

HUGH B. CAVE'S SPICY THREE PACK

Three great tales of spicy mystery, detective, and horror.

SONG OF THE LASH _____ **3**

The whole village was up in arms. A young girl whipped to death! Some blamed the Night Riders, but Joe Bates had a different idea....

ON ICE _____ **13**

To the local farmers the dead man may have been their Jim Holburn. I got one look at him and knew the case was much bigger than they thought. But what about Honeyboy's wife—or was she really his wife?

ZANNINI'S PUPPETS _____ **23**

"They are fools—fools!" swore Zannini. For he had given them proof of his powers and they called him a common trickster. Very well! If they wanted convincing, dangerous, proof, they should have it! He enlisted the aid of a girl ...

Copyright Information

Song of the Lash

Copyright ©1938 by Culture Publications Inc. for Spicy Mystery Stories, December, 1938.
All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the author.

On Ice

Published by Culture Publications, Inc. in *Spicy Detective Stories*, April 1941,
under Hugh B. Cave's pseudonym, Justin Case
All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Zannini's Puppets

Originally published by Culture Publications, Inc. in *Spicy Mystery Stories*, August 1938
Under Hugh B. Cave's pseudonym, Justin Case
All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the author.

SONG OF THE LASH

By Justin Case (Hugh B. Cave)

The whole village was up in arms. A young girl whipped to death! Some blamed the Night Riders, but Joe Bates had a different idea....



HER bare feet touched the ground, but she was not standing on them. Her knees were bent, her head lolled grotesquely, and she had long ago ceased to look at her tormentor. In the pale backwash of the lantern's yellow glow, she hung there like something in a madman's nightmare.

She was young, not more than twenty. Long dark tresses hung in a damp veil over her pain-twisted face, curled down over her bare shoulders and licked at the torn bit of silk which still clung feebly to her heaving breast. The ropes held her arms straight out from her body, and the weight of

her body threatened to tear the arms from their sockets.

She had stood erect at first. Had stood there, protected only by the bits of flesh-colored undergarments which his vicious fingers had failed to tear from her quivering form, and cursed him, defied him. Then the long black bull-whip had begun to sing its song of torture, and her defiance had dissolved into piteous pleas for mercy. Her knees had sagged. The pain in her brain had swelled into a vast, red-rimmed mass of darkness.

He was still there, still staring at her, but the lash had ceased to sing its song. It lay curled behind him, a tired snake sleeping on the soft carpet of dead leaves and decayed vegetation. There was no sound anywhere.

He paced forward. The lantern created a monstrous shadow of him and flung it against the black wall of the forest. The red robe hung shapelessly from his gaunt frame; the crimson cowl robbed his face—if he had one—of all form. His eyes glittered with a strange light in the cowl-slits. His gloved hands reached out to touch the girl's slender body.

"It hurts, no?" he whispered. "The whip, it has teeth that bite deep. But I am not finished with you yet, my darling. There can be but one penalty for being unfaithful—and that is death."

She had strength enough left to raise her head and look at him. Her face was a white, twisted mask of agony. The whip had licked at it, torn her lips. The whip had curled about her slender legs, caressed the youthful curve of her quivering white waist. The whip had sung its torment-song against her arms, her neck. Methodically and patiently it had sought out the pain-centers and made of her a cringing, whimpering creature in which life was slowly dying.

"Dear God," she moaned, "what have I done to you? Who are you?"

He laughed, and the sound was a cruel rasping that came from deep inside him. Savagely he gripped her sagging body, pulled her erect, held her against him. "A farewell embrace, my beloved . . . and then . . ."

He lifted the cowl, glued his mouth to hers for a moment, then released her. Her body went limp again.

He turned, paced away from her and picked up the whip. His arm swung back, forward again. The lash whistled about her legs, climbed to her waist. The third time, all his strength was behind the curling black snake as it whined forward.

It looped about her throat with a sharp crackling sound. A scream died on the girl's lips. She fought for breath, and in the yellow glow of the lantern her agonized face turned purple.

"Farewell, my beloved," he said softly. "Farewell . . ."

JOE BATES lowered his mouth to the warm red lips that trembled fervently beneath it. "You know," he whispered, "there'd be all hell to pay if old Jonathan knew you were here, darling. Sometimes I think that's why you come. You enjoy the thrill of danger."

She shook her head. Irma Henderson was young, twenty years old next January, and blessed with a clean, fresh-air loveliness which would have made her the envy of any city siren. She had spent all her life in the little village of Cordray, and now, at nineteen, she was the most beautiful, the most desirable thing in the whole of Kent County. At least, she was to Joe.

"No, Joe," she said. "It's you I love, not the danger of coming here. The danger is too real. You don't know my father when he is angry."

"If he ever laid a hand on you, darling, I'd—"

She silenced him by pressing her hot, quivering lips against his own. Her slim young body nestled in his arms, vibrant and yielding, and there was a strange kind of eagerness in her kiss that surprised him. More than once he had wondered how the daughter could be so utterly different from the father. Old Jonathan Henderson had a heart as cold as stone, no understanding whatever of the flames of love which could blaze in a human soul. Irma was red-blooded and responsive to love, unashamed to show it.

They were alone, the two of them, in Joe Bates' camp, and the hour was eleven-thirty. A lamp burned low on the table, casting warm, intimate shadows on the log walls. Outside, the night was still, and the lapping of miniature waves on the lake-shore was plainly audible.

Joe Bates drew the girl's slender body closer in his embrace, kissed her dark eyes, her hair, the soft curve of her lovely throat. He had met her a month ago, soon after his arrival in Kent County to take over the job of Chief Fire Warden. Carstairs, the ex-warden, had introduced her to him, and that very night Irma had come to Joe's camp. After that, every third or fourth night she had somehow managed to escape the watchful eyes of her widowed father and find her way to Joe Bates' arms.

She sighed contentedly now and pressed her slim form against him, drew his lips down to hers again. Her thin cotton dress had inched above her knees. The lamplight fell on white, smooth flesh. She was a little thing, almost too small, yet every

inch of her was woman, laden with a woman's emotions. . .

His fingers gently caressed a bare shoulder. She snuggled closer in his arms. Her mouth blended with his and the fragrance of her was like strong whiskey coursing through him. He forgot about her father then. He forgot everything—until a sudden alien sound jerked him erect, drew his gaze abruptly to the door.

RAPID, heavy footsteps came surging out of the night's silence. A fist banged the door until the hinges rattled. A hoarse voice called out: "Joe! Joe Bates! Open up, for the love of God!"

Scowling, Joe unlocked the door. Into the room staggered a chunky young man with disheveled yellow hair and wide, frightened eyes. Lester Agnew, deputy fire warden and one of Joe's assistants.

Agnew blurted out his message—most of it—before he saw that Joe was not alone. "There's been a murder!" he croaked. "Ruth Neglin, the Postmaster's daughter—found dead in the woods over near the Ridge Road! Whipped to death, Joe! The whole village is up in arms!"

"Whipped to death?"

"Yes! By—" Agnew saw Irma Henderson for the first time, and was suddenly silent, staring at her. A strange expression twisted across his face. When he spoke again, he chose his words with more care.

"They—they think the Night Riders did it, Joe. There's going to be hell to pay; you mark my words."

Joe Bates strode to the other side of the room, lifted his holstered pistol from the peg on which it hung, and whipped it around him. "You got your car?"

"Yes."

"Let's go, then. We'll drop Irma off at her house on the way."

Agnew hesitated, then shook his head. "She'd better stay here, Joe."

"Here? Why?"

"She'll be safer here." His eyes said more.

Joe Bates scowled. "Well, all right if you think so." He took the girl in his arms, looked down into her wide eyes. "He's right, darling. If there's trouble in the village, you'll be better off here. No

one ever comes here." He held her close to him, kissed her until her slim, trembling form threatened to melt against him and become a part of him. "You lock the door and wait, honey. I'll be back just as soon as I can."

HE and Agnew went out, strode down the path to the road where Agnew's car was waiting. Just once Joe looked back. Irma Henderson stood in the doorway, with the light glowing softly through her thin cotton dress, limning the alluring roundness of her legs, revealing every enticing curve of her perfect young form. She waved. He waved back.

"What's the story, Lester?"

"There's hell to pay. This girl was found murdered, tortured, most of her clothes torn off. Some fiend with a whip had made a horrible mess of her. They're blaming the Night Riders—and you know as well as I do who's head of the Night Riders."

"Irma's father? I'm not so sure of that."

"Well, everyone else is sure. The whole village is out lookin' for him now, and if they find him—God knows what they'll do to him. It will be ghastly."

Seated beside his deputy as the car growled forward, its headlights flooding the dark with an eerie brightness, Joe Bates began to realize how grimly serious this thing was. In the beginning, he had heard only vague rumors about the activities of the strange, white-robed cult known as the Kent County Night Riders. Later, from scraps of authentic information picked up here and there, he had built up a pretty accurate picture of the entire set-up.

The Night Riders had been secretly organized about a year ago, to combat sin and depravity in the valley. Until tonight, the Riders had contented themselves with punishing men and women who strayed from the straight and narrow.

At least a score of persons had suffered at the hands of the Riders. But until tonight, the white-robed cult had not crimsoned their hands with murder-blood.

Joe Bates stared glumly through the windshield and said: "What did they kill this girl for?"

"No one knows."

"She was running around with some-foreigner, wasn't she?"

"She's been going out with one, yes. Fellow named Graube. Nick Graube. A no-good skunk if ever there was one."

"Did they—did they get Graube, too?"

"He can't be found."

Joe Bates was silent. The car had climbed a steep stretch of rutted road, and the lights of the village were visible now at the foot of the long, gradual descent which lay ahead. The lights themselves were significant. At this time of night the little village was generally sealed in slumber.

But something else, closer at hand, had snared Joe Bates' attention. Midway down the slope, a tower of flames rose luridly into the black sky, painting the mid-night heavens an ugly red.

"Good Lord!" Joe gasped. "They've fired Henderson's house!"

It was a weird scene. The house, set back from the road, was hidden entirely by the flames that enveloped it. The crimson glare reached out to paint, as with a brush dipped in blood, the mob of muttering men and women who crowded against the hell-blast of heat. Men and women from the village, normally good, God-fearing people, had been transformed into screaming, blood-mad beasts by the murder of Ruth Neglin.

Joe Bates leaped from the car as it jerked to a stop. Fists clenched, he shouldered his way forward, made a lane for himself through the mob. His destination was a seething knot of flame-reddened shapes that snarled and shouted around the cringing, sobbing figure of a woman. The woman was Mrs. Fischer, Henderson's housekeeper. Irma Henderson always referred to her as "mother." "Damn you!" Joe bellowed. "Leave her alone! Take your filthy hands off her!"

THE woman slumped into his arms as he slugged his way to her side. Evidently the villagers had dragged her from her bed before firing the house. She wore a white nightgown that was torn down one side and sagged in shreds from her shoulder, covering but little of her curved form. She was an attractive woman, about thirty, dark-haired, inclined to plumpness.

Joe Bates put an arm around her, kept his other hand clenched and glared defiance into the carmined faces of the men who surged forward.

His sudden arrival had bewildered them into inaction; now their bewilderment was turning into rage.



Throughout that mad nightmare he kept her always beside him.

"What's the trouble?" Joe demanded. "What has she done?"

"She knows where Henderson is, and we aim to make her tell!"

"I don't know," the woman sobbed. "I swear I don't! He went out about eight o'clock and hasn't come back. I don't know where he went to!"

Joe believed her. He looked down into her terrified face and grimly stood his ground against the threats of the mob. The woman's half clad body, painted red by the fireglow, huddled against him. Through the torn shreds of her nightgown he could feel her quivering, could feel the pressure of warm contours against his rigid body.

"Stand back!" he bellowed.

They began to close in on him, muttering threats, curses. His face blanched. He knew what would happen if they reached for him and he

lashed out with his fists. They would drag him down, fall on him like wolves. They *were* wolves.

"Back!" he cried hoarsely. A clawing hand fastened on him. His fist exploded against a bearded face.

