

The Flying SKULL

Greer, the Swindler, Didn't Know the Grim Hand that Fate Was Dealing Him!

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GABRIEL GREER sat at his scarred desk and regarded his visitor with eyes that held all the humanity of a squid.

The room was on the ground floor of the house he owned in the middle West Twenties, and used as both office and residence. The brownstone front was scaly, the whole place needed paint and cleaning. The furniture was shabby.

Greer was not. His attire was expensive and carefully chosen. It was the wardrobe of a banker. Clean shaven, hale, florid and slightly portly, Greer, save for the baleful expression in his eyes, masked by tinted glasses, appeared a man of wealth and good taste. He might have been a philanthropist.

The man across the desk looked what he was—a fairly prosperous and successful accountant of an upstate town. A competent person whose business had become restricted by the depression. To him, at this moment, Greer was still the kindly man of affairs who had offered him a mortgage on a business block that John Clay, the accountant, had bought when times were booming.

Clay had a hobby. He had probably the finest private collection of moths and beetles and butterflies in America. It had considerable scientific value but, as a financial asset, would be represented by Clay himself in red ink. He had spent a good deal of the mortgage money on properly housing his specimens. Now he wanted Greer to renew that mortgage.

Greer listened to Clay's request with hidden amusement and contempt. He was not a handsome man, for all his grooming. But he was intensely vain. He had been born with poor teeth, his metabolism was faulty. He wore top and bottom plates of teeth as false as the smile they effected.

Because he had a parrot jaw, with a soft palate of unusual characteristics; it had been impossible

for him to be fitted with an upper plate that retained perfect suction.

Greer had developed a habit of adjusting it with the edge of his thumbnail when it slipped. It was a habit of which he had become almost unconscious, but not quite. His pride was always tender when he was reminded of his imperfect teeth.

To grant Clay the request would be to pass up a



Murder had been done!

rich and calculated profit. Perfunctorily, he glanced over the papers in the case. He meant to make this small-town accountant humiliate himself, beg for the renewal, before he refused him. Greer knew all about Clay's financial affairs, all about the expensive hobby.

Greer made a slight clucking noise with his tongue. The upper plate slipped. Automatically, he set the edge of his thumbnail beneath the teeth.

The process fascinated Clay. He had noticed it several times with sympathy. He himself had false teeth, and because his local dentist had sent none too excellent casts to a dental factory for the finished job, Clay had experienced much the same trouble as Greer.

He had found a remedy for it. He was naturally a man of good nature, and he was desirous of standing in well with Greer.

He fished in his wallet, took out a card and offered it to Greer.

"You might be interested," said Clay.

Greer glanced carelessly at the card. His face flushed crimson. It looked apoplectic as his rage mounted.

Five minutes later, Clay was in the street, slightly dazed, knowing he was not only close to ruin but that he had been tricked by Greer. The foreclosure of the mortgage would be the beginning of the end of Clay's credit.

For Greer, however, Clay's ruin meant gain.

There was a Government project in connection with relief, that would make the property of Clay not merely saleable but send its price soaring many times beyond its value. And, in dismissing Clay, Greer took care that Clay knew what wealth he had lost.

Left alone, Greer chuckled. He set the edge of his thumb beneath his teeth and clicked them into place. Then he picked up the card Clay had left. He read it:

TOOTH-EASE

Speak and eat in perfect comfort
as well as you did with your own teeth.

Forms a comfort cushion that holds your plate secure without ROCKING, or CHAFING. No DROPPING. No FIDGETING.

25c & 50c boxes at all good Drug Stores
GRIPPO COMFORT CORPORATION
Big Falls New York

GABRIEL GREER sat in his drawing room on the Albany Flier. Once again he was prepared to bring off a coup. He had caused to be inserted in a local newspaper of the town in which he was interested, an attractive advertisement offering mortgages on liberal and easy terms to the inhabitants.

Let the mortgagee beware! That was Greer's motto.

He gloated as he looked over the documents. He was beginning to feel hungry. The afternoon was hot, and he had taken off coat and vest, collar and tie. He took out his teeth, and placed them in a cleansing lotion in the little private lavatory.

He began to make his toilet with precision. He took from his pigskin suitcase a clean shirt, and laid it out. His dressing case was open, with its array of toilet articles.

