

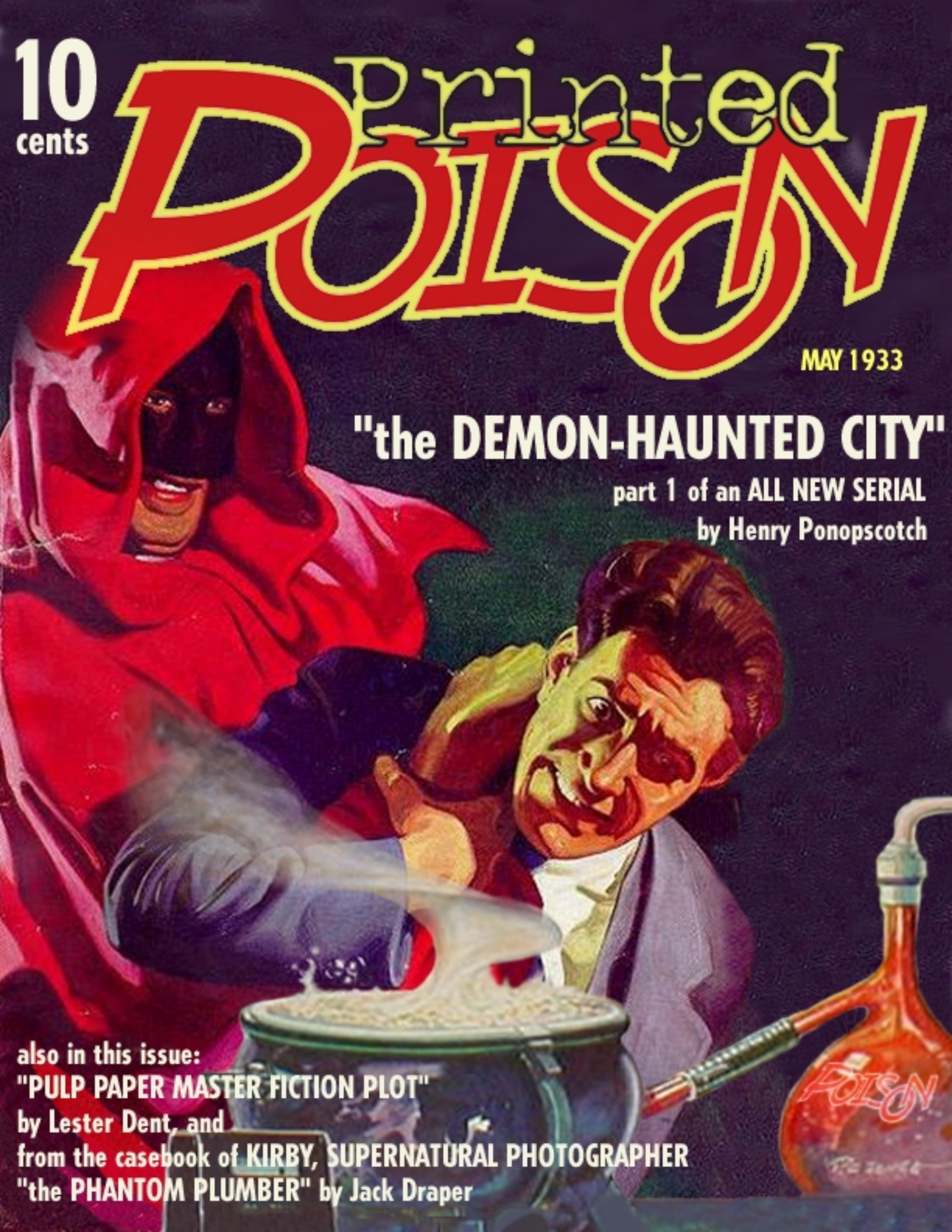
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Printed **POISON**

MAY 1933

"the DEMON-HAUNTED CITY"

part 1 of an ALL NEW SERIAL
by Henry Ponopscotch



also in this issue:
"PULP PAPER MASTER FICTION PLOT"
by Lester Dent, and
from the casebook of KIRBY, SUPERNATURAL PHOTOGRAPHER
"the PHANTOM PLUMBER" by Jack Draper

**PLEASE SUBMIT!
PRINTED POISON NEEDS YOUR
WORK!**

Printed Poison is a sporadically published, pulp-inspired webzine. We are seeking fiction and art submissions.