Suddenly he was not alone. A tall, clean-shaven man, gray-haired, middle-aged, stood beside him, holding up a hand. "This is all wrong," the man said. "You people are degenerating into beasts, losing all sense of justice. Go home now."

They listened to him. His voice had a quality that would have made savage beasts listen. "Go home and think things over, he said. "You have burned the home of Mr. Henderson; that is enough. Remember, you have no proof, no positive proof, that Mr. Henderson is the leader of the Riders. Go home and think."

To Joe Bates the man said: "I suggest we take Mrs. Fischer to my home. She will be safer there."

Joe stared. He had heard of this man, this Stephen Nason, before, but had never before stood so close to him or exchanged words with him. Nason was a dignified, middle-aged bachelor who lived alone in the old Mangan house, on South Road. People respected him.

Joe picked the woman up and carried her to Lester Agnew's car and put her in it. She was on the verge of collapse. When he lowered her onto the rear seat she slumped sideways and sat there with her eyes shut, her bosom twitching convulsively as she labored for breath. Nason got in beside her. Joe got in front with Agnew. There were no protests from the crowd as the car droned away.

"A terrible thing, all this," Nason said heavily. "And so senseless. They have no proof that Henderson is guilty. They have no proof that the Night Riders are involved at all. It could have been the girl's sweetheart—the foreign youth, Nick Graube."

THE house was about a mile distant, and there were lights in the downstairs rooms. Nason produced a key, unlocked the front door. "I keep it locked," he apologized, "because of my paintings. Some of them are quite valuable." Joe Bates followed him over the threshold, carrying the woman's limp body in his arms.

"Listen," Lester Agnew said. "I'm goin' back to see if that mob broke up. If it didn't, there'll be

trouble before this night's over, you mark my words."

"An excellent idea," Nason declared.

Agnew left. At Nason's direction, Joe Bates carried the woman upstairs to a bedroom. Nason brought warm water and stood watching, his face expressionless, as Joe bathed her wounds. She moaned now and then at the touch of his clumsy fingers on her bruised flesh.

The mob had used her roughly. Cruel fingers had gouged strips of flesh from her shoulders. A purpling blotch on the white flesh of a rounded thigh was unmistakable evidence that someone had brutally kicked her.

The woman slept. Joe and Nason went downstairs to await the return of Lester Agnew.

He came at last, his face gray with fright, eyes bulging, face running with sweat. "The whole valley has gone mad!" he croaked, wringing his hands. "Nick Graube's father is leading them. He says the Riders are responsible for what happened. Says they punished Nick only a week ago for goin' out with the girl, and threatened him with death if he went with her again. My God, they're goin' into people's houses now, searchin' for the white robes of the Night Riders! They found one in Jed Michael's house and used it to hang him with! They're insane!"

Joe Bates' face turned gray. Fists clenched, he strode to the door. "I'm goin' for Irma!" he shouted. A hideous vision swam before his eyes: a vision of a snarling, blood-hungry mob breaking into his camp, seizing the girl he loved, dragging her out and mauling her, tearing the clothes from her cringing body as they tortured her. She was the daughter of old man Henderson, leader of the Riders. They would show her no mercy.

He flung himself into Agnew's car, backed the machine out of the yard and sent it growling through the night. When he reached the top of the ridge a few minutes later and looked back into the depths of the valley, he realized that Agnew had not exaggerated. Flames climbed skyward in three separate places. The road itself was dotted with moving spots of light, torches, in the hands of marauders.

Murder Valley! Valley of Madness!

His heart was in his throat when he leaped from the car and ran toward the shack at the edge of the lake. The camp was in darkness, and the

darkness frightened him. Had the villagers been here already? Was he too late?

THE door was locked. He hammered on it, and presently a light glowed inside, a low voice, not too steady, demanded: "W—who is it?"

"Me! Joe!"

The door opened. With a sob of relief he took the girl in his arms.

She was almost as frightened as he was. Scared, no doubt, by his wild banging on the door. "I—I put the light out and tried to go to sleep," she whispered. "I was afraid, being left here alone, Joe." He crushed her against him, kissed her eyes, her hair, her trembling lips. The wild ride through the night from Nason's house had told him something; told him his little affair with Irma Henderson was not just an adventure, not just a dangerous game which he played because of her warm red lips and gorgeous figure. *He loved her.* A moment ago he had been sick with fear for her, and now his heart was pounding out a song of thanksgiving.

He hugged her to him until her lips parted with a little sob of pain and she said: "You—you're hurting me, Joe!" Then he lifted her in his arms, strode out to the car. When he took his place at the wheel she huddled close to him, her slim little body warm and soft against his own, so close that he could feel against his arm the rapid beat of her heart.

He drove slowly now. The road was deserted; there was no particular need for haste. She would be safe at Nason's house, he reflected, and then he himself would go out and find her father. If, indeed, her father was the leader of the Night Riders, he would smuggle the old man out of Kent County until the madness died down. For Irma's sake he would do that, even though it might be a dangerous procedure.

But something was wrong. He knew it as soon as he drove into the yard. There was an eerie stillness in the air, a deathlike silence that seemed to ooze up out of the ground to strangle him. The house was in darkness.

He fumbled for a flashlight, found one, and approached the house slowly, his right hand hovering over the holstered pistol at his belt. His fear was contagious, and Irma Henderson trembled at his side; her hand was cold on his arm.

The door hung open. The flashlight's glow reached in to yellow the living-room. Joe Bates stepped cautiously over the threshold, stiffened, and stood staring.

The house was not deserted. In the middle of the living-room floor lay a sprawled, silent shape, its head turned so that the ghastly grimace on its face leaped full into the glare of the light in Joe's fist. A bullet hole gaped in the center of that white forehead. Blood had gathered in a thick red pool on the carpet.

"Agnew!" Joe whispered hoarsely. "Agnew. . . dead! Good God!"

He pulled the girl inside, pushed the door shut and stood there, staring. The blood in his veins was ice. The flashlight sent a nervous lane of light around the room.

Nothing was out of order. Nothing had been disturbed. But Lester Agnew lay there in a pool of his own blood, dead.

Joe Bates advanced slowly, pulling the girl with him. He dared not leave her behind, dared not release her hand even for a minute, lest the thing which had slain his deputy should suddenly come snarling out of the dark to claim another victim. Slowly he paced across the room, entered the dining-room. Five minutes later he had explored every room in the house and knew that the house was empty.

Back in the living-room he sank onto a divan and stared again at the murdered man. "I don't understand it," he muttered. "Where's Nason? Where's Mrs. Fischer?"

The silence had no answer. Irma Henderson, wide-eyed with fear, huddled against him and he put an arm around her, did his best to calm her.

For the time being, he and she must remain here. Must wait for Nason to return. The inaction, the strain of waiting would drive him mad, most likely, but he could not leave Irma here alone.

"Let's have another look around," he muttered.

Once again he prowled through the house with the girl in tow, but this time his search was more thorough. This time, in a little upstairs room which was obviously Nason's workroom, he found something.

He found a scrap-book, lying there on a table cluttered with paints and brushes.

IT WAS a queer room. The walls were covered with oil-paintings and water-colors, most of them; depicting nude women. A hundred or more-canvasses were stacked in a corner, and they, too, were mostly nudes. Joe Bates was no judge of art, but this stuff looked like the work of a master. One picture in particular—a life-sized portrait of a girl about twenty years old—captured his gaze and held it.

The girl wore a tiny string of jewels about her hips, a fuzzy bit of porous, transparent cloth about her lilting young breast. Nothing else. She stood with her head high, her slender arms out-stretched. She was beautiful. Beautiful in a warm, sensual way which sent a queer thrill coursing through Joe Bates' blood.

The artist's name, lightly lettered on the canvas, was Stephen Nason. The same name appeared on all the other pictures.

Joe Bates bent over the scrapbook, thumbed its thick pages. It puzzled him. It was full of circus handbills, newspaper clippings, circus programs. Some of the handbills were highly colored. All of them advertised, in large letters, "The Masked Marvel of the Argentine! Master of the Whip! See Him Snap a Cigarette from a Girl's Mouth, from Fifty Feet Away! See him perform with the Fifty Foot Bull-whip!" And more of the same.

There was a picture, in color, of a girl standing with a cigarette in her lips, her arms clasped behind her head, while the "Masked Marvel," garbed in faded red robe and red cowl, coiled the long black whip in preparation for his act. Joe Bates stared at the girl for some time, then turned abruptly and gazed at the portrait on the wall. It was the same girl.

Frowning, he glanced at the newspaper clippings.

Most of them were reviews of the circus, and failed to interest him. Through them he learned only that the girl in the picture was the wife of the Marvel, that the Marvel himself was supposed to be a Spanish nobleman. But the last page of the big scrap-book contained something else. Headlines.

CIRCUS GIRL SLAIN DURING
PERFORMANCE! ROSITA, WIFE OF "MASKED
MARVEL," MURDERED BY HUSBAND IN FULL
VIEW OF 12,000 SPECTATORS! KILLER
ESCAPES!

Irma Henderson looked over his shoulder, her body warm and soft against his, as he read it. And while he read it, his eyes narrowed with understanding, his fingers curled until his hands were fists.

"Last night, in full view of 12,000 horrified spectators, murder was committed under the big top of the Marshfield Bros. Circus, which came to this city last Thursday for a one week stand. The victim, Rosita Damon, had been scientifically undressed down to her circus tights, by her actor-husband, Manuel Damon, the 'Masked Marvel of the Bull-whip', who, with the fifty-foot whip, had flicked the raiment piece by piece from her body. The final stroke sent the tapered end of the whip whistling about her throat with such force that the jugular was severed. She died before medical aid could be summoned.

"Jealousy is believed to be the motive. Circus people volunteered the information that Rosita had threatened several times to sue her husband for divorce on the grounds of cruelty. Also that her friendship for another man, whose name was not revealed, had of late brought forth repeated threats of reprisal from her husband.

"The murderer escaped and is still being sought."

Joe Bates closed the book and stepped away from it, trembling. "You know what this means?" he cried hoarsely. "It means I've got to—" He stiffened, was suddenly silent.

Downstairs a door had slammed shut.

Bates pulled his pistol from its holster, tiptoed to the threshold. "You wait here," he muttered. "Wait here until I call you."

HE WENT down the hall slowly, groping with an outstretched hand for the stair-rail. There was another sound downstairs now: a hoarse sobbing sound, guttural as the death-rattle of an animal in agony. Someone down there was crawling over the floor, dragging limp legs behind a wriggling body.

Joe Bates threw caution aside, whipped his flashlight from his belt and sent a white lane of light stabbing down the stairs. He descended rapidly, jerked to a halt at the bottom as the light showed him a disheveled, sobbing figure kneeling there.

"Mr. Henderson!" Joe gasped.

The old man gazed at him with fear-glazed eyes. Utter exhaustion had claimed that frail body. The face was white as paste, gaunt as the face of a corpse. His clothes hung in tatters. His hands, his forearms, his legs were red with blood, hideously torn and scratched by thorns and bullbriars.

"They're after me!" he sobbed. "They'll kill me!"

Joe strode forward, lifted the old man off the floor and eased him into a chair. "What happened?" he demanded.

"I—I was visitin' at Mrs. Ellwood's house. I went there early this evenin'—to—to talk to her about the church. Her son, Phil, was down to the village, and about twelve o'clock he come rushin' home to tell me the villagers were lookin' for me—to *kill me!* They think I'm one of the Night Riders, Joe! It's not true! I swear it's not! But they'll kill me!"

"You say they followed you here?" Joe Bates snapped.

"They—some of 'em saw me leavin' Mrs. Elwood's house. I had to run for it—through the woods. I—I didn't know where to go. I just ran and kept on runnin', with them after me. Then I thought of Mr. Nason and figured he would protect me . . ."

Joe Bates stood wide-legged, staring at the door. "Let 'em come," he muttered. "I'll tell them who murdered the Neglin girl, and I can prove it to them! Right here in this house I can prove it. Let 'em come!"

"They—they'll kill me, Joe!"

Joe gazed at the old man and felt sorry for him. It was a long way from Mrs. Elwood's house, up on the ridge, to this place. Four miles, at least. Four miles of terrible going, through the woods at night.