Greer took from its niche a silver-capped tube an inch and a half in diameter, five inches in length. He had it almost filled with white powder. This was "Tooth-ease." He had become angry at Clay's daring to suggest there was any deficiency about him; but he had tried it; and even felt grateful to Clay—though not to the extent of renewing his mortgage.

Clay—to use the vernacular—had lost his shirt.

Greer changed his shirt, arranged his tie, took out his teeth from the glass that held the cleansing lotion, rinsed them off. He let them dry, and then powdered the top plate with the Tooth-ease.

Then he put in his lower plate, attached to his few remaining teeth with a gold clip, slid in his now snugly-fitting upper plate, and started to smile at his reflection in the mirror.

As he did so, the porter knocked on the drawing-room door, called:

"First call fo' the dinin' cah."

But Greer barely heard him. He was seized with dizziness. The mucous membranes of palate and cheeks burned. His heart seemed clutched by a giant hand. He fell to the floor, and went into violent convulsions.

The Pullman porter, coming in for his brush-up tip, found the body. At Albany, police took charge. The body of Gabriel Greer was taken to the morgue. An autopsy was performed.

"Hydrocyanic acid, administered as cyanide of potassium by the deceased, believing he was using a plate-powder for his artificial teeth. The characteristic postmortem appearances were

present. The fingernails show purple patches. The blood was coagulated, and hemorrhages existed in both the pleura and pericardium. The mucous membranes of the mouth show corrosion, and the odor of hydrocyanic acid was plain in the cavities of the body."

GARRITY, the detective in charge of the Homicide Squad, read the report of the medical examiner.

"Must have been pulled by somebody who was close to him, Tim. We'll get a check-up on this Greer. I've got a line on him. Seems to have been some sort of a realty shark, lined up with a slick bunch right here in Albany. He kept that tube of tooth powder, or whatever you'd call it, in that dressing-case. We'll see what the fingerprinters have to say about it."

That report was not yet ready, but Garrity took the case they had powdered and photographed, and looked it over with his magnifying glass.

"I'll be darned," he said softly. "Look here, Tim, and see if you see what I do."

To Garrity's experienced eye, the loops and whorls and islands shown up by the powdering seemed to belong to one individual, undoubtedly the dead man.

But there was something else. On the inside of the leather flap that closed the dressing case.

"The guy who switched the stuff in the tube, or put it back after he had closed it, used a cloth, or gloves," he said. "But take a look at this!"

There was the imprint of a skull, distinct enough. It was no larger than half the space of Garrity's little fingernail. It was brown. A ghastly thing, the token of sudden death.

"I never saw the beat of it," said Mahoney.

"Rush those prints up here," said Garrity. "Get the Bureau chief to bring them."

"We spotted it, sure," said the fingerprinter. "It's not in our line. The regular prints are all those of the deceased. But it's sure a good picture of a skull, however it came there."

"You're a lot of use," said Garrity. "Just the same, before we hop to New York, I'm goin' to have Doc Lawson take a squint at this."

Lawson was in charge of the new department of Criminal Investigation, with its modern laboratory.

His interest was immediate. There was already a photographic record of the curious emblem. Lawson picked up the dressing case.

"There's a distinct residue here," he said after his profound examination through his own powerful apparatus. "I'll make an immediate analysis. I could make a guess at it, but guessing has nothing to do with scientific findings. I'll give you one thing to chew on, Garrity. That skull once flew."

He left Garrity and Mahoney looking at each other.

"Now, what the devil an' all does he mean, with his talk of flyin' skulls?" Mahoney scratched his head.

"He'll be tellin' us before we leave," Garrity was certain.

Before Lawson came with his discovery, Garrity had found out just how Greer made his money.

But he shook his head dubiously over Lawson's "finding." It left him baffled. Yet he was sure it was a lead, and Lawson had given him a valuable clue as to how that sign of a skull, the emblem used by chemists and druggists on their labels, might tie up with the murder of Gabriel Greer.

IT tied up with vengeance, within the first minute of his arrival with Mahoney at the house of Gabriel Greer. The man who answered the door was the sole occupant. He was, he said, clerk to Mr. Greer.

Garrity, official, efficient and imperative, towered over the man as he sat, by the detective's orders, at the deal table in the basement room that was part of his living quarters. Mahoney stood by the door, stolid and vigilant.

"So, your name is Clay? You handle Greer's accounts and do general chores. He gave you the job after he had taken over your property on a mortgage. Sorry for you, perhaps?"

