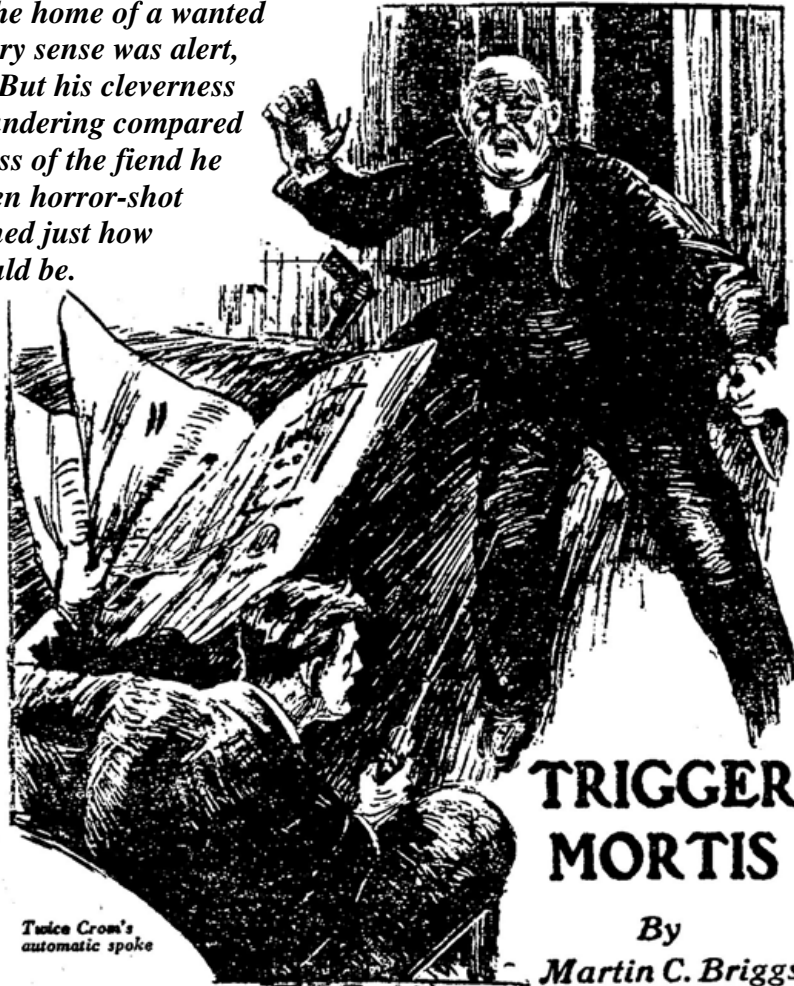


Tense, wary, Detective Crom Carson silently entered the home of a wanted criminal. His every sense was alert, tuned for a trap. But his cleverness was awkward blundering compared to the uncanniness of the fiend he hunted. And in ten horror-shot minutes, he learned just how ghastly death could be.



STRANGELY, the heavy door yielded easily to his touch. Detective Crom Carson pushed it wide open and listened. No sound came from the inky blackness of the apartment.

One minute, two, he waited. Somewhere, now, a clock was ticking, and the rhythmic beats synchronized with his thudding heart. He heard the clock tick off the seconds—ten—eleven—twelve. Creeping like a cat, he crossed the threshold into the impenetrable dark. One hand gripped his automatic; his other hand groped for the light-switch. He felt the button, and at his touch the electrics flared in a brilliant glare.

The room was empty. Maitland was away.

Crom sighed with relief. So far—good. He had hardly dared hope for this luck. He had only to wait here until Maitland returned and catch him unaware. Before morning, probably, he'd have Maitland behind bars.

He walked toward the center of the room. Furnishings of rococo ornateness crowded it: a carved teakwood chair, Ming pottery, a bust by De Buzo, on the wall a life-sized painting of a man.

Suddenly the scarcely audible creak of a turning hinge startled him. Crom wheeled, gun ready. His gaze fixed on the door through which he had entered.

The door was closing slowly, propelled by an unseen hand.

In a bound, he leaped toward it. Too late. The mahogany slid silently into place, and there came a faint click. Crom tried the knob. Locked. He ran toward the other egress. That door, too, was fastened. Trapped!

