, grabbing at the girl. She whirled away from him, stumbled. For an instant she was within reach of the huge, waddling, hair-covered monster. His hand closed—too slowly, and she was free again. A long howl went up from the three creatures as they turned and went after her again.

"She can't stay away from them much longer!" The doctor's voice trembled.

"You're a damn fool," Gee said. "She doesn't mean a damn to me, but you're just wasting her."

The doctor turned to look at him. They faced one another down the narrow passage between wall and scarlet curtains. "I believe you're telling the truth. You'll let them kill her before you sign."

"I'm looking after my own health."

"All right! All right!" the doctor's words came tumbling over one another. "We'll see! I will get her! I—"

The nurse said sharply, "What are you planning?"

"Shut up and do what I tell you!" he said coldly. "Here, take this gun and watch Gee. Don't go close to him—and shoot if he tries to reach you!" Then he had given her the gun and was gone, running.

Joe Gee grinned at the nurse. He did not dare look out the window again. He did not dare see how close the monsters below were to Nancy. Did they have her cornered? He just kept grinning and said, "I'm afraid your boy friend doesn't like you any more."

The nurse was breathing heavily. "To hell with him."

"That's what I say. But how, with a girl like you around. . . ."

"What do you mean?"

Imperceptibly the distance between them had narrowed. The nurse was moving as though drawn against her will. Her breathing made a low, rustling sound. She still held the gun, but as if unaware of it.

Gee reached out toward her with his free hand. "Hurry!" he whispered hoarsely.

She paused. She swayed. For an instant he thought she was going to back away. Then she flung herself against him.

Gee turned his left shoulder a little against her. When her head swayed back from his, he struck. He struck with the force of all his corded, trembling muscles. The blow lifted the woman into the air and she fell without a sound.

It seemed to Gee that it took him hours to free his ankles and his left hand. It seemed that hours passed while he taped and gagged the nurse, though his movements were a blur of rapidity. He was crossing toward the door when the curtain swayed back and the door was thrown open.

Nancy Ryan came first, the doctor close behind her, pushing her. He never had a chance to release her before Gee was on him, swinging the gun. There was the dull crunch of bone when the gun butt landed.

"They'll probably have some help around here," Gee said. "But with this .32 in my hand we'll be able to dispose of them, if they try to stop us."

JOE GEE sipped his drink and leaned back and grinned. "They had a good business while it lasted," he said, "but he wouldn't leave good enough alone. That was one of these semi-quack sanatoriums where they are suppose to transplant the youth of old people with transplanted glands and glandular injections and such stuff. But Dr. Harker, or Burks, or whatever his real name was, wasn't satisfied with the usual treatments. He had obtained a lot of freaks and monsters who seemed to resist age better than the average human being, creatures overdeveloped and underdeveloped into abnormality—and he was studying these, experimenting on them as he might on guinea pigs or white rats. And in some cases the results were . . ." Gee spread his hands. "When two of them happened to escape, they played hell with a city."

"But what about the girls he had taken out of the French Quarter?" Nancy asked.

"I told you Harker couldn't be satisfied with the usual methods. When he thought he had something new, he had to try it, and he was usually afraid to try it on his paying clients. So he got girls without families, without anybody to set up much of a howl if they disappeared, and tried out his work on them. He'd ask questions and learn enough about them for an introduction. He'd picked up

men, too, waterfront bums. Nobody would ever know what happened to them and nobody would care. Sometimes he used the men and girls to furnish the glands he transplanted, sometimes he used the freaks and practiced on the girls and men he had brought."

Nancy Ryan pressed a hand hard against her throat. "Evelyn. . . ?" she whispered.

"Whatever he had done to her, it went wrong. Then he took her back to your place and left her there. She was supposed to kill you, and be found later."

"But why?"

"He wanted you out of the way because you could identify him. And it's just possible that he had released a few of the girls after working on them more or less successfully—released them, but under threat of some hideous death if they ever told what went on inside that sanatorium. Evelyn would serve as a warning to them to keep quiet. At least that's one of the theories that the police are busy checking on."

Nancy Ryan shuddered and ran her hand over her eyes. "I wish I could believe it had never happened, could forget—everything."

"Not everything," Gee said. "I learned about you—and a narcotic that will give me six hours sleep no matter how interested I am in a case."

THE END

Death strikes Dan Murdoch, member of the famed Suicide Squad, in Emile C. Pepper's gripping novel of the government's fight against the murder syndicate. This stark tale of blazing guns and real man's courage, is called the "Suicide Squad's Murder Lottery." In it, a murdered Federal Agent comes back from the dead to close America's case against a crime king. Four novelettes of thrilling G-Man action are also found in this issue—"Dictators for Breakfast," by B. B. Fowler; "Manhattan Corpse-Peddler," by William R. Cox; "GX and the Gorilla Girl," by Harry Lee Fellings; and "Death Plans a G-Man's Holiday," by Edward S. Williams.



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BODIES TO BURN

I'm sure that the Larson girl doesn't go around dumping old gentlemen in tubs full of acid—but the cops won't see it my way. So the only thing I can do is lead with my chin, and wait for Death to tag me . . . and it does!



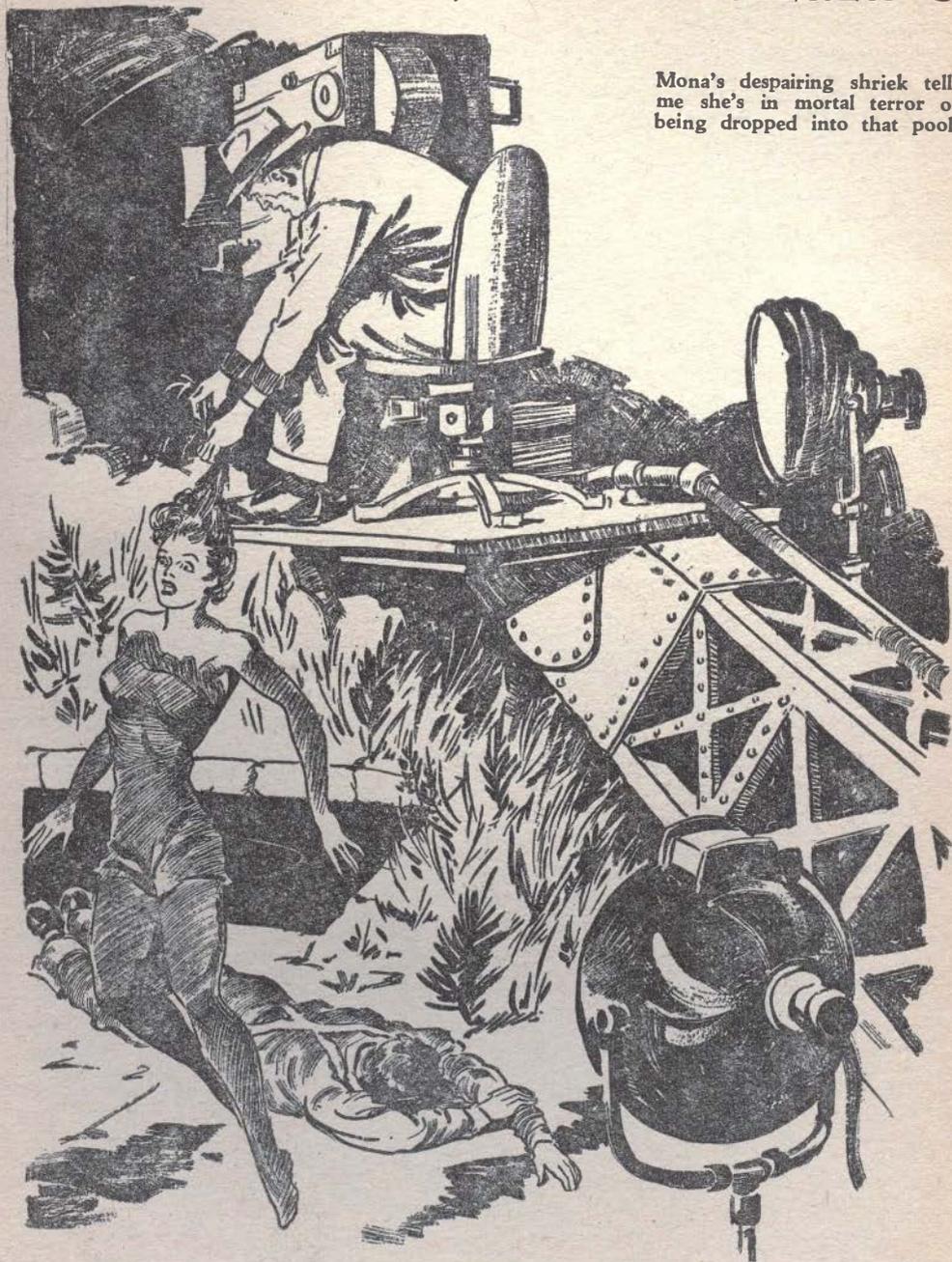
CHAPTER ONE

The Green Death

I'M JUST coming down to the lobby after taking the old ginzo in 721 a nightcap of hot milk and aspirin, when Joe Kalen puts the finger on me: "Hey, Scrapper! What kind of a bell-hop are you, anyhow? You working for the *Metropole*? Or do you get a split from these bill-jumpers?"

by STEWART STERLING

Mona's despairing shriek tells me she's in mortal terror of being dropped into that pool!



Now, Joe is not a bad lug even if he is our house dick. He generally does his own keyholing, instead of making us bell-hops do his gumshoeing for him—which is more than you can say of most snoopers.

So I don't blow off steam. I just answer: "Who's forgotten the little formality of paying his bill before checking out, Joseph? And why pin the blame on me?"

Joe gets red in the face, which is some-

thing to see, when you consider his skin is the shade of a peeled beet to begin with.

"Listen, you sawed-off little shrimp. That blonde you've been gabbing with—the one up in nine-0-two—she's taken a powder. And I don't mean Alka Seltzer!"

"Keep your pants on, Joey," I calm him. "If Miss Larson has run out, it wasn't while I was on the job. Besides, I don't think she'd pull a fast one like that. She don't look like a conniver to me." What the babe in question does look like is a merger of the best features of Hedy LaMarr, Ginger Rogers and Ann Sheridan. I don't know if she can *act* as good as those three oomphers—although she confides to me she is aiming to be an actress—but she can give any other femme cards and spades for my dough. "Miss Larson is strictly on the level, in my opinion," I tell him.

Kalen looks at me coldly. "Any dame with a neat figure can pull the wool over your eyes, Scrapper, an' run her baggage out without a peep from you. I suppose you carried her suitcase to a taxi, too?"

"Relax, Joseph," I say. "I haven't seen Miss Larson's luggage since the day before yesterday when I checked her in. She hasn't taken it out while I've been on duty, and no one else has toted it out of the hotel for her, as far as I know."

Joe sticks his fists on his hips and juts out his jaw. "How come the chambermaid on the floor reports nine-0-two as empty as the Yankee Stadium in January?"

A THOUGHT occurs to me. I hate to tip it to Joe, because it might put Miss Larson in a somewhat peculiar light. But I believe in playing ball with your own team, so I make a suggestion: "Before you go shooting your puss off any more, Joe, how about having a peek around on the ninth? I might be able to put the finger on this babe, and thus save no small amount of unpleasantness at the manager's office."

He gives me another cold look. "Why don't you stick to your ice-water and drugstore errands, Scrapper, instead of hornin' in on the detective department?"

"Because I've got an idea where she might of gone, gumshoe. What can you lose, if I'm wrong?"

He says no more, but stalks to the up-car. At nine we get off, turn right. The door to 902 is open. Right away I see Joe is correct. There's nothing there except a little of that gardenia perfume that Miss Larson always wears. Her airplane bag is gone; there's no stuff in the drawers or the closet. Joe grins, sour-like: "Okay, Scrapper. Where might the little lady be?"

"I'm not so sure, now," I tell him. "I'd expected to find a few things gone, in which case I could have suggested we look in room nine-forty for the rest of the stuff."

That gets Joe going. "Who's in it," he asks.

I feel kind of crummy about blabbing on Miss Larson, but there is no choice left.

"A guy named George Effridge," I reply. "You may recall a gray-haired, washed-out old dodo who wears very eccentric clothes—a stiff collar and a white wash-necktie, spats and patent leathers?"

"Sure," says Joe. "I spotted him the first time he drifted through the lobby, smirking at every good-looking babe in sight."

"Mister Effridge is no bargain for any dame, in my opinion, Joey. I know he has one glass eye and he's been chewing on store teeth for many a day now. Nevertheless, Miss Larson seems very fond of him. No doubt if you check down at our switchboard, she'll confirm what I say. They must have been phoning back and forth, at one time or another, because I've seen them meeting out here in the hall."

Joe ducks out the door, down the hall to 940. There's a card hanging to a cord looped over the door-knob:

DO NOT DISTURB

Kalen pays no attention to it—just pounds on the panel. When he gets no answer from inside, he jerks out his keys and opens up. He isn't supposed to do this without one of the assistant managers being there as witness, but who am I to tell a house-dick how to handle his job!

I'm half expecting we'll find Miss Larson there. We don't, but her bag is there. It's open and a few silkies and such are showing. The dame's bag is the only one in the room! Effridge's luggage is gone!

There's nothing there except a stench—a smell that makes you want to clamp a clothespin on your nose. It's like somebody'd been boiling old inner-tubes in rancid oil.

Joe gets the lavatory door wide. A cloud of dirty yellow mist comes swirling out; the odor's so vile we have to back up to the window and slide it open.

From there we can see nothing in the bathroom. We don't notice anything until the air has cleared a bit.

Then we look in the bathtub.

It looks like the tub is a third full of pea soup—green and greasy. There are some thin, white sticks floating in it. That's the way they look at first, until we see they're bones.

And there's something like an oversized milky marble lying on the floor beside the tub. I know what *that* is. Effridge's glass eye!

CHAPTER TWO

Shots in the Dark

JOE makes a noise indicating all is not well in the pit of his stomach. "Stick here, Scrapper. Don't let any one in. I'm going to get Mister Bessenger."

Kalen could call our assistant manager on the house phone easier than he can jump downstairs and bring him back—but what the house-dick really wants is some

good fresh air and a chance to collect his wits after looking at that steaming hell-broth.

That stuff in the tub is acid, of course. While I watch, what's left of the bones floating in that gruesome mixture, are melting away. In a few minutes there won't be anything left except that glass eye lying on the floor.

I haven't any doubt Effridge has been dumped into that death-stew. But who could have done it, or why, I can't figure.

I can think of plenty easier ways to knock off a guy than by dissolving him in an acid bath. Whoever poured that murder mess into the bathtub must have had a reason for using such a cockeyed method. And the killer must be one of our guests at the *Metropole*. No visitor could possibly tote in all that acid. I, or one of my pals on the bell-hop desk, would've spotted anyone lugging in bottles in any quantity. Unless they'd been carried in, via a trunk or suitcase, of course. At the moment, I can't recall anybody who's checked in any item that felt like fifteen or twenty gallons of acid.

I'm giving the room a quick looking over to see if the bottles in which the stuff had been carried are still around, but they aren't. Suddenly I hear a noise like somebody being strangled to death. I whirl. It's the tub talking, as that green stuff drains out with a gargle that sounds exactly like the throat-rattle of a dying man. The stopper must have finally been eaten through by the acid. . . .

By the time Joe and Mister Bessenger come pelting down the hall, there's nothing in the tub but a green scum like the top of a stagnant pool, plus the glass eye and a couple of pieces of gold which I suppose are teeth fillings.

Our plump little assistant manager puffs and pants like he's run a mile, when he sees the gangrene on the bottom of the tub: "Ah! You told me the tub was full, Kalen!"

Joe gasps: "It was, Mister Bessenger. It must have—"

"And where are the bones? You told me there were bones."

I chirp up: "They dissolved, Mister Bessenger." I have to gulp hard before I can finish, because I don't feel so good myself. "They just melted away. I watched 'em."

Mister Bessenger holds a silk handkerchief over his nose and mouth, stares around the room with his eyes practically popping out of his head.

"Effridge's baggage!" he mumbles. "Where is it?"

Kalen points to Miss Larson's little airplane bag. "This is all the stuff that was here when I come in, Mister Bessenger. It belongs to the skirt who registered into nine-0-two—a Miss Mona Larson. I was checking on her, figuring she beat her bill. Scrapper, here, says she was palsy-walsy with this Effridge gent. It looks to me like she murdered the old gaffer."

"THAT'S silly." I'm speaking out of turn, but I can't help it; it makes me sore to have a sweet kid like Miss Larson blamed for a crazy killing like this acid bath business. "How could Miss Larson have gotten that acid into the hotel? All the luggage she had was that yellow bag there."

Mister Bessenger motions to me to keep still. "Notify the police, Kalen. Give them a description of the girl."

Joe grabs the phone. "We have no positive proof this is murder, Mister Bessenger. Law says where there's no corpse there's no crime."

The assistant manager swears. "Let the detectives do the hair-splitting. Effridge is missing; the Larson girl has disappeared; and this tubfull of acid wasn't put here for fun! If that isn't a case for homicide investigation, I don't know what is."

Kalen gets through to headquarters. "Don't bother to send over no ambulance,"

he winds up, swallowing hard. "There's nothing left of the corpse."

"Doane!" rasps Mister Bessenger, his voice like a file working on saw-teeth. "Hustle down to the desk. Ask all the bell-boys on duty about Effridge's luggage."

"Yes, sir." I salute, snappy, and make a quick exit just as Joe is telling the central office boys the color of Miss Larson's hair and eyes. It will only be a couple of minutes now before the blonde's description will be bellowing out of a couple hundred loudspeakers all over town. And after that, it won't be long before they pick her up and put her on the grill. The way I figure it, somebody planned for her to get the blame. Nothing can make me believe that dame poured acid over anyone.

I have my own ideas about cross-questioning the rest of our bell-hop squad, too. I intend to find out about Mister Effridge's luggage, sure. But also I want to make a few inquiries about any heavy baggage, such as might have contained a few gallons of acid.

I'm hiking across the lobby towards the bell-captain's desk to get me a couple of answers, when a siren wails out on Seventh Avenue. I look up expecting to see a couple of blues bursting through the revolving door.

What I see is different. Mona Larson comes tearing in from the street, panic in her wide blue eyes, her breast heaving up and down like she's been sprinting hard.

She makes a dash for the elevator. I can't explain why I don't let her go, except I have that notion in the back of my head that a girl with eyes like hers wouldn't hurt a flea—much less kill a man. And the cops are just outside, on the street. They'll be swarming all over the lobby in a minute. If Miss Larson takes that up-car, they'll have her cornered. That's an idea I don't care for. So I yell: "Miss Larson! Message for Miss Larson!"

She hears me, hesitates, undecided. I hurry up to her.

"Follow me, please," I say in an undertone, so the elevator "op" won't hear. "They'll nab you if you go up to your room." I lead her down the corridor toward the assistant manager's office, and to the stairs that go down to the employees' basement.

She tags along behind, bewildered. "They can't get me here in the *Metropole*, can they? Won't I be safe here?"

"Cops can go anywhere they please, in this hotel, Miss Larson." I open the door marked:

FOR EMPLOYEES ONLY

"Cops?" She seems puzzled. "It's not the police I'm afraid of."

But I don't give her a chance to finish. Two big, blue-uniformed huskies come pounding through the lobby, and I'm afraid to let them get a look at her. After

that description Joe Kalen gave out, they couldn't miss her—and maybe they wouldn't be so pleased about my helping her, either. I shove her through the employees' door. "I don't know who you're running away from, Miss Larson, and it's none of my business. But they won't be likely to look for you down in the basement," I say to her.

She gives me a frightened little smile and goes downstairs without a word.

SHE has her nerve with her, at that; she doesn't really know me from Adam. For all she can tell, I may be getting set to turn her over to whoever it is she's scared of.

I might be taking a chance myself, if you look at it that way. All the facts say this honey-haired, cornflower-eyed babe has put the dot on Effridge. But it just happens I don't think so, that's all.

"There's a police alarm out for you,

Old Mr. Boston says—



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Miss," I say as we go down the corridor.

She gets pale around the gills. "Why are they hunting for me?"

"Murder."

She gives me the blank stare. If she's acting, she's doing very well.

"Mister Effridge seems to be missing. What makes it look worse, somebody filled the bathtub in nine-forty with raw acid and—" I don't go into details because she gets the picture.

"But they can't possibly imagine I'd do anything like that—" she whispers.

"These hard-boiled homicide plain-clothesmen haven't any imagination, Miss Larson. But our house-dick found your bag in Mister Effridge's room, so—"

I can hear considerable noise overhead. I cross my fingers and hope no one got a look at me when I steered the girl down here.

She isn't paying any attention to the racket the cops are making up in the lobby; she seems suddenly to have made up her mind about something.

"If he's really dead," her voice is very shaky, "I know who killed him. I'm not afraid to tell the police, either. I'm going up right now—"

But she doesn't. Twenty feet down the corridor the door of the men's locker room opens, and a few inches of something that looks like a piece of black iron pipe pokes around the corner of the jamb.

I dive for the blonde, get my arms around her and one foot behind her ankles. When I trip her and we go sprawling on the floor, she's ready to fight back, but the gun barks and I yell: "Keep down. Flat on the floor."

That first shot hadn't missed by much. For a second I think the guy behind the pistol is blasting at me, then I realize it's the girl he's shooting at, because the second shot knocks a chunk out of the concrete right beside her head. If he comes closer than that, it is going to be curtains.

There isn't much I can do. I haven't

any equalizer and it's a hundred to one that, if I make a dash for that door, this lad who's doing the gunwork will sew a lead button on my vest before I can get halfway to him.

But up on the wall, a couple of yards away, is the switch for the corridor lights. I get to my knees, lunge for it.

Just before I touch the lever, something slams me on the side of the head like a sock from a sledge-hammer!

