

The Dead Man Laughs

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The

Dead

Man

Laughs

—as a Scientific Sleuth Tackles the Riddle of

A Mysterious Fire!

A Dr. Feather Story

By

Ray Cummings

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"I'M GLAD you happened to be in town, Dr. Feather," Captain Allen said. "Read that." He tossed a letter across the desk. Dr. Feather and Kit, his daughter, read it attentively.

Police Captain Allen Police Station Maple Grove, N. J.

Dear Sir:

If anything should happen to me, I want you to know my grandson killed me.

Yours truly,

Ezra Kaine.

"He's certainly to the point," Dr. Feather commented dryly as he handed back the letter. "What'd you do about it?"

"Nothing yet. I just got it," Captain Allen said. "I've heard of old Ezra Kaine—eccentric, miserly sort of fellow. Crotchety as the devil. Lives with his grandson in the Johnson Apartments, over on the West Side. The grandson works in New York—"

"Crime prevention is out of my line," Dr. Feather said. "But if that note is authentic, I suggest you'd better ask him what he—"

THE distant wail of the village fire siren echoed through the frosty night air—a long and two short blasts.

"The West Side," Allen murmured. "Quite a coincidence."

Dr. Feather and Kit exchanged glances. The police captain grabbed the telephone.

"It's the Johnson Apartments, all right!" he exclaimed as he slammed down the receiver.

"Dear me," Dr. Feather murmured. "It may not be a case of crime prevention. Shall we go, Captain?"

It was nearly one A.M.—a Saturday night in November. Dr. Feather's big limousine was parked in front of the police station. Kit jumped behind its wheel, with Dr. Feather and Allen after her. Down a distant cross-street, Maple Grove's fire engine went with screaming siren.

At the west edge of the village the Johnson Apartments stood in a big, somber, tree-shrouded garden—an old-fashioned dingy-looking frame building of three stories, divided now into half a dozen apartments. The fire engines already were there; the place was in a turmoil, with pedestrians and cars miraculously arriving.

"I guess they've got it out," Dr. Feather observed. "We'll stay here, Kit."

Captain Allen had leaped out and run into the house. Smoke was pouring from some of the windows. On the dark front porch several of the partly clad tenants were gathered with their belongings around them. But quite evidently the fire was already under control.

Then suddenly Captain Allen came dashing from the house. His face was grim.

"The fire—" Dr. Feather began. "It's out," Alien said. "Amounts to nothing now—one of the lodgers fortunately discovered it almost at once. But old Ezra Kaine—he's dead!"

"Dead, Captain? Dear me—why—" He seized Allen and lowered his voice. "Not murder, by any chance?"

"Dead in his bed up there," Alien said grimly. "I phoned for some of my men—for the Kaine's family physician, and the medical examiner. You can't tell—"

"Come on, Kit, let's go in." Like a little bird Dr. Feather hopped from his car. On the front porch three men and a woman, tenants of the building, were gathered, excitedly talking, trying to explain to each

other what had happened.

“Here's his grandson,” Allen said.

The young man—Bob Kaine, a tall, dark- haired youth, pajama-clad—had just appeared from within the house.

“Did the smoke overcome him?” he exclaimed. “When will the doctor be here? He's dead.”

He turned to rush back, but Dr. Feather stopped him.

“Wait! I'll go with you. Come on, Captain.” The owner of the apartment house also in his pajamas, with a dressing gown over him, came forward. He was Thomas Johnson—a small, grey- haired widower.

“Lee Polter here discovered it,” Johnson started explaining. “I was in bed—Polter came home—”

They were in the hall now, starting up the stairs. The firemen were tramping the house; the hall was wet with hose water and littered with charred woodwork which the firemen had chopped away.

Within a minute Dr. Feather had the main facts. Thomas Johnson had been in his apartment on the ground floor asleep. Lee Polter—a tall, blond young artist who had a studio on the second floor—had just arrived home.

“Coming up the stairs I smelled the smoke here in the storeroom,” Polter told them.

The storeroom was off a landing halfway to the second floor. It was wrecked now, with the firemen chopping at its walls.

“I opened this door,” Polter said. “It was just a little fire on one side of the room—hadn't been going more than half a minute, I guess. But Lord—it sure was burning with pep.”

“Incendiary?” Kit murmured. But no one heard her save Dr. Feather.