With deepening dismay, he turned to face the unknown menace that he knew now awaited him. Tense stillness, broken only by his own stertorous breathing, pervaded the room.

He'd begged Cap Jackson for this chance—to bag "Diamond" Maitland alone—and Jackson, reluctant at first to give such a ticklish job to a new man, had finally consented. Maitland had laid a cunning trap, and he'd blundered into it. Might have known better—

Crom paced the floor, his young face wrinkled in thought. Two doors, both locked. He inspected the room minutely; no other way out. He might batter through one of them and get away. No! He had come for Maitland, and he would get Maitland. His chin set in determination.

"Listen!"

Crom jumped. The voice, biting, cruel, chilled his marrow. He whirled to face the apparent direction from which it had come, and he saw a man, a young man, well set up, looking straight at him. Instinctively his finger tightened on the trigger of his gun. Then he almost dropped the weapon. The man was his own reflection in a large wall mirror. Crom pulled himself together.

From behind the mirror the voice continued:

"You have come here uninvited, evidently seeking information of the jewel robberies of which I am suspected. No uninvited guest has ever crossed my threshold and lived. Probably you belong to the police, and policemen are especially repugnant to me; they hamper me in my work."

The speaker paused, and resumed suavely, suggestively, "Shall we call it the third murder?"

For an instant, Crom's red blood froze in his veins. Then his pounding pulses calmed and his brain cleared, became cold as ice.

"If you like," he said. "You have killed other men, then?"

"Perhaps," the other fenced.

CROM looked at the large painting, and something in the fixed, sardonic expression of the face told him that this was Maitland himself, the demon that he had to fear. At least, he knew what the man looked like.

The heavy aura of impending death hung over the apartment.

The lights! If he could extinguish them—

Before he had taken three strides, the voice spoke again:

"Stop! The lights remain on."

Ignoring the uncanny divination of his thoughts, Crom flipped the switch. The incandescents did not even flicker.

A mocking laugh sounded.

"I have certain devices here for my protection. Since you will never leave this room alive, I can tell you what they are. The lights, for instance, have double wiring, and the doors close by pushing a button. But this mirror—ah—it is wonderful. From my side I can look through and see the entire room, plainly. But from your side it seems an ordinary mirror. Just a little invention of my own—one of the precautions that my scientific mind deems necessary to preserve my liberty."

Crom faced the glass. "Maitland, you can't get away with this. The men at headquarters know that I am here. If I do not return—"

Maitland caught him up: "Naturally, they will come here. Of course, I will say that I never saw you. Your body will not be found. In order to prove the crime of murder, the body must be produced. *Corpus delicti* I believe the legal gentlemen call it. Checkmate! What next?"

Crom did not answer him. How or when

the struggle would come he had no means of knowing. Perhaps a shot; perhaps gas. Involuntarily he looked toward the ceiling.

A hole marred the fresco, and from the hole a short pipe protruded!

He moved farther away. Detective Crom Carson, unafraid of facing danger, was helpless in the lap of fate. He could do nothing but await the next move of his mysterious antagonist.

Calmly he crossed the room. The evening paper lay on the table, and he bent over it. He picked it up, taking it with him to the teakwood chair, and, as his tease body sank into the cushions, he spread the paper before him. It shielded his face but not his vision. Through the small hole that he had punched through the sheet when he picked it up, he could see most of the room.

He had not long to wait. The side door moved open a few inches, hesitated, and opened wider. As the aperture widened, a man peered in.

CROM gasped. He had seen monstrosities in human form, but this man was unlike anything human save that he had arms and legs and a body. His chalk-white face was distorted with a fantastic leer. His head, too big and misproportioned for a normal man, was superimposed on a body so squat and muscular that it might have belonged to a gorilla.

Cautiously the man entered, and the door closed noiselessly behind him as he sidled through. He moved with quick, sharp movements, as a snake wiggles its form preparing to strike.

The brute's right hand gripped an automatic; more terrifying, his left hand closed over the hilt of an ugly knife.

Through his peephole, Crom watched the automatic rise toward his head, and for a chilling instant he gazed down its dark muzzle.

Quick as light, the detective ducked his

body, bending almost double, while his arms remained upward, holding the paper in almost the same position that it had been before.