I don't click the switch, but the lights go out, just the same. And me with 'em. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Verse

IT'S Joe Kalen who douses a pail of cold water over me and snaps me back into life. The lights in the corridor are on; I guess they never went off. Mona Larson's nowhere to be seen. I wouldn't even have been sure she'd been here, if it wasn't for that faint perfume of gardenia I could still smell.

"What goes on, half-pint?" Joe growls, as I splutter from the sousing. "We send you down to check on Effridge's luggage an' here you are, dead to the world—"

"I came damn near being that, Joe." I feel my head, realize I haven't been drilled by a slug, after all. The metal plate of the light switch isn't in the wall anymore. A bullet must have knocked it loose and caromed it back at the side of my skull. I have a lump like a duck-egg right over my ear, and I can still hear bells ringing off in the distance, but I haven't been shot or hurt bad. "Some lug took a pot-shot at me, from down there by the men's locker-room."

"Yeah?" Joe sounds suspicious. "What the hell were you doing down here in the basement, anyway, Scrapper?"

I kick my gray matter around in high. I don't dare to tell Kalen about Miss Larson—if she is actually on the lam.

"Just an idea of mine, Joey," I mumble. "Thought maybe Effridge's bag had been brought down on one of the service elevators and hidden in one of the locker-rooms."

The house-dick snorts, scornful. "How many times I got to tell you to stick to bell-hoppin' an' let me do the masterminding? I come down to check on that chambermaid who reported nine-0-two empty. She's still supposed to be on duty, but nobody's seen her for the last half-hour. Unless maybe *you* seen her?"

"Not me, Joe. I didn't even see the punk who shot at me, a few minutes ago." I stagger to my feet, stumble down the corridor to the men's locker-room. It's dark and when I put on the lights, I find that the room is empty.

Kalen doesn't come after me; he goes into the woman's locker-room, checking on the chambermaid. I'm cocking an eye at the mirror to make sure the Doane features are all intact, from snub nose to red hair, when Joe hollers: "Scrapper! *Here!*"

I get across the corridor fast, thinking Joe has caught someone, or is in trouble. I'm wrong on both guesses. . . .

He's standing by one of those long wooden benches they put in front of the lockers for us to sit on when we're changing out of our hotel uniforms. Between the bench and the row of green steel cabinets, I can see a skirt and a pair of woman's legs.

"That her?" I shout, before I get close enough to see.

Joe doesn't answer. He just points down to the woman's face. Or what had been her face.

Because now, there isn't anything between the woman's hair and the white collar of her uniform, except a green and slimy scum. She looks like something you'd find in a stagnant pool—her nose is gone, there aren't any eyes in the sockets. . . .

JOE wipes the sweat off his face with his sleeve. "Yep, that's her, Scrapper. See the number on the edge of her cuff? 42A? That was her number." Joe turns his back on that grisly looking thing on the floor. "Run up to the office, Scrapper, an' tell Mister Bessenger I got to see him right away."

I back away from the bench, bump against a pail standing beside the lockers. The pail's half full of a liquid which looks like floor-oil. A little of it slops out on my uniform trouser-leg.

Before I can take a step, the cloth is smoking; in ten seconds there's a hole as big as an apple right above my ankle, where that stuff had splattered.

"Holy cats!" I howl. "Here's your acid, Joe. Look at my uniform!"

He peers at the bucket. The inside of it is coated with wax. "You're running in luck, Scrapper. If you'd spilled that stuff on your feet, you'd be minus a couple of toes, by now.

"Sure. And if I'd got a cupfull in my face, I'd look like that floor maid. Only she had it coming to her."

Joe scowls. "Why say that?"

"She must have been in with the killer," I point out. "She could lug that acid upstairs in the service car. If she was careful not to spill any, the elevator operator wouldn't get wise. And after she'd helped the murderer do his dirty work, he paid her off with a dose of the same medicine." I sit down on the bench and slide out of my trousers. That hole is getting bigger all the time and I don't crave to have the acid burning me.

Joe agrees: "That's the way it must have been, kid. She was probably in cahoots with Miss Larson."

I have to admit it doesn't sound so good. Maybe I'm just what Joe claims—a sucker for a neat-looking gal. But I still don't think so. I'm thinking that the punk who's been slopping this acid over his victim's faces, and who fixed my wagon

in the corridor a little while ago, has also put the snatch on Miss Larson so the police will think *she* murdered old Effridge and is making a getaway.

Joe must figure I'm low in my mind. He comes over and pats me on the shoulder. "Don't let it get you down, Scrapper. You better sign off for tonight. That lump on your noggin and everything. You go home and catch some sleep."

"A fine chance," I answer. "When the bulls learn there's been another of these acid-murders, they won't let anyone leave the *Metropole* without a Supreme Court order." I am wondering what I'll tell the little Boy Blues when they ask me why I got shot at by the murderer. I don't dare explain I was helping the Larson babe!

Joe sighs as if he has a rock weighing a ton on his shoulders: "There'll be plenty of trouble, Scrapper. But it'll be for me, not you. I'll get hell for not wising up to that Larson kid earlier."

"You're screwy, Joe. It wasn't Miss Larson who just shot at me."

Joe frowns. "No? I thought you didn't see who it was!"

He has me there. But I come back. "It was a man's hand holding the gun, Joseph." I hadn't seen anything but that muzzle, of course, but I contend I'm right about a man being behind it.

"Yeah? Then the Larson girl must have a male accomplice. Out of sixty grand, I suppose she can afford a split."

"What sixty grand?" I inquire.

"Mister Bessenger checked up on this George Effridge," answers Joe. "He's a manufacturer of corsets, up in Malden, Mass. Cashier of his bank says Effridge drew sixty thousand cookies, five days ago. Wasn't coin he needed to run his business, either. I'd say that clinches it. The frill grabbed the cash, killed the old geezer, with or without the help of this punk who shot at you, destroyed his body so they can't pin any first degree sentence on her, and beat it."

"It doesn't make sense, Joseph," I tell him. "Why should she kill the goose that laid eighteen-carat eggs? If she was gold-digging, which I doubt, she wouldn't have had to murder him, to make her score. And even if she had, why would she go to all the trouble of pouring him into a tubfull of acid, when an ice-pick or a hammer would have finished him off much easier?"

He groans again. "Let the headquarter's boys figure it out, Scrapper. Just rush a couple of 'em down here, will you?"

I GO up to the lobby, very shaky on my pins, but glad to get away from that hideous thing lying in front of the women's lockers. There are a couple of uniformed patrolmen guarding the Seventh Avenue entrance and a blocky-shouldered gent with "plainclothes" written all over his hard-rock map standing by the desk. I go up to him and say: "Mister Kalen, our house-detective, would like a couple of officers to go down to the women-employees' locker-room."

"What's the trouble?" He narrows his eyes. "An' who are you?"

"Charles Doane, bell-hop here for the last six years. The trouble is that somebody's been spilling more of that acid around."

That's all he needs. He calls one of the brass-buttons and they double-time it down to the basement. And I'm just figuring on ducking quietly out the back way so I can smoke a butt or two to quiet my nerves when I hear a girl's voice: "Scrapper! Oh, Scrapper Doane!"

It's Ellamay, our switchboard brunette and not a bad looker, either, even if she does enamel her nails purple and use too much mascara now and again. I drift over to the phone-board.

She gives me the slow up and down, from under those artificial lashes: "Didn't I see you talkin' to Miss Larson here in the lobby a little while ago, Scrapper?"

There's no use trying to put anything over on Ellamay; she's like that newsreel that hears-all and sees-all.

"So's what?" I hand her the nonchalant pose.

She pats her permanent. "I thought so. But I didn't tell the cops I thought so."

"That," I grin at her, "proves you have something useful under those snazzy brown curls. Were the cops giving you the quiz about the Larson babe?"

"An' how, Scrapper." She talks to me out of the corner of her mouth while she's making a couple of connections. "Who she called. How often. What time. . . . The works. But they never asked me. If I'd seen her lately, so I didn't mention it. I listened in on Mister Kalen's calls to headquarters, so I know what's going on up in nine-forty—but it will take more than a few dumb policemen to make me believe Miss Larson ever committed any murder—"

"Me, too, Ellamay,—"

"—which is why I kept this phone call to myself," she goes on. "I answered all the questions they asked—truthful. But they never inquired about any *incoming* calls."

"Who was buzzing Miss Larson, honey-chile?"

She passes me one of those telephone call-slips.

It reads:

Miss Mona Larson

Room 902

Time 8:45 P.M.

Mister Leslie Vyborg left this message:

*"Life is a checkerboard of nights and days,
where destiny, with men for pieces, plays."*

Operator 21

"Isn't it silly?" says Ellamay. "It sounds like poetry, but why would anyone be calling up a girl to leave a message about a checkergame? Unless maybe it's a code."

"Yeah." I have an icy prickle at the

back of my neck. "It might be something like that. But you forget about it, Ellamay. I'm going off duty and I might give this Leslie Vyborg a ring to see if he knows anything about Miss Larson."

What gives me the shivers is that I'm damn sure this Vyborg knows something about the murders. Because I know the next lines of that verse!

CHAPTER FOUR

Stand-In for the Dead

IT'S probably the only piece of poetry I do know, outside the gag about the boy on the burning deck and the first couple lines of the *Star Spangled Banner*. The stuff Vyborg has sent is from the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam and it's either a threat or a warning. As I remember it, it goes:

*Life is a Checkerboard of Nights and Days
Where Destiny, with Men for Pieces, plays,
And moves and checks and mates and slays
And, One by One, back in the Closet lays.*

It's a cinch this Leslie Vyborg expects Miss Larson to get his message and figure out that next line—about slaying. It could be a warning that there's a killer on the loose, or maybe just a means to scare the blonde silly so she will make a wrong move and get picked up by the law. . . .

I don't tell Ellamay what I dope out, because, although she's played it smart so far, you never can tell about people when the blues start to put the pressure on.

So I decide to look up this Vyborg gent and find out what goes on, before I get in any deeper. I know nothing about him, except I've seen his name in the gossip columns. He's a movie director, come from Hollywood to handle production at one of the new eastern studios. The Larson kid has probably been trying to land a part in a picture, as I dope it out.

I get out of the *Metropole* through the kitchen, without anybody paying much attention to me. In a drugstore on Broad-

way, I thumb the phone-book to the V's and get an address.

It's on Central Park West. I use a bus, and when I arrive and ask the snooty guy in gold braid for Mister Vyborg, he directs me to Penthouse B.

I go to the top floor in an elevator that's lined with mirrors and has a carpet that feels like pillows.

Then I climb a flight to the roof, find a door marked B and bang away on a knocker made like one of those scowling mugs they always print on theatre programs.

A black-haired Filipino in a bright red uniform opens the door.

"Mister Vyborg—" I gawk at a living-room nearly as big as our main ballroom at the *Metropole*. There is a lot of screwy-looking modern furniture scattered around, and on the walls are a bunch of tapestries about twenty feet long showing a lot of heavyweight dames gambling on the green. "I'd like to speak to Mister Vybork about Miss Mona Larson—"

That's as far as I get. A big, broad-shouldered giant of a man, with close-cropped blond hair and a thin, sharp, hatchet-face, comes rushing across the room. He's wearing dinner clothes, except for a purple smoking jacket in place of a tux coat.

"My dear chap," he roars in a deep bull-voice, "come right in. I've been expecting you. Rini, take his hat. Sit here, beside the fire, won't you? Now then," he pushes me into one of those low-slung, upholstered chairs, "what will you have to drink?"

I'M SORT of stunned by all this magnificence, but I manage to murmur: "I could use a shot of rye."

He waves a long-fingered hand at the Filipino. "Rye and soda, Rini. The best old rye, so we can drink to our mutual success, Mister Effridge."

"Just a second." I can't guess why he thinks I'm George Effridge but I don't wish to be running around under false pretenses. "There's something I'd like to get straight—"

"All in good time, sir." He offers me a cigarette from an ivory box. "We'll come to the . . . ah . . . personal matter . . . directly. I assure you I am very much interested in Miss Larson's future. Yes, indeed. But first," he shows a set of strong, yellow horse-teeth in a personal-ity smile, "you'll be interested in some of the details of '*The Green Death*.'"

The Green Death! I grunt something which I mean to be: "No thanks, mister, I've seen all the details I care to."

But he interprets my mumbling as interest and before I can get a word in wedgewise, he rattles on: "We title our film *The Green Death* because of its jungle setting and the fatal fascination which this primitive South American wilderness has over our hero. The heroine, of course—" Vybork bows at me—"is a native girl who attempts to learn the ways of the white man because of her love for the hero. But she fails and eventually reverts to the savage ways of her ancestors—"

I get the setup, now. Mona Larson has wangled it so Effridge is putting her into pictures. That's what the sixty thousand bucks are for—to help back this *Green Death* film Vybork's going to direct. With the blonde as star, of course.

Apparently, Vybork hasn't ever seen Effridge and doesn't know what the corset manufacturer looks like or how old he is or anything except that he has to be sold on the idea of the picture. When I came in asking about Mona, he jumps to a wrong conclusion.

I'm just about to break it up and holler: "Hey, mister, I'm not the guy you think I am," when there's a shout from outside the penthouse:

"Help!"

We get to our feet, fast. DIME AD

"Leslie! For God's sake, let me in." It's the cry of man in pain.

I make the door before Rini can come running in from the kitchen. Vyborg's right on my heels.

I jerked the door open, stumble over a fat guy who's crawling toward the door-sill on his hands and knees, whimpering all the time like a puppy with a busted leg.

Vyborg picks him up. Then I see why the stout gent's moaning. There's a spot about the size of a dime on the fat boy's cheek—it's the same nasty, greenish color as the stuff in Effridge's bathtub and that hideous smear on the chambermaid's face!

"DIETRICH," cries Vyborg, picking the roly-poly man up in his arms the way he'd carry a child, "what in God's name's happened to you?"

The tubby gent paws feebly at his cheek. She threw . . . something on me. From a vial. It burns like fire, Les. Get me a doctor."

Rini comes running up to help; the director barks instructions: "Soda bicarb, Rini; water and bandages. Snap it up." Then he puts Dietrich down on a big divan. "Who was it, Dietrich?"

The stout man sits up, holding his jaw in his hands and chattering with pain. He's a short little customer, but he must weigh close to two hundred. His face is a little flabby but pink and healthy looking, and his hair is all his own, even if it's a little thin on top. The clothes he's wearing would set me back six months' worth of tips. . . .

"Mona," he mumbles. "Must have been hiding out there by the elevator, waiting for me."

Vyborg dabs a wet bandage with the soda bicarb solution on Dietrich's cheek. "You must be mistaken, Dietrich. Why should Miss Larson try to harm you?"

Dietrich shivers as the soda goes to work on the acid eating that hole in his

cheek. "Don't know, Les. Maybe she's had a quarrel with Effridge—thinks it's my fault."

Vyborg stops dabbing the liquid on the fat man's cheek, squints at me, very peculiar.

"Mister Effridge didn't mention anything of the sort to me," he says, accusing-like.

Tears stream down Dietrich's face as he touches the acid burn. The spot is losing its green color and is now an angry red. "When did you see Effridge?" he begins—and that's my cue to get a couple of points cleared up, pronto:

"Been a little misunderstanding, gentlemen. Mister Vyborg, here, took it for granted I'm George Effridge—"

The big director stops his first-aid work, gapes at me: "Aren't you—?"

Dietrich grimaces: "No more'n he's Jimmy Cagney."

Vyborg comes over to me; grabs me by the collar.

"Who are you, runt?"

"Take it easy," I tell him. "I'm Charley Doane. Bell-hop over at the *Hotel Metropole* where Effridge and Miss Larson are registered."

"What's the idea of playing me for a sap?" He gives me a shake that practically snaps my neck vertebrae.

"Lay off!" I warn him. "I came over here to find out what's happened to Mona Larson and what you meant by that message—"

He clips me, sudden. I ride with his punch, to take the sting out of it, but it still jars my teeth loose. So I go back at him with a right jab and then a good, solid left. I catch him smack on the chops and rock him back on his heels—not bad for a bantam going up 'against a heavy!

But he stumbles back against a table, jerks open a drawer and comes up with a nickle-plated hammerless. By the ugly look in his eyes, I know the gun is loaded and that he means to put the lead to me.

He's just tightening his finger on the trigger when Dietrich yells:

"Les! For crysake! Put that shooter down. You gone clean out of your mind?"

Vyborg lowers the muzzle of the gun. "Listen, Doane. If you've gummed up our plans for this picture, I'll make you wish I *had* shot you."

CHAPTER FIVE

Statues of Horror

DIETRICH staggers up from the divan, holding a hunk of bandage to his cheek. "Don't you get it, Les? The Larson girl came here with this young squirt and waited outside for me, while he stalled you. She's had a breakup with Effridge and she probably blames you and me and Hank Hurley for it. And there goes the backing for my picture."

I give them the horse-laugh. "She'd be likely to show up here on Central Park West, with half the cops in town looking for her, wouldn't she?"

"Cops?" they chorus. "Why?"

"Murder," I say.

Vyborg puts the gun in his pocket. "Who's been put out of the way?" His voice is queer and strained.

"Effridge for one," I answer. "A chambermaid on Effridge's floor at the *Metro-pole*, for another. They were both burned to death by acid."

Vyborg's nostrils flare out like those of a horse in the homestretch. But it's Dietrich who cries out:

"Acid! A woman's weapon! The Larson girl, beyond a doubt. Effridge probably got cold feet; decided not to risk his sixty thousand. She must have assumed that we'd turned her down on account of that unfortunate screen test, and she's started out to square accounts by murdering Effridge and attacking me!"

Vyborg mutters, as if he's in a trance: "Who'll be next?"

"Hank Hurley," cries Dietrich. "She'll blame him particularly. We ought to call him; put him on his guard."

The director reaches for the phone. "He's at the studio, testing the lights for that temple set." He dials a number, waits a minute with no results. "That's damned queer," he says, tight-lipped. "The studio doesn't answer."

Dietrich shudders. "Suppose she's already there, Les. Suppose she's thrown acid on Hank—on our cameras."

"We ought to notify the authorities," Vyborg says, heavily.

"And have police swarming all over our sets for the next few days—holding up shooting schedules? Get our name mixed up in a scandal like this? Not as long as I'm president of Prestige Pictures, we won't. We'll go over there now and handle it quietly, ourselves. If we get any dirty publicity out of this, we'll *never* get an angel for this picture."

Vyborg calls: "Rini."

The Filipino slides out into the living-room. "Sir?"

"The car. We're going over to the studio. You'll drive."

"Yes, sir. Immediately, sir." Rini vanishes like one of those puppet toys you work with a string.

The director turns to me. "You say you want to know what's happened to Miss Larson, eh?"

"That's right." I'm still puzzling over that verse this movie-guy phoned to Mona,—but he hasn't shown any indication to talk about it, so I don't bring it up. Also, I am recalling what the blonde said about being scared of someone—and knowing who it was had killed Effridge. Maybe she meant these guys here. I make up my mind to watch my step very, very careful.

"Then you'll come over to the studio with us," Vyborg growls. "Perhaps you'll find out what she's doing."

THAT suits me. I'd intended to go, anyway, whether they liked it or not—and now I'm invited. But I don't care for it so much a few minutes later when we're all in Vyborg's big limousine.

Because I'm sitting in the rear seat, between Dietrich, who has a collodion patch over the hole in his cheek, and Vyborg, who keeps his gun in his lap while Rini tools us through the Broadway traffic. I get the idea that I'm no longer free to act as I please; it doesn't sit so well with me, either.

I do a lot of high-pressure head-work on the way over to Brooklyn. I'm in a tight spot; I've practically muscled myself into this mess and both these picture gents have a right to get sore if I step on their toes. Nor am I by any means so certain as I was, about the Larson frill. Dietrich says he saw her out on the roof, and there's no kidding about that being acid on his face. Maybe she's been hood-winking me right along, with that baby stare, like Joe Kalen claims.

Finally, what Dietrich has been saying gives me another idea. What if Effridge isn't dead at all! Maybe he got cold feet when it came to laying the sixty thousand shekels on the line, like this chubby little picture executive suggests. In which case, the corset manufacturer may have framed it so it would look as if he'd been demised—left his glass eye and gold fillings in that acid-bath, to cover up his

own disappearance and give him an out with the dame. It's been done before.

Still and all, if that's the way it stacks up, why the attack on the chambermaid—and Dietrich? It gives me the jeebies, trying to dope it out. . . .

The studios are over near the Canarsie flats; they take up a whole long block. We drive under a big arched entrance and park in front of a building that's all glass-brick and stainless steel.

We go through the office and down a corridor until we come to a lighted door, labelled:

Sound Stage No. 3

Keep Out When Red Light Is On

There's a red light above the door right now, but we go in, anyway. We're on a set that's supposed to represent a ruined temple stuck somewhere in the middle of a jungle.

It gives me a very uncomfortable sensation to walk through this set, even though I know it is phoney and the palms and vines and plants were probably brought over from the Bronx Botanical Gardens. I can't put a finger on what it is that sends a prickle up and down my spine, but that's the way I feel.

Maybe it's the muggy heat or the moisture on all this tangle of plants and creepers. Or maybe it's the rows of mud statues lining two sides of that broken-down temple. They're life-size images of



young girls, about a dozen of them, and they're very life-like. Some of them seem to be praying, others are holding their hands over their eyes, as if they wanted to shut out the sight of something pretty horrible.

Down at one end of the stone floor of the temple is a little pool with giant weeds and rank grass and huge ferns all around it. There's a tall, stoop-shouldered gent in a pair of faded overalls, working under a big tin reflector full of high-powered light bulbs. I hardly notice him, on account of what's he working over.

For a couple of seconds, I think it's a length of fire-hose, wound in around through the ferns and tree-trunks,—but then I realize that a fire-hose wouldn't be covered with green scales. And it wouldn't move, by itself the way this does.

I don't have any doubts when I see one end of this thing that's about six inches in diameter and twenty feet long. It's a snake—the slimiest, most repulsive looking thing I ever hope to see.

And the bright black eyes in its big, flat head are watching every move we make!

