

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 ...

By JUSTIN CASE



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



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