Our guidelines are as follows:

FICITION

- We are looking for pulp-inspired, two-fisted fiction. Mystery, adventure, horror, science fiction, and western are all welcome.
- Not sure what qualifies as pulp? Check out the Lester Dent article on page 8. Not all Printed Poison stories must conform to this master plot, but it captures some of the soul of what we're after here.
- Try to write your stories as though you are living in the 1930s. (You can set your stories later than that, but then they'll be science fiction!) Don't think of it as a restriction, think of it as a writing challenge!
- We are really keen on publishing serials just so long as you guarantee you can finish them.
- Writing quality should be good but it doesn't have to be genius. This is pulp-inspired so we're shooting for Dent, not frickin' Joyce. Please spell-check!
- Word count: 1,000 – 10,000 words, but we can accomodate longer and smaller pieces.
- Send all fiction submissions or proposals to **printedpoison@yahoo.com**

ART

- We are looking for black-and-white interior artwork of all sorts. 1930's era and pulp-inspired, of course.
- We prefer drawings to photos. Comics-style is perfect.
- Currently, the next few cover images are sorted, but we'd like to see new ideas.
- Send art submissions and/or queries to **printedpoison@yahoo.com**

All these guidelines are just that: *guidelines*. Don't be afraid to ignore them.

PRINTED POISON IS:

Editor-in-chief } Henry Ponopscotch
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Contributing editor Jack Draper

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CORRESPONDENCE

Please direct all Printed Poison correspondence to:

printedpoison@yahoo.com

Printed POISON

Volume 1, Issue 1



May 2003

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK...

On the cover it says that this little pulpy e-zine costs a mere 10 cents. Seeing as you're reading it and I'm not a dime richer, it's pretty obvious that that's just there because it looks nice.

Actually, I have a far more expensive payment scheme in mind.

As you may have noticed, the first story in this issue is the first chapter in a serial. Nasty tease that, eh?

Fear not. The whole thing is written.

But here's the deal: I won't put out another chapter until somebody sends me some fiction to print alongside it. Your pulp for my pulp. I think that's fair.

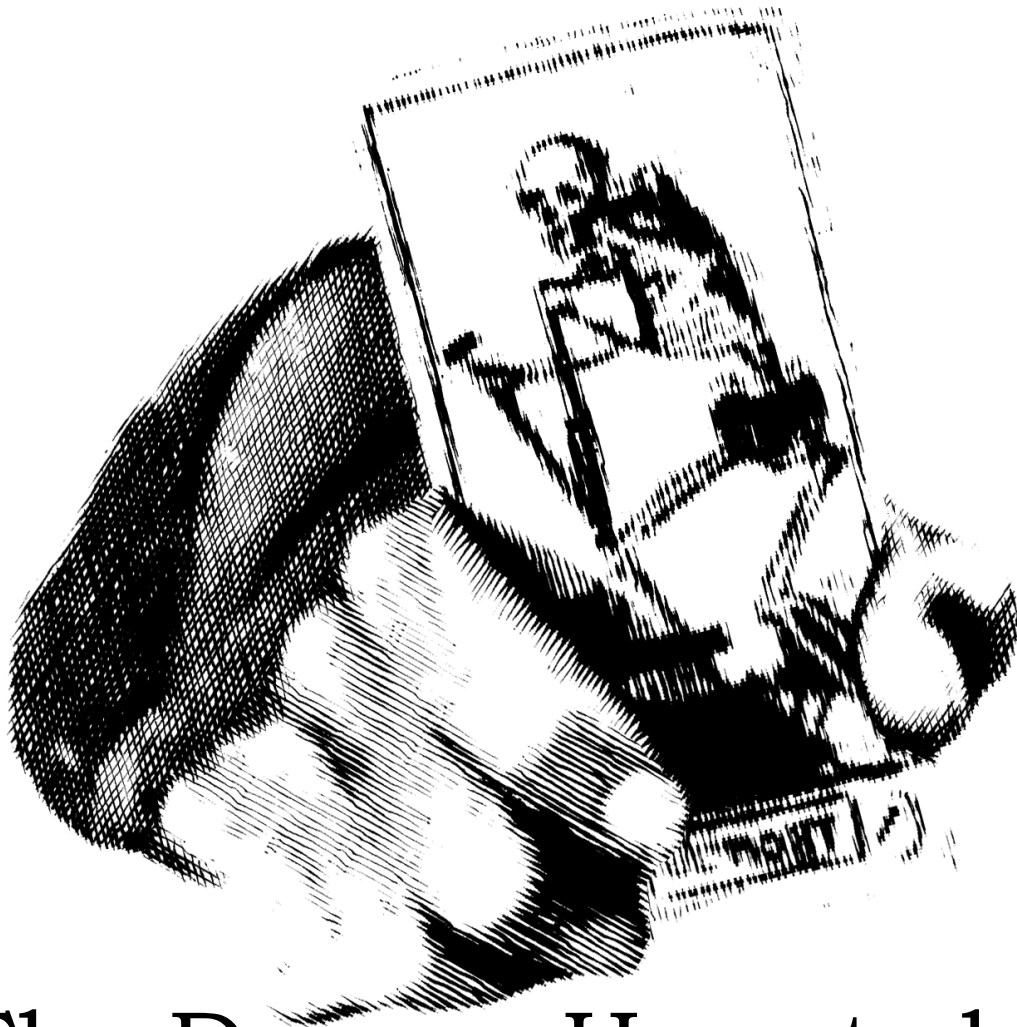
If you hate the stories in Printed Poison, that's okay. Curse me under you breath for wasting your time and don't bother sending me a story. I'll live.