“**H**OLY hinges!” I burst out. “Is that thing supposed to be part of the scenery?”

Dietrich snaps impatiently: “That anaconda will play an important part in *The Green Death*; but you needn't be afraid of him. He's harmless when he's kept well fed. Anyway, Kettlet has him drugged—haven't you, Ed?”

The stoop-shouldered man grins, lopsided. “That python wouldn't harm a baby. Sleeps most of the time—only wakes up a couple of hours each night. You lookin' for Hank Hurley, Mister Dietrich?”

“Yes. Where is he? We tried to get the studio on the phone, but no one answered.”

Kettlet shrugs. “I was prob'ly feeding the constrictor, Mister Dietrich; I wouldn't have heard the telephone. But Hank ought to be over on Stage Four. He was bringing over some of them big reflectors. You'll find him over there.”

Dietrich leads the way off the jungle set—and I don't mind admitting my pulse slows down a little when I get away from the vicinity of that big snake. I tag along behind Dietrich, sweat running down my face. I want to take a closer gander at some of those strange-looking mud statues, but I figure Vyborg is close behind me—with that gun of his still handy.

I give a quick look-see, to make sure. Vyborg isn't following us at all. There's no one behind me!

I let Dietrich get a longer lead, then I step behind a film-drying rack until he gets out of sight. In no time at all I'm heading back for Stage Three and that jungle-temple that somehow manages to make my flesh creep.

I have an idea about those statues; I hope I'm not right about it, but I'm afraid I am. My notion is that they are much too good to be fake sculpture in a movie production. They look to me like life-size death masks—plaster casts made from the bodies of real girls.

I get onto the set behind the statues. I can't see Kettlet, though I can tell where he is working by the floodlights he's got shining over that little pool. And there's no sign of Vyborg. I sidle along close to the statues so no one can come up behind me. And I keep my glims open, underfoot, for that boa constrictor!

I lean against one of the statues, tilt it off its pedestal a bit. It's light, can't weigh more than fifty or sixty pounds. That's a relief; I'd half expected to find a body inside each of the dozen statues. Live girls may have been inside these things once, but apparently they're not here now.

But just to play safe and make sure

they're *all* empty, I go down the line, tipping each one up to be certain they are merely mud shells. I am down to the next to the last in the first row, when I hear someone cry out in a curious, choking voice. . . .

I dive out from behind the row of statues. Kettlet has apparently heard that uncanny sound, too,—for he is standing there, scratching his head and trying to make up his mind where the cry came from.

I hear it again, fainter. It's from that little fringe of dense grass surrounding that little pool. I get to it—watching close for anything that looks like a green fire-hose!

Three feet from the pool, I see Vyborg. He's lying on his back, his face contorted in a spasm of pain. There's no mark on him—but from his lips there is coming a little wisp of yellow vapor. . . .

He's already dead, his wide-staring eyes glazed and his hands clenched convulsively at his sides. In the tangle of grass beside him, I find a wax-paper cup. In the bottom of the cup are a few drops of greenish fluid.

Then I know what's happened. The director has drunk some of that acid—maybe accidentally or perhaps he was forced to. But he's being eaten up, inside, by that hellish stuff.

"Kettlet!" I call. "Get Dietrich here, fast."

He hollers "Okay," starts running toward Stage Four.

That's what I want. To be alone, on this set, for just a minute or so. I can't do anything to help Vyborg, now—but I may be able to do something for one of those mud statues!

Because, as I'd hurried past the last one in the row—on my way to this pool where Vyborg died—I'd smelled something that was never supposed to be on that jungle set.

The perfume of gardenias!

CHAPTER SIX

Hell's Swimming Pool

BESIDE the paper cup, in the tangle of grass, is something glittering. Vyborg's gun. I grab it and run back to that last mud statue where I'd smelled Mona Larson's perfume.

I know I'll only have a couple of minutes before Kettlet gets back with Dietrich and maybe this camera-man, Hurley, too. There's even a possibility that black-haired Filipino of Vyborg's might not have stayed at the car, like he was supposed to. So I have to work fast.

This end statue is of a girl on tiptoe, her arms held straight down and back, stiff, like she's going to take a dive off the end of a springboard. The girl is about the same height and build as the Larson blonde, near as I can figure.

The head of the statue is angled back, with the chin lifted; that and the position of those arms give me a cold chill, because they're just the way a girl might stand if she'd been bound and gagged!

I put my shoulder to the statue; get my weight against it. -It's heavier than the others. I can't lift it. But I can use Vyborg's pistol to pound the clay off one of the hands.

The mud doesn't seem to be baked as hard as on the rest of the images. It hasn't had time to dry out thoroughly. It's easy to crack off—and underneath is white skin and warm flesh! *Warm!* She's still alive!

I go at that ugly mud casing some devil's packed all around her, but I can't pound too hard for fear of hurting her. I get her head uncovered, first, and see that while she's alive, she's unconscious. In a few minutes more, I suppose she'd have suffocated, with that gag in her mouth and only the air left inside that plastering of mud, to breathe.

I have her neck and shoulders free

when Kettlet comes racing back, with Dietrich and another guy—a big, burly mugg whose face looks like it lost an argument with a rock-crusher when he was a child. He has a four-foot length of pipe in his fist and he seems to be spoiling for trouble.

They don't spot me, right away. They find Vyborg lying there in the grass and Dietrich cries: "Hank, look here! Vyborg's swallowed poison of some sort. . . ."

Hank gives the director's corpse a hasty once-over: "Suicide, Mister Dietrich. But why, in the Lord's name, should he go out by drinking a cupful of acid?"

I've thought of that suicide angle myself, but I can't figure out any reason why Vyborg should have done the Dutch. If he's the lad behind all these acid murders, and has felt that the law is closing in on him, why wouldn't he have used his pistol, instead of gulping that paper cupful of stuff that's burnt his insides out? It's much more likely that Vyborg was suspicious about this setup here and was investigating, when someone cracked him on the skull, knocked him senseless and poured that liquid flame down his gullet.

BUT I don't bother to tell Dietrich or Hank or Kettlet any of this—because it's a cinch one or more of these three ginzos has put the dot on Vyborg, and will do as much for me if I'm caught getting Mona out of her plaster-casket.

I just get the stuff broken away from her neck and shoulders, when Hank spots me. He comes at me on the dead run, brandishing that pipe as if he'd like to spatter my brains all over the set.

I sling Mona, limp as a sack of ashes, over one shoulder, and waggle Vyborg's gun at him. "Back up, baby, or I'll ready you up for a coffin, and no kidding about it."

He backs up. I head for the studio exit.

I have to go past that little pool where Vyborg's lying, to get to the door.

Kettlet and Dietrich have both vanished somewhere into the gloom of the temple. I can't be sure whether they're afraid of my gun or of Hank's length of pipe.

Mona is just coming to life and it's a break for both of us that she is—because while I am picking my way through that tangle of grass and vines, being careful not to step on that damned boa constrictor, which is practically under my feet, she gives a strangled little moan, right in my ear:

I look up, quick. A huge black beam, like the boom of a derrick, is swinging directly over me. It's the camera boom they use to make high-angle shots—and hanging from the camera seat is Hank Hurley.

He swings down at me with that length of pipe. I duck and fall flat in the grass. He clouts at me again, and I shoot up, from where I'm lying—and miss.

He makes a grab, gets the girl by her hair. The boom lifts—someone back there in the cab, behind us, is manipulating the controls—swings her out toward that tiny pool of stagnant water.

Not until that very instant do I get it, but Mona's despairing shriek tells me she's in mortal terror of being dropped into that pool.

I glance at the scummy surface of that liquid and the shiny, whitish surface of the imitation rocks surrounding it, and know why. The stuff isn't stagnant water, fixed for photographic purposes. *It's acid!*

This must be the place where the girls who acted as models for those clay statues, have been dropped and dissolved—as Efridge was!

I SHOOT again and graze Hank on the arm. He drops Mona.

She lands an inch from the edge of the pool; some of her hair falls into it, and a little puff of yellow steam rises from its surface!

The boom swings down close to where I'm lying; the camera-man clubs at me with the pipe and catches me on the arm, knocking my gun out of my grip where I can't get at it without crawling over that python!

It looks like the end of the reel for me. He is coming at me again and one clout from that pipe will cave in my skull like a match-box.

I try to roll away from him. My hand brushes against that wax-paper cup. It's an idea. I gamble on it without thinking.

I lean over to the edge of the pool, right beside Mona; scoop up a cupful of that vicious green stuff and toss it up at the camera-man.

He sees it coming, dodges. The acid falls back into the grass—and then hell really busts loose!

A big green hawser comes lashing up out of the grass and flails against the end of the camera-boom, knocking Hank off his little seat—and coiling around him like a whip-lash around a hitching post!

It's the anaconda! That cupful of acid I'd meant for the camera-man has spilled on the giant snake and waked it up—but sudden!

The little section of jungle beside that pool is a madhouse of threshing boa-constrictor. Hurley screams like a demented thing as his ribs are crushed in; and then the big snake uncoils and lashes the other way, throwing Hank smack into that pool.

There's one banshee howl of horror as he hits the surface. I don't see what happens after because I bury my face in the grass to avoid getting splashed. When I look up, there's only a hand waving frantically above the surface, and then that flops back into the liquid, which is boiling and bubbling like it was on some giant stove!

I drag Mona back from the edge of the pool. She has passed out again—which is just as well for her sanity, because watching Hank do that death dive is something

I'm going to have nightmares about, for a long time.

I snatch up Vyborg's gun, as I haul the blonde to safety. I want to square accounts with the lug who's been handling the controls of that camera-boom.

He doesn't wait for me to come to him. He steps out of the control box and levels an automatic at me. It's Dietrich, and his eyes are blazing like a maniac's.

He fires first and I hear the bullet ricochet off one of the floodlight reflectors. Then it's my turn, and I put a thirty-eight calibre slug right through his belt buckle. That python is threshing around and knocking stones and vines everywhere, so my aim isn't so good, but I put a second bullet in Dietrich's paunchy midriff before he goes down.

I get up on my feet and go over to the president of Prestige Pictures, stumbling over a man's body on the way. It's Kettlet, he's deader than any door-nail—one side of his head smashed in, by Hank's pipe, I suppose.

Dietrich grits through his teeth: "Get me a doctor."

I look at the two holes in his belly. "It wouldn't help you any, rat. You've got a through ticket."

"It was that damned Vyborg," he grunts, in great pain. "He began to suspect me when Effridge didn't come through with his part of the agreement. If it hadn't been for Vyborg—" He fumbles at his belly for a minute and twists over on one side.

"You got Effridge's sixty grand, just the same, didn't you?" I'm asking—but I know the answer, anyway.

DIETRICH manages a crooked grin. "I had to kill him there in the *Metro-pole*, to get it. That's why I had to use the acid there in his bathtub. All the rest of them—" he groans in agony—"I finished . . . over here." He points to the pool where Hank had vanished.

"How long've you been working this racket?" I get down close to him so he can't miss what I'm saying. "Stringing would-be actresses and their sugar-daddies or their doting relatives along with the idea they'd be starred in one of your films if they'd only come across with a few thousand to back the pictures?"

"Six months," he whispers, weakly. "Paid even better than making a smash picture. Twelve of them I fooled—" he waves feebly toward the row of statues.

I don't ask him what happened to the other girls. Now I've seen that green pool in action, I know what would have happened to Mona Larson if things had gone just a little different. I suppose Dietrich's scheme of making mud-casts of his victims, before he poured them into that babbling bath of death, is just his way of keeping a murder diary, something to remind him what a clever guy he is! And I realize now that Vyborg must have done his best to warn the Larson kid, with that verse from the Rubaiyat—to scare her away from the studio.

That's where she'd been when she came tearing into the *Metropole* earlier tonight. Probably Hank had tried to put her in that plaster-cast then, only she'd man-

aged to escape. It would have been Hank who followed her to the hotel, too, and shot at her to keep her from talking to the cops. When he thought he'd killed me, he must have forced her to go out of the hotel with him and then brought her over here to the studio again.

But there's one thing I can't dope out. So I ask: "What was the idea of spilling acid on yourself, back there at Vyborg's penthouse, Dietrich?"

His lips writhe in a spasm of pain. "I didn't," he gasps. "I splashed some of the acid on myself when . . . I was finishing Effridge . . . had to have . . . some way to explain it . . . to Vyborg . . ."

He rolls over on his back, his muscles all contorted so his knees are practically up under his chin. "Had it . . . all figured . . . out. Never get me . . . no bodies to convict me . . . ah, God, it hurts!"

"You're getting it easy," I say. "By rights, I ought to take you over to that pool of acid and let you have a taste of it, before you pass out."

But he doesn't hear me; my suggestion comes too late, anyway.

That is okay with me. I don't care if I never see another drop of acid as long as I live!

THE END



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SATAN'S BROILER

by COSTA CAROUSSO

There was darkness on the top of that huge funnel . . . and there was fear. There was also that hidden evil force that had sent fourteen men plunging to horrible death!



BILL BAINTON climbed on to the rest platform of the gigantic funnel and sat down beside Gunner Gray. He was breathing hard.

"Some climb, eh, kid?" said Gunner, lighting a cigarette expertly against the lashing wind.

Bill watched the match swirl down into nothingness. "It isn't the climb," he said.

Then Bill's feet crashed through the glass.

"I'm getting used to it. It's . . ." He looked upward along the bulging orange-red side of funnel. "It seems to push at me today—as if to throw me off."

Gunner's eyes softened in his granite-carved face. "It's like that at first," he said. "It was like that when I started in."

Bill shook his head. "No, I'm not scared," he said. "I got over that. This is different. I got a feeling that . . ."

Then a man screamed, then another, and another, until the air quivered in a shrill symphony of pain and horror and madness. Black shapes tumbled over and over down the red vertical cliff of the stack, and as they plunged sickly downward to destruction, they sent up an agonized screech for mercy. Then they hit the pavement. He heard the dull crunching of snapped bones, saw the dark splatter of shattered flesh and fountaining blood. The world reeled and twisted and he flung himself back against the stack and gouged his fingernails into its scaly sides. And like a bloated orange monster, it seemed to bulge and heave beneath his touch—seemed to force him out toward the abyss below.

"Easy, Bill. Easy, kid," Gunner said.

His body was drenched in cold sweat, and his guts heaved wrackingly, endlessly. "I'm okay now," he said. But he couldn't close his eyes to the picture of mangled, twisted, bloodied flesh, and he couldn't close his ears against the horrible screams of those squashed bugs that had but a moment ago been men.

THERE was nothing that they could tell the police. There was little left of the mangled mass of flesh for an autopsy. The police that were detailed to the top of the stack didn't find a single thing out of order. But a newspaper man found a witness among the noonday idlers who said he had been watching when it happened. One after another, the men who were working on the top let go with one hand

and pushed themselves out into space. The newspaper played that angle up, said that there was a supernatural evil influence hovering over the building that had made those men hurl themselves to destruction.

"It's no use, boys," the super told Gunner and Bill for the fifth morning in a row. "I can't get any other men. Come back again tomorrow. Maybe by that time . . ."

"But I need a job," said Gunner. "I'm willing to work."

"Sure," said the super wearily. "I got to get this stack up for the company. And I need men to do it."

Bill and Gunner walked off in dispirited silence. Then Gunner said viciously: "No curse killed those men! It was murder! I'm going to find out how it was done and who did it. I'm going to start that job up again. I've got to get work!"

Bill knew what the Gunner expected him to say, but it was hard to get out the words that would say it. For the words would be irrevocable, and they were like a sentence of death. Finally he was able to get them past the cautious barrier of his lips. "Yes," he admitted. "It's the only way. When do we do it?"

"Tonight," said Gunner.

A DROPSIED moon peered malignantly at them from between black clouds, and then went into hiding again to brew more of the poisonous silver light that threw dark shadows of fear across their path. The flashlight that Gunner carried as he led the way up the steep stairs was a futile gesture of defiance against the lurking powers of darkness and evil. The men toiled upward silently. There was no sound but the sibilant hissing of their breath, and the dry scraping of their soles upon the dusty steps. Soundless, invisible fears pressed down upon them, forcing them close to the stack's scabrous sides.

Finally Gunner reached the top. He stretched a leg over the lip of the stack, and lifted himself over the edge and onto

the working platform that was built inside. A few seconds later Bill Bainton was standing beside him.

Above them there was nothing but the blackness of the night. In the distance the river wound softly—like a subtle poisonous snake. Far, far down the depth of the canyon bright-eyed bugs crawled slowly. Only the dark wall of the River Hotel was in front of them—close, ominous.

Gunner Gray got down on his hands and knees and began crawling around the circumference of the platform. His flash held Bill's eyes like a beacon light holds a storm-lost, and wind-wearied bird. But gradually a stronger spell seized him and held him. It was the opalescent light that glinted from the black window in the very top tower of the River Hotel. Part of the window must have been shaded, or the shade was drawn, and the window glared out at him like the heavy lidded eye of an unknown monster.

Bill Bainton tried to turn away, but he couldn't break the spell that held him. A wind blew against him, and he shuddered. But it wasn't the cold that made him shudder. Borne on the wind was an odor. It was the odor of death.

"Snap out of it," he told himself. But he couldn't snap out of it. A terrible loneliness seized him in the blackness, and to break the spell of that loneliness he mumbled his thoughts aloud. "It's evil," he said, looking at the winking eye. "Death is lurking behind it."

"What's that?" said Gunner Gray, stretching upward to his feet.

"Nothing," Bill replied. But there was something. He knew that there was something. And although he didn't know what it was, he knew that it was evil. . . .

"I'm going to look on the outside," said Gunner. He lifted a long leg up and swung himself to the ledge.

It seemed to Bill that the evil eye was shining brighter, as though in anticipation of some unknown sinister triumph.

"No!" he said. "No, Gunner. Don't!" He reached out and grasped Gunner.

The larger man shook him off. "I'm going to solve this thing."

"Don't, Gunner," Bill pleaded.

The other man looked at him through eyes that were narrowed in suspicion. "Why not?" he asked. But there was no answer that Bill could give him. Gunner turned away, and started raising himself again. The evil eye was glaring brighter. Then something white shone upon it. "It's the devil's face," Bill thought. "Oh, Mother of God, I'm crazy, but I saw it. I saw the devil's face!" And Bill was going over the edge of the stack. Once he was outside, the power of evil would possess him, and he would scream and push himself into the terrible darkness. His scream would wail upward to the stars as his body thundered downward and smashed into blood and splintered bone.

SUDDENLY there was a heavy wrench in Bill's hand, and he was lifting it, bringing it down. Somehow Gunner sensed him and turned. The wrench missed his head and thudded dully into his powerful shoulder. Gunner winced. Then he swung himself back onto the platform. His hands reaching for Bill Bainton's throat. "You dirty little murderer," he hissed. There was a look of horror on his face. Fear was there too, and the lust to kill. "You murdered all those men," he gritted.

"No! Gunner! No! As God is my witness!" But there was no chance to talk. Gunner's powerful hands were closing on his throat, shoving him down to his knees. A red mist swam before his eyes. A hot iron seared his chest. Thunderous seas pounded in his brain. But before he went under and drowned, a spasmodic impulse brought his knee up sharply. It sunk into something soft. There was a groan, and then the weight lifted.

When Bill Bainton struggled to his feet

and shook the needles of pain away from his eyes, he heard a soft moaning. Gunner was on his back. His ankle was wedged in the V formed by a support from the platform to the derrick pole. His leg was twisted grotesquely to one side, and a white fragment of bone bit through the welter of blood-sodden cloth above his knee.

There was no way Bill could get him down alone. He made him as comfortable as he could, and then he was lifting himself over the side of the stack to go down for help.

The devil's face was gone from the eye now. He paused for a moment to make sure, then he tightened his grip on the iron rim. A warmth coursed through his hand, and in a moment that warmth became unendurable. It was impossible to touch that iron and swing over the side.

He moved backward in dazed disbelief. He touched the stack in another place. It was hotter than before. His finger stuck to the iron, and the skin peeled off when he tore it away. Bill Bainton moved backward to the center of the stack. Even as he moved, the iron began to glow dully.

In two minutes the heat was unbearable. In five it was hell.

"Water!" Gunner moaned. "Water! I'm hot! I'm hot! I'm burning!"

Bill tore off his clothes, threw them away. His shirt landed near the side of the stack. In a moment it burst into flame. He ran over and stomped it out. It was like running against a wall. A burning wall. Even fifteen feet away from the glowing sides, the heat was like an oven. Soon the platform would begin to smoulder, then it would burst into flames. Their bodies would turn red, then brown, then black. They would fall to the bottom of the stack like charcoal.

"The rope!" Gunner yelled. "Use the rope and get away. Go down—the inside—leave me—no use . . ."

"No," said Bill quietly. "I won't leave

you." He climbed on to the derrick platform and looked at the eye again. The devil's face was in it again . . . and the face was laughing!

IT DIDN'T frighten Bill now. Now it was the object of his danger, the menace to his life, the target of his hatred. It was something that he had to destroy or die.

He grasped the rope in his hands and tied one end onto the derrick pole. On the other he tied a loop. Then he coiled it carefully. He gauged the top of the tower to be fifty feet away from him and about thirty below. He measured the distance to the gargoyle on the top and threw.

He missed the first time. He missed the second time. After the third time he stopped counting. It was throw and coil, throw and coil, over and over till his arm was a machine. But it was a machine that was breaking down. He made it finally. He knew that he would make it as long as he was alive and could keep trying. Then he swung himself into space.

The rope burned through his hand like a blazing wire, but he didn't check his downward speed. When the pain became unbearable, he thought of Gunner roasting alive up there. He had to save Gunner. He couldn't let Gunner die.

As he slid downward, the weight of his body bellied the rope till he was level with the window. That was good. This way he wouldn't have to do any climbing. The devil's face was watching him as he swooped down closer and closer. But it wasn't grinning now. There was hatred in it . . . and fear. Then there was a knife in its hand. The hand was reaching upward through the opened half of the window and slashing at the rope.