"They won't harm you, Mr. Henderson. You just relax and—"

The words were slammed back into his mouth by a sound from upstairs. The sound came again, jelling his blood, emptying his face of color. It was a scream, a shrill, needling scream of terror, from the lips of the girl he loved.

With it came a harsh, bestial outpouring of guttural laughter.

Joe Bates took the stairs three at a time, rushed blindly along the hall to the room where he and Irma had pored over the scrapbook. His flash flooded the chamber with light. The room was empty. An open window loomed ahead of him, and from the darkness outside came a second burst of that mad, blood-curdling laughter.

Joe stumbled to the window, looked down. His flashlight stabbed the inky blackness—but the thing spitting out that vile mirth was gone. Echoes of the laughter drifted up to him. Then the stillness returned, thick and heavy and strangling.

SICK with fear, Joe turned, blundered back across the room and down the stairs. The thing had sneaked up the back way, seized Irma Henderson, spirited her away. But he, Joe Bates, was chained here by his duty to the frightened old man who huddled there in the chair. He could not leave Jonathan Henderson here alone.

"She's gone!" he groaned. "Gone! My God, what can I do?"

Jonathan Henderson scowled at him. "Who's gone?"

"Your daughter! She was upstairs. I've got to go after her! But—"

The old man pushed himself erect, clawed at Joe's arm. "My daughter, Irma? Gone? Do something, man!"

"He's taken her away, into the woods," Joe mumbled. The rest of it he left unspoken, but in his heart he knew what would happen. It was dark out there. He might blunder through the woods for hours without finding the girl and her captor. By that time the fiend in red would have had his way with her; the bull-whip would have branded her lovely body, cut her white flesh to ribbons, curled around her throat and strangled her.

But old man Henderson was clawing feverishly at Joe's arm. "Listen," he croaked. "On my way here from Mrs. Ellwood's house I passed through a clearing. A woman was there—dead—almost naked—tied to a tree. My housekeeper, Mrs. Fischer. There was a whip lying on the ground. I stumbled over it. He'll take Irma there, Joe! There to that same place!"

Joe Bates lurched to the door, dragged it open. The old man stumbled after him. It was not dark out there—not at the front of the house. Red flares blazed in the road, and hoarse yells of

triumph burst through the night as Joe and Henderson emerged.

"It's Henderson! Old man Henderson! Get him!"

"Get both of them!"

Dark shapes rushed forward across the lawn, snarling curses, brandishing weapons as they stormed toward the house. But Joe Bates, after an almost fatal instant of fearful inaction, took the situation in his teeth and was too fast for them. Whirling, he slammed the old man back into the house, yanked the door shut and locked it. Then, seizing Henderson by a wrist, he ran with him to the rear door.

The door slammed shut behind them. The woods swallowed them.

"Now," Joe gasped, "lead me to that clearing!"

How long he crashed along behind the stumbling, staggering figure of Irma's father he never knew. The old man was frail, worn out, yet had amazing vitality. He knew the way and made no mistakes. Half a dozen times, when he fell, Joe dragged him erect again and snarled at him to hurry.

They covered a mile, a mile and half, through black woods, with bull-briars tearing at them, low hanging branches shredding the clothes on their bodies, hidden roots tripping them. Joe himself was twice on the verge of collapse, yet the old man kept going. And suddenly a light winked ahead in the darkness. A low sound vibrated through the dark to beat against Joe's brain.

A woman, moaning.

He seized the old man's arm, pulled him to a halt. "You stay here," he muttered. "I'll handle this alone. I've got a gun."

But he didn't have a gun. The holster had been torn from his hip during the mad race through the woods, and his hand, groping for the weapon, came away empty. He sucked in a deep breath, made fists of his hands and crept forward, toward the light.

IT WAS a lantern. In the pale yellow glow of it, a red-robed figure stood wide-legged, one gloved hand gripping the butt of a huge whip. Before him a limp, sagging, near-naked form was bound to the bole of a tree; bound with strips of her own garments. Hair hung in her eyes, licked

down at the turbulent, throbbing bosom. In the glow of the lantern her slim body was like a thing made of spun gold, flawless in its perfection. Rounded legs curved from the tattered rag that clung to her hips. Small, golden feet dug at the soft earth as she struggled vainly to free herself, moaning out her anguish.

The bull-whip streaked out, cracked against sensitive flesh, then snaked back through the carpet of dead leaves to coil itself for another agonizing strike. The girl screamed in pain, writhed against the tree.

The thing in red drew back his arm to strike again, but a yell of blind fury stopped him. He whirled, crouching, took a sudden backward step as Joe Bates lunged into the spread of light from the lantern.

There was murder in Joe Bates' heart. A red mist hung before his eyes as he charged. He saw the whip, saw it rise from the ground and snake out to meet him, but he had no thought except to seize that macabre red shape and destroy it.

The whip whistled around his waist, caught him in a grip as powerful as that of an octopus. He stumbled. The girl screamed in horror. But Joe Bates caught himself.

He caught himself, clamped both hands around the sleek black snake and with a superhuman wrench pulled the butt from the fiend's grip. And then, gripping the loaded butt like a baseball bat, Joe Bates surged forward.

He was merciless. Again and again the bludgeon crashed home with heavy, sodden thuds. The red-robed shape staggered back, fell to its knees, and even then Joe kept swinging. When he stopped at last, the crimson cowl was drenched with blood and the monster lay in a sprawled, lifeless heap at his feet. And the night was full of voices—hoarse, clamoring voices, and crashing sounds made by heavy feet in the underbrush.

Joe turned, prepared for the worst. Into the clearing stormed gaunt-faced men from the village, dragging with them the exhausted, stumbling shape of Irma Henderson's father. They stopped when they saw the robed thing at Joe's feet. Stopped and stared, bewildered.

Joe glared at them. "You're wrong about Henderson," he said grimly. "This is the man you want. This is the killer. And his name is Nason. Stephen Nason!"

Gaping, they crowded around.

"If you want proof," Joe snarled, "go to Nason's house and look at the scrap-book I found there. This man was once a circus performer. He killed his wife. Now he wants to kill others."

A tall, powerful figure pushed through the crowd, said quietly:

"No, Joe, you're wrong." Joe Bates stared with wide, unbelieving eyes. The man was Stephen Nason.

"You're wrong, Joe," Nason said. "This man was a circus performer, yes—and he did murder his wife. But that scrap-book you found in my house doesn't belong to me; it belongs to him. I stole it from his home two days ago."

NASON dropped to his knees beside the cowed shape on the ground. "If you read the account of that first murder, Joe, you know that this man murdered his wife because she loved another man. I was that other man, Joe. I painted her portrait, fell in love with her. When he killed her, and escaped, I vowed to find him if it took the rest of my life.

"I found him at last, Joe—here in the valley. But then he murdered Ruth Neglin. Murdered her because she looked a lot like Rosita. He's always been queer. Perhaps in his twisted mind he thought Ruth Neglin was Rosita, come back to life. He killed her, and then his mind snapped altogether. He became murder-mad.

"This is the Masked Marvel of the circus, Joe. This is Manual Ramon—known to you people as Isidore Graube, Nick Graube's father. And you've cheated me, Joe, by killing him. I—I wanted that job myself."

With tears in his eyes, Nason wrenched the blood-soaked cowl loose. The villagers crowded forward. The battered, evil face that stared up at them was the face of Isidore Graube.

"You've cheated me, Joe," Nason said again, dully, "but it was my own fault. I shouldn't have left Lester Agnew and Mrs. Fischer alone in the house I thought I could find this fiend myself, and square accounts with him . . . but it didn't work out that way."

Joe Bates was not listening. He held in his arms the limp, white body of the girl he loved, and with clumsy fingers was wrapping his own shirt

around her to hide her from the stares of the villagers.

He held her as he would have held a tired child, but the thrill that ran through him as she stirred in his arms and pressed her soft curves against him told him she was no child. He whispered words of comfort, and her arms crept about his neck, drew his mouth down to hers.

The strange light in her eyes, the ardent pressure of her parted lips as she strained against him were a promise—a promise that in the days to come she would forget the horror of this one night of madness which was now over.

THE END

ON ICE

By Justin Case (Hugh B. Cave)

To the local farmers the dead man may have been their Jim Holburn. I got one look at him and knew the case was much bigger than they thought. But what about Honeyboy's wife—or was she really his wife?



AT the start it was just a two bit murder. Worth a couple of lines on page one for the ice angle, maybe, but otherwise strictly filler stuff.

Jim Holburn lived out there in a year 'round camp on Blue Lake, with his wife Millie. Someone cut a hole in the ice and Jim fell into it and was drowned.

Alvah Tucks, the sheriff at Kimms Corner, investigated. He talked to Millie. He asked her who cut the hole in the ice and she didn't know. She said Jim must have cut it. It was a big hole, right smack on the path they took across the ice from their cabin to the shed on the opposite

shore, where they kept their car. Jim must have cut some ice for the ice-house, she said, and then stepped into the hole that night on his way home from the village. Drunk, she said.

Alvah Tucks looked in Jim Holburn's ice-house and didn't find any fresh cut of ice. He asked around and learned that Jim was sober when he left the village that night. Cold sober.

What actually happened, Tucks said, someone else cut that hole in the ice without Jim's knowledge, and hid the ice someplace. Then the hole froze over a little, and some snow

fell, and Jim Holburn crashed through to his death.

That's what the hole was, Tucks said. A death trap.

He arrested Millie. He said it was well known around Kimms Corner that Millie had been two-timing behind Jim's back. Lots of times while Jim was in to the village, Tucks said, there'd been strange men visiting the camp. Now Jim was dead, and by God he was going to get to the bottom of this.

I HEARD some of this from Tucks' own lips. The boss sent me up there, you see, to give Tucks a hand. I'm only a newspaper man, but the owner of the *Chronicle*, Big Sam Leahy, is a political boss and was pushing Tucks for reelection. Small stuff, but important.

It was more important than he thought. I looked at the hole in the ice, I talked to Tucks, and I asked to see Jim Holburn. Holburn was in the Kimms Corner jail, under a blanket. I lifted the blanket and looked at his face. Lowered the blanket, stared at Tucks, said, "This is Jim Holburn?"

"Who else would it be?" he cracked.

I knew who else it could be. I knew who else it was. And I knew I had stumbled on a story far bigger than any local murder. The big, dark-haired lad under that blanket may have been Jim Holburn to the local citizenry, but I'd seen that swarthily handsome face too often to be mistaken.

This was something!

"You want to talk to Jim's wife?" Tucks asked me.

I almost said, "Which wife?" but controlled myself. "Sure," I said.

She was locked up, of course, and as Tucks opened the door of her cell I helped myself to a good look at her. With a little more color in her face and something a mite more cheerful than the black dress she was wearing, this girl could have written her own ticket to Hollywood.

I wasn't surprised. Honeyboy Harris had always picked the cream of the crop. I'd known at least half a dozen of Honeyboy's "wives" and all had been gorgeous, young, shapely, dripping with boudoir appeal.

On the other hand, all the others had been just a trifle hard around the eyes—wise in the

ways of the world—and this girl wasn't quite that sort. She had long, slim legs, all right, and the thin black dress hugged a deliciously pert bosom, but she didn't have that sneer, that look of wise sophistication. She appeared to be just a pale, bewildered kid.

"Careful, Johnny," I thought. "Looks are sometimes deceiving. Most likely this sweet young thing would invite you up and slip a knife into you for a couple of bucks spending money."

Tucks introduced me. "Mrs. Holburn, this here is John Kern, from the *Chronicle*. You want to talk to him?"

She looked at me, and I hung onto my breath for a second. Something about those eyes of hers, the way she raised them, stared at me, made me certain I'd met her before somewhere. Or was I crazy?

"What do you want to know?" Millie said.

"How long have you been Jim Holburn's wife?"

She hadn't expected that question. She stiffened. Her breasts thrust sharply against the black dress and she trembled a little. "I—I married him just before we came up here."

"What was your name before you married him, Mrs. Holburn?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Mildred—Smith."

I scowled at Tucks. "You mind if I ask Mrs. Holburn a few personal questions, Tucks?"