If you do enjoy Printed Poison, but don't like writing yourself, that's fine too. At least send me an email encouraging me to continue with the serial. (I can be reached at printedpoison@yahoo.com)

Consider this "write-ware." You write and I write. In the end the world gets more writing. That's a good thing.

Hope to hear from you soon.

Henry Ponopscotch
Editor-in-chief



The Demon-Haunted City

by Henry Ponopscotch

A man on the run from a demonic menace. The only things more mysterious than the fiends loose in New York City are the heroes that must stop them.

CHAPTER ONE MANHATTAN MAX'S FINAL BOW

"I will need a volunteer from the audience," said the magician. He was a tall man, apparently in his early sixties, and he wore a tight-fitting, black tuxedo over a gaunt frame. Atop his head, his thinning, white hair was precisely combed. Upon his face was a broad, knowing grin and his eyes danced mischievously as he surveyed the audience. He brought a hand up to his brow to shield his gaze from the stage lights then stalked like some bizarrely animated scarecrow up to the edge of the orchestra pit.

The crowd sat in rapt attention. This was the first encore of what had been thus far a two hour performance. The posters and flybills had promised acts of prestidigitation the likes of which New York City had never seen before. The posters and flybills had not lied.

The next morning, the papers would declare this show a spectacular artistic triumph and, alternately, a disgraceful display of macabre bad taste. The theatre editor for the Brooklyn Free Times—who sat in this audience, his knuckles white as they clutched the arms of his seat, and applauded for this encore despite himself—would go so far as to write that this

magician—this Professor Deadmoor—should be “banned from the New York stage and sent back to Europe where the loose morals and superstitious minds of the Old World might have some use for this poppycock.” Thanks to such press, the city would be abuzz with rumors and tales of his extraordinary feats of conjuring; and, in some of the more credulous circles it would even be whispered that the mysterious Professor Deadmoor cavorted with evil spirits. The next evening, the lineup at the theatre, The Emperor’s Own, would be even longer.

But all that controversy was hours away.

Presently, the magician made his selection. “You my dear,” he said, pointing out into the audience. A young girl stood up, her dark eyes wide with fear and embarrassment. She had bright yellow curls and a dress of blue and white taffeta. “Yes, darling,” he beckoned her to come to the stairs at the side of the stage, then added, darkly: “There’s nothing to be afraid of... *up here...*”

The audience gasped but the girl stepped onto the stage regardless. She glanced back to where her parents sat. They clutched one another, smiling nervously, torn between worry and excitement, fear and pride. To think, their daughter had been called on stage by Professor Deadmoor. *The Professor Deadmoor.* Their friends up at the yacht club would be so jealous. He’s one of the most famous magicians in the world. A friend to kings and presidents. Courted by Hollywood and all the great stages of Europe.

“Now my pet,” though he seemed to be merely speaking cordially with the child, he projected his voice in such a way that it resonated throughout the theatre and was clear to everyone there. “What is your name, hmm?” he asked her. He was kneeling beside the girl and had an arm around her shoulders so that she stayed facing the audience.