Then Bill's feet crashed through the glass. Razor-sharp daggers cut at his body, his face. A warm flood of his blood blinded him and ran salt in his mouth. Then his feet struck something solid that

gave way before him. He thudded on to the floor. After a while he was able to get to his feet. But the thing on the floor would never get up again. It had crashed down sideways against the knife. The eyes still glared up murderously at him, but it was dead. He could see by the light of the single candle in the room. The man's skin was wrinkled like rotted parchment, and the bones showed through his face in the naked outlines of a skull. He could see the gleam of genius in the dead eyes, and he could see that the genius had turned to madness.

He saw something else by the light of the candle. Something that he wished he hadn't seen. But even if he hadn't seen it, he would have smelled it. It was a corpse, but this one had been dead a long time.

THE skin was black except where some powerful liquid had burned outward from the inside, leaving brilliant green circles of corruption. The stench that came from the hideous thing stung his senses and sent a thrill of horror tingling across his scalp. Then as his eyes grew used to the darkness, he saw that the thing was clothed in flimsy white silk clothes, and that it had once been a woman. A black wave of horror pounded down on his mind, and his senses reeled. Sweat broke out on his body, and he breathed heavily to keep above the nauseous tide that was threatening to engulf him. Finally he won the struggle and managed to find a light.

The scene that leapt before his eyes was only the first clue to the answer that would lead him out of this tortuous labyrinth of horror. Hundreds of wires crossed and recrossed against the ceiling. On the tables were strange dynamos that he could not understand. Shiny tubes glittered from countless sockets on the walls. Focused through the window was something that looked like a movie projector. But Bill knew that it wasn't a

movie projector. He knew that it was a machine of death. He tore the plugs loose, and instantly the glowing sides of the tower grew dim, then became dark.

The diary that he found made things clear. He didn't look through all of it. Just the first page and the last.

The first page was dated Aug. 1st, 1934; beneath the date, in a thin, womanish writing, he read: *My Alicia died today, and the world has lost all meaning. I cannot work without the inspiration of my lovely bride. The joyful triumph of my experiments is turned to gall.*

April 3: I shall never leave this room without Alicia beside me. I can bring her back. That will be my work, and my success will be like laughter of defiance in the face of the gods. I will bring her back!

May 14, 1940: I cannot work with that devilish noise outside my window. All day long those hammers speak to me and their speech is mockery. Dead dead dead dead dead, they say over and over. But she is not dead. For my will has entered her body, and it will be only a matter of days before I can strike the vivifying spark. But those men with the blaspheming hammers must first be destroyed. . . .

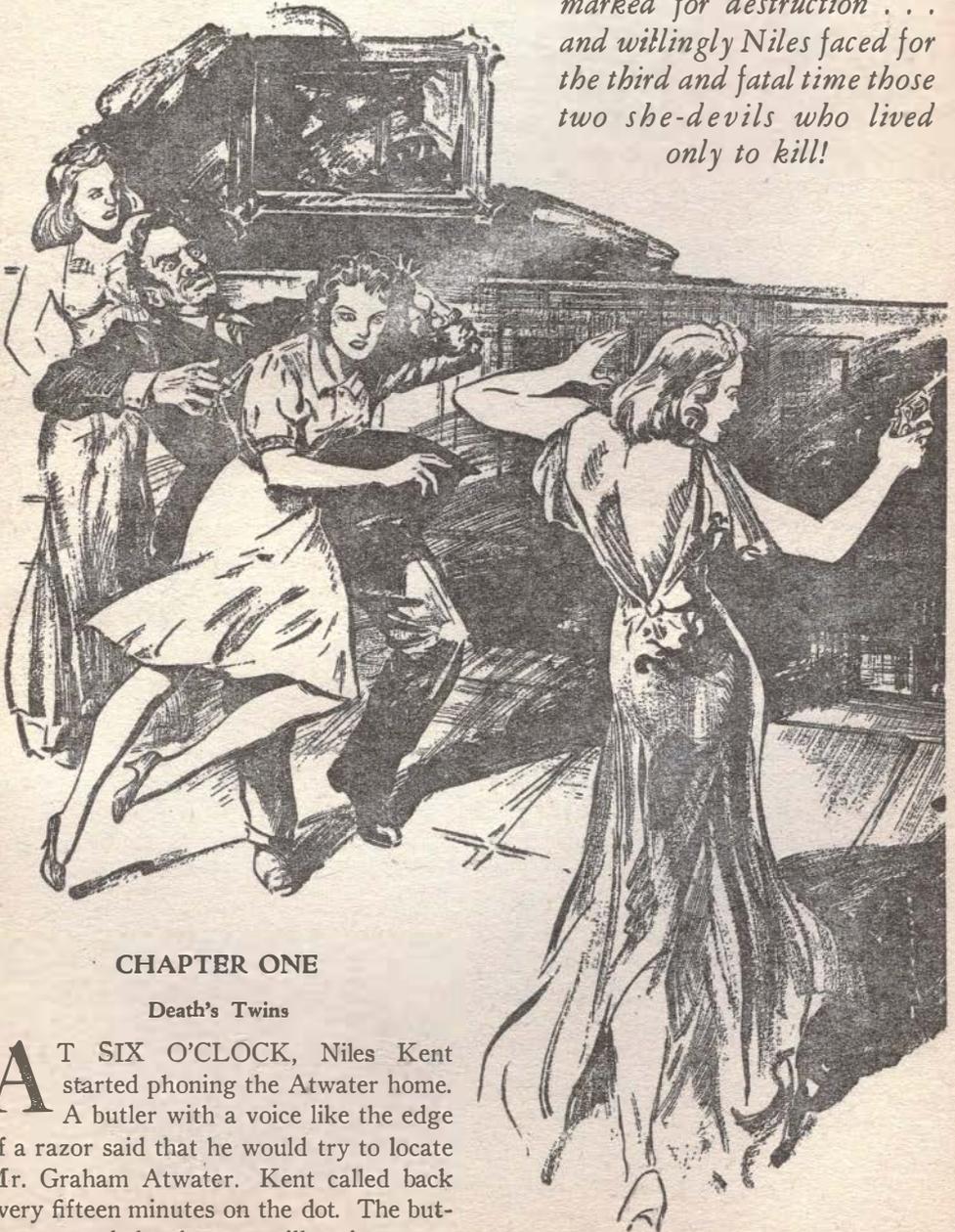
He had the key to the labyrinth now, and with its possession came a lassitude that stole all strength from his limbs, and all force from his will. Yet somehow he managed to stumble out into the hall and explain about Gunner trapped in the stack before he collapsed into welcome oblivion.

He was beside Gunner when he awoke in the hospital. For a moment he could remember nothing, then memory came back to him in a hideous rush. "Gunner," he said. "Don't ever tell anyone about what happened tonight. I much prefer to forget all about it."

"You'll forget," said Gunner. "You'll forget everything except my gratitude. I'm going to make you remember that for a long, long time."

DEATH'S GRAY SISTERS

Death, ghastly and inevitable, was the fate of the hapless man or woman who saw for the third time the two Gray Sisters together. Twice had Niles Kent seen them; and twice had he escaped with his life. Now it was lovely Daphne who was marked for destruction . . . and willingly Niles faced for the third and fatal time those two she-devils who lived only to kill!



CHAPTER ONE

Death's Twins

AT SIX O'CLOCK, Niles Kent started phoning the Atwater home. A butler with a voice like the edge of a razor said that he would try to locate Mr. Graham Atwater. Kent called back every fifteen minutes on the dot. The butler reported that he was still trying.

A Mystery Novelette by RUSSELL GRAY

At seven o'clock the razor-edged voice at the Atwater end of the wire gave way to the crisp, annoyed bark of a woman.

"Are you the detective who has been keeping this line busy?" she demanded.

"It's important that I get in touch with Graham Atwa—"

"What woman's husband hired you to obtain divorce evidence?" she cut in.

Niles Kent was properly outraged. "The name," he said incisively, "is Niles

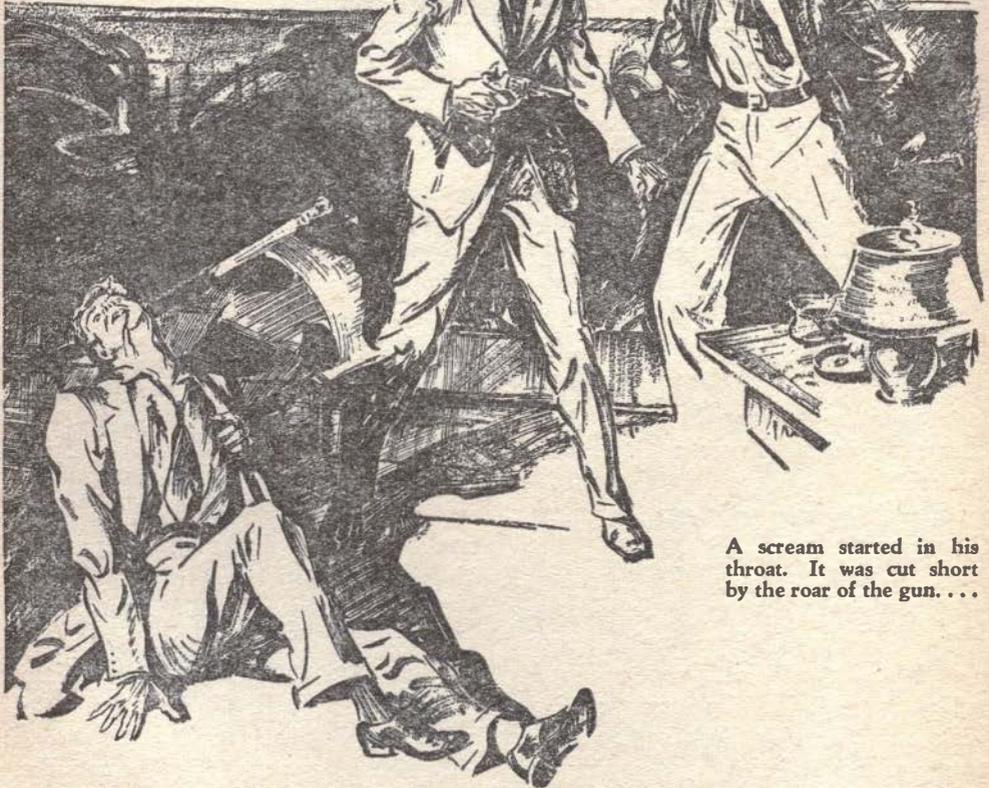
in danger. In view of that, I have reason to be uneasy when two hours have passed and he hasn't shown up."

"Life in danger!" she sniffed. "Probably some man out gunning for Graham."

"Whatever the reason, he asked me for help," Kent said patiently. "Haven't you any idea where I can find him?"

"In some woman's apartment, probably.

**Had those two women
some strange power
denied to ordinary
mortals?**



A scream started in his throat. It was cut short by the roar of the gun. . . .

Kent. If you've heard of me at all, you know I don't mess with divorce cases. At five this afternoon Graham Atwater phoned me that he'd be in my office in twenty minutes. He said that his life was

Or if it's still too early in the evening for that, pickling his conscience in alcohol at a night club." And she hung up.

That, he mused, must have been Lois Atwater, Graham's sister-in-law. A couple

of minutes after Graham Atwater had phoned him, Kent had got in touch with Willie Flam, a gossip columnist who was his source of inside information. There were four in the Atwater household, Flam had told him. Two brothers, Kelvin and Graham. Kelvin was the dour, industrious head of an insurance firm and the husband of the former Lois Minor, a stiff-necked pillar of society; and both Kelvin and his wife thoroughly disapproved of Graham, who had no aptitude at all for work, but an abundance for women and liquor. The fourth Atwater was Daphne, the kid-sister. A honey of a lass, Flam asserted.

After he had spoken to Lois Atwater, Kent locked up his tiny office and stopped off at his apartment to put on evening clothes. Then he made the rounds of the local night clubs.

He drew three blanks. As he stood in the lobby of the Club Hi-Ho, peering into the main hall, an open palm pounded him between the shoulder blades. It was Gene Dow, owner of the club. He was almost as tall as Kent and twice as broad.

"The demon shamus in person," Dow chortled. "How's crime?"

"Rotten," Kent said. "If the homicide rate continues to drop in this town, I'll starve to death. Know a Graham Atwater?"

"Do I? He's becoming as permanent a fixture as the molding."

DOW stepped through the doorway with Kent and pointed out a man with rounded, pleasant features at a ringside table. Seated with him was one of the most attractive girls Kent had ever seen. She was brown-haired and brown-eyed and a slinky white evening gown limned a charmingly curved figure. Well, Graham could certainly pick them.

Kent weaved his tall, free-swinging form between tables and sat down in an empty chair next to Atwater. The girl's

eyes opened wide, and Kent told himself that he had never thought eyes could be so large or so richly brown. Atwater frowned glumly at him.

"I'm Niles Kent. Remember talking to me?"

Atwater said: "Oh, yes. Have a drink." He called over a waiter and ordered three sidecars. He was already quite drunk.

"I thought you were dead by now," Kent said. "Or something."

The color went out of the girl's face. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Private detective," Atwater told her. "Great guy. Never saw him, but I read a piece about him. As soon shoot you down as have a drink with you. . . . Kent, want you to meet my sister, Daphne. Good kid. Not like most of the tramps I mess around with."

Willie Flam hadn't exaggerated about Daphne Atwater. She leaned forward, her startled eyes fixed on Kent.

"Was that a joke, that you thought he might be dead?" she asked.

"No joke," Atwater told her thickly. "Kent, you been wondering why I didn't show up at your office? Saw the gray sisters on the way and figured it was no use." He brooded into his empty glass. "I'm as good as dead."

"Graham, don't talk like that." Daphne faced Kent. "He's convinced that he's going to die. That's why I wouldn't let him out of my sight. I can't drive sense into his head. Perhaps you can."

"I'll try," Kent said. "Who are the gray sisters, Atwater?"

"Two girls." Atwater started to laugh weakly, and suddenly broke off and pressed a damp hand against his forehead. All at once Atwater was sober and Kent saw stark naked terror in eyes which had been dulled by liquor. His shoulders slumped with hopelessness.

"It's no use," Atwater muttered. "Nobody can do anything for me. You'd be all right, Kent, if some mobster was gun-

ning for me. But what can you do against two creatures like that?"

"You mean that two women are trying to kill you?"

"Not the way you think. I'll just die." Atwater gripped Kent's arm. "Listen. I've seen the gray sisters together twice now. More often than that separately, but it's only when they're together that it counts."

Daphne and Kent looked at each other, and their glances conveyed agreement that Atwater was raving drunk. Yet Atwater didn't seem quite that far gone. There had been such intense conviction in his tone and manner that Kent felt a chill play along his spine.

The waiter returned with three side-cars and placed the glasses on the table. Atwater lifted his, then set it down again, staring into the depths of the liquid.

"When you see them three times, you die," Atwater whispered as if to himself. "See them together, I mean. All right, I've seen them twice. The third time will come soon, and then nothing on earth will be able to save me."

"But that's nonsense!" Daphne protested.

He shook his head with fatalistic certainty. "No. I'll die."

THE band started to blare loudly and the lights went out as the floor show got under way. A couple of baby spot-lights focussed on a scantily clad chorus kicking neat legs.

Kent raised the side-car to his lips, and above the rim of the glass he saw that Daphne was also drinking and that her hand was unsteady. Graham Atwater was still brooding into his glass. Kent told himself that only the presence of Daphne kept him from feeling that he had wasted his time seeking out Atwater. Drink had obviously softened Atwater's brain and given him a persecution delusion. But simply being at the same table with his

sister was worth lots of anybody's time.

A moan sounded in Kent's ear. He turned his head and saw that Atwater had half-risen from his chair and was staring with bulging eyes at something across the darkened room.

"The sisters!" Atwater gasped. "The third time!"

Kent followed the direction of his stare. Two girls stood in the broad doorway, and light from the lobby behind them shone fully on them.

From head to foot they were gray, and they were so identical as to clothes and figure and features that they might have been a double exposure of the same individual. Even their hair was gray, although not with age, for they were young and beautiful in an exotic, strange way which was like the beauty of no woman Kent had ever seen. Even their skin was gray, somehow, and yet with enough life and vitality in it not to be repulsive. And their gowns were the color of their hair and skin—high-necked, long-sleeves, clinging, which showed to advantage the full curves of tall figures. There was but one break in that monotone of gray—the scarlet of their lips, contrasting so vividly that they were like bleeding gashes in those gray faces.

Daphne was also staring at them. Then she turned to her brother.

"They're only women," she whispered, "although quite exotic looking."

"Only women!" he echoed, and he burst into crazy, hysterical laughter which rose above the blare of the band and the singing of the chorus. People at nearby tables turned to look at him with angry frowns.

Atwater rose unsteadily to his feet and lifted his glass in a quaking hand. "To death!" he toasted wildly. "Drink, for tomorrow we die!" And he tossed off the liquor.

Immediately his expression changed to one of contorted agony. Desperately he appeared to be trying to talk, but the

sounds which issued from his throat were wordless groans.

"Graham!" Daphne shrieked and leaped to him.

But she was too late. Atwater, in the grip of terrible convulsions, took two or three steps and collapsed to the floor where he lay writhing. Froth oozed from his lips.

The band stopped, the singing stopped, and chaos descended over the night club. Daphne was down on the floor, holding her brother's head on her lap, sobbing and pleading with him. Kent knew that it was too late to do anything for Graham Atwater. The symptoms of strychnine were obvious. He plowed through the milling guests toward the door.

When he got there, the gray sisters were gone.

The hat-check girl and the uniformed doormen were rushing forward. Kent stopped them.

"Where'd the two women in gray go?"

The hat-checked girl frowned. "They were standing right here. Then somebody screamed. Then, why, they just disappeared."

"I saw 'em come in, but they didn't come out," the doorman volunteered. "What's going on in there?"

KENT swung back into the main room. He mounted a chair and swept the room with his eyes. Waiters were trying to clear a space around where Graham Atwater still lay twitching on the floor with his head on Daphne's lap. Gene Dow's broad back, stooping over, hid Daphne's face from Kent.

No sign of the gray sisters, and they were certainly conspicuous enough for him to have picked them out at once. He jumped off the chair and rushed out to the street. Maybe they had managed to slip past the doorman without him having seen them. If so, they could already have driven away.

A hundred feet down the street stood a gray limousine. Grimly he smiled to himself as he went to it. Were they carrying out the gray motif even as to their car? And when he looked through the windows into the car, he saw that his guess had been right.

One of the gray sisters was sitting in the back seat. There was nobody else in the car. She smiled to him and her scarlet lips looked like an open wound.

"Were you looking for me?" she asked softly.

"You guessed it, sister."

She leaned forward and pushed open the door. By the light of a street lamp he saw gray pumps and a delicately turned calf in gray hose.

"Come in," she invited.

He put his foot on the running board and then changed his mind. He hadn't known fear often, but now he was suddenly afraid. And of a woman!

"You're coming back to the club with me," he told her. "The cops will want to have a word with you."

She came out of the car, still smiling. He saw then that her eyes were gray also and there was something in them that was not as young as the rest of her appeared to be. It made him feel strangely troubled to meet her gaze.

"Where's your sister?" he asked.

"Uta? You are fortunate that she is not with me. Seeing us together too often is not conducive to long life. You have seen us once."

"So you admit that you murdered Graham Atwater?"

Her smile grew tight. "You aspire to be clever, Mr. Detective Niles Kent. We know who you are, Uta and I, and we admire your strength and your courage."

A slim gray hand spread itself on his chest. He felt her body brush against him, and a perfume rose from her gray hair which was not like anything he had ever smelled. A giddy sensation possessed

him which for several moments he made no attempt to shake off.

"No soap, sister," he said. "Women like you don't soften me up." But he wasn't sure whether or not his words were true.

She shrugged and took her hand from his chest and half-turned from him. Then her right hand moved toward him again and a slender knife had suddenly appeared in it. Without a flicker of an eyelash she casually drove the naked blade toward his stomach.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Is a Youth

NILES KENT caught her wrist. Horror crawled under his skull-cap as he looked down at the deadly point of the knife pressed against the button of his dinner jacket. He had been as close to death before, but always the most ruthless killer had shown on his face the terrific emotion needed for the act. This woman's face was serene, unconcerned, as if she had been about to step on an insect.

She laughed. "Do not imagine that I was actually going to kill you. I would have arranged it differently. You would have had, to teach you respect, just a little wound which would have been painful but not fatal. When I want to be rid of you, you have only to see Uta and me three times and then—"

"Cut the mumbo-jumbo," he said harshly, holding tightly to her wrist. "The police should get to the Hi-Ho Club any minute. You're coming with me."

"I think not," she told him softly.

It was then the rubber sap landed behind his left ear. His knees buckled; his hand slid from her wrist. With an effort he twisted his head and glimpsed a blurred gray chauffeur's uniform. The sap struck him again then, and he went down and out. . . .

Kent was sitting in a doorway when he awoke. Painfully he massaged his aching scalp and looked around. They hadn't moved him far; he was some ten or twenty feet from where the gray limousine had stood at the curb. A man and a girl drifted by and glanced at him and the girl giggled. Evidently they, as well as others who had passed, had taken him for a drunk who had managed to get only this far from the night club. His wristwatch told him that he had been out for almost an hour.

He rose groggily, one hand pressed to his aching head while with the other he brushed his clothes. By the time he had walked the hundred feet to the night club, his steps were almost steady.

Two patrolmen stood outside. One of them studied his face and said: "You Niles Kent?"

"I know," Kent said. "There's an alarm out for me by now."

The cop took his arm and led him inside. The guests were gone. Where Kent and Daphne and Graham Atwater had sat there was a mob of plainclothes men. Graham Atwater was already dead, of course, and his body was covered by a tablecloth. Daphne sat in a chair a short distance away, her eyes red and a handkerchief pressed in her hand, although she was no longer weeping. Near her stood a stately woman who would have been attractive if she had permitted her features to relax, and a man who looked a great deal like Graham Atwater except that it was obvious that he seldom permitted himself the luxury of a smile. No doubt they were Kelvin and Lois Atwater.