He liked that. He had the look of a man about to peer into a bedroom window. "No. Go right ahead."

"I mean personal. Private. Just Mrs. Holburn and myself."

His face fell. "It ain't exactly regular. . ." But he caught the look in my eye, shrugged and went out, leaving us alone.

I WAITED until the sound of his footsteps assured me he was well out of ear-shot. Then I leaned forward, put a hand on Millie Holburn's knee. I said, "What Tucks doesn't know won't hurt him. What I know may hurt *you*, though, unless we get together on this." When that got only a frown from her, I added gently: "Honeyboy Harris didn't usually marry his wives. Did he marry you?"

I didn't think her face could get any paler, but it did. Every trace of color ran out of it, and her mouth was a pale, soft, trembling blur in a white

mask of fear. She trembled like a leaf, staring at me. Then all at once she folded, put her face in her hands and went all to pieces, sobbing.

I'm human. I'm thirty and single, and she was a very lovely young lady in trouble. I put my arms around her. She didn't protest.

"A lot of nice girls fell for Honeyboy," I soothed her. "The hell with that part of it. The point is—did you kill him or didn't you? Either way, maybe I can get you out of it."

She needed someone to cling to, that girl. She was scared. And I was handy, and she didn't have much choice—either me or Tucks, with Tucks a shriveled little runt as heartless as Hitler.

She pressed her head against my chest and hung onto me, and I liked it. She was warm and soft. She had a lot of delicious curves that intrigued me. I could feel her breasts throbbing through the thin black dress. I could see an interesting inch of smooth creamy skin where the hem hitched up her leg. I liked the smell of her hair.

After a while, I said, "How about it, Millie? Did you cut that ice?"

"No," she whispered.

"Did you get someone else to cut it?"

"No . . . I didn't. I don't know *who* did it."

I gave her a smile and tipped her face up so I could look into her eyes. "Okay," I said. "You just leave this to your Uncle Johnny. Uncle Johnny likes you." And I kissed her.

Under the circumstances, that was a remarkable kiss. I mean she wasn't in the mood, she just let me kiss her. But the way her soft, warm mouth blended with mine, the way her lips came apart and shaped themselves . . . *uh-huh!* My mind was made up, Alvah Tucks was definitely not going to keep those lips locked up in his two-by-four jailhouse. Not for long!

It was just getting dark when I parked at the lake shore, beside the shed. The wind off the lake whistled through me, and I tugged my collar up, walked over to the shed, looked in with a flashlight.

Two cars were in there. One belonged to Jim Holburn, alias Honeyboy Harris, and had been there when Tucks showed me around before. The other was a snazzy New York coupe, a new arrival.

Over across, two or three windows of the camp glowed with light. I started toward them,

warily circled the roped-off patch of thin ice where Honeyboy had stepped to his death.

A weird spot, this Blue Lake. About a mile long, it had a flock of hidden inlets and was surrounded by deep woods. The camp for which I was headed was the only one on the lake. In summer you could drive clear to the lodge, but with snow on the ground the road around the lake was too tough for a car, and you walked the ice.

Right now the ice was solid enough to support a team of horses. But beyond the rope barrier lay a patch of deep black water that looked ugly. I gave it a wide berth, and was glad to reach shore. But the lights puzzled me. So did that New York coupe. I'd expected to find the place empty.

Up the steps I went, and rapped on the door. A chair moved inside. I heard a soft pat-pat of footsteps, and the door opened. I got the surprise of my life.

"Fancy," I said, getting my breath, "meeting *you* here!"

She didn't place me at first. Turning her carmine lips into a scowl, she gave me a thorough once-over, and a good sixty seconds passed before her big brown eyes filled with a light of recognition. Then she stepped back, smiling.

"Come in, Handsome, come right in. I'm just dying to meet someone who might *know* about this dirty business!"

I shed my coat and hat and parked in a nice comfortable chair before the fireplace, where pine logs gave out a pleasant glow. Then I got up again and peeked into the bedroom. Sure enough, her slippers were under the bed and a suitcase full of feminine doodads lay open on a chair. She'd moved in.

"Making yourself right at home, Lou?" I said, returning to my chair.

She said, "Why not, Handsome? The joint's mine now, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"I legally married the guy. He may have run out on me, but I'm his legal widow. Got papers to prove it."

I didn't argue. If Lou Lester said she had papers to prove it, then she had papers to prove it. I knew Lou. I'd seen considerable of her—and I mean just that—six months or so ago when Honeyboy Harris bucked the Orio mob, found them too tough, and went into hiding. The coppers had wanted Honeyboy for questioning concerning

the machine-gunning of Frank Orio's brother George. Some of us newspaper lads had stuck close to the hunt anticipating a scoop.



The coppers hadn't found Honeyboy. He'd been hiding out here at Blue Lake, as Jim Holburn. Now he was dead. The gal with whom he'd been hiding out was in jail, accused of murdering him. And here, warming her luscious self at the fire, was Honeyboy's wife.

I LOOKED her over warily. Not too long ago, Lou Lester had wowed the customers of the better class night spots with a very slinky feather-dance and strip act. She hadn't lost any of her figure. Right now she was wearing a thin, pale-blue pair of lounging pajamas that hid practically nothing.

Lou Lester had shape. Curves where curves belong. She had long, slim legs and long slim arms, classic shoulders, a full, arrogant bosom. I stared at her and it wasn't the fire that sent waves of heat through me. It wasn't the fire that made the tips of my fingers tingle. I was remembering some very torrid memories.

"Drink, handsome?" Lou said.

I nodded, and she was back in a moment with a bottle of Scotch and two glasses. She poured a drink, watching me. I said, "When," and she said, "You're slipping, Handsome," and went right on pouring. When the glass was full she sat on the arm of my chair, held it to my lips. It warmed me, that Scotch—but not half as much as the lips that shaped themselves to mine a moment later.

"One for old times," Lou whispered.

She meant one for the book; and the book had flaming red covers! Her arm slipped around my neck, warm and soft, and she slid down close to me, so close that when her mouth melted against mine and she began trembling, I could feel every delicious tremor of her body.

Some ladies never learn how to kiss like that. With them it's purely lip service. But a kiss with Lou Lester was an all-out gesture extending from the tinted tips of her toenails to the topmost wisp of her blonde hair. A kiss with Lou Lester was a combination of limp, luscious surrender and fiery totalitarian attack.

I forgot about Honeyboy Harris for the next few minutes. I even forgot about the sweet little trick in Alvah Tucks' jail. With Lou Lester in my arms, I forgot everything but Lou Lester—the thirsty pressure of her soft red lips, the eager quivering of her mature young body, the pulsing of firm, rounded breasts.

We paused for breath. "Still like it, Handsome?" she smiled.

What a question!

We had another drink, and it didn't do me a bit of good. Another half hour elapsed; then, reluctant but tired, and somewhat deliciously disheveled, Lou untangled herself and made repairs. "Now tell me," she said, "about Honeyboy. Did that girl really put him on ice?"

I said, "She's a nice kid, Lou. I don't think she set that trap for Honeyboy."

"Who is she? What's her name?"

"Millie—Mildred Smith."

Lou smiled. "Oh yeah?"

I stuck out a foot and kicked a glowing ember back into the fire. With studied indifference I said, "You want to see the kid burn, Lou?"

"Why not—if she killed him?" Lou shrugged. "I sort of liked Honeyboy, even if he was a rat."

"He gave you the air, Lou. Deserted you."

She shrugged her shapely shoulders, stared into the fire a moment. "If things had been different, and he hadn't had to go into hiding . . . oh, what the hell. You're fond of this Millie Smith, Johnny?"

"Me? Hell, no."

"Then why the concern?"

"She's just a kid. And I don't think she had a thing to do with Honeyboy's death."

"You think it was an accident?"

"No. but—"

Lou looked at me, hard. Lamplight spilled down over her shoulders, outlining the soft curve of her throat, revealing the dusky allure of shadowed breasts. "I don't know who put Honeyboy away, Handsome. I'm not even sure I care. I came up here to look around, see what I could do. When it's over, I'm going back." She looked around, shivered. "Brrr! Catch *me* living in a God forsaken place like this!"

I said warily "How did you know Jim Holburn was Honeyboy?"

"One of the boys told me, some time ago."

"Then the big town knew . . .?"

"A few of Honeyboy's old trusties knew," she said. "That's all."

"And maybe," I muttered, "some of his old enemies found out, too. That would explain a lot of things, Lou." I poured myself a short one, downed it, stood up. "Well, Lou, so long."

"So—soon, Handsome?"

I hesitated. She looked disappointed, and I thought of how cold it was outside, and of how warm, how deliciously warm I could be if I lingered.

"I'll be back, Lou. If you're in bed, don't get up."

Lou yawned, gave me a beautiful smile. "I wouldn't think of it, Handsome," she said softly.

WHAT I had in mind was this: If Millie Smith hadn't cut the death trap for Honeyboy—and why *should* she?—then suspicion logically rested on one or more of Honeyboy's big city connections. But the man who cut that ice must have planned the job carefully. He must have known Honeyboy was going to the village that night. He must have known there'd be a fall of snow to cover the skim-ice that formed over the hole.

You need time to gather such information. You need to be around a while.

Tucks had talked about strangers visiting the camp during Honeyboy's absence. Okay. Maybe Millie would talk about them, too, if I applied pressure.

I hiked across the lake in the dark, giving the hole a wide berth. But I didn't get to the car. Down the shore a light winked on and off, and I watched it. It winked again. Someone was prowling over there.

I closed in.

It wasn't too hard. The guy was taking his time, hugging the shoreline, and I cut straight across the ice, in the dark, to overhaul him. The snow on the ice was soft and I made no noise.

He turned into a hidden little cove well out of sight of the camp, and now the light went on and stayed on. He was a big fellow, bare-headed, wearing a leather jacket, corduroy pants and heavy boots. The light played over a mound of snow-covered ice blocks near the shore, moved across the pile and focused on a ragged red sweater draped over the end of an old log.

He strode forward, reached for the sweater. From twenty feet away I barked, "All right, you! Hold it!" and he froze.

I walked up to him, a gun in my fist. "I'll take that," I said, grabbing the flashlight. "And this, too." And I reached for the sweater.

He was a tough baby with plenty of intestinal fortitude; say that for him. It took him just about six seconds to realize trouble was on the make for him. He used up another two seconds sucking a breath into his big chest. Then he flung himself at my legs.

Almost reluctantly I stepped back and swung the gun. It smacked him where the hair grows thin. He leveled out, slid on his face and hands along the ice, and lay still.

I walked over to the pile of iceblocks. They were fresh cut. I looked at the ragged red sweater. The manufacturer's label was worn thin, but the owner's name, lettered in indelible ink, was still legible. P. Burke. In one of the two pockets I found a pack of cigarettes, almost full, and a piece of torn newspaper containing a weather forecast.

We were getting somewhere, but fast! I tied the sweater around me, worked the guy over my shoulder. He was no lightweight, but neither am I.

We got back to the car all right. Half an hour later I lugged him into Alvah Tucks' little red jail, dropped him on the floor.

Tucks blinked at him. "You know him?" I asked.

Tucks nodded.

I said quietly, "I found that cut of ice, Tucks. It's piled up in a little cove. This—" and I slapped the red sweater on his desk—"was draped over a log nearby. The boy friend here was after it. Left it behind, evidently, when he stacked that ice, and figured it might get him into trouble unless he went back for it." I gave the diminutive sheriff a scowl. "Is his name Burke?"

"Paul Burke," Tucks said, nodding.

"All right. Swell. Now maybe you'll give Millie a break and believe her."

Tucks put the sweater down, peered at the pack of cigarettes and the weather forecast, put those down too and shook his head. "This don't clear Millie. I never figured Millie cut that ice without help. This just lets us know who helped her."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Paul Burke used to work at the camp," Tucks said, "until Jim Holburn fired him a while ago. Everyone said Jim fired him for being too friendly with Millie. This bears it out. It also gives us a motive for the murder." His mouth twisted in a crooked grin. "You've been a great help, Kern. Thanks."