Just in time! The fiend's gun roared, and the bullet whizzed through the paper.

Twice Crom's automatic spoke, and, when the acrid smoke had cleared away, a man no longer human, and perhaps never possessed of human attributes, lay stretched on the rug.

Crom bent over the grotesque form. Dead. Dark blood from the wounds in his breast welled over the exquisite Sarouk rug that had cushioned his fall.

The door! Crom rushed for the door through which the man had entered, but it had closed. He tried the knob. Locked. He might have known that Maitland's diabolical cunning would have seen to that.

Crom looked expectantly toward the mirror. Surely this chapter in the unfolding chain of astounding events deserved special mention from that quarter. But the mirror gave forth only his own image, and no word came from behind its adamant glaze. Might Maitland and the dead man be one and the same? If so, the menace no longer existed, and his only problem was to free himself from the locked room.

Carefully he examined the edges of the glass where it was fastened to the wall. Cemented firmly, it appeared to be set permanently in place. No way out there, unless he smashed it.

Suddenly the voice boomed again, so close that it seemed to be speaking in his ear. Crom jumped back.

"Remember, the third murder!"

The cold glass showed only his own pale face as if he himself had been the speaker.

The third murder? In a frenzy, Crom stepped back and raised his gun. One shot would shatter the glass, perhaps reveal Maitland.

A peculiarly sweet, overpowering odor stole into his nostrils. Too late, he remembered the pipe in the ceiling.

His arms felt like lead, and every nerve quieted with lulling lethargy. Again he feebly tried to raise the gun, but the gas, seeping into his senses, overwhelmed him. Down, down he slumped into oblivion.

WHEN Crom opened his eyes again, his languid glance wandered over the room. What was this place? Where was he? He tried to recollect, but his numbed senses failed him. Pleasanter to sleep—

Some one was prodding his arm. “Wake up.”

A bottle was forced between his teeth, and he tasted the burning stimulus of raw whiskey. Gradually his mind cleared, and he looked about him.

Was he dreaming? It couldn’t be real—that thing. Ten feet away a man sat slumped in the teakwood chair. The man’s eyes, veiled with the film of death, looked straight into his. The face, ashy white, and the head twice too big for its body. The lifeless hand clutched a revolver, an automatic.

Recollection came to Crom with a rush. The mysterious attacker that he had shot! He remembered everything now, and with remembrance he felt the paralysis of fear, but he managed to fight it off. In an instant, he was alive again.

He tried to rise from the chair in which he sat, but sturdy ropes bound him with a firm hold. Pinioned and helpless, he waited for what was to come next.

“You are with us again, I see.”

With a thrill, Crom recognized the voice of the mirror; but now the owner of it was in the room with him. The man, who had been standing behind, came forward, and Crom saw him for the first time.

His sharp eyes took in every detail of the man. He had the face of a scholar; the lofty, bulging forehead crowned regular features. Almost handsome, except for his eyes, which were closely set. They were small, bright eyes, and in them was a peculiar burning glint. In

the brightly lighted room the man’s complexion seemed a trifle sallow. The suit that covered his thin body was of expensive cut and fitted perfectly.

“I’m Maitland.” The shrewd eyes appraised Crom.

Crom knew as much. He jerked his head toward the picture.

“Your portrait flatters you, Maitland.”

The equanimity of Maitland’s face was not disturbed by the dubious compliment. He smiled slightly.

“Perhaps. That is neither here nor there. There are more important matters to consider. You are of the police, and the police and I are natural enemies. You probably know that I am suspected of certain jewel robberies that have recently taken place, and that is why you have come here. Right?”

“Right,” said Crom.

“This will be the third—”

Crom interrupted, “The third murder, Maitland? You have said that before.”

“Precisely.”

Maitland joined the tips of his fingers, and his face composed his thought. He resumed:

“Your death, however, will be different. In dying, you will be comforted by the thought that you have contributed to science. I will explain partly by action.”

As he listened, Crom’s muscles were straining under the bonds, but the cords held him relentlessly. He watched Maitland approach the dead man.

Maitland turned. “Allow me to introduce Barney. You met him before this evening and exchanged compliments. As a result, poor Barney will not be with us again, but he, though dead, will have eternal revenge upon his killer.”