"So here you are!" Lieutenant Reeves of Homicide growled. He was a spare man with a thin mouth molded for being nasty. "Where the hell did you run out to?"

"After the gray sisters," Kent said.

Reeves laughed mirthlessly and some of the other plainclothes men smiled to each other.

"You getting that bug in your head?" Reeves clipped. "Hell, they were never further inside this place than the lobby."

"**B**UT they're somehow involved in Atwater's murder," Kent said. "Atwater was afraid of seeing them a third time, and when he did he died. And they're deadly as the devil. I caught one of them in a car outside—or rather, she seemed to be waiting for me. When I tried to bring her back here, she pulled a knife on me. Then her chauffeur came up behind me and sapped me. I was out all this time."

Reeves looked at him with narrowed lids. "You were knocked out and she had a knife. She could have killed you then if she had wanted to."

Kent said: "She was saving me. Didn't want to break the pattern. You have to see her and her sister together three times before you die. Are you picking her up?"

"You making a charge against her for pulling a knife on you?" Reeves asked with a smirk. A couple of plainclothes men simpered. That was supposed to be funny—the hardboiled shamus running to the police because a woman tried to stick him with a knife.

Kent clipped: "I'll continue to take care of myself. I'd imagine you'd want both sisters for the murder of Graham Atwater."

"What for? We know who did it. The waiter."

"Ah," Kent said, "And what's his story?"

"He doesn't say. He's dead. He put a knife into his heart. That's how we know he did it."

Kent massaged his chin. "And that satisfied you? Why'd he kill himself?"

"His nerve gave out."

"And who hired him to drop the poison into the sidecar?"

"Maybe nobody did," Reeves said. "Atwater's been coming here a lot and he

might have incurred the waiter's hatred. Or maybe the husband of one of the many dames I hear Atwater played around with slipped the waiter dough to do the poisoning. We'll check all angles. And I think we'll be able to struggle along without you, shamus."

Kent shrugged and drifted over to Daphne Atwater and her brother and sister-in-law.

"Sorry I couldn't have prevented it," he said.

Daphne forced a wan smile to her lips. "You couldn't know how it would happen. Even Graham knew only that—that he was going to die."

Lois Atwater clamped a righteous expression on her face and asserted severely: "Graham courted such an end by his disgraceful conduct."

"Please, Lois, this is no time for recriminations." Her husband turned to Kent. "I assume that my brother owed you something for your brief services, such as they were. Send me a bill."

"Not yet," Kent said. "I've only started the job."

Kelvin Atwater scowled at him. "As far as I'm concerned, the case is closed. His murderer is dead. I forbid you to rake up any scandal about Graham's life."

Daphne reached for Kent's hand. "My brother is right. Please don't try to uncover any mess."

Kent said: "All right then, I'll permit myself the luxury of working for myself. I resent having knives jabbed at me and being conked on the head. Good-night."

He strode off. Newspaper men were milling about in the lobby. They clamored about him as he shouldered his way to the door. Word had trickled out that he had had a brush with one of the weird gray sisters and the newshawks demanded details.

"I dated the gal up, of course," he said and got free and spun toward the door.

One of the newspaper men hurried after

him, and when Kent saw that it was Willie Flam, the columnist, he waited under a street lamp.

"I should have known there'd be fireworks before the night was over when you asked about the Atwater family," Flam panted. "How about returning a favor or two?"

KENT shrugged. "I'm as much in the fog as the police, except that I think I see a vague light shining through. I met one of the gray sisters, and about all I found out is that they'd stick a knife into somebody as calmly as you'd light a cigarette and that her sister's name was Uta."

"That means that the one you saw was Ora," Flam told him.

Kent caught the columnist's arm. He was a little fellow with a pinched face and weak eyes hidden behind tortoise-shell glasses. Kent said: "Of course you hear something about everything. Give, Flam."

"Sorry I haven't much for you, Kent. A guy like me gets around a lot and hears hints and rumor. Never saw them, but I heard their names are Ora and Uta, and that maybe they're young and maybe they're old as sin, but in spite of their curious grayness they're easy on the eyes. Men have died because they've seen them three times, or so it's said. Lloyd Wister, the steel magnate, dropped in the street of what the medics called heart-failure, but I've heard it whispered that the two gray sisters were near him when he dropped and that it had been the third time he had seen 'em. Then there was Charles Lislie who owns half the slums—he fell fourteen stories out of his apartment window. The elevator operator swore he took two gray women up to the fourteenth floor five minutes before, and nobody ever brought them down again. The police checked and got nowhere. And now there's Graham Atwater, who, I understand, was scared stiff of seeing both sisters together a third time."

"Yes," Kent said hollowly. He recalled the hopeless conviction of Atwater that death would be inevitable when he saw the gray sisters again. And he had been right.

"Yesterday I spent an hour in the library and I found something in a book on witchcraft," Flam was saying. "I'm devoting most of tomorrow's column to it. Seems that last century there were two women in gray drifting around London and whoever saw them a third time died. They were ancient hags, though, and our pair of sisters are supposed to be beautiful; but maybe they have some uncanny power to juggle their ages. Of course that's absurd, but then there's a lot connected with them that isn't reasonable. The horrible part about the whole business is that the deaths of these men seem utterly senseless."

"Maybe," Kent muttered. "Haven't you any idea where I can find the sisters?"

"They appear suddenly and disappear into thin air. I'm not exactly superstitious, but if I were you I wouldn't go out of my way to see them twice more."

"Once more will satisfy me," Kent grunted. "Thanks, Flam. I'll give you the first break when what I do to them is news."

Flam turned back to the night club and Kent continued down the street. As he neared the doorway where he had lain unconscious, he gingerly felt his scalp where the rubber sap had landed. His headache was almost gone, but nausea still lay in the pit of his stomach. Automatically he glanced into the doorway. His right hand streaked toward his shoulder-clip.

"Don't!" the boy who stood in the doorway barked. Kent's right arm, bent at the elbow, froze.

HE WASN'T more than seventeen or eighteen, the youth who held the bore of a black .38 automatic levelled unwaveringly at Kent's heart. He had smooth,

hairless, girlish features and thick black hair which swept up from a high forehead. A nice looking lad, but his eyes weren't nice and neither was his gun.

"A stick-up, sonny?" Kent inquired with a half-smile. His arm still bent, he shifted nearer to the lad.

"Stay back!" The words came tightly. "Say your prayers, shamus."

Kent laughed aloud, but inside he was taut. These kid killers were the most dangerous. They had no sense of proportion and were like fine wire which had been stretched to the breaking point.

"You've been seeing too many movies," Kent said. "A modern killer doesn't tell you to say your prayers. That went out with the last century. You have a lot to learn."

The kid's mouth opened with the stress of emotion. Here it comes, Kent thought hollowly.

Voices sounded and three men strolled by.

The kid shifted his shoulders back into the shadows and covered his gun with an arm. This was Kent's chance, but if he took it the three men would be endangered by flying bullets. He inched in closer, however, and stopped again. Then the three men were past and the bore of the gun gaped at him.

"What do you want?" Kent asked.

"Your life." The kid required time to work himself up once more to murder pitch.

"NOW if you'll just wait—" Kent's right arm rode in the middle of the sentence. His grasping fingers caught the kid's gun-wrist. The automatic thundered, chipping brick from the side of the doorway.

The kid was fast, however. His left fist jabbed up into Kent's jaw. Kent went back a couple of steps, pulling the kid with him. The kid's head bucked into Kent's chest and both of them went down, the

detective on the bottom. Kent's head cracked on asphalt.

The world whirled, then straightened out. Sitting up, he saw that the kid was gone. Feet slapped the sidewalk. The blue coat stationed in front of the Club Hi-Ho came up to Kent as he was getting to his feet.

"Kent!" the cop grunted. "I saw a couple of guys fighting and came to break it up."

"Where'd he go?"

"Search me. He faded back along the wall and now—" The cop looked about. "Maybe he ran into one of the houses. What was up?"

"A guy got fresh."

The cop grinned. "Looks like you need police protection, shamus."

Kent didn't bother cracking back. He felt sick and miserable and angry with himself.

No sense going hunting for the kid; he'd be blocks away by this time. Kent brushed himself off and walked until he came to an empty taxi. He gave his home address and pulled deeply on a cigarette and wondered why the devil the kid had wanted to kill him. Did it tie up with the gray sisters? It didn't seem likely because an hour and a half ago the sister named Ora could have killed him without trouble while he had been unconscious, and she had spared his life.

What he needed was a good night's sleep to clear his brain. His head was once again throbbing hellishly.

He let himself into his apartment and poured a stiff shot of rye. While drinking it, he stripped off his dinner jacket and removed his shoulder holster and dropped them on the sofa. Taking off his stiff collar, he went into the bedroom and snapped on the light.

One of the gray sisters was sitting on the edge of his bed. She blinked at the sudden flood of light. Her scarlet lips twisted into a self-satisfied smile.

CHAPTER THREE

Execution

NILES KENT tossed his stiff collar on the dresser. "This is a night of surprises," he said.

She stood up. Kent was keenly aware of the fact that her body was very pleasingly curved.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" she asked throatily.

"I gather that the death jinx doesn't count when you gals are seen separately?"

"No," she said. "We have to be together."

He had been certain that she was Ora, the one who had tried to knife him. Looking at her closer, he wasn't sure. There seemed to be a subtle difference in features, although the one glimpse he had had of them together had revealed them as absolutely identical.

"I take it you are Uta."

"Yes. It was Ora you met."

She stretched out her arms to him. Involuntarily he found himself going to her, and a pulse hammered in his temple. He told himself that here was a chance to work her for what information could be gotten out of her, but at the same time he knew that that wasn't it entirely. He would have gone to her anyway, drawn inexorably by her curiously gray, exotic appeal.

Uta swayed to meet him. Her arms went about him and red lips met his.

The door to his apartment creaked open. He tried to tear away from her. Her arms tightened and she was clinging to him with a kind of frenzy.

He broke her grip, threw her to the bed, and spun away. His gun was in his holster on the living room couch, but there was another in the dresser. Feet moved in the other room as he jerked the drawer open. He reached for the gun.

Through the dresser mirror he saw a

gray body leap erect on the bed and fly toward his back. He threw himself aside, catching the weight of Uta's body on his shoulder. She grunted hollowly and sat down on the floor. He dove for the dresser drawer, but didn't quite reach it. The bedroom filled with people.

Ora was the first. Pushing in behind her were three men. One was built low to the ground with shoulders which seemed barely able to squeeze through the doorway. The second was incredibly tall and incredibly thin with dull eyes sunk at least an inch in gaunt sockets. The third was the good-looking youth.

Ora had a compact gray automatic in her hand. The thin man and the kid also had guns. The squat man's bare hands were probably as deadly as any weapon.

"You fool!" Ora said to her sister. "This man is a detective and extremely dangerous."

Uta continued to sit on the floor, completely unconcerned.

"He's attractive," Uta said with a childish pout. "I can make him care for me. Possibly he can be useful to us."

Ora twisted her mouth in an annoyed grimace. "He's not like those others, Uta. Get up."

Uta rose. "He has a gun in that drawer."

ORA stepped past Kent, looked into the drawer and slammed it shut. For a wild moment, Kent thought of grabbing her gun and trying to shoot his way out. Not that he would have a chance, of course, but at least he could do some damage before he died. Although possibly there might be another way.

He said: "I don't suppose you're going to kill me. I've seen you two girls only twice. I understand it's three strikes before you're out."

Ora nodded. "You are fortunate for the second time. Perhaps now you will believe that I wasn't going to kill you a few

hours ago. I wanted simply to warn you that I was dangerous."

Kent's gaze swiveled to the kid, who suddenly paled and moistened his dry lips.

"Then why did you send Sonny Boy out to shoot me?" Kent asked.

"Shoot you?" Ora turned slowly toward the kid. Her voice was low. "Did you, Hubert?"

The kid's gun hand was quaking now. "This shamus is dynamite. It's a rope around our necks every minute he remains alive."

"He's seen us only twice, Hubert." Ora's voice was scarcely above a whisper.

Uta put in: "Anyway, Hubert's lying. I told him I was coming up here. That's probably how you knew where I was. He's jealous of the detective."

"All right, call it that," the kid flashed angrily. "Hell, do you think I'm made of stone? It's bad enough you two and those other men. You say it's necessary, but it wasn't necessary for Uta to come up here! We can't get anything out of this dick. She's got a yen for him, that's what it is."

Uta stepped quickly across to him and, with utterly no change in her expression, cracked him sharply across his face with her open palm. The kid's head snapped sideways. He remained motionless, fear rather than anger in his eyes.

Ora said quickly: "You've disobeyed, Hubert. Give your gun to Stretch."

The shadow of death crossed his smooth young face, but he made no attempt to use his gun. He handed it to the tall man and dropped his hands weakly to his side. His shoulders slumped.

"I think it would be a good idea to use Kent's gun," Ora mused as if she were making up a shopping list. "I noticed it on the couch. Bring it, Gor."

The squat man went into the living room. Kent felt a tightness about his heart. Good Lord, what was going to happen now?

Gor returned with Kent's .45 automatic

and started to give it to Ora. Uta snatched it out of his hand.

"Let me," she said with a happy, childish smile.

"You'd better use a pillow," Ora suggested mildly. "It is preferable not to have noise."

With horror-stricken eyes Kent watched Uta walk over to the bed. She picked up a pillow and returned to where the youth stood.

Kent tried to shout a protest, but his throat was suddenly arid. Good God, this couldn't be real! He was still unconscious from the blow on his head and this was part of a nightmare. And the most unreal thing about it all was the way the kid waited for his execution. He did not cry out, did not plead for mercy, made no attempt to put up a fight. He stood watching Uta approach him as a stricken bird watches a snake, with only his tongue licking over his lips and stark terror in his eyes.

WITH that set smile still on her face, Uta pushed the pillow against the side of the kid's head and buried the barrel of the gun into its softness. Ora looked simply bored by the whole procedure. The squat man and the tall man watched with only remote interest.

There was a muffled sound. The kid's knees bent and then he fell forward on his face at Uta's feet. She tossed the gun on the bed and went to stand by the door.

Niles Kent expelled his breath in a savage growl. He certainly had had no love for the kid; a short time ago he might have killed him himself if he had had the chance. But to cold bloodedly execute him because of an infraction of orders! What sort of devilish creatures were these sisters? One had calmly pulled a knife on him; the other had just executed a man as casually as if she had been shooting at a clay pigeon.

"Gor, tie Kent up," Ora ordered.

The squat man pulled a sheet off the bed and tore it into strips and tied Kent's wrists behind his back. Kent had to submit. Even if he wanted to make a fight for it now, he would be utterly helpless in the powerful grip of the squat man. He had to rely on Ora's word that he would not be killed this time.

Gor threw him down on the floor and tied his ankles and stuffed a gag into his mouth. Then the two sisters and the two men were ready to leave.

At the door Ora turned to him. "You have seen us twice, Niles Kent. I would strongly advise you to avoid us henceforth. The third time, you know, is invariably fatal."

The quiet conviction of her words made his flesh crawl. She seemed actually to believe that it was fate that he would die if he saw them together once more. And, he almost believed, it might be at that. They weren't altogether human, those two.

Feet moved across the living room floor, and then they were gone and, save for the corpse, he was alone in the apartment. He tore at the strips of linen, but Gor had fastened the knots with skill. There was a good chance that he would starve to death before he was found.

But less than an hour later Daphne Atwater appeared in the doorway of the bedroom.

She cried out and swayed against the doorjamb. Kent thrashed his body to show her that there was only one corpse in the room. Averting her eyes from the dead youth, she dropped down at Kent's side and removed his gag. Kent told her where to find a knife.

Then he was standing up and rubbing circulation back into his limbs. He picked up his automatic from the bed and led her into the living room and shut the bedroom door.

He poured drinks for Daphne and himself. They both needed them.

"THE gray sisters," he said, as if no more explanation were necessary. "They killed that boy who was one of their gang. I suppose their accomplices or slaves or whatever they are, get a special dispensation from the devil which keeps them alive after they've seen the sisters three times. Now what good star brought you?"

"I had to see you at once. I found the door open and came in."

"Thoughtful of the sisters," he observed grimly. "They didn't want me to starve because it wasn't yet time for me to die."

Daphne moved to his side and gripped his arm. She was still wearing that tight-fitting, low-cut evening gown. Lord, but she was good to look at!

"Listen," she said. "Now it's my other brother, Kelvin, who's in danger."

Kent whistled. "That paragon of virtue!"

"I thought it was all over with when Graham was killed," Daphne said. "I agreed with Kelvin that it wouldn't do any good to investigate Graham's death further and rake up all the scandal in his life. But that wasn't Kelvin's real reason. The gray sisters ordered him to keep you from the case, and he obeyed."

"You sure of that?"

"I'm sure that Kelvin is in some way mixed up with them. When Kelvin and Lois and I arrived home from the night club, Lois started a terrible argument with Kelvin. I wasn't supposed to overhear, but I couldn't help it. A few minutes after we got home, a private detective phoned her. She'd put him on Kelvin's trail; she's the kind who wouldn't trust a saint. Earlier tonight Kelvin had been with one of the gray sisters; the detective saw them together and followed them to a house where Kelvin stayed for nearly an hour. Lois even knew the address; she shouted it at Kelvin. It's 317 Willow Lane. Kelvin, oddly enough, didn't even answer Lois. After listening to her ranting for a

few minutes, he simply picked up his hat and left the house."

Her hand tightened on his arm. "I'm sure he went straight to those terrible sisters. We'll never see him alive again."

"Take it easy," Kent said, stroking her bare shoulder. "They don't kill everybody they know."

"They killed Graham. We have to hurry."

"We?" he echoed. He looked at the determined light in her large brown eyes. "Baby, you're going home and staying home. So far they haven't bothered with women. I'd hate to have them start up with you."

Daphne didn't argue. "All right. But hurry."

He picked up his shoulder holster and got into it. He'd seen those sisters twice, and each time a man had died. This third time his number would be on the board. A tight smile made little wrinkles at the corners of his mouth.

CHAPTER FOUR

Abode of the Fiends

IT WASN'T necessary for Niles Kent to peer at the house number to know that it was the right place. It was the only gray house he had passed on Willow Lane.

He was a few feet from the walk when a car roared up the street and, with a screeching of brakes, pulled up at the curb. Kent melted back among the shadows of a tree on the sidewalk. A broad-shouldered man got out of the car and hurried up the walk. He punched the doorbell, then stamped impatiently about the porch.

The door moved inward, and the incredibly tall, thin figure of the man called Stretch appeared in the doorway. The broad-shouldered man glanced over his shoulders, then slid past Stretch. The door closed.

Kent's teeth clicked. The broad-shouldered man was Gene Dow, owner of the Club Hi-Ho.

A light snapped on behind the two windows which looked out to the porch. A moment later a woman laughed huskily in the house. Kent had heard that laughter on two occasions tonight.

He moved cautiously up the walk, keeping to the protective shadows of trees which lined either side. He mounted the porch and shifted over to one of the open windows. Through a part in gray lacy curtains, he saw one of the sisters lounging in an armchair, puffing indolently on a cigarette.

She had changed her clinging high-necked dress for a negligee which was made of gray spun stuff, so sheer that her every motion shimmered through it. The room was furnished entirely in gray, and even the smoke from her cigarette—well, Kent had never before paid attention to the fact that cigarette smoke was gray. The unbroken monotone associated with the sisters was beginning to frazzle his nerves.

"We do not make bargains," the woman was saying.

Gene Dow moved across Kent's line of vision. He stopped in front of the woman's chair, his broad shoulders quivering with rage.

"My God, didn't I do everything you two asked of me?" he cried. "Didn't I even—murder? I slipped the strychnine into Atwater's glass. I knifed the waiter, who'd never harmed anybody, so that it would look as if he did it. And now you're still not satisfied."

The woman blew smoke-rings in the air and watched him. At first Kent hadn't been sure which sister she was; studying her now, he believed that she was Ora, the one who had pulled a knife on him.

"Ten thousand dollars will satisfy us," she said.

Dow's great fists clenched. "How do I

know? I gave you plenty. Then you demanded I murder those two. Now you're still hounding me."

Ora shrugged. "Do you wish me to call my sister? You have already seen us together twice."

Kent felt a little sick as he saw the abject fear which gnawed at Gene Dow's face. It had been a strong face; now it fell to pieces.

"God, no!"

Languidly Ora rose from her chair and moved toward him. Dow trembled like an oak in a violent gale. His arms moved out to crush her to him.

With a little laugh she slid away from his embrace. "Bring ten thousand dollars tomorrow morning, Gene Dow, and you can have your life—and me."

He stepped after her. "Why wait till tomorrow? I swear I'll bring the money."

Again she sidled away from his groping hands. "Tomorrow," she said. "When you bring the money. Go now."

He looked at her, his eyes drinking in her exotic beauty. Then he turned and stumbled out of the room like a drunken man.

Kent pressed his back against the wall. The door opened and Gene Dow appeared on the porch. Still moving unsteadily, he went to his car and drove off.

WHEN Kent again looked between the curtains, Ora had returned to her chair and was lighting a fresh cigarette. Kent threw a foot over the low sill and stepped into the room.

She was not startled or even surprised. She smiled. "Here so soon, Niles Kent? Uta said you would be afraid, but I said that you were the kind who would find us and come."

"But not to offer you money or love-making," Kent said. "Where is Kelvin Atwater?"

"In another room. My sister is attending to him."

Kent took out his gun. "All right, let's go."

Her gray eyes opened wide, and now there was surprise in them. "You have seen us together twice. You would dare?"

Kent felt the short hairs on the back of his neck stiffen. Good Lord, the woman actually believed in her own mumbo-jumbo!

He said: "What's so mystical about having your killers murder a man when you decide the time is ready?"

"Does it matter to the man how he dies so long as he dies when a certain thing occurs?"