I was speechless. I sat down, brooding. Damn it, I'd thought I was helping the girl, to repay her for the trusting look in those soft, sad eyes of hers!

Tucks lifted a pair of handcuffs from a desk drawer and put them on Burke's wrists. He wrestled the big guy onto a chair, got some water and revived him. Burke glared at me, and I wondered if Tucks were right, after all. This lad was young and husky and good-looking. Almost any girl would look twice at him.

"Well," Tucks said, confronting him, "you got anything to say, Burke?"

"A little," Burke growled.

"Well . . . ?"

"Just this. Go to hell."

Two hours later, when I walked out of there, he'd repeated those three terse words a few hundred times—but he hadn't said anything else, and wasn't going to.

WHERE I spent the rest of that night is my business, but brother, I didn't suffer from the cold any; I was warm and cozy and comfortable. In the morning I went back to the village, saw Tucks again. He was adamant.

"Far as I'm concerned," he snapped, "this case is solved. Millie got Paul Burke to cut that death trap, Without Jim's knowin' it. They wanted Jim out of the way because they were sweet on each other. That's all there is to it. They're both in jail and by God they'll sit there till I get confessions out of 'em!"

I went in to see Paul Burke, hoping a night in jail had softened him. It hadn't. But my call wasn't wasted. Unusually alert for that hour in the morning, I noticed something odd about Burke's cell. It was too clean. Not a cigarette butt in sight. You lock most men up, and they smoke themselves into a stupor.

"Matter?" I said. "Tucks deny you cigarettes?"

He gave me a queer look. "I don't smoke," he said.

I checked with the sheriff. Sure enough, Paul Burke didn't smoke. Yet there'd been a pack of cigarettes in the pocket of that ragged red sweater.

That started me thinking. The cigarettes were on Tucks' desk, and I took another look at them, noted the brand. In a big city, that brand would have been common enough, but here in Kimms Corner . . . well, I had my doubts. So I went shopping.

They didn't have any at the grocery or the drugstore. They didn't have any in Kimms Corner's only restaurant. I tried the barroom. The barkeep shook his head. I straddled a stool and ordered a beer.

The place was empty. The barkeep said conversationally, "It sure is too bad about Jim Holburn, ain't it though?"

"Sure is," I said.

He looked at my beer, poured one for himself. "Reckon I was one of the last to see him alive. He was in here, chewin' the rag."

"Drunk?"

"Well, he was more talkative than usual, but it wasn't from liquor, I guess. He was kind of put out. Dunno what about, but he was sore. Moody, sort of. I sold him a pint of rum but he never touched it. Just had a few beers at the bar here and sat around. Sulky, sort of."

I felt sulky, sort of, myself. One thing, I realized, had to be proved. The fact had to be established that Honeyboy Harris was drunk when

he left town to go home. Proving it wasn't going to be easy. Still . . . I had *something*.

I went back to the jail and wheedled Tucks into allowing me another conference with Millie. Looking at her, I felt sort of guilty for not having spent the night out in the cold. She had that trusting, wistful look, and she was trying so damned hard to be brave.

I sat on the cot and put an arm around her. A nice, fatherly gesture. But when she began sobbing, began trembling against me, all warm and alive, I didn't feel fatherly. Not Johnny Kern. I just whispered, "Okay, baby," and silenced the sobs with a kiss.

As before, she didn't exactly kiss me in return. But her soft, warm mouth shaped itself to mine, and through the thin fabric of the cheap black dress she was wearing I could feel the thrust of her hot little breasts, the quickening of her heart.

She clung to me for a moment; then I said gently, "Tell me something, child. The night Honeyboy was drowned, were you planning a trip to the village?"

She gave me a wondering look, nodded.

"With him?" I asked.

"No. Alone."

"Why didn't you go?"

"I—I hurt myself," she said, and without meaning to, she gingerly touched her shoulder. "I—I fell." All at once, for no apparent reason, she seemed terribly embarrassed. Tears welled in her eyes.

I stood up, scowling. I looked around, to make sure we were alone, and then, almost as if I were dealing with a child, I deliberately unbuttoned the front of the cheap black dress and slid it down over her shoulders. I knew what I'd find. Sure I knew.

SHE tried to stop me. She whispered, "No—no, please!" but I was determined as hell by this time, and had my way. And I was right. The smooth, ivory skin of her shoulder wore a purple blotch, a bruise, yellowing at the edges.

I inched the dress a little lower, and my gaze roved over firm, tempting contours. She was beautiful, this girl, and I mean ravishing. The cheap black dress hadn't done her justice. Her skin against that black shroud was white as milk. Her soft young bosom was molded from pure

gypsum, alluring as something seen through the seductive mist of an opium dream.

I stared rudely, and my heart began to thump. My temperature went up, but rapidly. All my nerve ends began to itch. But I bottled these emotions up, because I was supposed to be looking at the bruises on this girl's lovely body—not at the body itself.

There were plenty of bruises. Ugly ones. Someone had given Millie Smith a terrific pounding.

"Honeyboy?" I growled.

She said almost inaudibly, "Y-yes."

"Why? Drunk?"

She shook her head. "No, Mr. Kern. Not—not drunk. It's just that he—he sometimes had a temper."

I said sternly, "Are you holding out on me, Millie?"

"No," she insisted.

I pulled the dress back up, with gestures; kissed her and told her to keep a stiff upper lip. On the way out I didn't say anything to Tucks about the bruises. Hell, he'd have considered it just another strand in the rope with which he meant to hang the girl.

Half an hour later I got out of my car on the road in to the lake and began looking. That's right—looking. There hadn't been a fall of snow since Jim Holburn's "accident" and the thing I hoped to find would be along that road somewhere. It should be lying where it fell when Honeyboy Harris tossed it out of his car.

And I found it, not far from the shed. An empty pint rum bottle, the label still new and bright, undimmed by time or weather. Into my pocket it went, carefully wrapped in a handkerchief.

One thing more was needed. One little thing. I hiked across the lake, knocked on the lodge door and walked in.

A sound of running water in the bathroom ceased abruptly. Lou Lester's voice called out, "Who is it?"

"Johnny," I said. "Your old pal Johnny."

She laughed merrily. "You gave me a start, Handsome. I'm taking a shower. Thought you might be a bear."

I thought of last night. "You should be afraid of a bear," I sassed. "You'd make a rug of him in

one session, sweetheart." She laughed again, and I went through to the kitchen.

I figured it like this: You live in a place like this, where a good snowfall is apt to bottle you up for a spell, and you buy supplies in bunches, store them until needed. Cigarettes, for instance. Especially when the brand you favor is not for sale in the village.

I hauled three full cartons of those cigarettes out of a kitchen cupboard, and the job was done. I knew who'd murdered Honeyboy Harris. I could prove it. Elated as hell, I hiked back into the living room—and got the shock of my life.

I hadn't heard him come in. I hadn't heard a sound except the running water in the bathroom, and even that, I realized now, was silent. But there he was in the doorway, aiming a gun at me. Alvah Tucks' gun. And his scowl said he meant business.

I said, "I thought you were locked up, Burke."

He took a step forward, a crazy glint in his eyes that dripped icewater on my nerves. "Think again, mister," he snarled. "And think fast. You ain't got much time."

There wasn't much I could do. With a cold-blooded killer, sure of himself and sure of you, you can sometimes play for time. But Paul Burke was trembling with rage; his mouth was working and his face was waxy white. And I had my hands full of cigarette cartons and didn't dare drop them; didn't dare make any sudden move that might cause a convulsion in the guy's trigger-finger.

I stared at him, chilled to the tips of my fingers, and said, "Why pick on me, Burke?"

"You're too smart to live!" he snarled.

I said, "Hell, it didn't take brains to solve this case. Killing me won't save you. Someone else will figure things out."

He took another step toward me and pushed the door shut behind him. There wasn't a sound from the bathroom; not even a whisper of noise.

"There won't be nobody else figure things out," Burke snarled, "after you're dead!"

I said, "Sure they will. It's open and shut, Burke. Somebody cut that ice and paid you to help. Right now, Tucks thinks you did it alone, for Millie, but he'll catch on after a while. Why hell, *you* weren't wearing that red sweater. It was your sweater, but the other guy was wearing it. The guy who smoked this brand of cigarettes." I tried to stare the murder-lust out of his eyes. "You

know who I mean, Burke. Jim Holburn. Tucks will figure it out in time."

HE licked his lips, and for an instant I thought I had him. Rushing on, I said rapidly, "The rest is easy. You and Holburn cut that ice, then Holburn fell in by mistake on his way home that night. In other words, he was drunk. Tucks says he wasn't drunk, but Tucks doesn't know about the pint of rum Jim bought at the barroom and drank on the way home." I measured the distance between us and got ready to heave those cartons of cigarettes; tensed myself for a dive at his legs. It was my only chance. "Hell, Burke, Jim Holburn cut that death-trap to get rid of Millie. It's open and shut. He even tore the weather report out of the paper when it promised snow—snow to cover the trap. Tucks will catch on, and then—"

He jerked the gun up and I stopped talking. His grin was ghastly. "How do you know I helped him?" he snarled. "How do you know he didn't just borrow my sweater?"

"How did *you* know the sweater was there?" I cracked.

He said, "You're smart. But you won't never put Tucks straight, where you're goin'."

I didn't think I would. My fingers tightened around the cigarettes and I sucked up a breath to quiet the sledging of my heart. Then the bathroom door opened. Burke looked, and his mouth fell apart.

It wasn't his fault, really. I mean you can't blame the guy for being human. In the first place he didn't know there was a soul in the camp besides me. In the second place, he certainly never expected to see what he saw.

Lou Lester put on a good act. Her eyes widened and she said, "Oh!" as if she were just too, too surprised. She made a fluttering gesture with her hands, as though to cover up certain portions of her gorgeous anatomy. But she didn't try too hard.

There she stood, with just a couple of cobweb wisps of this and that snugly clinging to her more important curves. Even I stared. But then, Lou Lester was decidedly not ordinary. They say all ladies look alike *when*, but that's malarkey.

Lou's half-draped body was a symphony of satin curves, deliciously white and tempting. You could see right through the strip of mist that cradled her powdered breasts. You could see the

sleek swells of pale loveliness rise and fall with her breathing. And brother, you looked!

Paul Burke was still looking, mouth agape, when I stepped into him. I connected, and my good right fist drove his lower jaw damn near through his roof. He rolled his eyes. Blood spurted from his nose. Meek as milk, he folded at my feet.

"Whew!" Lou said. "That was close, Handsome!"

I looked at her. She was right—it had been close. But it wasn't half as close as Lou and I were a moment later, when I commenced to allow my gratitude. Nor was the guy on the floor nearly as limp as Lou became, when I cradled her warmly in my arms and whispered my words of thanks.

She said, "Hell, Handsome, you had a break coming. You're a good guy. Run along now, and take care of Millie."

I stared at her. She stared back at me, and gently straightened the wisps of silk that hugged her curves. Then, smiling, she lightly slapped my face.

"Run along, Handsome. She's more your type. And if you're worried about the six months she spent with Honeyboy, I'll tell you something. Are you worried, Handsome?"

I shrugged. "I'm no angel myself, Lou."

"You're a good guy," she said. "A very likable cuss, Johnny." Her fingers touched my mouth, and suddenly, impulsively, she gave me one last kiss. I'll never forget that kiss. It shook me to my toes and raised my blood pressure to an all-time new high.

"Her name isn't Smith," Lou said then. "It's Southey. Mildred Southey. Her brother was a cop until Honeyboy sent him to the morgue. She swore she'd get even, Handsome. Maybe in time she would have, if Honeyboy hadn't found her out and tried to drown her—and drowned himself instead."

I blinked. "How the hell—?"

"I got wind of it just a while ago," Lou said. "That's why I came up here to warn Honeyboy. I could have left it to one of the boys; they visited him off and on . . . but I thought I'd come myself. I got here too late."

Lou put a cigarette in my mouth and lit it, patted my cheek again.

"Anyhow, Handsome, she's a nice girl. And you're a nice guy." She blew smoke at me and turned toward the bedroom.