“Patricia,” she replied.

“Ah. Patricia. Such a lovely name,” he cooed. “And how old *were* you Patricia?”

“Seven.”

“Just seven?” the Professor asked. “Not ‘and a half? Not ‘and three quarters?’”

“No,” she said. “I’m seven—and that’s all!—years old.”

“Splendid. Seven it is. That’s just about enough for anyone, I should think.” Behind

them, from stage left, an assistant rolled out a wooden cabinet. It stood only a foot or two taller than the girl, and moved on well-oiled wheels. The woman who pushed it was not dressed as a typical magician’s assistant. She wore no sequins nor feathers nor skin-tight leotard. Instead, she wore a dusty dress of plain black fabric. Her skin was pallid, her hair wiry and dark and pulled back into a tight bun. About her neck she wore a length of thick hemp rope loosely tied in a noose knot.

“Tell me Patricia,” continued the magician, “Have you enjoyed my little tricks thus far?”

“Yes, very much sir,” the girl replied, looking over her shoulder at the cabinet as it drew close to them.

“You did? Such a polite girl. They didn’t frighten you, my tricks? Did they?”

“No sir.”

“Excellent. Such a brave girl you are, Patricia. Then you shan’t mind being part of my next little trick, shall you?”

The girl looked worried. She didn’t answer.

“You’d like to be the star of the show wouldn’t you?” the Professor asked, smiling broadly. “Show all these fine people how brave you are?”

“Yes sir,” she answered.

“Excellent.”

From stage right came another assistant. She had the same pallid skin as her colleague, but instead of a bun her dark hair was worn in two long plaits, and instead of a dress she wore a man’s suit that looked as if it had been shredded by some wild animal—it showed a scandalous amount of her skin underneath. She was pushing a wide-mouthed, wooden barrel; the wheels on which it moved squeaked horribly, drawing every eye in the theatre towards it.

Professor Deadmoor stood up quickly and interposed himself between the girl and this noisy stage prop. “Oh no, you mustn’t fret over that, my dear,” he said. “It is nothing for you to worry about...”

The barrel contained a great clutch of shiny swords, their points downward, their curving metal guards gleaming under the stage lighting.

“Nothing to worry about...” He smiled down at the girl. “...*yet*, my pet. I’m going to teach you how to do magic now. How would you like that?”

The girl giggled and nodded up at him.

With that, Professor Deadmoor addressed the audience, “Ladies and Gentlemen, I will con-

clude with a moldy morsel of hocus-pokery. Something dusty, crusty and mummified. One of the oldest bits of conjuring in any magicians repertoire. Don't believe me? I was talking to James Henry Breasted, the famed Egyptologist, after a show in Paris and he said that he'd actually read about this trick before. 'In what publication?' I asked. 'Not a publication,' he said, 'in the tomb of Ankhotepe the Third. Written in the hieroglyphs.' You see: this trick is so ancient, it is *almost* as old as I am."

He guided the girl back to the cabinet. A door in its front panel lay open.

The professor looked at his assistants and sneered. "Grimalkin. Gertrude. Begone," he commanded, and they retreated into the wings.

"Now Patricia my precious," he said as he knelt down beside her again. "I am going to teach you some magic words and it is very important that you remember them. Because when I tell you to, you must say them as loud as you can and that will make this trick work. Do you think you can do this, my dove?"

She nodded eagerly.

"Excellent."

He cupped his hand, put it up to her ear and whispered to her. She giggled and nodded.

"Do you have that?" he asked.

"Ra —" she started.

"No, no!" he laughed. "Not yet. You will spoil the magic. Only when I tell you. Now, we must get you in here."

The cabinet, which looked very much like a small, upended coffin, was raised a bit off the ground by its wheeled stand, and thus the audience could see that there was no trapdoor in its bottom. He took the girl's hand and helped her up this small step, and once she was safely inside and turned around to face stage front, he patted her on the forehead. "Goodbye my treat," he said, and closed the door on her.

He stood straight and looked out at the audience. A grim look came over his face. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he announced in a somber tone. "The Cabinet of Blades!"

He turned then and grabbed the cabinet as though he were hugging it, pressed an ear against one side, and said aloud, "Still with us my Patricia?"