The nonchalance with which she said that was somehow more horrible than would have been an admission that she and her sister actually had hell-born powers to bring death. She talked of murdering men as emotionlessly as a trapper would tell about his day's catch. He had been a witness to how casually her sister had killed one of their henchmen. Looking at Ora, he found that he was more afraid of her than he had ever been of an armed man.

"I ought to kill you right now," he said. "You haven't even the excuse of being mad, because mad persons aren't quite so logical. Your racket is plain enough. You or your sister start by making love to rich men. They fall for you and are ripe for a certain amount of plucking. But it's not too hard to find beautiful women, so you can't take them for everything they have. You build up a psychological terror for that.

"You've heard the superstition of two gray women in London; people who saw them three times were supposed to have died mysteriously. You impress that on your victims. Some may believe you, because they come to learn soon enough that you are not like ordinary women, that there's something uncanny and inhuman about both of you. Those who don't quite believe that you have supernatural powers

know they'll die anyway at the hands of your henchmen. You've done your job well. Some are so afraid of you that after they've seen you two together the third time, they die of heart-failure, like Lloyd Wister; and perhaps Charles Lislie wasn't pushed out of his window but jumped because he couldn't stand waiting to be murdered. Well, you're through spreading—"

She had risen while he spoke and undulated over to him. Suddenly she stood on her toes and pressed her mouth against his, cutting off the words. Roughly he jerked his head aside.

"You are brave and clever," she said. "You could go far with us."

"You don't really believe I'd become one of your stooges."

She sighed. "Unfortunately I do not." And suddenly she twisted against him and both her hands clamped down on his gun-arm.

Because she was a woman, he hesitated to clip her on the jaw. Then he heard movement behind him and he smacked her and her grip fell away from his arm. He whirled, but it was too late. The squat, powerful Gor had his mighty arms wound around him.

KENT kicked backward. He heaved and tried to get his gun free, but Gor's embrace was like that of a steel vise. Ora sat on the floor, rubbing her chin where she had been hit. There was no hatred in the look she directed up at Kent.

"You were right," she said. "I had intended from the first that you must die. But of course it was necessary that I maintain the pattern of three."

She rose to her feet and stepped to his side and yanked the gun from his grip. Kent, remembering how the kid had died, braced himself to receive a bullet in his brain.

Ora shook her head. "It would be too merciful to kill you that way."

While Gor continued his hold on Kent, she stepped out of the room and returned with rope. She kept the gun fixed on Kent while Gor tied his hands behind his back. His feet were left free.

"Take him down to the cellar, Gor."

The front door burst open. Heel clicked rapidly in the foyer outside.

Ora tensed. Gor looked at her for instructions.

Another door slammed open and a woman cried shrilly: "Kelvin! I knew I'd find you with this creature!"

Ora's lips drew away from white teeth. "His wife, probably. This should prove interesting. Come."

CHAPTER FIVE

Hell's Creatures

ORA led the way. Kent followed, prodded by Gor who brought up the rear.

In the foyer, Lois Atwater's voice came louder: "Kelvin, I demand that you leave with me at once!"

Ora stepped to the door and pushed it in. Kelvin Atwater cried out; and past Ora's shoulder as she stood just inside the room, Kent saw him gasping at her as if he were looking at the face of death. And he was.

Without doubt this was the third time Atwater had seen the sisters together, and in the murder pattern of those devil's daughters, that was an inevitable death sentence.

Uta was leaning lazing against a table. Like her sister, she had changed to a sheer gray negligee. Evidently Atwater's wife had burst in on them while they were in the same room, but Uta had not troubled to make any denials.

Lois Atwater, a stately figure of righteous indignation, ignored the newcomers and strode over to Uta. "You brazen hussy!" And she slapped Uta sharply across the face.

Gor charged past Kent and hurled Lois against the wall. She slumped to the floor and stared up at Gor as if she couldn't believe that anyone would dare to put hands on her. Uta hadn't moved. The gray of her cheek was tinged with white where the palm had struck.

Kelvin Atwater did not more than glance at his wife. Then he saw Kent. Sudden hope flared in his eyes.

"Kent, for God's sake, save us! They intend to kill us."

"Unfortunately, he is as helpless as you are," Ora told him. "You cannot see that his arms are secured behind his back. This is his gun in my hand."

She stepped toward Atwater and nonchalantly lifted the heavy automatic.

Atwater stumbled backward, clawing at his mouth. "You can't do that! I've given you money. I'll give you more."

"You were foolish to let your wife know so that she could follow you here."

"She had me followed. She didn't know what she was doing. I'll give you every cent I have."

Ora shrugged. "Even if we cared to spare you, we couldn't. You saw us three times. So—"

The gun rose higher. A scream started in Atwater's throat. It was cut short by the roar of the gun. Kelvin's face struck a chair, then the floor. He rolled over on his back and lay still.

Lois shrieked and bounded to her feet. Maddened by the callous murder of her husband, she threw herself at Ora, ignoring the gun in the gray woman's hand. Gor intercepted her. He lifted her from the ground and held her helpless against his chest.

"The cellar," Uta said.

Kent said: "That woman never harmed you. You don't even have to maintain the idea that death comes when you two are seen together three times. She's never seen either of you before."

"She slapped me," Uta explained, as if no punishment on earth could atone for that.

She moved after Gor who was carrying the screaming, thrashing Lois Atwater over one shoulder. Ora poked the gun at Kent. "Let's go," she said.

Stretch appeared in the foyer. Silently he joined the procession toward the rear of the house. They went down a flight of stairs and were in a furnished cellar room. Stretch pushed Kent down into a chair.

GOR tossed Lois onto the floor and went to stand near the door.

Kent pulled against the ropes which bound his wrist, but it was at most a frantic gesture. Even if he could free himself, he would have no chance against the strength of Gor and the gun which Stretch no doubt carried in his pocket.

Muffled voices came through the door at the head of the stairs. Gor moved forward, Stretch went reaching for his hip pocket.

"It's all right, girls," a man's voice said. "We've got company."

Kent saw the white evening gown first, then the pale lovely face under a tumble of brown hair. His heart slid down through a vacuum.

A man was holding Daphne, forcing her down the stairs; and not until they were halfway down did Kent notice his small frame and pinched face. Willie Flam, the gossip columnist! It didn't make sense.

"I found her snooping about the place," Flam was explaining to the sisters. "Had this gun, too." He displayed a small blue automatic which he then dropped into a pocket. "Took it away from her and here we are . . . Well, well, this is quite a party. Kent here and the virtuous Mrs. Atwater."

Daphne was staring horror-stricken at her sister-in-law, who crouched in the center of the floor.

"Lois!" she muttered. "What are they doing to you?"

"They murdered Kelvin!" Lois shrieked. "And now they're going to kill me!"

Ora said dispassionately, "Dump her next to Kent."

Roughly Flam tossed Daphne down to the floor at Kent's feet. She turned brown eyes up at Kent.

"I thought you might need my help," she quavered. "In some ways a woman can fight better against these creatures. There was danger that you—you might succumb to their wiles."

Kent said: "There's only one girl on earth I'd succumb to, and that's you."

For a moment her eyes softened, and something stronger than fear or horror appeared in them.

Then Ora's voice broke in harshly: "Isn't that interesting, Uta? They are fond of each other."

Groping at a final straw, Kent appealed to Willie Flam. "You must be human, Flam. In the name of mercy, stop them."

Flam shrugged. "I couldn't if I wanted to. And I'm in too soft to do anything to spoil it."

"Soft!" Kent said bitterly. "You're the finger man and the propagandist for them. You know most of the wealthy men in the city. You manage to get them together with the gray sisters. And once they've fallen for one of the sisters or both, you spread the superstition that whoever sees them together three times dies. Fear gets money where their fascination can't. And you say you're in soft because you get part of the pickings!"

Uta was stirring impatiently. "We didn't come down here for conversation. Let's get started, Ora."

Lois shrieked as the attention of the sisters was again drawn back to her. And her voice cracked as Uta's pistol rose slowly and relentlessly.

Kent kicked Daphne lightly, then harder, until at last she glanced up at him.

Behind his back he twisted his tied wrists toward her. She understood at once, edged closer to him so that she leaned against his leg. He felt her nearest hand move along his arm; then her fingers were fumbling at the knots.

Lois was on her knees now, praying for mercy, but the sisters only regarded her coldly. Suddenly Uta's finger tightened about the trigger and there was a roar and a blast of flame. Lois gave a shriek and sank writhing to the ground. She was not quite dead, Kent could tell by the spasmodic twitching of her body.

Daphne's fingers dropped from Kent's wrist and she pressed herself close against him as the sisters turned to her.

Kent could have done considerable damage to one of them with his free feet, but he restrained himself. It would accomplish nothing. He could not tell to what extent Daphne had loosened the knots; he had not dared to test them for fear of tightening them again.

Suddenly Stretch cried: "Hey, I hear fire! By God, I smell smoke!"

There were moments of taut silence. And they all heard the cackling of flames overhead, which had been drowned out by Lois's screams. Stretch wheeled and rushed up the stairs and yanked open the door. A blast of smoke poured through, drove him momentarily back. Then he plunged through the door.

Kent tore again at his right arm and it came free. He leaped up, rope dangling from his left wrist. In the chaos created by the knowledge that the house was on fire, he went unnoticed for precious moments. Kent had had plenty of time to plan his actions. He dove at the back of Willie Flam who had started to stumble toward the stairs.

Kent threw one arm about Flam's skinny frame and plunged his other hand into the pocket in which he had seen Flam drop Daphne's automatic. Flam screeched and twisted. His pocket ripped and the

small automatic was in Kent's hand. Kent fired with the gun against Flam's body.

There was a bellow like that of a wild animal behind him. Kent pivoted and managed to send a slug into Gor's massive chest before Gor was on him. The bullet hadn't stopped him. Kent drove a left uppercut up to Gor's jaw, but that didn't stop him either. Then Gor's powerful arms were around him, crushing bones.

But Kent still had the gun. Gasping for breath, he managed to twist up his wrist and sink the bore into Gor's belly. He emptied the clip. Gor fell away from him.

Through the smoke billowing down from the open door, Kent saw Ora coming at him with a gun in her hand. He dropped to his knees as a bullet whistled over his head. Before she could fire again, he was upon her. Then his fist lashed flush into Ora's face. Her eyes glazed. She crumpled.

"Daphne!"

She was at his side. He started to lift her. She pulled away from him.

"Take Lois," Daphne said. "She's still alive."

As he ran to the unconscious woman, he glimpsed the gray form of Uta scurrying up the stairs. He swung Lois up in his arms. "Follow me," he called to Daphne and started toward the stairs.

Flame leaped out at them through the door.

He took a deep breath and plunged. It was like running through a bonfire. Flames licked out at him and his burden; smoke rasped in his lungs. There was a single sharp crack, and he realized that Stretch must be waiting outside for them with a gun and was already shooting at them. Death by fire or by a bullet—they were through.

The blaze seemed to part before him and he saw a door. He bucked through the opening and almost stumbled over a gray

body lying motionless on the grass. And ahead of him was Stretch with his gun raised.

No, not Stretch! This man was shorter and twice as broad. He lowered the gun and hurried forward.

"Kent!" he yelled, and Kent saw that it was Gene Dow.

Kent literally threw the unconscious woman into his arms and whirled back to the house. Daphne was through the door, staggering, her tossing hair smoldering.

As Kent carried her to the grassy part beyond the range of the fire where Dow had deposited Lois Atwater, he saw another dead body on the ground. It was Stretch.

Gene Dow again had his gun raised and pointed toward the door. Kent said thinly: "No more will come out. I killed Willie Flam and Gor. The other sister is still down there, unconscious. Nobody could bring her out now."

"I'd kill anybody who tried," Dow said with a bitter twist to his lips. His eyes were wild. "I killed those other two as they came out. Almost shot you too before I saw who you were. I fired the house. I heard them down in the cellar and found kerosene and decided to trap them like the rats they were. Worse than rats."

His gun fell from limp fingers and he sank to the ground. "I didn't know you or the Atwater women were down there," he muttered. "I couldn't stand it any more. It wasn't only the money they got from me or the fact that they made me their slave. They forced me to murder two men tonight. He looked dully up at Kent. "I'm a murderer. Arrest me."

"The police will be here any minute," Kent said wearily. He was infinitely sorry for the man.

He kneeled down at Daphne's side. Her deep brown eyes were open and through pain she smiled up at him. Then she threw her arms about him and clung to him.

Asylum for Murder

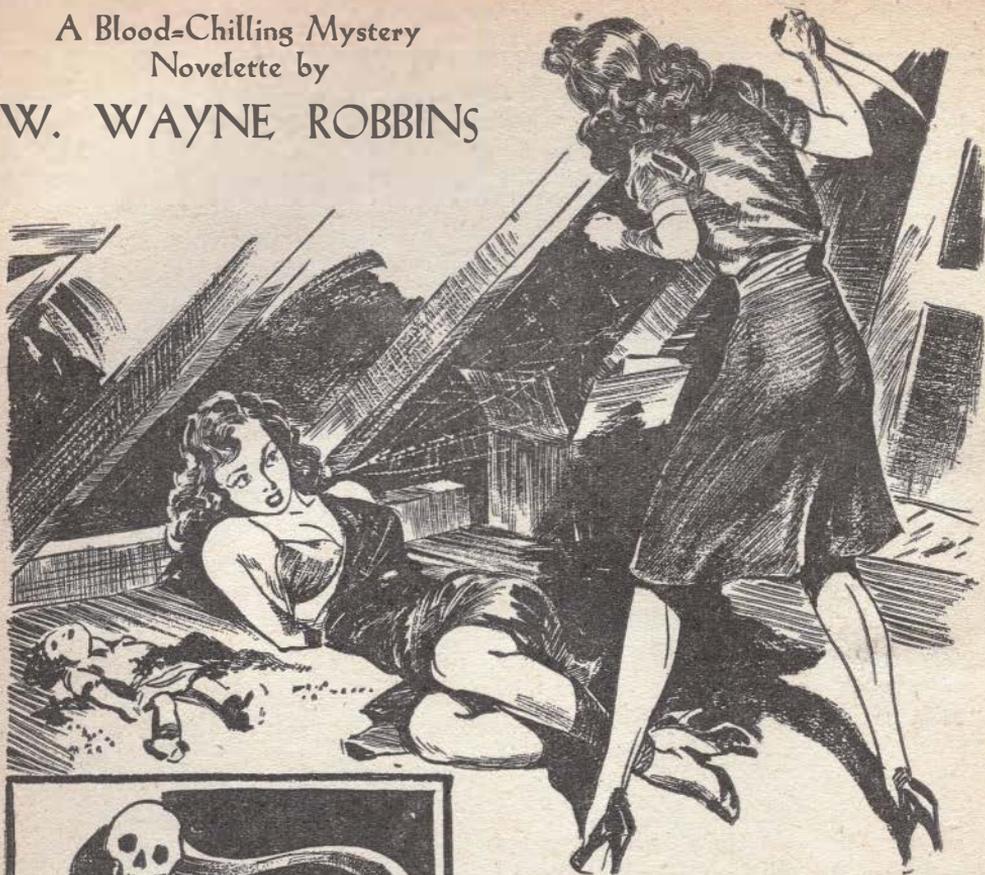


I opened the trap, pretending to ignore the gun poised over my head.

• • •

Jack Lambert believed that Ursula Van Wyck was innocent of those horrible butcheries because Glenda, her sister, was beautiful and convincing. But soon Jack was to find that the knife in Ursula's hand, which was so expert at disembowling toy dolls, was equally expert at things far more horrible!

A Blood-Chilling Mystery
Novelette by
W. WAYNE ROBBINS



CHAPTER ONE

Corpses, Calico and Flesh

AFTER I had finished talking with the girl I stayed at the phone and called police headquarters. I caught Vic Payson just in time.

"I was just going out there," he told me after I mentioned the Wells killing. "The chief phoned and said I have to stand guard tonight—they're afraid to move the girl, for fear she'll get out of hand."

I asked him to drop by for me on his way out. "Sure, John, heck, yes. But I don't quite get your angle in this thing; have you been called in? The way I got it, it was just an open and shut maniac slaying. I don't think there'll even be an indictment."

That was the way I'd got it, too, but I had to go out—after promising the girl I would. I'd look things over, tell her to forget any wild ideas she had, and blow back to town.

Payson came by in his white and black pattie wagon and we went out to the Van Wyck estate. It was far out in the suburbs of Seattle.

It's funny about people living that way. They go down to a place like that and rip out barely enough trees to allow elbow room for throwing up a sort of a house, usually mammoth, and elegant inside. But outside they let nature keep her own. Probably they put up a high wall along the front, next to the ribbon of highway, but that's all.

The conifers spread their dank branches to fill in the wound in nature's bosom, and the ferns and underbrush return to claim their own, and the vines edge along the wall and cover it until you have to look twice to be sure it isn't just a high bank. Then moss comes to clothe everything in a thick blanket like green snow, to slippery-up the paths, to make the house centuries old in a dozen years. They love "antique" atmosphere.

And people live that way. All this greenery shuts out the eyes of the curious just as completely as it does the rays of the sun. You never know those big estates are there. But the forests have their tenants; they're the people who don't like the city, but who can't live far from it. So they compromise on darkness and gloom and obscurity, for reasons either practical or neurotic.

The ancient at the gate, a man Payson called Bartlett, let us into the grounds. We circled around awhile and finally discovered the house. A brown-haired servant girl with a tiny white cartoonish cap let us in at the front door. Payson looked her over admiringly as we brushed past. We hadn't seen any cars out front, but we knew there were quite a few police around.

We paused at the door of the drawing room where a small gathering looked up at the sound of our feet. A blonde girl came forward at once and thrust her hand in mine. She was nice and tall, with a certain dreamy way of moving; at least it made me dream, in spite of myself. She had on a taffeta thing, and black silk

hose; she had the kind of legs that could wear them.

"Oh, Jack," she said, "it's sweet and thoughtful of you to have come."

I grinned down at her, and saw Payson's face crack with astonishment, surprised that I was a bit ahead of him. The girl and I had arranged it that way over the phone; I was to be a Seattle friend of hers, not a private detective.

We had a sketchy meeting with her uncle and aunt, and their son, a fellow whose toothy grin was not quite sincere and whose hand was white and cold.

"I heard and came right out," I told her softly. "Officer Payson here found me wandering around and brought me in." Payson's big smile showed he had got the angle now.

PAYSON had to go upstairs and report for duty, and the girl made it so I had to go with him. I still hadn't found a chance to get her alone and ask what was biting her. She'd said over the phone to consider myself retained—she'd have to explain later because she didn't know who might be listening to her phone. There were some things, she'd said, that she didn't understand, and at present didn't want to talk to the police.

Hall lights that were probably never turned off in this dark hole showed us along an upper corridor to an open door from which voices were coming. Payson and I had come here about twenty minutes after the rest of the police.

We rounded to that room and planned to go right in. But it just didn't work that way. When our eyes took it all in, it was just like a sickening blow. We stopped dead, staring.

The medico was still puttering around, itemizing injuries for his report, and talking of stretchers and such, and he hadn't even covered it up yet.

It was a man, almost all hacked to pieces. The knife had been used mostly

around his middle, but some of the slashes had reached up to his throat, and even up to his face. His middle had been opened up wide. It was all aimless butchery, as might have been expected. No one blow had been delivered with the exact desire to kill; it had all been the wild, primitive impulse to slash and cut, slash and cut.

Maniacs work that way. I'd seen their work before.

The man in charge, an Inspector Miller, motioned us on in with a frown. "Kind of gets you, at that," he admitted. To me he said: "Hello there, Lambert. You in on this?"

"Sort of a friend of the family role, is all," I said vaguely. He looked questioning but let it go at that.

He began giving Payson his instructions. "It seems we don't dare take the girl back to the asylum tonight. Doctor Page here—" he indicated a plump, bald man—"has forbidden it."

Page nodded forcefully. "Impossible. She'll be upset a month as it is. Any more excitement might kill her."

Inspector Miller went on to Vic Payson: "You'll stand right outside her door, understand? They've moved her down the hall. We can't have any more messes like this around. She should never have been released in the first place."

The man called Page bristled. "My dear sir! It wasn't my word alone that released her. It was upon agreement of a staff of Washington's most competent mental authorities. It almost passes my belief that she could have done this. We had thought long ago that, although not entirely cured, she was certainly harmless. I can only say that it was her return to the scene of horror of ten years ago that unhinged her again."

Miller made placating motions. Page was an important man. "No recriminations, sir. None at all. Tragic affair all around. No one to blame. We can't blame the family, either, for having sued to bring

her home. It's only a wonder it didn't strike closer to them."

Payson didn't know much more than I did; I was glad he was there to ask all the questions.

"No," Miller answered him, "Wells here didn't live under this roof. He was a bachelor neighbor. Well-to-do, I understand. He'd come over as an old friend of the insane woman to welcome her home. She'd only been here a day, you understand. They missed him down below, came up and found—this. She was sitting here, crooning to one of her dolls. He must have found her with it himself, before she . . ."

"That's another thing," Page cut in. She'd always been so gentle with the dolls. Associated them with her mother. She'd call for one and we'd send for it and she'd quiet right down. She had a pathetic love for them, sometimes even jealousy. And now, to have her turn on them with such savage hatred—" He made a gesture which my eyes followed.

In an armchair sprawled a gangling gingham doll, one probably three feet long. It was eerie; it iced my spine to see it. That crude, faceless boudoir doll had been torn to pieces, not accidentally as a child might mangle it, but intentionally. Its middle was all torn out, leaving the cotton stuffing hanging out in dirty white dribbles.

Payson came over and stared at it wild-eyed. "You mean to say, sir, that she did *this*?"

"Seems so," Miller said. "Doll or human, they're all the same to her."

"God!" whispered Payson. I kept still, but my stomach was turning over from the way I had to keep looking back and forth, from torn man to torn doll.