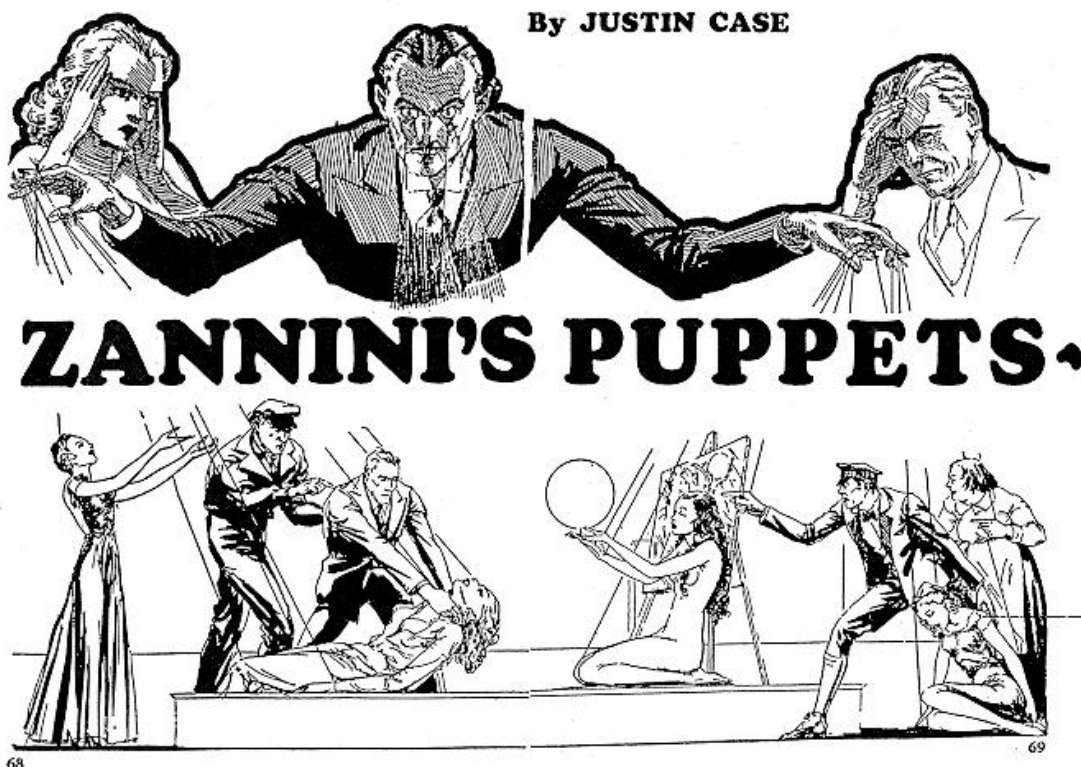
"See you both in church some time," she said.

THE END

ZANNINI'S PUPPETS

By Justin Case (Hugh B. Cave)

"They are fools—fools!" swore Zannini. For he had given them proof of his powers and they called him a common trickster. Very well! If they wanted convincing, dangerous, proof, they should have it! He enlisted the aid of a girl ...



HANDSOME in a gaunt, cadaverous way, Dr. Leon Zannini had the compelling eyes and the low, persuasive voice of a hypnotist. Slouched behind the wheel of the expensive sedan which smoothly devoured the miles of super highway, he talked to himself, with a crooked smile, as he drove.

"Too long they have called Zannini a fool! By tomorrow they will know better!"

The girl in the road was evidently waiting for a Boston-bound bus. She was young, attractive. When Zannini's car slowed beside her and he

smilingly opened the door, she hesitated before getting in. Her dark eyes scrutinized him shrewdly, questioning the motive behind his generosity. Then, with a slight shrug which emphasized the arrogant thrust of her bosom, she accepted his offer.

"Yes," Zannini murmured, "by tomorrow they will know better!"

The girl glanced at him sharply and realized he had not been addressing her. Frowning, she looked out the window.

It was not easy to do that when she could almost *feel* Zannini's gaze crawling over each line of her figure. His vague smile too frightened her, and her hands trembled on the alligator-skin purse in her lap.

"It is beautiful weather we are having, no?"

"Yes," she murmured tonelessly. "Isn't it?"

"And are you going far?"

She had been going to Boston, but her one desire now was to get out of this car. "Only to Walpole," she lied.

"That is unfortunate. I enjoy your company. What is your name?"

"Doris Kirby."

He smiled, and his eyes were crawling again, insinuating themselves into the secrets of her mature young body. His eyes had long, thin fingers that sent little ripples of apprehension shuddering over her breast and down the warm, soft curves of her legs.

SHE stared at the road and wondered what was wrong with her. The sun had something to do with it, perhaps. The glare. Her head ached as though invisible fingers had twisted a band of hot metal around her skull and were fiendishly tightening it. She closed her eyes.

Zannini pulled the car into a side road and took her in his arms. She did not resist.

He drew her close to him until the warmth of her yielding body crept into his blood and filled him with a pleasant sensation of triumph. He bent her head back and deliberately molded his mouth on hers and held it there until she struggled weakly for breath.

"You are very beautiful," he purred. "Very . . . very beautiful...."

She was only half aware of what he did after that. Her mind was a complete blank and she was like putty in his arms. Either his hands or her own fumbled for a moment with the large bone buttons of her coat. His lips moved to the soft curve of her throat, and as she trembled against him the world around her was a strange, unreal blur in which nothing mattered except that she must do exactly as this man ordered.

"We are in Walpole," Zannini said softly.

Doris Kirby sat up with a start, realized that the car was turning into a gasoline station. Had she been asleep? Frightened, she opened the

door and got out. "I— I'm very grateful, " she forced herself to say.

Zannini got out, too, smiled at her, and then said to one of the two attendants: "Ten gallons, please." Behind the wheel again, he gave the girl another smile as he drove away.

The big car swung out to the road and picked up speed. From a pocket of his coat, Zannini drew a folded half-sheet of newspaper.

The face that met his evil gaze was young, rugged, with intelligent eyes and a firm mouth. The caption read: WINS FAME WITH ART. Below: "Peter Goff, Local Artist, Whose Work in Modern Art Has Attracted the Attention of Critics Throughout the Country. He is now at work on a series of modernistic nudes."

"Never again," Zannini muttered, "will they call the great Zannini a fool!"

Back at the gasoline station Doris Kirby, still shaky from her experience, walked out to the road to await the bus. Suddenly she stopped, voiced a cry of dismay and looked in the direction in which Zannini's car had vanished.

"My—my purse!" she gasped.

"Something wrong, lady?" One of the attendants hurried toward her.

"My purse! I had four hundred dollars in it! I left it—" She stopped abruptly, turned pale. "No, not I *couldn't* have left it in his car! *That man stole it!*"

PETER GOFF blocked his cigarette and turned impatiently from his easel when the doorbell rang. He was in shirt-sleeves, wearing slacks and slippers. The girl on the dais gazed at him questioningly.

For more than two hours Goff had been hard at work, and for almost as long the girl had maintained her pose—a pose which kept her on her knees with her head thrown back and her long, slender arms outstretched toward a huge glass bubble.

She had not complained, but when she changed her position now at a nod from Goff, her lips twisted with pain and she sagged down on the velvet-draped dais, utterly exhausted.

The doorbell rang again. Goff said impatiently, "Damn it, wait a minute!" and paced quickly to the girl's side. She looked up at him, forced a smile to her mouth.

"I guess I can't take it," she said.

He reached for a robe, but before placing it over her shoulders he gazed at her admiringly. Ruth Traynor was the loveliest thing he had ever laid eyes on. Her pale, soft body was flawless under its chiffon drape, and yet despite her youth she was every inch a woman. He had been seeking a figure like hers, legs and hips like hers, ever since he could remember. The fact that she had fallen in love with him—and he with her—had provided him with an inspiration which had lifted his work out of the mediocre class and made him nationally famous.

He stooped, kissed her on the mouth as he tenderly draped the robe over her. Then he went to the door.

He was surprised when he saw the police uniforms. "Yes?" he said awkwardly.

"You're Mr. Peter Goff, aren't you? We'd like to have a talk with you."

"Why—of course. Come in."

There were three of them and they stared at him queerly as they entered the studio. Goff paced to the dais, drew a screen around it, then came back and sat down.

"Well, gentlemen!"

"This afternoon, Mr. Goff, you drove to Boston. You picked up a young lady by name of Doris Kirby. " The lieutenant fumbled in his pocket, produced a scrap of paper and glanced at it, nodding. "You gave this young lady a ride and let her out at a gas station in Walpole, Mr. Goff, and—"

"I *what*?" Goff gasped.

"And the young lady claims you stole her purse, containing four hundred dollars."

Peter Goff had a look of utter amazement on his face as he rose slowly to his feet. "Where in the world," he demanded hoarsely, "did this story come from?"

"The young lady gave us your name, a description of you and a description of your car. Attendants at the gas station gave us the same information, Mr. Goff. Even the registration number of the car. "

"Someone is playing a practical joke, Lieutenant." Goff wiped a paint-smeared hand across his forehead to remove the perspiration that had oozed out on him. "What time was this supposed to have happened?"

"About four."

"From two-thirty until after five I was in the office of Martin Cavanaugh, at the museum. Cavanaugh and his secretary will bear me out on that. At five I went to dinner at the Flagstead Hotel with my fiancée, Miss Traynor. We didn't leave the Flagstead until after six. "

The policemen exchanged puzzled glances. "You didn't go to Boston today, Mr. Goff?"

"No."

"But the girl gave us the number of your car, and it—"

"My car," Goff declared, "is over at the Cady Garage, where I left it at eight this morning. I dropped in after lunch, about one o'clock, and at that time it would have taken ten men and a small boy to put the thing together again in time to have it on the road by four. A ring job takes time, Lieutenant."

The lieutenant looked sheepish. "Someone," he admitted, "must be giving us the run-around. I'll look into it, Mr. Goff. Sorry to have troubled you."

When they had gone, Peter Goff lit a cigarette, scowled at the carpet and shook his head. "Run-around?" he muttered. "I wonder. "

It had all the earmarks of something more serious. Was it possible that certain competitors, of which he had more than a few, were trying to blacken his character, so that his name would be crossed off the list of those being considered for the job of doing the new murals for the museum?

There was an unhappy expression on Goff's face as he turned to stare at the girl who came out from behind the screen. Then his bitterness softened. It was impossible to think of sordid things when Ruth Traynor stood before him. He took her in his arms.

"Peter," she said, her voice troubled, "I overheard what they said. What does it mean?"

"Mean? Nothing," he said lightly. "Just a joke."

"A girl who would do a thing like that," she replied, "must be pretty low, Peter."



He nodded, thinking the same thing. Then, shrugging it off, he held her close to him, looked deep into her eyes a moment and kissed her. There would be time enough later to worry about what the police had told him. Right now his work was done for the night and it was time for relaxation.

He drew her toward the divan, and she closed her eyes, trembled in his arms as he sank down upon the cushion and held her close. The robe had slipped from one rounded shoulder, but she made no attempt to shrug it back into place. She was used to being stared at—by Peter. Used to the touch of his hands, the gentle insinuating caress of his fingers on her white flesh, and the hungry pressure of his lips. She lived for nothing else.

DR. LEON ZANNINI, in the living-room of his palatial home in the suburbs, shifted his evil gaze from one to another of his guests and then picked up a folded newspaper which the dark-haired woman, Anita, had placed on the table within reach of his hand.

"I read," he said slowly, "from The Observer's column in this morning's *Dispatch*. 'Police,' The Observer writes, 'are baffled by a puzzle which has all the earmarks of a practical joke. Yesterday afternoon a young lady, whose name is being withheld pending further

investigation, was given a lift—so she claims—by a prominent local artist (name also withheld) en route from this city to Boston. She was robbed—so she says—of four hundred dollars, and was forced to yield to unwanted and unasked-for attentions. Her description of the thief and the car in which she rode is perfect—but a check on the activities of the accused artist proves that he neither drove to Boston nor allowed anyone else to drive his car to Boston, the car being dismantled in a local garage. Quick, Watson, the needle!"