Polter had aroused the house. Old Ezra Kaine was sleeping alone in his big apartment on the second floor. On the third floor there was a Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

“We heard the rumpus,” Smith said now. “Polter and I tried to put the fire out—Johnson phoned in the alarm—”

The excited group had reached the top of the stairs. Dr. Feather suddenly turned to young Kaine, the grandson.

“And where were you?” “Me? Why—why, I was trying to get in to my grandfather—to wake him up. And now he's dead—”

“Don't you live with him?” Dr. Feather said. “I—well, yes I do. But we had a quarrel.” “He was sleeping on the third floor,” the big burly Smith put in.

Mrs. Smith, a chubby little blond woman added, “We offered him a room with us, but—”

“I gave him a single room on the third floor,” Johnson said. “We knew, in a day or two, the trouble—”

DR. FEATHER and Captain Allen exchanged glances. "Trouble?" Allen echoed. "What trouble?"

"My grandfather and I had a fight," young Kaine admitted. "He—we disagreed about a girl friend of mine. He—you might as well know—I've nothing to hide. You tell them, Mr. Johnson. You heard the argument."

Quite evidently everyone knew of it, Old Ezra Kaine had been infuriated. He was going to disinherit his grandson. And he threw him out of the apartment. Said he was afraid to have him there.

"He was pretty crotchety," Johnson said. "He didn't mean it—so I just gave Bob a room upstairs."

The firemen had come, Dr. Feather now learned; and when the locked door of Ezra Kaine's apartment was finally broken in—

"We found him—well, like you see him now," Johnson said solemnly.

The hall door of the Kaine apartment opened into a small hall; then an interior door led into the bedroom. There was almost no smell of smoke here. Quite evidently the fire could not have caused the old man's death.

With the excited group crowding behind him, Dr. Feather stood in the bedroom doorway. It was a small room, with only one door and one window. Both were open now. Dr. Feather asked about them.

"No, they were both closed when we burst in," Polter answered.

The dead man lay in the bed—a wizened old man, with the covers almost completely enveloping him. His glazed eyes stared unseeingly. But on his face was a queer grimace—with his lips parted as though he had died upon the brink of a laugh!

Dr. Feather turned suddenly. "Captain, take everybody downstairs, will you? My girl Kit and I will look this over for a few minutes. When the doctor comes you can send him up here."

Alone in the room, Dr. Feather and little Kit for a moment stared at each other blankly.

"Dear me, it looks very queer, Kit," Dr. Feather said.

"It could be murder, couldn't it, Father?" "Well, I suppose so. But that note that old Kaine wrote—I can understand it. A crotchety old man—angry—they get the obsession sometimes that their life is in danger—"

"Especially if they're rich," Kit agreed. "That note was just a gesture of anger. To make trouble for his grandson. I don't believe for a minute that boy Kaine—"

"Don't theorize, child." They were examining the body now. It was still warm. "Dead only half an hour or so," Dr. Feather murmured. "Just before the fire was discovered."

And there was not a mark of violence on the body! No wound. No evidence of poison. The old man, who had locked himself in the bedroom, seemingly had simply died, awake in his bed! And died, about to laugh!

“There's something queer here, Kit,” Dr. Feather said, cocking his head birdlike to one side.

“The fire was queer,” Kit agreed. “You heard what that young artist—that Lee Polter said? A little fire, but it must have burned so briskly—”

They stared at each other. “We'll take a look at that storeroom presently,” Dr. Feather agreed. “This laugh on his face, Kit, I can't understand—”

DR. FEATHER was still examining the body. Kit was searching the room—its closets, its walls and floor—

“Father, come here,” she exclaimed excitedly.

There was a picture fairly low on one interior wall. Kit had moved it, and behind it there was a small hole—a break in the old plaster and wood.

“A mousehole,” Dr. Feather decided. “Only you don't find one halfway up a wall. Now where could this lead to?”

Kit was shining her light into it. Then she smelled it.

“No odor, Father.” Then with a finger prying into it, she added, “A rubber tube in here!”

They verified it. A half-inch rubber tube ended here. Where did it lead?

“We'd have to pull the house down to find out,” Dr. Feather said lugubriously. “Wait, child, let me think—”

For a moment he stood pondering. “No lethal gas coming through this tube to kill him. True, he was in a small closed room, but somebody would have smelled the gas. And the body would show signs of it—and he wouldn't have died with a laugh on his face!”

But something had come through the tube—some lethal weapon—of that Dr. Feather was convinced.

What was it?