Crom was in a cold sweat. Was the man mad? He hung on Maitland’s words.

“Barney was my valued assistant. For years he has helped me. He will help me now, and your blood will not be on my hands.” Maitland laughed callously. “Too much blood

on my hands already; sometimes I have difficulty in sleeping nights.”

Maitland coolly raised the dead man’s hand—the hand clutching the gun—and laid it on the chair arm. He adjusted the weapon so that it pointed directly at Crom. Stooping, he sighted along the short barrel.

“Right at the heart,” he said. He wiped his hands with his handkerchief, and smiled. “Now—we shall see. The term *rigor mortis* doubtless means nothing to you. However, it is a scientific fact that shortly after death the tendons of the muscles shorten, draw together, as it were. Barney has not been long with Satan, though the time may, to you, have seemed interminable. Am I not right?”

Crom shivered. Maitland’s voice droned on, “In a few minutes, Barney’s dead fingers will begin to draw together as *rigor mortis* sets in. The pressure on the trigger of the automatic that he holds will increase. Soon, without warning, the gun will be discharged.”

Maitland paused dramatically, and venomous hate dripped from his words, “The gun points toward your heart!”

THE full import of Maitland’s machinations dawned on Crom. For minutes that would crawl like leaden hours he must sit waiting, staring at the unseeing eyes until the hand, flexing in the throes of after-death, hurtled lead into his body. No use to cry out; the house was too isolated.

Maitland was regarding him. He saw the man cross to the radio and pull a button.

“In your last hours—no, more exactly, minutes—you may wish to listen to the police broadcasts. This is a short wave set, attuned to them. It may serve to distract your mind from the depressing business so close at hand. Meanwhile, I shall be waiting.”

Faint hope stirred in Crom. He might move the chair out of-range. He pushed his feet hard on the floor, but the chair did not budge.

Once more the uncanny prescience of

Maitland asserted itself.

“Of course I took the precaution to fasten the chair to the floor; it cannot be moved.”

Crom strained against the hempen bonds until the fibers creased his raw flesh. If he could get out of line of that threatening muzzle—the bonds gave not an inch.

Panic seized him. Away from those dead eyes, then. He could easily close his own, but the dead man’s countenance, like a supernatural magnet, held his gaze, and the enormous head with its ghastly face filled his vision and could not be erased.

Abruptly the radio blared forth.

“All squad cars attention! We now have the exact description of the man who held up the Traub jewelry store this afternoon. Note carefully: about five feet four, squat, muscular body. Distinguishing feature, an abnormally large head. Complexion, ashy white. He is believed to have an accomplice who waited for him in a large car. Traub offers a reward of five thousand dollars for either man, dead or alive.”

Crom’s glance, momentarily distracted, fixed again on the dead man in the chair.

Maitland laughed harshly. “Yes, they are speaking of Barney. Too bad you can’t collect!”

Crom did not appear to hear him. His head lay on his chest in an attitude of utter dejection.

Maitland rasped: “Lost your nerve, eh? Oh, well,” he shrugged.

CROM had not lost his nerve. Suddenly he had discovered that with his teeth he could reach the rope that bound his arms and shoulders. His keen incisors clamped down. One strand gave way. Another. He glanced upward, and the hope in his heart smothered at sight of that malignant face watching him, gun ready in a lifeless hand.

How long? If what Maitland said was true, and it sounded plausible, any minute, any second—

He bent his head again, but the rope eluded him, and sudden fear shot to his heart. There! He found it, and another strand snapped. He strained against the rope, but it did not weaken.

Maitland was reading a newspaper, paying no attention to him.

Silently he worked his strong jaws, champing on the rope, and one by one the infinitesimal strands that held him were giving away.

Once Maitland spoke without looking up. "Soon, now. Barney has been dead eight minutes."

Crom could feel the rope weakening. His heart throbbed with wild elation. One fiber broke of its own tension. Another.

In spite of himself, he looked again at Barney. One of the dead man's eyes was partially closed, and the sight flooded him with quick terror. *Rigor mortis*? Was it coming now?

The dead hand held steady, and behind the threatening muzzle, Crom imagined that the finger was tightening. He could almost see it tightening—

Frantically he bit at the rope. Any moment Maitland might look up and discover him. But curiously, Maitland did not look up, and Crom was watched only by an eye that would never see.