A voice from within squeaked: "Yes!"

"The magic words!" he commanded, "Now!"

"Rats! And Bats! And Ragdolls!" she shouted.

And with that, Professor Deadmoor spun the cabinet with his arms and with a massive thrust of his chest, pushed it away from him at a great speed. As it careened across the stage, whirling madly on its wheeled base, a little voice from inside shrieked with fear.

The crowd gasped. A woman was heard to shout, "My Patricia!" The audience thought they had known this trick, but they had not expected the spinning box, the screaming girl.

From the wooden barrel, the magician grabbed up a sword, and with all the grace of a dancer, he leaped after the little cabinet. With only two steps, he was upon it, and thrust downward with his weapon. The point drove through the flimsy wood and shot out through the other side.

The cabinet stopped dead, impaled upon the blade. Patricia shrieked no more. The end of the sword gleamed red, dripped a dark fluid onto the floorboards.

The audience was silent. No one moved. Something had gone wrong. There was a scream from the balcony.

Still holding the grip of the sword, Professor Deadmoor pivoted on his heels and flung the cabinet off across the stage again. And again, he leaped, once, twice, and grabbed up another sword. And again he plunged it through the spinning box only to send it again whirling off to the other side of the stage.

Another sword he grabbed and off he dashed.

Back and forth, back and forth he danced this macabre ballet beneath the proscenium arch. His aged form seeming now supple, agile, full of vigor and as he leaped and pirouetted, the audience rose to their feet and applauded, cheered his acrobatics, his mastery of the sword. Blade after blade he struck into the box until it began to resemble a globe of shining thorns. Then, at last, he drew the final weapon from the barrel, leapt and drove it through the top of the cabinet. The end poked through the bottom and thunked into the floor.

Professor Deadmoor stopped, his feet close together; one hand was behind his back, the other rested upon the pommel of the blade. Sweat pored from his head. His chest heaved. Slick red lines criss-crossed the stage.

The crowd shouted their approval and applauded even more loudly now.

He said nothing. He merely raised his hand from the sword grip and held it aloft, palm towards them, to call for silence.

It took only a moment for the noise to die down to a mere anxious whisper, then: "I imagine you are hoping the girl is unharmed?" he said and grinned evilly.

Grimalkin and Gertrude came out from the wings, took hold of the Cabinet of Blades and wheeled it offstage—still unopened, still dripping gore, the last sword point rasping as it dragged across the floor.

"I know I am," he said, then bowed low and with an "Adieu" concluded his show.

The audience surged up towards the edge of the stage, hooting and cheering. Flashbulbs went off as newspapermen struggled to capture the magician on film. At his feet, bouquets of roses were tossed, most of them red, but in keeping with the motif of his show, many of the blooms had been painted black.

He lingered there a moment and bowed again, basking in their praise.

Then, up from the throng he heard a single voice calling to him.

"Goodbye, my friend," it said, and though it must have been loud enough to rise above the noise of the audience, its tone seemed intimate, as though the words were spoken right next to his ear.

He knew this trick. And the voice was familiar.

He turned to where he thought the voice must have come from: down in the crowd, off to his left. There, in among the fur stoles and black bow-ties; the theatre critics, society ladies and captains of industry; he saw a face he recognized: an old man wearing a shabby fedora and rumpled brown suit with no tie. The apparition waved then retreated back into the crowd. Though those around him stepped aside to let him pass, they seemed to take no more notice of him.

Professor Deadmoor shivered then pressed a palm against his chest and found there was something in one of his inside breast pockets that had not been there a moment ago.

Through all of this he had maintained his composure—his stage smile. But now, he bowed one last time, and as the red curtain slowly dropped, he walked into the wings. Outwardly, his gait seemed triumphant. Inside, his mind was troubled.

He was greeted backstage by his assistants.

"They don't cheer for us like that in France," said Grimalkin. She had removed her shredded suit and was wrapped in a white flannel bathrobe. It hung open at her chest, revealing the flesh-toned leotard she wore on stage.

"We've been away too long," he replied. "They've forgotten all the old gimmicks. Good thing too. I was late on my cues with the guillotine. The French would never have forgiven that." His voice now seemed deeper and softer, his posture relaxed.

"You're too hard on yourself," said Gertrude. She was still in her costume.