“There were two crimes,” Kit said slowly. “A man is murdered, and then there is an attempt to burn down the house. There must be some connection, Father.”

Dr. Feather was pondering deeply. “Yes, of course, Kit. It would be pretty coincidental when a man is murdered to have the house catch fire almost immediately afterward.”

“Especially with a queer fire,” Kit commented. “I don't see how it could be anything else but incendiary—”

“If the murderer set the fire”—Dr. Feather was talking softly, thinking aloud—“then the most obvious reason was that he wanted to burn down the house to destroy evidence of the murder.”

“Exactly,” Kit exclaimed. “That seems obvious—”

“Yes, it seems obvious, Kit. And yet, I don't know—”

“What, Father?”

“Well,” he said, “this is a mighty clever murder, Kit. Would the murderer go to such extremes to make sure?” Again Dr. Feather pondered. “I’m puzzled, child,” he said at last. “Let’s take a look at that storeroom, Kit. We don’t know yet that the fire was incendiary. Or, if it was, we don’t know that it was done by the murderer.”

They went to the storeroom. It was littered with furniture, boxes of rubbish, barrels, old trunks—all wrecked and wet now with the fire and water. There had evidently been quite a litter of papers—the ashes were strewn about.

There was no evidence that gasoline or anything of similar inflammable nature had been used here. The wet, charred objects all had a normal smell.

“No ashes of gunpowder or other explosives,” Dr. Feather said. “But this fire—as that man who discovered it said—certainly burned with a queer briskness. Look where it jumped from here, to here, Kit.” He pointed to a drape that had burned, and, several feet away, another pile of charred cloth, with an area of wood between them which had not ignited.

“Queer, Kit,” he continued. “For the fire to have made that jump, the ignition point of this cloth must have been materially lowered. At a much lower than normal ignition temperature, it ignited from the heat of those burning drapes. Something lowered the ignition point of things in the room. And look at that paper ash. I would say, Kit, even without a chemical analysis, that that paper burned with abnormal briskness, and abnormal thoroughness.” He snapped his finger triumphantly.

“Then you’re sure now that the fire was incendiary, Father?”

“Yes, I am, Kit. And I’m almost positive the murderer did it. If we could find some evidence that ties them together—”

KIT had been prowling the room. “Look here!” she suddenly exclaimed.

She was stooping down by the baseboard. There was a hole there in the old wall—a hole quite similar to the one in the murder room upstairs, with a similar small end of rubber tube leading—somewhere.

“Well, the same man committed both crimes, that’s obvious,” Dr. Feather declared. Again he was pondering. “And the motive—”

“If only we knew where the pipes lead to,” Kit was murmuring.

“But I think I do, child!” Dr. Feather jumped to his feet. His eyes were flashing now. “Everything fits in perfectly. The murder, the fire, the method! You didn’t notice those men’s hands? You ought not miss anything, Kit! Come on, we’ll take a look.”

Whatever it was he had seen, Kit had missed it. Chagrined, she silently followed him down the stairs. The doctor had come now and was starting up to see the dead man.

Some of Allen’s uniformed men were just arriving. The inmates of the house were still crowded here in the lower hall. They gazed at the policemen with startled surprise.

“What's the matter?” Polter demanded. “Why the police?”

“You all go into Mr. Johnson's apartment,” Dr. Feather ordered. “You go with them, Captain. Kit and I will join you presently.”

Young Kaine stared blankly. Johnson said, “I don't understand—”

But Dr. Feather and Kit had vanished. He led her outside to the dark porch.

“The cellar, Kit,” he murmured. “I want to take a look down there. Now how the deuce can we find it without asking?”

They had seen two or three doors in the big lower hall, one of which probably led downward. But Dr. Feather wanted no one to see them go. They prowled the dark outer walls; found a small side door. Kit pried it open quickly. A small half- flight of stairs led downward.

The big cellar was clean and neat. Stairs led evidently to the upper main public hall. The big old-fashioned coal furnace was going. Several coal bins were partly filled. Dr. Feather and Kit poked silently about with their flashlights.

“Here they are, Kit!” he said presently. From out of the ceiling two small rubber pipes, side by side, came down close along the wall—two little black rubber tubes that buried themselves in the mound of coal in one of the bins.

“He didn't have time,” Dr. Feather said exultantly. “It's good we got here quickly. Kit. At the first chance, since he found the house didn't burn down, he'd have destroyed this evidence.”