"He gave me the job," said Clay, "because he wanted a good man at figures, who would work for next to nothing, over and above his board and room. He wanted a man-of-all-work. He got one."

"All right. And you collect butterflies?"

There could be no denial to that. A shallow box lay on the table, lined with cork strips upon which were displayed various specimens, their wings skillfully outstretched. The tabletop was cluttered with jars, with a cheap microscope and mounting materials.

"Where is Mr. Greer?" demanded Garrity.

Clay's face revealed nothing under Garrity's scrutiny.

"He should be in Albany. He went there on business."

"He's there all right. *Dead!* Found murdered on the train! Does that surprise you?"

"You mean—he was shot, killed—"

Clay's face was still impassive. Too much so, Garrity decided. He tried another tack, still rapping out his questions, watching the other's face and eyes intently. The detective had picked up one of the jars. He pulled the tray of specimens toward him.

His eyes narrowed, then widened. He pointed at one of the specimens.

"What kind of a moth is that?" he demanded. Mahoney sauntered over to the table. He betrayed his interest in a low whistle. Clay did not appear in the least perturbed.

The moth was a brown one, of fair size, with shapely, narrow wings, suggestive of swift flight. And on the back of the thorax, against a purplish ground, there showed distinctly in dull orange the design of a skull.

"It is the death's-head hawk moth," said Clay. "*Acherentia atropos.*"

Garrity nodded, his eyes cold.

"Here is Greer's dressing-case," he said. "How did that mark get there? We've had it microphotographed, analyzed. Scales, or feathers, from the back of one of those moths."

Clay was startled now. He glared at the emblem, held his tongue as Garrity persisted.

"You wear false teeth, don't you?"

Clay nodded an assent.

"Use this 'Tooth-ease' to keep the plates in place? Recommended it to Greer. And mixed *his* with cyanide of potassium. That's what killed him. The same stuff you use in these jars, underneath plaster-of-paris, so that, while you keep the jar corked, the hydrocyanic gas will fill the container and kill the butterflies so quickly they won't flutter and spoil their wings."

Clay smiled thinly.

"I had no idea the police knew anything of entomological research," he said. "Your facts are correct. But—"

"You murdered Greer," said Garrity. "You were smart enough not to leave prints on the tube, but you left your trademark just the same, the mark of the flying skull. You might have got away with it, at that, if the cyanide had not made him retch, eject

the plate, call attention to it. *You murdered Greer.*"

CLAY smiled his thin smile again. Then the cunning gleam in his eyes burst into a flame. His smile expanded to a laugh.

"You are clever," he said. "But it does not much matter. Only, you are wrong in one thing. I did not murder Greer. I *executed* him. The mark of *Acherentia atropos* surprised me. I overlooked it. I was in the yard when Greer called me, as if I were his dog. He was suave to most people; to me, his slave, he was a tyrant. He set me to any menial task. But it was a place where I could have some hours alone, to prepare a few poor specimens—and to find out all about Greer's chicanery, to expose him."

His voice was shrill, almost hysterical.

"He told me he had got a telegram and must go to Albany. He ordered me to pack some things for him while he got together some papers. He had barely time to make the train. When he shouted at me, I had my hand upon a moth, a death's-head hawk moth. I—I am not so well as I have been—a little nervous. I am not used to being bullied. It was dark. I had only a flashlight with a weak battery. No doubt I jabbed my thumb down on the moth. I left it there. I found the next morning that a bird had pecked away the body.

"So, no doubt, I left that print on the inside of the flap. I handled the tube carefully, with a cloth, and I changed the contents for what I had already prepared. I knew why he went to Albany. It was because he was ready to pull off another of his infernal tricks, to ruin others as he had ruined me, to laugh over their downfall. He reveled in the misfortunes he brought about, in the despair of his victims. And he was bound to arrange for more deviltry. But I had made up my mind there should be no more of it!"

Clay's eyes were bloodshot now. He snatched at a tin, took off its lid, tilted white crystals to the palm of his hand.

"I made sure," he cried. "I put this much into the plate powder—"

Garrity swooped, clutched the man's wrist, and spilled the cyanide in time.

"You don't want to do that," he chided. "You'll never get the chair for this. Maybe they'll send you upstate a while, and if you behave yourself they'll let you chase butterflies to your heart's content."