"Perhaps," he shrugged. "But what do *you* think?" he asked as he crouched down. Gertrude had an arm around Patricia and it was to her that he had directed this question.

"I want to go back on stage," the girl replied.

"Not now, my pet. I'll tell you what we're going to do instead, though. We're going to go out through the *stage door*. Only the cast gets to use that. And there we'll give you back to your parents. I'll bet they're worried about you. And then we're going to talk to the press for a while. Newspaper and radio reporters. You'll have to pose for pictures."

"I'm going to be on the radio?" The girl laughed.

"Indeed you will, dove. Tonight you'll be the toast of New York City."

He stood up and looked at Gertrude and Grimalkin. "Can you two...?" he said as he gave them a "*take the kid for a second*" signal with his eyebrows. "I'll be along. I just need a second alone."

"Sure boss," said Grimalkin.

"You must be thirsty," Gertrude said to the girl. "Let's get you a mineral water."

"What's that," Patricia asked.

"It's French."

The three of them left for the green room.

Professor Deadmoor turned around and looked out at the stage. He reached into the jacket of his tuxedo. From one of the many pockets he used for secreting props, he pulled a single playing card. The pattern on the back was a simple white and red hatchwork. It was not one of his.

He flipped it over.

It was the Ace of Hearts.

The Emperor's Own sat in a little theatre district on the edge of Harlem called the Four Corners. Clustered here—the intersection of 132nd and St Nicholas—were opulent theatres and glowing music halls and though this neighborhood was still prosperous and attracted wealthy entertainment seekers from all over the city, just two blocks away the depression was already taking a serious toll. Boarded up shop fronts, unlit streets grown grimy from neglect: many people saw this decrepitude and assumed this was a dangerous part of the city, and perhaps they were right—no aid could come from abandoned buildings to those in distress.

But to others, those who relied only on their own wits and knew these streets by dint of long experience among them, the darkness and desolation offered a refuge from pursuit.

It was one such fugitive who hurried now down a darkened street and ducked into an alleyway between two vacant tenement buildings. He wore a rumpled brown suit with no tie and a fedora pulled low over his eyes. He moved quickly despite his apparent age and kept glancing over his shoulder as though his pursuers might show themselves at any moment.

He was happy that he'd been able to get his message off, cryptic though it had to be. Deadmoor was clever; he'd be able to sort it out. Not in time to help with the present predicament, of course, but the man had not counted on the Professor's aid. The situation was desperate, but he still had a last trick up his sleeve and would play it alone rather than endanger a friend.

Ahead of him, he saw the exit of the alleyway. It was lit by the feeble rays of a nearby streetlamp. He did not relish the thought of coming out of the shadows, even for a moment, but he seemed to have little choice.

He looked up at the sky and cursed his luck. The night was warm, humid and overcast. His whole life he'd been a gambler so he knew better than to bet on the weather. Still, he'd bet on it all the same. He'd counted on rain to come sooner rather than later, hoping it would conceal his path—and his scent. It hadn't come, and so now he felt uncomfortably exposed.

Just a few more feet and he'd be out onto the street again and... But then, into the circle of

light at the end of the alleyway a figure stepped, blocking his path.

The man recognized the silhouette and knew that it would be pointless to flee. The exit that lay behind him would be guarded as well.

"Manhattan Max," the figure said, his accent cultured, precise. "Going somewhere?"

Max stopped. He hadn't wanted to be caught here, but there was nothing for it. "Gig's up, eh," he replied.

"So it would seem," said the figure, his features still hidden in the gloom.

Though the alley was cloaked in a nearly complete darkness, on either side of Max shadows rose up on the walls, blacker than the blackness around them, as though they were literally cast upon the brick instead of being spots of absent light. Their shapes were indistinct, nebulous, but undeniably menacing, suggesting the presence of claws and fangs and things that could rend flesh.

"Call off your demons," said Manhattan Max, his voice resolute. "They don't frighten me."

"I thought as much," said the figure.

The shadows slunk away.

Then, from invisible fire escapes above him, Max heard the clicks of a great many gun safeties being released. He caught a faint gleam of metal as the man before him reached into his jacket and pulled out a weapon.

The figure continued: "That's why I came prepared with more conventional instruments."

Manhattan Max smiled. "So did I," he muttered. And though an instant ago his hands were empty, now, as if by magic, they held two black revolvers.