STRETCHER men came in, and things got under way. Page and Miller and the rest of the police began leaving. Before he went out Page said something

about picking up the insane woman in the morning. "Surely Officer Payson will keep things in check tonight. And the nurse—the Van Wycks have retained for the woman will be able to handle her. She's experienced, and very competent."

I didn't get any more out of it than anyone else did. It was open and shut and here was my last chance for a lift back to town going out the front door. But I decided to stick it out, remembering the girl and the feel of her hand in my own. And she *was* an heiress; mugs like me don't meet girls like that every day.

I left poor Payson slumped dejectedly in front of the madwoman's door and moved below to hunt up my client, talk her out of any fancies she might have, and phone for a cab back to town.

I paused at the landing when I heard a door close behind me. A low voice called my name. I turned as a white dressed, remarkably girlish figure approached. Obviously this was the nurse. In spite of her youth I could see as she drew near that her manner was one of calm efficiency, her eyes lighted with cool nerve.

But fear echoed in her words. "Mr. Lambert," she whispered, "I must talk with you—I heard Glenda phone you. I know you're a detective."

I said, "Ah," and waited.

"I—I'm afraid to talk here. I'm afraid of everyone in this house. I've been here two days, you know. It's frightful—this atmosphere."

"Please explain. What, exactly, do you mean?"

"Oh, everything. I don't know what's going on, but you and I are the only outsiders, and we've got to work together." I said yes, hopefully, and she went on. "For instance, I know a dreadful injustice is being done the insane woman, in spite of what she did in the past."

I had heard other hints of some spectre from the past, of some stark tragedy, but I hadn't been able to learn anything def-

inite. "Just exactly what was this that happened?"

Her white-cuffed hand touched my wrist. "You didn't know?" A call came to interrupt her, from back down the hall. It was Payson calling her to come and look after the wants of her patient. But she ignored it. "I'll have to tell you about it later—the dolls and all, but Ursula . . . ten years ago she—murdered both her parents!"

"Well, what do you mean an injustice is being done her?" I asked, after getting my breath. "If she did that—"

"But, you see, I have reason to know that—that she didn't do this crime!" She paused, then hurried on. "This crime—please, may I speak frankly?"

I said, "Please do."

"I know psychiatry," she began. "I'm taking my degree in it, and I insist the insane woman wouldn't, couldn't have done it, for two reasons. The least one is that this was definitely a crime of adolescence." She paused for a moment, then continued. "This is the crime of a person who wants to maim and butcher. It's a—a sublimation of other instincts."

"But this girl—she tears up the dolls, you know."

"Ah, but there's a reason for that—I'm the only one she's told. She trusts no one, except her sister Glenda, and—me."

"What's the reason?" I asked, and added another question. It was fated that the first would never be answered. "And—you say adolescence. But isn't Miss Glenda Van Wyck herself the youngest person here?"

Payson bellowed for her more loudly from back down the hall. She clutched at my sleeve briefly. She answered, and then turned swiftly, as though unwilling to let me question her further.

But she had looked me straight in the eye as she said:

"That's—what I meant. Oh, it's terrible, terrible!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Family, Cotton and Blood

I MANAGED to get Glenda Van Wyck alone and lead her to a secluded window seat off the library. I would have staked my life that the little nurse had been utterly sincere in the appalling things she had hinted of, but I was sorry to have her words still ringing in my ears now. A private dick has few enough illusions allowed him as it is. Of course, I didn't believe any of it, but the idea had jerked me rudely back to the plane of practicality whereon one has to admit that anything is possible.

I hated to have to consider the possibility, because Glenda Van Wyck and her tall, dreamish person, and her little-tow-headed-boy air, was the kind of a girl you could go dippy about.

"You'll want to know all about me—about us," she said, beginning with care. "I'll be able to pay whatever you ask, later. That is—if something doesn't happen to me."

I gaped at her, and she went on: "I called you in because I have reason to suspect two things. I think my sister is entirely innocent of that terrible crime tonight. And I think that I am in terrible danger."

"It's odd, Miss Van Wyck," I said slowly. "Those words are very similar to what the young nurse just told me. She said—positively—that she knew your sister was innocent, hinted that someone was using her as a blind, killing just the same way she—" That was a crude thing to have said, and I paused, hoping I hadn't hurt her.

"It's all right," she sighed. "You had the know about that. It was ten years ago. They tell me Ursula was a perfectly normal girl until—it happened."

"Have you any idea about the dolls,

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why she has always loved them until tonight, when she turned on them? The nurse hinted there was a reason."

"Why, no. I can't imagine. Only that she has always been fond of them. Mother had a hobby of making them, you know. They're still scattered all over the house, in almost every room. But the nurse—you say that she knows Ursula didn't do it?"

"Yes," I said. "She was so certain that I'm sure she must know something very definite. Perhaps she was even with her at the time, in which case it will be perfect for Ursula. But not so good for—someone else." I studied her closely, but there was so much of fear in her face already that I couldn't have detected any heightening of it.

"I think that must be it—and she's been too frightened to say so. I remember seeing her there on the second floor, You see, I . . . I was up there, in my room, when it happened."

I couldn't help giving her a piercing glance, recalling the nurse's full message. "You're positive that you didn't hear or see anyone else?"

"No—and that's what makes me afraid. I don't know what to fear most. Whoever did it may believe I saw them, and try to silence me. Or, on the other hand—" she gave a sudden wild stare about, and a hand arose to press into her breast "—maybe it's just the chance they wanted. I know I'm hated here because I'm going to be wealthy soon. Maybe someone is trying to blame this on me."

"WHY should your becoming rich make you hated?" I asked.

"I don't know, but it's true. They want to keep me under their thumbs. They want to tell me what dances I shall go to, how I'll dress. Look—*black stockings!* They know I'll move into town, and rent an apartment, and live my own life."

After a struggle to withdraw my eyes from the extended legs, with skirt drawn well up to exhibit them, I mumbled reverently that they were nice. The skirt descended. "But," I asked. "The will—I take it there was one. It made your uncle guardian of you girls? Did he get a share?"

"Oh, yes. Father was always generous with him. He came in for a full third of his own. And he has control. You . . . you're not thinking . . . ?"

"I don't know what to think," I said slowly. But I was thinking of two things, the first by far the pleasanter. I was thinking how nice it would be if she moved into Seattle and I could show her around and get her acquainted with decent living and—fawn chiffon hose, so nice with her hair.

Someone was moving around in the library and we had to break it up. Even as I took her hand in mine to squeeze it reassuringly, I had to face that second thought: Someone could be planning this to secure an added portion or two of that fortune, someone of this outfit of misfits—either the old uncle, or aunt or son for that matter, or the not-too-insane woman, or—Glenda.

Three people were in the library. Glenda sailed past them and for a moment the air fairly sparked with venomous glances. She went on out, while I deliberately lingered.

So far as I knew, to the family I was simply a boy friend of Glenda's. Eventual words seemed to bear this out. Glenda's uncle and aunt stood firm and straight awaiting a word with me, and the son leaned languidly against the marble fireplace. Jason Van Wyck seemed to be about twenty-eight or thirty. He gave me a quizzical look, held out his cigarette case without a word.

There were throat-clearings while I lit up. Uncle Van, a tired-looking, worried man of over middle age spoke first. At

first he tried to beat around the bush over small things, and then began pumping me about things pertinent to my status in life. I was being given the usual prospective-husband working over, I thought.

Finally he came to the point. "Mr. Lambert, I'm afraid you'll think me very rude—"

"In what way?" I asked helpfully.

"In telling you you must get over any serious ideas you might have regarding my niece." He ignored my raised eyebrows. "You must be told—unpleasant as it is to tell, or to hear, that—well, the family stock has run out completely on the side of Glenda and, er, her unfortunate sister. It's not to be trusted."

"Isn't that for us to decide?" I asked stiffly. "Glenda seems normal enough."

"How long have you known her?" Jason asked dreamily through a cloud of smoke.

Van Wyck senior asked: "Would you willingly tie yourself down to something that might prove a burden in later years, if not something—much, much worse?"

"And suppose I should happen to love her?" I began getting sore, almost as if I really were a suitor. Something was certainly rotten here, or—did they have reason for this?

"**I**N THAT case," the aunt put in, "you are indeed to be pitied." Her words came grimly through a mouth that hardly moved. It occurred to me that she should be taking cod-liver oil for that anemia. While apparently she was some younger than her husband, her stoop, and the way rimless glasses perched upon a high Grecian nose like chiseled marble made her seem some fantastic white-faced bird of prey. "You don't know her, my son," she went on. "I presume you have met her at some of those dances she was allowed to go to before we put a stop to it. But there should be no dancing for such a girl as Glenda."

"Dancing, I take it," I responded acidly, "is something particularly vile?"

"It's a tendency," she said evenly. "It shows a leaning toward other and worse things. If you want to know it, young man, we've had a fight keeping her even as normal as she is—"

"Tell him about the room," young Jason put in eagerly. He was ignored.

"Just what," I asked the company in general, "are you driving at?"

The uncle said sadly: "Over a period of years, my young friend, little things have happened which are not nice to tell—"

"That's enough," Mrs. Van Wyck cut in. "There are limits, Henry."

"Let me take him up and show him the room," Jason insisted.

"No, Jason. Your mother is right; we mustn't be unfair. But," he added, turning back to me, "all these things have shown that she—and her sister are—well, it's the run-out blood on that side of the family. They hold out till they're nearly through the crucial stage of adolescence. But they don't quite make it."

Jason managed to begin, "We have a room—" before his father's voice drowned his high voice out.

"Yes, Glenda is her sister's sister. It could strike any time now. Perhaps—no, no; we must be charitable." He gave his wife a beady-eyed scrutiny, and took up a different tack. "Ten years ago we took little Glenda with us to visit a neighbor—poor Wells, who was killed tonight, in fact. Her poor parents hadn't realized what a dreadful thing was dwelling under the same roof with them. When we came home their bedroom was locked. No one answered. We finally had to break down the door. It was horrible, sir. There she was, sitting there with the bloody knife, turning it round and round in her hands and looking at the bodies. She had brought dolls to keep her company in her final mindlessness, and stacked them all around herself. She had thrown the key

through the register into the room below, and there she sat laughing and laughing and laughing . . ."

I tossed my cigarette into the fireplace, gave the three of them a long look and then shuddered. I left, after making it pretty plain that I was shuddering, not at the things they had told me, but at them.

IT HADN'T occurred to anyone that I might want a room. I was just a sort of ghost. I reflected grimly, a derelict floating about the place and picking up all manner of loathsome flotsam and jetsam from the sullen sea of these people's lives.

Finally I managed to find the maid who had first admitted us and asked her if I rated a room. It must have been about eleven-thirty. Big Payson shifted his feet and gave me a scowl as I led her away. She had been talking with him, leaning against the wall.

"I'll send her back," I told him with a wink, and she giggled.

I remember that we passed the little nurse on our way down the hall.

She showed me to a room half-way down and on the opposite side from the door where Payson stood. The girl had one knee on the bed while turning down the sheets, and I was given a view of a sleeky stocking leg.

Just then Payson came to the door, smiling sheepishly. When his eye followed mine I think his reaction was the more obvious one. He didn't catch sight of the small bulge at the top of that stocking, nor wonder as I was doing if it would be money, and how much a servant girl could save up to put in that most usual of all feminine banks.

I switched my eyes and grinned at Payson. "Checking up on me, huh? Come in a sec." I brought from my pocket a pint of pretty good stuff I'd pinched from the liquor cabinet down below.

"The nurse is attending the patient," Payson grunted, his big round face a bit red. "She sent me hiking." He sampled the Scotch, did it again. "Takes a detective to root out stuff like this—" he began, then paused, looking at the maid who apparently hadn't noticed the break. As she went out he gave her a pat to show me he was still ahead of me and she giggled up at him.

"See that you stick to that door to-night," I warned. We had another. We were on a third and the pint was looking sick when we heard the scream slash the stillness.

Payson said, "Holy Mother," and we both got up and started moving. We rounded out into the hall and headed instinctively for the door of the insane woman's room. It stood ajar.

The little brown-haired maid stood in the door, with one fist ground into her mouth. "Get the hell away," Payson told her.

We crowded her aside and looked in, stopping there because there was nothing we could do.

It was the first time I had seen the woman. She sat on her bed, rocking slightly. Even at a time like that I couldn't help being surprised at the impression she gave. She wasn't bad looking at all—she was actually pretty—but you could see by her eyes that she was mad. Her color was that of blanched almonds, and her hair had a wild, uncontrolled luxuriance that piled high on her head and still had length enough to cascade darkly about her shoulders.

Her eyes, of course, were dead blank. She was rocking something in her arms, something of calico, but with cotton and sawdust stuffings dribbling out across her arms where she had ripped into it. There was cotton strewn all over the room. She was sobbing low in her throat as she prodded the thing, prying about in the cotton of its stomach.

Across the room, on the floor, was the nurse. Blood was all over everything. She had been stabbed in the face, neck, and shoulders—insanely, haphazardly. And a real, flesh and blood person that way—they aren't made of cotton and sawdust stuffing. . . .

"Merciful God," I said, because it was all I could say.

CHAPTER THREE

Insanity Offers Its Arms

PEOPLE began appearing to gawp over our shoulders. We couldn't keep them from looking. Uncle and Aunt Van came and their faces turned white. Jason came and his already pasty face went a sort of livid green. Glenda came from nowhere and looked and screamed.

All the others began looking at Glenda, with significance.

"I should have stayed here," Payson said, half-crying. "I should have stayed here—I'll lose my job, and I ought to. I was supposed to keep her from—"

"Tell 'em I called you away," I said. "I don't care. Me, I'm through with the whole set-up. It's plain as hell now. Everybody's been running around trying to make something difficult out of the obvious. I'm going, only you better watch her damned close."

Glenda said: "I don't care what it looks like. I insist she's being framed. You see, I happen to know."

I said, "Shut up, you little fool. Leave it alone, leave it alone. Do you want to go to the pen?"

She said, "I don't care. I know Ursula didn't do this."

At mention of her name the insane woman looked up and smiled at Glenda. "I hear, Glenda," she said happily. "I know—it's my sister Glenda and she's going to help me with the dolls. So many to find."

Everyone still watched Glenda. The atmosphere in the corridor seemed to have congealed into a thick, syrupy, poisonous substance. Her Uncle Van asked very slowly: "Just what do you mean, Glenda?"

I interrupted before she could answer. I didn't want her to put a noose around her own neck. Payson was there with his ears sticking out, and he was a policeman. Loyalty to her sister was all very fine, but all she could save the sister was a trip back to Southland Asylum, and it looked as if it could be at the cost of her own life. I had no doubt, now, of her innocence.

I got Payson to moving ponderously about his duties. He took as brief as possible a look around the room, then asked the family to lead Ursula out. He locked the door, pocketed the key.

There was no discussion concerning where the madwoman would be taken this time; we trekked in a tight little group down the hall. Clear at the end of the wing was a door, which they opened. Inside the door were bars, and looking across the room when the lights had been snapped on, I could see more bars at the one window. We put her inside.

It struck me as odd. The insane woman hadn't been in the house at all since her madness—then why the barred room? I asked about it.

Young Jason said: "Why, this is what I wanted to show you." He looked at Glenda, who had swung round first to him, then to me. "It's a convincing argument, isn't it?" he said. "Shows just what we've expected of Glenda all along—to have everything all ready for her this way"

I FELT like hitting him, but I didn't. I went sort of sick. Payson had a deep scowl between his brows. He seemed about to say something, but held it. I told him quickly that I would go down below and make another call for the coroner.

Payson stayed there and the others

drifted along ahead of me. All except Glenda, who lingered. I took her arm and led her up the corridor. I could tell she was near breaking, because she was fighting to keep from sobbing.

I asked which room was hers and shoved her inside, "Stay in there, and hold tight, and don't open your mouth," I said. "I'm sticking with you."

She looked gratefully at me and held the door open to say: "You're the only friend I've got. If you desert me—"

It wasn't acting, or if it was it was darned good.

I went down and tried the phone, but the line was dead. Someone had cut it.

I went back up to tell Payson we'd have to drive his pattie wagon to some neighboring estate to phone from. But I stopped in my room first, and made the bottle of Scotch look even sicker. The jittering in my knee-caps steadied slightly.

I was just at the door, hand on the light switch, when the lights went off by themselves. The hall outside was a black maw when I looked out. I stepped out and began feeling my way along. I was going quickly and quietly because I wanted to find the master switch on that floor and see if I could catch the person at it. I was quiet, and that's the reason I caught the faint sound of breathing in the dark behind me. I paused a moment thinking about it and getting worried.

Whoever it was, I didn't relish having them sneak up on me in the dark. I had flattened myself back against the wall. My hand brushed the knob of a door, and the next moment I had it open and was slipping in.

My hand was outstretched to feel my way, and to locate a weapon as quickly as possible—I had reason to imagine the person out there would be carrying a knife, and I hadn't brought a gun—when the lights came back on. A quick glance about the room told me it was feminine. There was a ruffled dressing table with

Asylum for Murder

cosmetics and perfume atomizers on it. Various bits of lacy apparel were tossed onto a wedding-ring quilted bed.

A movement at the door brought quick action from me. To have appeared so quickly, whoever was there would probably be the person I had sensed in the dark. And those sounds out there had been definitely furtive. If they knew I was in there and came in after me why that was all right, too

There was only one place to hide myself, in case it was someone I wouldn't want to reveal myself to. A clothes closet. I pulled the door shut all but an inch.

Glenda herself came in

I was caught dead to rights. I couldn't reveal myself, and even though I might have wanted to she acted so swiftly, and so strangely, that I had to watch. She stared warily about the room, and her hands arose and began fumbling at the belt of a dressing gown—sort of a housecoat thing—that she wore. She must have slipped it on sometime previously, because she had been wearing it when the nurse's body was discovered.

Her back was to me as she tossed the housecoat on the bed, leaving her clothed in the same blue taffeta she had worn all evening. She half turned back toward me, with her hands working feverishly as she worked at the buttons along the front of the taffeta. It seemed to be all wet down the front.

Those dark, sticky stains down the front of the taffeta were blood! I felt sick suddenly, all gone, thinking what an unholy sucker I was being taken for, and thinking it was a hell of a world. Yeah, I'd stick by all right, but it knocked all the pins from under me, and I just kept on staring as if my eyes would drop out.

SHE stepped out of the dress, working fast. Clothed in the slip she went to the fireplace, a flimsy little thing flush with

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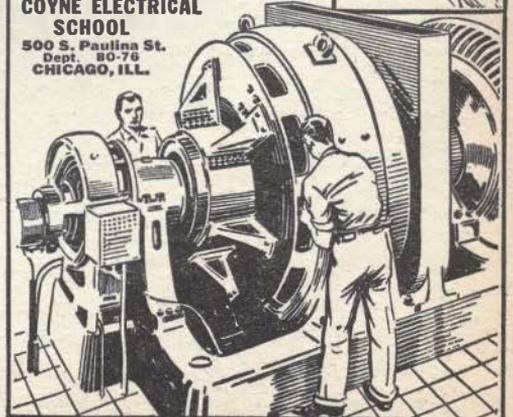
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the wall, and lit some papers, letting them get to burning high. She threw in the dress.

She was breathing hard as she watched the dress burn, and by degrees the breathing turned to sobs, hard and weary. Pretty as hell, I thought, and just as deadly.

I had to make the break sometime, so I stepped out into the room. She looked up and stared incredulously.

Her eyes had gone outraged and angry. "I believe you have the wrong room," she said with words of arctic chill.

"It's a good room to be in, though, for a dick who's trying to solve a crime." I pointed at the smouldering fragments in the fireplace and waited.

She didn't look; she kept staring into my face as if she had lost something valuable and might find it there, but didn't think so. "You—you think the worst. I know. You think I did it, and that's what you're supposed to think. That blood—someone grabbed me from behind awhile ago, before I even knew about the nurse. They had a wet rag and they ran it over my dress, and wiped their hands on me. I only just had time to put on the robe and hide it when I heard everyone rushing along the hall . . ."

"That'll do to tell," I said. "It's the first yarn anyone would think of. Me—I'm through with you. Let the police handle it—Payson's got his suspicions anyhow. I actually thought you were nice. Nice! Me for Seattle."

Lights of fear sprang into her eyes, and then her eyes went dull as she peered into space and seemed to see things there. "You—you're walking out on me? Oh, no, you can't do it. I can't face it alone. They've finally poisoned your mind against me. Oh, God, I can't face the horror I know is coming—not alone."

"Don't worry about me," I said. "If you think I'm going to get myself in a jam by

admitting I let you destroy important evidence, why you're crazy."

"So you're leaving me, and I'll be arrested—or killed. I don't know which is worse. Don't you see that someone was after me out there in the hall after the lights went off? I heard them back behind me and slipped in here."

I thought it over a minute. Her story could be true, in spite of the way things looked. I didn't like to walk out an anyone, especially her. But I didn't want to be played for a sap. She decided things for me.

Suddenly she began laughing, loudly and wildly. But there was no hysteria in it; it was acting, and it was intentional. She kept on flinging out those wild, abandoned peals of mirth, like a person in an utter frenzy of glee. It was devilish.

I heard running feet along the hall. Just as they came to the door she threw herself at me. We fell over backwards onto the bed, and her strong little arms held me there off balance so I couldn't get up. By the time the door had burst open, she had fastened her lips to mine in a kiss that masted my head swim.

I was caught dead to rights; it was a hell of a time for a kiss

CHAPTER FOUR

A Gun in the Dark

VAN WYCK and son Jason came in and, a step behind, Mrs. Van Wyck, with scrawny neck poking out of a flannel nightgown. Another bleak face came up up to bat feeble eyes over her shoulder, but I didn't pay much attention to him. I was busy trying to disentangle myself.

They just stood there that way for a second, gaping the way they did and scarcely breathing and not knowing what to say.

They watched the ending of the kiss, watched Glenda allow me to leave her

arms as if she were reluctant, and then Van Wyck spoke. "I believe this leaves us but one course. Glenda, you'll join your sister." He let the sadness go from his voice as he addressed me. "As for you, sir, if I were younger I'd give you a thrashing you'd not forget. You'll leave this house at once."