Zannini put down the paper, folded his arms on his chest and smiled a twisted smile of triumph. "Now, gentlemen, you are satisfied that the powers I claim are genuine?"

There were three men in the room. They exchanged glances. One said: "It could have been a trick, Zannini. In *my* opinion, that is exactly what it was."

Zannini's face crimsoned; his eyes narrowed to slits. "You accuse me of being a common trickster?" he thundered.

"After all—you have shown us nothing. You say you have a strange power over the human mind, but just what *is* this power? Hypnotism?"

Zannini drew a deep breath, exhaled heavily and walked to a chair. Seating himself, he stared at his guests for a moment without speaking. The dark-haired woman, Anita, moved silently to his side, sat on an arm of his chair and put a soft white arm around his neck.

Zannini ignored her. Ordinarily, he would have thrilled to the nearness of her, feasted his eyes on the loveliness of her. When this woman was close to him, his blood pounded crazily through his veins. Tonight, in a daring gown which revealed more than was proper of the high, sloping swell of her bosom and clung like an extra layer of skin to her generous curves, she was more alluring than ever—but he had no time for her.

He glared at the three men. "It is plain to me," he declared bitterly, "that I am dealing with fools. Hypnotism, you say? How can it be hypnotism, when you know as well as I do that no human being can be hypnotized into doing something he would not do in his conscious mind? I grant you, my friends—" he spoke the word sullenly—"there are limitations to my power. I cannot gain control over a man's mind unless there is a direct physical contact, and I cannot

maintain my control for more than a few days. But the power itself is genuine! The proof is here before you, in what has happened, and still you are stupid enough to deny it!"

"We demand more proof than this, Zannini."

"Then, by God, you shall have it!"

The three men rose. Zannini, trembling with rage, rose with them, stood glaring at them as they took their departure. When they had gone, he poured himself a drink of whiskey, downed it, and savagely paced the floor, muttering to himself.

"Fools!" he snarled. "Ignorant, stupid fools, unwilling to believe anything which their puny minds cannot grasp."

The dark-haired woman stepped closer to him. "You are excited to night, Zannini," she whispered "That is not good for your heart. And we must take care of your heart, my precious; otherwise, what will become of that little portion of it which belongs to me?"

"They are fools!" Zannini repeated sullenly.

"Yes, they are fools. And before long you will prove it to them. But tonight, my beloved, you have Anita, and your Anita loves you."

Zannini stared at her and his scowl softened. She was beautiful. He took her in his arms, hungrily. The warmth of her crept into his gaunt body.

Her moist red lips were parted, awaiting his kiss. He bent her supple body in his strong arms, pressed his mouth to hers.

IT WAS midnight the following night when Leon Zannini left his palatial home in the residential section. Alone, he walked for seven or eight blocks and then took a cab. The cab-driver knew him. "Good evening, Dr. Zannini," he said respectfully.

"I wish to go to Randall Street." Zannini smiled.

"Randall Street? But—"

"Randall Street," Zannini repeated softly.

He knew why the driver had evidenced surprise. Randall Street was an infamous lane in the heart of the city's slum district—no place for the famous Dr. Zannini at this hour of night! But Zannini had been there before, unknown even to the dark-haired woman, Anita. Zannini's quests for beauty and adventure had carried him *into*

more than one dark rendezvous of whose very existence his wealthy and respectable patients did not dream!

Reclining in the cab, he stared hard at the back of the driver's head, through the glass partition. Presently the driver put a heavy hand to his forehead, as if suffering from headache. Zannini smiled. Later, the police might ask this fellow questions. The answers would be most surprising.

Randall Street was deserted at that hour. Red lights glowed in some of the tenement-house doorways, and a barroom was open at the corner, but there was no other sign of life. Zannini lit a cigarette and waited for the cab to depart; then he walked slowly along to a made-over tenement marked No. 41. A sign in the downstairs window near the doorway read: ROOMS.

Zannini pressed a gloved thumb against the bell, and waited.

The woman who opened the door was short and plump, and wore a cheap cotton dressing-gown over her soiled nightgown. Her swarthy face wore a scowl. "What you want?" she demanded.

"I have come," Zannini said, "to visit Miss Marie. She is at home, no?"

The woman stared at him. "You been here before?"

"But certainly."

"All right, then."

"Room number nine," Zannini murmured.

"That's right. Nine."

He smiled at her. She would remember him later, if the police came to ask questions, but she would not remember him as Dr. Leon Zannini. Ascending the stairs, he paced quietly along the second-floor corridor to a door marked 9, and knocked.

There was a sound of bedsprings creaking inside, and a light went on. "Who is it?" a low voice demanded.

"Zannini. "

The door opened. Zannini said softly: "We meet again, my beloved," and entered, smiling graciously at the girl who stood scowling at him. She closed the door.

"You!" she said. "After all these months. . .!"

Zannini removed his gloves, stuffed them into a pocket of his coat and then removed the coat. His lips were smiling, but his eyes narrowed

a little as he gazed at the girl. She was still attractive, in a coarse, sensual way, but there was something wrong. He did not like the color of her skin, the peculiar lack-luster of her eyes. Pacing forward, he seized her left wrist, pulled her arm forward and thrust up the sleeve of her pajama-jacket. The soft white flesh of her upper arm was dotted with tiny red punctures.

"Again?" he said, staring at her.

"Why not?" she snapped. "You promised to cure me, but you never came back. Did you expect me to cure myself?"

Zannini sighed, shaking his head. His gaze wandered over the girl's slender body, lingered on the too mature swell of her bosom. "You are still very lovely, Marie," he murmured.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. She *had* been lovely, once. Traces of that beauty still lingered in the molded curves of her throat, the seductive flare of her hips and the tapered softness of her legs. The pajamas she wore were wrinkled from having been slept in, and the two top buttons of the jacket were missing. Her attitude was one of indifference. She was used to being stared at.

Zannini sat on the edge of the disheveled bed and smiled at her. Most of the smile came from his eyes.

"What—what do you want of me?" the girl demanded.

"Come here," Zannini whispered.

"No! By God, I've had enough of you! I—"

"Come here, Marie."

The girl did her best to refuse him, but it was not enough. Returning the gaze of his unblinking eyes, she shuddered, then moved slowly toward him.

Zannini took her in his arms, pressed his mouth to the quivering curve of her throat. He did not kiss her lips, but crushed her against him, thrilling to the wild throbbing of her half-covered breasts, the ripples of emotion that ran through her. Then he said quietly: "Put out the light, my Marie. I am going to kill you."

The girl nodded, as if living in a dream. She said, "Yes . . . yes, Zannini . . ." and when the room was in darkness she returned to him. Zannini pulled her down beside him and leaned over her. In the dark, his groping fingers slid caressingly toward her throat.

"Farewell, my Marie," he whispered.

The girl did not reply. Her arms stole around his neck and clung to him. She made no sound, uttered not even a moan of pain, as he strangled her.

IT WAS in the paper the next morning, and Peter Goff read about it while breakfasting in his studio. The headlines had to do with war in China, but a sub-heading said: GIRL SLAIN BY STRANGLER! POLICE HINT AT DOPE RING CONNECTION.

It was carefully worded. The girl's name was not given, nor was the address of the house in which she had been murdered. There was "no clue" to the identity of the killer. The girl herself had been a drug addict.

Peter Goff turned to the sporting page and was reading a report of last night's hockey game when the doorbell rang.

His visitor was a tall, gaunt man with strangely fascinating eyes and a low voice. "How do you do, Mr. Goff?" the fellow said, smiling. "I, sir, am Dr. Leon Zannini."

Peter Goff had heard of Dr. Leon Zannini—as who hadn't?—but this was the first time he had ever met the man. He shook hands. He and Zannini sat in the front room.

"I have come to you about the affair of last night," Zannini said softly, leaning forward to peer into Goff's eyes. "As yet, my friend, the police do not know of your connection with what happened."

"I'm not sure I understand," Goff declared, frowning.

"But you will, my friend; you will."

Peter Goff put trembling fingers to his face and wondered what had caused the headache which was making him feel so heavy and stupid. The closeness of the room, perhaps. He rose, opened a window, but when he sat down again the ache was worse. He realized dully that Zannini was staring at him in a most peculiar way.

Then he realized something else, and shuddered. His face paled. He saw himself in a cheap, poorly lighted bedroom in a house in the slums. Saw himself hungrily kissing a girl who ardently returned his caresses. She was attractive in a coarse, sensual way. She wore pajamas, and the jacket sagged to reveal the upper slopes of a white, trembling bosom.

He saw his hands creeping to her throat, strangling her. Then he saw himself prowling out

of the room, down a flight of musty stairs and out into the night.

He stared at Zannini and Zannini was smiling. Sweat broke out on Peter Goff's forehead. He looked down at his hands and said hoarsely: "Oh, God—no! No!"

"But yes," Zannini murmured. "And before many hours have passed, the police will learn the truth about you."

Peter Goff lowered his face into his hands and sobbed out his terror. It was all hellishly clear now, this ghastly crime he had committed. He did not understand the reason for it, but every minute detail of the act itself was vividly real to him. And Zannini was still smiling.

"There is but one way out," Zannini said. "I have here the names and addresses of three men to whom you will send your confession. Then . . . there is always the river. The river, my friend, would be more merciful than the electric chair."

Zannini rose, moved to the door. "Good day, Mr. Goff," he said softly. The door closed behind him.

PETER GOFF did not move. Every inch of him was trembling, and his face was slick with sweat. He did not wonder how Zannini had learned his secret; his mind was full of the hideous picture of the crime itself. Her name was Marie—how clearly he remembered, now! The house was number forty-one, and the number of her room was nine. And in that room numbered nine he had strangled her.

There was but one way out, just as Zannini had said. The river, cold and dark and deep.

He reached for the slip of paper which Zannini had placed on the table. It bore typewritten names and addresses. Rising, he walked slowly and stiffly into the studio proper, sat at the little portable typewriter on the desk in there, and, with his eyes closed and dark despair eating at his heart, wrote out a full confession. He had signed his name and was addressing the last of the three envelopes when Ruth Traynor came.

The shades were down and the girl did not notice anything wrong. With a cheery "Good morning!" she kissed him, then went behind the large screen in the corner of the room and disrobed. There was work to be done today.

She emerged wearing only a light dressing-gown, stood waiting for Peter to finish typing.

Peter Goff pushed himself erect, stood with his legs wide apart and stared at her. His eyes were aglow with a strange madness—the madness of a man who knows the end to be near and that he must make the most of the few short hours remaining to him. He strode forward, crushed the girl against him, held her until his powerful arms wrung a little gasp of pain from her lips.

"Peter! What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" he said. "Nothing's wrong! But there'll be no work today. I've no time for work!"

He was like a beast then. His customary tenderness was gone, and he was like a starving man gulping food. He bent the girl in his arms, pulled her roughly to the divan. His fingers tore cruelly at the thin garment which barely covered her trembling body.

"Peter!" she gasped. "What—what is it? What's happened to you!"

He laughed, and the laugh was a rasping; bitter sound that lived a long time in the silence of the room. He knew what he was doing, and vaguely he knew it was wrong. She would hate him for it. But nothing mattered now except that he had only a few hours to live and must make them count.

"You're mine!" he muttered. "Mine! No one can take you away from me!"

"But Peter—of course I'm yours. You know I love you!"

"Then prove it! Show me!"

"No, Peter! You're ill...."

He smothered her protests by molding his lips on hers, crushing her against him until she went limp from the exhaustion of her effort to free herself. He was too strong for her, and she loved him too much, in spite of his cruelty, to claw at him and fight him the way she might have fought another man. A low moan of anguish came from her lips as he forced her back among the cushions. She looked up into his eyes, saw something that made her horribly afraid; then she could struggle no longer, and lay limp in his savage embrace.

He pressed his mouth to the soft, warm curve of her throat, dug his strong fingers into the satin smooth flesh of her twitching back. He was breathing hard, and little globules of sweat dripped from his face. Deep within him, a faint spark of the old Peter Goff was fighting with this

new, sullen thing which had taken hold of him. But the warmth of the girl's pliant body, the nearness of her, lashed him to a frenzy—and the spark expired.