Back at the Emperor's Own, Professor Deadmoor stood on the steps outside the stage door. There was a crowd of reporters and admirers surrounding him. He was chatting with one of them, a young woman, and signing an autograph for her.

From far off, he heard a faint succession of pops—a crackle really. And then a deep rumble. A look of sadness passed across the magician's face.

There would be a storm this night, but he knew that what he had just heard was not the sound of thunder.

... continued next issue ☞

Illustration from *the Secret in the Sky* by Lester Dent.



Pulp Paper Master Fiction Plot by Lester Dent

From the pulp master behind Doc Savage come these tips on how to make your purple prose fit for print. Well I'll be superamalgamated!

This is a formula, a master plot, for any 6000 word pulp story. It has worked on adventure, detective, western and war-air. It tells exactly where to put everything. It shows definitely just what must happen in each successive thousand words.

No yarn of mine written to the formula has yet failed to sell.

The business of building stories seems not much different from the business of building anything else.

Here's how it starts:

1. A DIFFERENT MURDER METHOD FOR VILLAIN TO USE
2. A DIFFERENT THING FOR VILLAIN TO BE SEEKING
3. A DIFFERENT LOCALE
4. A MENACE WHICH IS TO HANG LIKE A CLOUD OVER HERO

One of these DIFFERENT things would be nice, two better, three swell. It may help if they are fully in mind before tackling the rest.

A different murder method could be—different. Thinking of shooting, knifing, hydrocyanic, garroting, poison needles, scorpions, a few others, and writing them on paper gets them where they may suggest something. Scorpions and their poison bite? Maybe mosquitos or flies treated with deadly germs?

If the victims are killed by ordinary methods, but found under strange and identical circumstances each time, it might serve, the reader of course not knowing until the end, that the method of murder is ordinary. Scribes who have their villain's victims found with butterflies, spiders or bats stamped on them could conceivably be flirting with this gag.

Probably it won't do a lot of good to be too odd, fanciful or grotesque with murder methods.

Illustration from *the Mystic Mullah* by Lester Dent.



The different thing for the villain to be after might be something other than jewels, the stolen bank loot, the pearls, or some other old ones.

Here, again one might get too bizarre.

Unique locale? Easy. Selecting one that fits in with the murder method and the treasure—thing that villain wants—makes it simpler, and it's also nice to use a familiar one, a place where you've lived or worked. So many pulpateers don't. It sometimes saves embarrassment to know nearly as much about the locale as the editor, or enough to fool him.

Here's a nifty much used in faking local color. For a story laid in Egypt, say, author finds

a book titled "Conversational Egyptian Easily Learned," or something like that. He wants a character to ask in Egyptian, "What's the matter?" He looks in the book and finds, "El khabar, eyh?" To keep the reader from getting dizzy, it's perhaps wise to make it clear in some fashion, just what that means. Occasionally the text will tell this, or someone can repeat it in English. But it's a doubtful move to stop and tell the reader in so many words the English translation.

The writer learns they have palm trees in Egypt. He looks in the book, finds the Egyptian for palm trees, and uses that. This kids editors and readers into thinking he knows something about Egypt.

Here's the second installment of the master plot.

Divide the 6000 word yarn into four 1500 word parts. In each 1500 word part, put the following:

FIRST 1500 WORDS

1. First line, or as near thereto as possible, introduce the hero and swat him with a fistful of trouble. Hint at a mystery, a menace or a problem to be solved—something the hero has to cope with.
2. The hero pitches in to cope with his fistful of trouble. (He tries to fathom the mystery, defeat the menace, or solve the problem.)
3. Introduce ALL the other characters as soon as possible. Bring them on in action.

4. Hero's endeavours land him in an actual physical conflict near the end of the first 1500 words.
5. Near the end of first 1500 words, there is a complete surprise twist in the plot development.

SO FAR:

- Does it have SUSPENSE?
- Is there a MENACE to the hero?
- Does everything happen logically?

At this point, it might help to recall that action should do something besides advance the hero over the scenery. Suppose the hero has learned the dastards of villains have seized somebody named Eloise, who can explain the secret of what is behind all these sinister events. The hero corners villains, they fight, and villains get away. Not so hot.

Hero should accomplish something with his tearing around, if only to rescue Eloise, and surprise! Eloise is a ring-tailed monkey. The hero counts the rings on Eloise's tail, if nothing better comes to mind. They're not real. The rings are painted there. Why?