The rope started to give. Not ceasing in his work, he began to move his numbed muscles so that they would be ready to respond to instant action.

Only a few filaments between him and freedom. Crom's brain danced.

He took a deep breath, and all the power in his body flowed into a forward jerk. The rope twanged like a bowstring.

Snap! He was free!

He bounded from the chair, only to face the wicked gun that Maitland held on him. So absorbed had he been that he had not noticed that Maitland had witnessed his escape and was ready.

Crom danced sideways, but the gun followed him. He paused for a split second to gather himself together. The spring in his legs relaxed, tightened. In a flash he catapulted through the air, straight at Maitland.

The gun thundered so close to his ear that the fire burned him. He heard the tinkle of glass as the overhead light was shot out. Darkness, instant and terrible. Mad melee of thrashing bodies. He felt Maitland's agile form squirming in his grasp, but it eluded a firm hold.

MAITLAND still had the gun. Crom tried to hold his arms, to reach the gun, but they evaded him. Blows hammered on his head and body. Weakened as he was from the narcotic and the strain, he clung desperately to his adversary. Crom's breath was coming shorter, in gasping pants.

He marshaled all of his strength for one last effort. His right fist drawback, poised, shot blindly into black space. Given luck, he might hit Maitland.

He felt his muscles crack against solid flesh. Heard the thud of a body as it struck some piece of furniture. A low moan. Too spent to follow up his advantage, Crom slumped in a heap. Tense quiet pervaded the room.

Where was Maitland? Was he getting ready for a new attack? Crom strained his eyes into the impenetrable darkness but he could see nothing. Somewhere, Maitland was waiting—

The suspense was unbearable. Crom raised himself.

A faint rustle from the center of the room. The noise was not repeated, but he fixed the direction of the sound.

Cautiously, not to make a noise, he raised himself. Without hesitating, he flung his body toward the spot from which the sound had come.

Suddenly the thundering: roar of guns filled the air with hellfire. Flashes of blue-

yellow light bit into the dark. The room became a black inferno filled with belching flame.

Bullets whizzed by him. He dodged, cringed, drew back. If only he had a gun—

The deafening noise stopped abruptly, and the room settled to pregnant quiet. The smell of gunpowder wafted to his dazed senses, filling the air, choking him with acrid fumes.

Where was Maitland?

Thump! Thump! Crash!

Some one was pounding furiously at the outer door.

For one uncertain moment he did not know whether it was friend or foe. Then he heard his name called.

“Crom!”

The police! Unmindful of personal danger from Maitland, he ran to the door and shouted.

“Be careful, boys. There’s a dangerous man here and he has a gun!”

His words were drowned in a splintering crash as the door fell inward. Three men plunged into the room, and from the faint light in the hall Crom recognized Detectives Thomas, Olson, and Adams. Thomas had an axe.

“That you, Crom? You didn’t come back, so Cap Jackson sent us after you.”

“It’s me, all right. Watch out! Maitland’s here,” Crom added sharply.

In concerted understanding, every man listened. Not a sound.

Crom remembered the flashlight that he had not dared to use before. He pulled it from his pocket, and touched the switch.

The sight that the beam revealed made him recoil in mute horror. One of the detectives started to speak, but the words trailed to a gasp.

Maitland, blood-spattered, was slumped in the chair that Crom had so recently vacated. Crom’s blow had sent him sprawling there, and the thundering gun had done the rest. Blood flowed from many wounds. The man, target of a murderous fusillade, was stone dead.

Sickened, Crom pointed the light to where Barney sat. The lifeless fingers were still clutching the automatic. It was pointed toward Maitland, as it had pointed toward Crom when he had sat, a prisoner, in that same teakwood chair.

Crom shuddered. Unsteadily, he walked toward Barney and touched the gun.

The metal was hot.

Barney’s fingers, in *rigor mortis*, had pulled and held the trigger until the magazine of the automatic had emptied.

“That’s all, boys,” said Crom. “Maitland’s done for.”

“You killed him, Crom?”

“No, *rigor mortis* did it.”

“Reggie Morris? Who’s that guy? Never heard of him,” said Detective Olson.