Mrs. Van Wyck looked as if I were some sort of crawling creature. "But for the scandal of it," she said, "we would certainly prosecute you. She's still a minor, you know, and not morally responsible. You believed everything we told you all along. But you were the sort of vile thing that would take advantage of such things."

"I'll go," I said.

Young Jason asked Glenda, "Aren't you going to try to explain, Glenda?" He blinked weak eyes, studying her with a sort of contemptuous interest.

She shook her head. She was watching me to see what I would do. I was disgusted, and more than that. I wanted to reach out and twist her neck, but somehow a sated indifference stole over me. I had nothing but sick contempt for everyone in that room. Guilty or not it was plain she had put herself and me on a pretty spot. And it was equally clear that some of the things they had claimed were true. and she was insane, she must be.

I started through the door. "Who the hell are you?" I asked of the man who had stayed like a shadow in the background. When he looked up I recognized him. It was the old gatekeeper. He looked back at the girl, dreamily.

"Bartlett," he said. "Gardener. Fifteen years. An' all that time watching the old family crumble and crumble into madness. . . ."

"You're leaving at once, sir." Van Wyck repeated to me.

They threw something around Glenda and began leading her down the corridor. I ignored the command and went along,

and there was nothing they could do about it just then. I'd have to see Payson again before going.

His eyes were round beneath astonished brows. While they were opening the door and the barred gate I told him cryptically that the girl seemed to have gone insane. Glenda went inside, sobbing.

I couldn't help noting, though, that as she joined her sister her shoulders somehow slumped, almost as if with relief. Her outspread arms clutched the white bedspread as she threw herself there, and gathered it in and hid her face in it.

"Phone's out, been cut," I told Payson. "I'll have to take your pattie wagon to get to a phone for you." He nodded agreement.

"Who doused the lights?"

I said I didn't know. But I had enough sense to be glad he'd mentioned that. I was so sickened by the whole thing that the old bean had practically stopped working. It made me realize that Glenda couldn't have cut off the switch, because she'd been just outside the door when the lights came back on. Maybe part of her story was true. But still and all, hadn't she repudiated any help she might expect from me by doublecrossing me back there? Anyway, it amounted to the same thing, because here I was being booted out.

All three of the Van Wycks and the old gardener whom they'd called into the house to "have another man around" went stubbornly along with me to the door. I went out breathing deep of the ocean scented air. It was great stuff after the sickly dankness of that house.

I WAS confused and mad and half sick and I sat there awhile thinking about all manner of things. Finally I got up the will-power to stab at the starter. It was after the engine was running that I heard Payson's shout. Its source seemed indeterminate out there, but I knew it must have come from an open window over my

head, because it was Payson sure enough. I turned off the motor to listen better and he did it again. When it came again it had changed but I was already out of the car and moving because I knew I was hearing that most horrible of all sounds—a big, powerful man screaming in agony.

I went in the front door saying what curses I could think of.

There were running feet along the corridor up the stairs ahead. Up there I collided with the old gardener in the front part of the hall and had some trouble with him. He babbled curses at me, asking if I hadn't been told to get the hell out, and he tried to get tough, old as he was. I shoved him aside and ran around the corner.

Payson had screamed, all right. He had been a good cop, and a nice friend to have on the force. He would never again complain that he was on homicide when I asked him to fix parking tickets. He was doubled up in front of the barred room, having done that as a last conscious effort to hold his ripped stomach together. His dead eyes were turned up as if there were untold horror up there on the ceiling. I found myself looking around for a torn-up doll.

Then I looked into the barred room, saw that the door swung open, and that the room was empty.

Everyone still living in that damned house had come up and I turned to them and asked if they wanted to be dragged into jail as accessories to murder. When they said no I said all right, that I was the next thing to an official there, and was taking over. I showed them my private op's badge and let them get a good look. They didn't have anything to say when I told them what to do.

I was through playing around. With guys like old Payson I considered an eye for an eye no more than fair, either.

I went first down to the end of the corridor's ell and peered out of an open win-

dow into the sullen face of the night. There was the roof of a porch out there along which an escape might have been made. That seemed to be all.

I told the three men to begin searching the grounds and we all went down to the ground floor. Mainly I wanted to get rid of the whole bunch of them so I could have the house to myself, and then see what would happen.

I went all over the ground floor, including the kitchen, butler's pantry sans butler, a drawing room, one bedroom, and came back to the library. In the alcove with its window-seat there was a furious threshing of arms and legs. It was a battle, silent and intent. Mrs. Van Wyck had the brown-haired servant girl down and was rough-housing her and was doing a very competent job of it.

THEY were so occupied that they didn't realize they had a spectator. Mrs. Van Wyck held the girl down with one arm, leaning all her weight on it, while the other hand fumbled at the top of one stocking. She drew out what she was after and gave the girl another wallop or two and let her up.

They were both red-faced from the tussle when they turned out into the room. Mrs. Van Wyck eyed me threateningly, breathing hard through her white nose, and the girl made a get-a-way while I tackled her mistress. It was no trouble to take from her what she had held in her hand. It was a folded piece of paper.

"I don't know what it is," she said sullenly. "I caught her with it out, reading it and acting suspicious. She had the nerve to refuse my demand for it, the little hussy."

"You sure you didn't know what it was?" I asked, after reading it.

She drew in her breath, her face going white all over, and read it while I held it for her. It wasn't signed:

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"When this is found I think I will have been murdered. I won't sign it in case I am wrong, and if I am not you will know who wrote it. As you by now know, the dolls are important—Ursula knows that. Ask her. I know that this is a house of horror. I could perhaps tell the authorities, but I doubt if I'd be allowed to. I think it's coming in a matter of moments now, even though I've suspected it for days. I think the stage is all set tonight. And I'm filled with a sudden lack of caring about everything. If a person I have loved could plan such a thing I want only to escape such a world as quickly as possible. This seems the only way of telling."

I watched her carefully as she read. She seemed to flinch at every word. "Do you know who wrote it—which of the murdered people?"

"Believe me, I don't," she answered. "But I think the maid picked it up there where Norman—Mr. Wells was murdered. I saw her stoop as if to pick up something back when we all discovered him, but never thought about it till now."

"You do know, though," I said. "You know, you know, you know!"

All sullenness, all grimness left her face by degrees and she became haunted in every lineament. She drooped, and I felt very sorry for her. "See here," she said, not sounding hopeful, "we're rich. You could go away, retire on the money I could see that you got."

"Would you do that?" I asked. "Would you allow a thing like that to go on and on and on?"

She began to shake her head, and got out— "The third floor. . . ." But I was surprised to see her eyes open wide, looking past me. I tried to duck, but something caught me punishingly across the head. I slipped down to my knees, and the lights seemed to have gone out but I knew it was within my own head. I heard her say, very distinctly, "Yes . . . I . . ."

think . . . I . . . would." Then she said, and I heard it easily: "Not too hard, Bartlett. Don't kill him. All we need is time. Take the note."

I didn't lose consciousness, but I had a powerful struggle not to. I heard them go out, talking about cars and preparations for a flight. I couldn't get up off my knees, and I was shaking all over from something it had done to my nerves.

When I could finally get up I still staggered around hitting things.

Finally I decided I could try to find the answer to what she meant about a third floor, before Bartlett came along. I hadn't seen any third floor, nor any stairs, nor heard of one before.

I went up past the barred room, having to step around Payson's body, and saw that the lights were still on in there and that it was still deserted. I knew I had to look for an attic stairway.

The first two rooms I looked in were without break. But in a third, nearly directly across from the barred room, I saw a ladderlike contraption against the back wall. I was clear inside, having left the door open to give a bit of light, when I sensed that there was someone in there.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Calico Scent

MY EYES grew more accustomed to the twilight of the room and I saw that it was somebody standing very still alongside the rickety old stairs, directly beneath a yawning trap above.

She stared at me for a space and then moved forward with a slow, hesitant quality to her movements. I could see it was Glenda.

"Stop," I said. "What are you doing?" She didn't stop; she kept walking toward me. Her breath was coming huskily, only a shade from a sob; but there was no mistaking the twisting movements of her

body. It was all I could do to keep from going to meet her. I backed up a step, wishing I had driven away from this mad menage when I had the chance.

"Get away," I said, "I can't stand it. Get away—" My brain filled with a smashing anger to crowd out any other emotions. She had no right, when she knew the spot it put me on. I almost called her a name I'd have been sorry for later; I didn't get all the picture.

She came clear up against me, brushed against me, and whispered loudly and gratefully: "Put your arms around me—take me close." I tried to make her get away again, but something, some peremptory command lying under the surface of her words and some feverish earnestness glinting in her eyes made me do it.

Then she sprawled in my arms, husking endearments in a loud stage voice. She interrupted them and seemed to be trying to kiss me. But in reality her lips came close to my ear and she said with the faintest of respiration: "Listen—gun pointing at us. . . . Was told to do it."

Meanwhile her hand was guiding me to the pocket at the side of her house-dress. I grasped the hilt of a knife thrust down into the pocket. Now I realized how things were, and began playing up. "Where?" I whispered.

When the chance came she answered: "Up overhead . . . I was told to entice you up there. . . . Be careful." Much louder she reworded it, making it sound sultry and inviting. "There's a room upstairs—Jack. A nice room that maybe you'd like to see. . . ."

I grunted, "Anywhere with you, kid," and tried to sound enthusiastic.

She went ahead up the ladderlike stairs, and her head disappeared into the black rectangle overhead. It was hard for me to ignore the jutting snout of the revolver peering over the edge of the trap. I knew if I pretended complete dumbness I'd live longer. But I had to go up. I felt that so

far I was the only thing lying between Glenda and something pretty terrible. My death, if I bid for a quick one, would leave her alone to face it. Of course eventual release would come to her from whatever hell she had lived in during the past ten years, but in between she'd find some pretty grisly things.

The gun all but scraped the back of my head as I inched up, but I pretended to ignore it.

I had thought that, since it had taken some trouble to tempt me up here, there must be a reason for keeping me alive at least a while. But I decided this was my last and worst boner when the gun banged down on my skull, in practically the same spot where little electric jabs told me I had been conked a while before. As I was going out I felt hands beneath my shoulders, drawing me on up and I was glad because I wouldn't have been pretty with a broken neck. Of course, a knife used that way wouldn't be pretty either. . . .

I CAME to myself with difficulty and decided I must have a slight concussion. I was tied, and it took quite awhile to get back to the stage where I cared. It took the concentration of every faculty to keep from going back to sleep.

Finally I had courage to look up at the rest of the room, and the two people in there. An ancient coal-oil lantern hung guttering from a rafter. Fantastic cobwebs hung like faded banners after a celebration. There was no trap door I could see so I decided we were in some room farther back under the roof. I could hear the steady dreary drip of night-sweat from the senile pine's outside.

Hanging from nails, sprawled on pieces of discarded furniture were weird clusters of calico arms and legs. Dolls, a dozen or more of them, left here long ago to watch with featureless faces the dull plodding of the years.

Glenda lay near me, flung against the

wall like one of those dolls. Ursula Van Wyck was in the attic, standing very straight and tall and thoughtful, with the lantern light playing through the twisted luxuriance of her ebon hair. A knife was turning over and over in her hands.

The ropes binding me were of stout twine, doubled enough to offer no hope. We three seemed to be alone, so I spent the next minutes watching the insane woman.

Ursula stood another moment tensed on one foot, seeming to listen, her great blank eyes oblivious of us. She appeared to reach a decision and began collecting the dolls. Each new one brought a little murmur of greeting and joy from her poor, twisted mouth. One, only, dangling with other debris from a nail, escaped her notice.

She flung into a corner with a fierce eagerness and began ripping into them. Her thin, milk-white hands prodded grotesquely into each cotton-stuffed interior. But by stages her expectancy turned to disappointment and fury. It was then she caught sight of Glenda. Some new light glimmered in her eyes, and anticipation came into her murmurs as she approached.

My mouth was suddenly dry and choking, and my heart beat like a sledge within a well. I dreaded to think what was coming. Glenda, enclosed that way in her cotton print gown, was like some sprawled rag doll. Such dolls were to be torn into, to prod and poke and search. . . .

So I'd had it all wrong; Glenda had been wrong too. Now we would pay for thinking ourselves so clever, for not admitting that the insane woman was the only logical answer all the time.

THE knife came down toward Glenda. I began shouting, trying to tell the woman what she was doing. "It's your sister—your sister!"

She murmured, "Yes, it's my little

Asylum for Murder

Glenda. You always loved mother's dolls so, do you remember? Could you help me? It's so hard to remember—it must have been long ago. Years and years, and she said one was yours and mine. . . ."

She began cutting at Glenda's bonds, and new hope sprang shouting up within me. Glenda could loosen me after she was loose, and—

A door that of course was open a crack all the while came on open and rapid thudding footfalls sounded. A snarl commanded her to stop. A person came into my line of vision, and as I looked up into that twisted, writhing mouth, a lot of things came clear to me. I had been right all the while, and yet, in a way, wrong.

This, then, was the distorted thing that had moved among us all, murdering.

The murderer sprang quickly to Ursula's side, and the barrel of a gun crashed against the side of her head and sent her cringing back into the corner. Her hand caught in a loop of binding twine that hung from a nail, the same nail that the one remaining doll grimaced from. The blank, featureless face swung around and then plummeted into her lap.

But my attention was snapped back. "So," I said, "it was a crime of adolescence after all?"

JASON VAN WYCK gave me a long, pitying scrutiny. "I'm twenty-eight," he said.

I gave a nasty laugh. "That doesn't matter. Some people never get past adolescence—their minds stop growing."

He pondered me through his weak eyes and they got bigger and bigger, and I knew I was looking at utter insanity. It had angered him to be described to himself. He came over and his foot landed hard in my chest. It doubled me up and for a time all I could do was cough.

"Maybe I am mad," he said worriedly. "But—I don't think so. It all seems so

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29x4.75-19	2.50	31x3.50-14	3.25	30x3.50-14	3.35	34x4.75-16	3.75
29x4.75-20	2.50	31x3.50-14	3.25	30x3.50-14	3.35	34x4.75-16	3.75
29x5.00-18	2.65	31x3.50-14	3.25	30x3.50-14	3.35	34x4.75-16	3.75
30x5.00-20	2.85	31x3.50-14	3.25	30x3.50-14	3.35	34x4.75-16	3.75
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6.00-17	3.40	31x3.50-14	3.25	30x3.50-14	3.35	34x4.75-16	3.75
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31x5.00-19	3.40	31x3.50-14	3.25	30x3.50-14	3.35	34x4.75-16	3.75
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logical. It has for ten years now. But I know one thing—I'm safe. Ursula will be blamed for murdering you two. And it strikes me I definitely *would* be mad if I didn't end things by accepting the—the opportunity I've wanted so long." He turned his great blinking eyes on Glenda.

He crouched down beside her. Don't you know," he asked chidingly, "how it hurt me to see how nearly you gave your love to him?"

"I didn't," Glenda gasped. "I—I knew I was in terrible danger. I was afraid, and thought he was deserting me to face it alone. So—the safest place in the house was behind the bars. I did the first thing I thought of to get there."

"It didn't save you, though," he smiled, fondly. He paused again, studying her through half-closed eyes. "You're prettier than the little nurse was," he told her.

"**YOU'RE** just an adolescent," I told him again, trying to change his mood back to anger. "You were eighteen ten years ago—you're still eighteen." He merely paused long enough to smile down at me, leaning on one hand.

"Your mind still works the same," I went on doggedly. "You used the same psychology tonight you used ten years ago." He paused again, seemed to tense.

I laughed bitterly. "It's obvious, my insane friend. You murdered tonight in the name of Ursula, just as you did years ago. Only that time there was no insane person; you had to *create* one. It was easy enough, if you possessed the sort of nature that would allow you to do it. At that age a girl's mind is a fragile enough thing, and would probably totter into madness if locked for hours in a room with her butchered parents."

He breathed hard as he thought about it. "So you figured that out, did you? Well, all right. I sneaked back that night and did it, and even if she hadn't gone

clear mad, she'd still have been blamed."

"I'll give you credit for preying on human frailties," I said. "Even tonight your mother was willing to make a criminal of herself to protect you. And when Glenda's fear drove her beyond mortal limits you turned her strange actions to your own advantage." He seemed interested in being told about himself. I told him I guessed Wells, the neighbor, had finally found a clue to things and had become dangerous. Jason had already talked his parents into suing for Ursula's release so that he could embark on another bloody career.

"Yes, so I decided I could use the same opportunity to get rid of both Wells and Glenda—before she became twenty-one. When the folks got it into their heads that she might be doing it, I saw that was just as good. It's been easy to blame things on her all these years anyway. I'd eventually have control of all the estate anyway, whether there were two madwomen or one, because it would all go to my folks."

I was doing what I could to fight the twine binding my wrists, but it was only a gesture on my part. They'd never give. My hands were slippery with sweat.

"The maid was in with you?" I asked.

"To a certain extent. That's another thing I've got to do—she's too dangerous now. She only knew that I offered her money to get the big cop away from Ursula's door so I could get in to the nurse. Ursula's memory is too jumbled ever to tell, even though I did it right in front of her. I wonder what the idea of tearing up the dolls is?" He brooded only a moment over that point, before his eyes began slipping back to Glenda.

"Why, don't you know?" I asked slowly. He hadn't been paying any attention to Ursula, who in the meantime had been working at the one remaining doll. I'd have to play it close now. It wasn't even a chance, really, but I'd try. Perhaps it wouldn't work out, and maybe I had made

a wild conjecture that would prove to be wrong.

But the nurse had said: "There's a reason for tearing up the dolls. . . ."

Ursula herself had said: "Could you help me, Glenda? It's so hard to remember."

And down below I had found two women struggling for possession of a slip of paper.

I told Jason sketchily about that, playing his curiosity along. I told him about the writer's fears, about his mother's dread of admitting who wrote it.

"It wasn't anyone that you murdered tonight that wrote it," I said. "Wells had found it in an old doll he had at home. He came over with it to try questioning Ursula. *Because he knew her mother wrote it ten years ago, on the very night she knew a monster was sneaking back to kill her—and she hid it in the only place where it would be safe from you, in a doll!*"

"Incredible," Jason marvelled. "Maybe, as you say, she hid it before I got there. Or she could have lived long enough to do it—afterwards. I remember that I killed her last, and when I brought Ursula in to see, she was still moving. It doesn't matter, though."

He still hadn't looked back over his shoulder, so he still hadn't got the idea.

"IT MATTERS a lot," I told him. "If the mother died last—by your own admission, it makes what I'm thinking practically a certainty. She said in this note that the dolls were important; she wanted whoever stumbled onto the note to realize that. The only sensible answer is that this first note was a clue to a second one—or something else of importance."

"Go on," he said agreeably.

"All right. What could be more important to a dying person than to make certain the murderer's deed didn't profit him—and at the same time to benefit her children?"

He came up to his feet glowering. I had him worried now. "Well," I said, "if the mother died last, she had absolute right to make a will—another will, post-dating the first, which must have been a joint will since its provision was for the death of both parents. So another will would have nullified it, and the second would have left all the property to the daughters alone!" I pointed past him at Ursula. "And there it is!"

Jason shouted in his high, quavering voice, and made for Ursula. She cringed back, holding a crackling piece of paper behind her.

"Keep away from him, Ursula," I belted. "Keep him away—cut him to pieces." She still had the knife she'd used on the dolls. Jason had forgotten about his discarded gun.

He'd be able to handle her without it anyway, I feared.

I began rolling, bringing myself up to Glenda's back, where her tied hands could reach me.

"The knife," I whispered. I could feel

its pressure in my pocket where I had put it after taking it from her.

Her hand could just reach into the pocket. She grappled out the knife, knew what to do with it. All she had to do was hold it firm while I moved my wrists along its edge.

My hands came free. Another slash loosed my feet.

Jason had his hands full with Ursula. She had the strength of madness, and he was slight. She had dropped the knife, was intent only on keeping the paper from him. I knew his one desire was to destroy that thing which mocked his ten years of plotting. But he saw me coming and had to let go.

He fell to his knees grabbing for the dropped knife.

He looked up at me, and his gaze froze on what I had in my hand—his own little revolver. He seemed to peer past me then, and I knew it was the look of a man staring into his own damnation. I shall always recall the bleak terror of his face as he plunged the knife into his own throat. . . .

THE END



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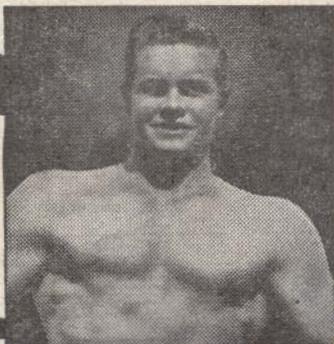
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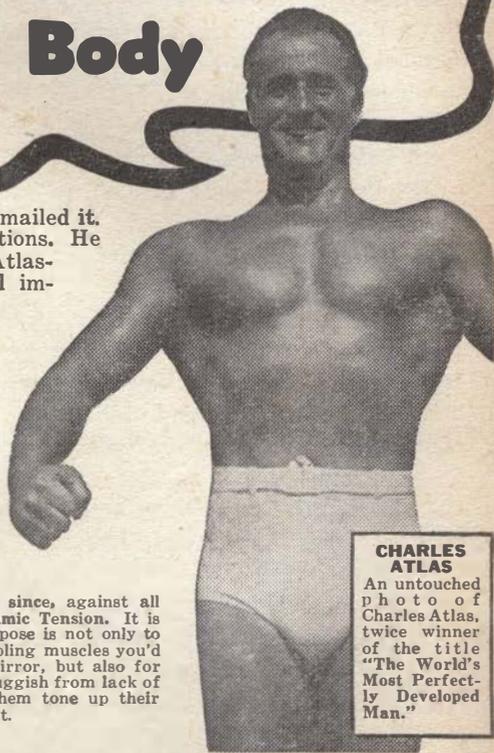
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