He was conscious only of the fact that she was a woman, and lovely. She was soft and warm and close to him, and no longer able to resist him. He gloated over her, kissed her until her lips were bruised and swollen from the savage pressure of his own.

The girl was sobbing when Peter Goff finally staggered erect and moved away from her. She watched him, afraid of him, while he poured a drink and downed it. She saw him snatch the three letters off the typewriter table and stumble to the door.

"Peter...."

He looked back, uttered a short, mirthless laugh. The door clicked shut behind him.

RUTH TRAYNOR stayed there for more than half an hour, sobbing her misery into a pillow. Her world had collapsed around her and she did not know why. She had loved Peter Goff with all her heart. He had always been gentle with her. Now she knew him as a beast, a madman.

Heartbroken, she struggled to her feet at last, drew the folds of her dressing-gown tightly around her. Then she saw the letter.

It was of the three which Peter Goff had snatched from the table. It lay near the door now, and the girl picked it up, turned it in her hands. Peter must have dropped it when pulling the door shut behind him.

Ruth Traynor looked at it for a long time and then opened it. Her face paled as she read the typewritten sheet inside. Her eyes widened, and her hands shook so violently that the paper crackled in her fingers.

She slumped down on the arm of a chair, holding the letter in front of her and staring at it. Cold hands were strangling her. A dry sob burst from her lips as she reread the last two lines.

". . . and so, when you receive this, it will be too late for you to do anything but pity me. Tonight, the Morton Street Bridge will hear my last farewell, and tomorrow the river will give up my body. *Why* I committed this frightful crime I do not know, but I shall pay for it by committing suicide. "

Ruth Traynor lifted her head and stared at the door which had closed behind the man she

loved. "No!" she whispered. "Dear God . . . no. . . !"

IT WAS ten minutes to midnight when Peter Goff crept from the network of black streets under the Morton Street Bridge. The night was as dark as his mood; drops of rain splashed on the concrete steps as he climbed slowly to the bridge level and made his way toward the center of the huge span.

The lights of the city were barely visible through the murk. Below, the deep black waters of the river were shrouded in a low-hanging mist. There was no man-made sound anywhere except the thud of his own heels on the deserted walk.

It was a long way down to that treacherous water. Peering down into the mist, he shuddered, pulled the collar of his coat higher. There was a raw, chill bite in the wind. Overhead, telephone wires and trolley wires sang a tenuous dirge which came and went and came again like a death-chant from outer space.

He did not see the girl until he reached the center of the bridge, and even then she was hardly more than a formless shadow as she moved out of the darkness toward him. At first he thought she might be a creature of his own kind, lonely and desperate and seeking relief from a life which had gone wrong. Then he heard his own name in a low, anxious voice, and stared at her.

"Peter...."

Her face took form as she came closer. His eyes narrowed with bewilderment.

"Anita!" he gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"I came because I knew *you* would come," she said softly. "Peter—this thing you are going to do—it is wrong. I can help you, if you...."

She left the thought unfinished, but her hand was on his arm then and her face was close to his. Looking into her eyes, he knew what she meant, what she wanted. She could save him if he would give her the love which belonged to Ruth.

He laughed mirthlessly, shook his head. "It won't do, Anita."

"But, Peter—you did love me, once."

"No. I admired you. There is a difference, Anita. When you worked for me, I admired your beauty, I said you were lovely. Your hair, your eyes, all of you . . . but that was not love. I did not

say I loved you." Queer, how he could stand here in the rain, explaining these things so patiently, when in a few more minutes his life would be snuffed out by the oily black waters which even now lay in wait for him! Queer... yes... but everything had been queer since his talk with Dr. Zannini.

"Peter, listen to me. I can give your life back to you!"

He shook his head.

"But I *can*, Peter!" She flung herself against him, clung to him desperately. Her tall, willowy body was afire with an emotion so intense that it made every soft curve of her tremble.

He might have taken her in his arms under different circumstances. After all, she was beautiful, and not so long ago she had been the inspiration for his work. But already the chill of the river was creeping through his veins. The red promise of her lips, the flame in her eyes, floated before his vision, but beyond her mist tentacles reached outward for him beckoningly. The river was waiting.

He sighed, said quietly, "I'm sorry, Anita, but my love belongs to someone else," and pushed her away.

"Peter, you do not understand!" In her desperation she blurted the words out wildly. "It was not you who murdered that girl! It was Zannini!"

"No, Anita, it was not Zannini."

"It tell you it was! From the very beginning, Zannini had been using you as a victim for his mad experiments. It was my fault, Peter. I hated you for throwing me over. I suggested to Zannini that a man as important as you would be an excellent subject. Peter, I—"

Her voice died to a whisper, then was silent. She was not staring into Peter's face then, but at something beyond him. At a tall, gaunt shape which had stepped into view from behind a concrete column.

ANITA'S face paled. She took a step backward, trembling with terror. The voice of Leon Zannini stopped her.

"So," he said softly, "I was right in my suspicions. You do love this man. You have always loved him!"

"No, no!" she gasped.

"I thought as much when you first suggested his name to me," Zannini declared coldly. "Your hate for him was too violent, too vindictive. Hate like that is usually an inverted form of love. And so tonight, my dove, you walked into my trap—as I anticipated. You praised me for *my* cleverness, then you crept from the house and came here to save *him*!"

The girl moaned out her terror. Peter Goff stared at Zannini and felt no emotion whatever.

Zannini smiled, came closer "You shall have him, my beloved," he said gently. "You shall have him for one brief moment, and then you shall share his fate. He spurns your love? But no, Anita. He is mad about you!"

Peter Goff did not understand the change that came over him then. He knew only that Zannini was peering into his eyes, and in Zannini's unblinking orbs was a nameless power against which he, Peter, had no resistance. A burning fire crept through his veins and he turned slowly toward the girl.

There was something beyond her, high up on the network of black girders. The thing he saw was a hunched, creeping shape that moved slowly along one of those girders and would presently be directly over Zannini's head. But it was unimportant. The hellish yearning in his heart was the only thing that mattered.

That yearning was in Anita's heart, too. She flung herself against him, and her slender body throbbed in a mad surge of emotion. Locked in his arms, she crushed her moist, parted lips against his mouth. Her lips were living flames, searing him. Her heaving bosom lost its shape against his chest, and the world around became a blur. There was no Zannini. There was no creeping shape up there on the girder. There was only Anita, warm and pliant in his arms. Anita with her fiery lips that filled him with a strange agony, her trembling body that was so close to his.

But the voice of Zannini was murmuring: "The river lies below you, Peter Goff. You made it a promise, and that promise cannot be broken. Take Anita with you, in your arms."

Peter looked at the railing and shuddered. For the last time, he glued his mouth to the girl's quivering lips; then he drew her forward. She did not struggle. She, too, knew that Zannini's grim command must be obeyed. Her one desire was to make the most of the last few seconds remaining to them.

Zannini stood with his long, thin arms folded on his chest, and stared at them. He was smiling the same cruel smile. "I grow impatient," he said.

Peter Goff did not look up again at the shape on the girder. He looked down—down at the layer of mist which drifted sluggishly above the black surface of the river. Anita looked, too, and shuddered against him, but said nothing.

That water was deep, treacherous, filled with ugly whirlpools. No living person had ever swum the river at this point; no human being had ever jumped from this part of the bridge and lived to tell the tale.

Peter said softly to the girl beside him: "Farewell, Anita. Some day, perhaps, we may meet again." Then he took his arm from around her trembling waist and put his hands on the rail.

He did not see the creeping shape on the girder. He did not look up to see that slow-moving figure come to a halt almost directly above the gaunt, wide-legged form of Zannini. He did not see the gun.

There was no sound as the gun belched death. The low moan of the wind smothered the faint *zip* of the silencer. Peter Goff did not turn to see Zannini's gaunt body stiffen and stagger backward. Intent on the black water beneath him, he did not hear the sodden thud as Zannini crashed.

A low moan of agony whimpered from Leon Zannini's lips, but that too was swept away by the whine of the wind and the ceaseless mutter of the rain. The big man's hands groped to his face, and blood gushed through his thin fingers. He rolled over, made a weak attempt to get to his knees, then collapsed and lay still.

Peter Goff was still staring down at the water, but as the shape behind him ceased twitching, something in Peter's brain freed itself from strangling bonds and functioned normally again. He frowned, stepped back from the rail and peered at the girl beside him. There was no longer a driving force compelling him to commit suicide. There was only bewilderment.

He turned, saw Zannini lying there. The girl put a trembling hand on his arm but he shook it off, strode forward. Vaguely he remembered what had happened—and what might have happened. Jerking his head up, he peered suddenly into the network of girders. There *had* been a prowling shape up there....

There was nothing now. Nothing at all.

Peter went to his knees beside the sprawled shape of Zannini and peered into the man's face. Blood had poured from a bullet wound in Zannini's head and painted the face crimson.

"Dead . . ." Peter whispered. "He's . . . dead."

Anita was beside him, whispering his name. He rose slowly to his feet, stared at her. Turning abruptly, he walked away into the rain and the darkness.

DAWN was slate-gray in the East when he let himself into the studio, and even after walking the streets all night he was still struggling with the horde of unanswered questions that tormented him. The last thing he clearly remembered was his talk with Zannini in the studio. Everything after that was but a half-recalled nightmare.

Closing the door behind him, he widened his eyes at sight of Ruth Traynor. Wearing only a dressing-gown, she sat in one of the overstuffed chairs, staring at him.

Despair twisted Peter's heart when he realized how she must hate him. Hoping against hope, he tried to mumble an explanation.

She silenced him by pressing her soft, slender body against his and putting her arms around him. "You mustn't," she whispered. "I understand everything, Peter. You were not responsible for what you did."

She drew him toward the divan then. Her warm arms cradled his head against the soft, throbbing curves of her bosom, and she smiled down into his face.

"You dropped one of the letters, Peter, and I found it. I went to my brother, who is a lieutenant on the police force, and had a talk with him."

Peter clung to her hand as she talked. Her voice soothed him. The warm fragrance of her young body crept through the thin robe and did him more good than medicine.

"That girl, Marie, did not die, Peter," Ruth said quietly. "The police gave it to the papers that way because they planned to use her later in a drive against the drug ring which supplied her with dope. She didn't die; she recovered and named Zannini as her assailant, and told the police of Zannini's strange powers. So you see . . . I know you were not guilty."

"You—knew!"

"The police were confused, Peter. The landlady and a cabdriver named *you* as the man

who visited Marie that night, but Marie herself named Zannini. I talked with Marie and she told me the one way to save you."

Peter Goff looked into the dark depths of her eyes and thought of the prowling thing he had seen on the bridge. He turned his head and stared at the girl's clothes draped over a chair. Wet clothes, red with rust-stains. Suddenly his blood ran cold with terror.

"What will happen when the police find out who killed Zannini?" he muttered.

"They—already know," Ruth replied slowly. "my brother called me on the phone, half an hour ago, Peter." She was not looking at him but staring into space, as if lost in her own thoughts. "Marie had a boy-friend, drug addict like herself. He learned from her the name of the man who had tried to kill her. He swore vengeance. Tonight . . . less than an hour ago . . . his body was found in the river. The police are convinced that he killed Zannini and then committed suicide. The case is closed, Peter. After Zannini was killed, the police took Anita into custody and forced from her one of the strangest confessions ever recorded. What she told them agrees with what Marie told them. The case is—closed."

There was something queer in the tone of her voice, something that drew Peter's attention to those wet clothes again. He stared up at her and his lips parted to ask a question—a blunt question to which there could be no two answers. Instead, he drew a deep breath, put his arms around her and said quietly: "Yes, darling . . . the case is closed."

He would never know the truth. Perhaps Marie's drug-crazed boyfriend had killed Zannini. Perhaps he had only tried to, and found Zannini too powerful for him. Peter did not want to know the answer.

It was enough that he, Peter Goff, could hold in his arms again the girl he loved.

THE END



WARNING: For private home use only. Federal law provides severe civil and criminal penalties for the unauthorized reproduction, distribution or exhibition of copyrighted material.

Support Vintage New Media and Internet Publishing by not supporting piracy!