Two coffinlike boxes were buried in the coal, “with the tubes leading into them!

“There you are, Kit,” Dr. Feather chuckled. “Just as I figured. If I don't startle him into confession—good heavens, there'll be enough routine police evidence here, of course. And the motive—” He stood for a moment in thought.

“You wait here, Kit,” he added. I'm going up and send them all down. Don't show them anything! Just keep them here till I come. I'll be detained upstairs a few minutes.”

In the hall upstairs he herded them all to the cellar.

“You stay with them, Captain,” he ordered. “My girl Kit is down there—I'll be there in a moment.”

IT was five or ten minutes before he joined them. And as he faced them he said abruptly:

“Ezra Kaine was murdered!” His raised hand checked their exclamations. “You, Mr. Polter,” he continued, “you discovered the fire—”

“Why—why yes, I did,” the young artist agreed. “I told you—”

“And it was burning briskly! Abnormally briskly! Well, the reason for that was that a little rubber tube led a gas from a cylinder down here in this coal bin up to the storeroom. The murderer started the fire—the gas in the room fed it nicely!”

Dr. Feather held up his hand sharply. “Don't ask me any questions! My goodness, I'm telling you as fast as I can! The same gas was introduced previously into old Ezra Kaine's bedroom. He breathed it—he woke up. He didn't feel sick. He died—well, just when he was about to laugh! The gas killed him—I imagine because he had a very weak, perhaps an impaired heart.”

Dr. Feather swung suddenly on the pallid grandson. “Did he have a weak heart, Mr. Kaine?”

“Why yes—yes, he sure did. But I don't understand—”

“Neither did I, at first,” Dr. Feather said grimly. “But here was a dead man, without any sign of poisonous gas in him—an autopsy wouldn't show a thing. And the murderer tried to burn down this house and all this evidence—”

Dr. Feather had seized a shovel; uncovered an end of one of the boxes. Within it was a steel cylinder, with a pressure gauge on top.

“Oxygen!” Dr. Feather said. “The gas of life! But too much of it intoxicates you—over- stimulation. It will race a weak heart, cause death. And it makes you want to laugh, with its intoxicating quality. That's why the dead man had that queer contorted laugh on his face! It's a perfect murder weapon! It evaporates out of the blood very quickly—an autopsy wouldn't show it.

“And with the same weapon, this murderer expected to burn down the house. Things burn very quickly indeed, with an excess of oxygen in the air! The ignition point is lowered by the oxygen—things ignite at an abnormally low temperature—and they burn very thoroughly. If Mr. Polter hadn't discovered the fire—grab him, Kit!”

Like a little cat the girl leaped upon Johnson, the house owner, when he tried to make a bolt for the outer door. Then he stood sullen, as the astonished, triumphant police captain seized him.

“He's your man, Captain,” Dr. Feather said. “You'll find plenty of routine police evidence here to convict him. My goodness, yes— fingerprints on these cylinders, and his fingerprints around all that carpentry he did on the house, leading those tubes upstairs. And the motive—”

“Oh, you've got me all right,” Johnson growled suddenly.

“You set the fire because your old house here is well insured,” Dr. Feather said. “I was searching for a motive. Covering up the murder was one. But then the murder was pretty neatly covered up already. Why burn the house; who would have another motive for doing that? You, Johnson, were the logical person.”

“Yeah,” Johnson muttered sullenly. “The damned old dump is heavily insured—”

“But that wasn't your motive for killing Ezra Kaine,” Dr. Feather said. “I've just been searching your apartment. Naturally, since you expected the house to burn down, you didn't hide things.

Wasn't it a question of some raised rent checks? Ezra Kaine's rent checks?”

“You go to the devil,” Johnson growled as the triumphant captain led him away.

There was a moment when Dr. Feather and Kit were alone in the cellar.

“I muffed part of this one, Father,” the girl said lugubriously. “How did you figure the cylinders were down here?”

“Johnson's fingernails were extra clean, Kit—newly cleaned, it seemed to me because his hands were rough and chapped—the hands of a man who works around a place like this and would seldom have clean nails. In fact his fingernails really looked suspiciously—most incongruously clean, Kit. And then I saw that the skin of his hands was abraded in several places. There was coal dust in the abrasions, and it didn't come out when he washed his hands!”

Dr. Feather was smiling as he regarded his chagrined young daughter.

“You've got to notice little things like that, Kit, or I'll never make a good detective out of you!”

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