SECOND 1500 WORDS

1. Shovel more grief onto the hero.
2. Hero, being heroic, struggles, and his struggles lead up to:
3. Another physical conflict.
4. A surprising plot twist to end the 1500 words.

NOW:

- Does second part have SUSPENSE?
- Does the MENACE grow like a black cloud?
- Is the hero getting it in the neck?
- Is the second part logical?

DON'T TELL ABOUT IT!!! Show how the thing looked. This is one of the secrets of writing; never tell the reader—show him. (He trembles, roving eyes, slackened jaw, and such.) MAKE THE READER SEE HIM.

When writing, it helps to get at least one minor surprise to the printed page. It is reasonable to expect these minor surprises to sort of inveigle the reader into keeping on. They need not be such profound efforts. One method of accomplishing one now and then is to be gently misleading. Hero is examining the murder

room. The door behind him begins slowly to open. He does not see it. He conducts his examination blissfully. Door eases open, wider and wider, until—surprise! The glass pane falls out of the big window across the room. It must have fallen slowly, and air blowing into the room caused the door to open. Then what the heck made the pane fall so slowly? More mystery.

Characterizing a story actor consists of giving him some things which make him stick in the reader's mind. TAG HIM.

BUILD YOUR PLOTS SO THAT ACTION CAN BE CONTINUOUS.

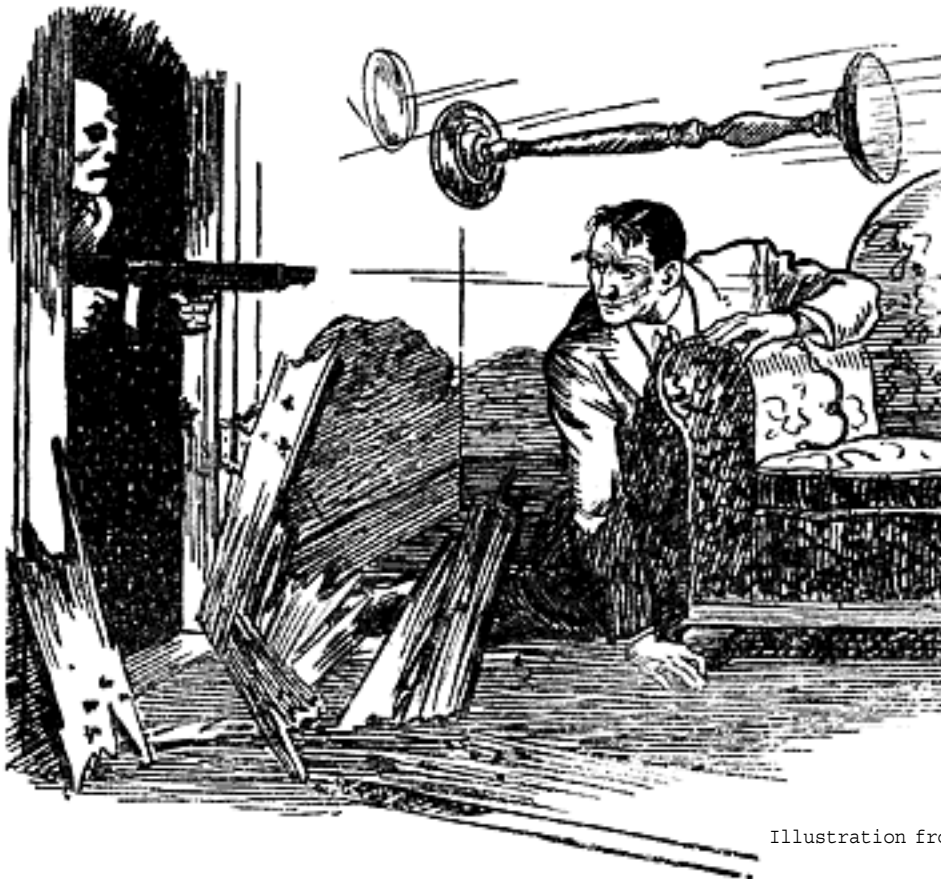


Illustration from *Death in Silver* by Lester Dent.

THIRD 1500 WORDS

1. Shovel the grief onto the hero.
2. Hero makes some headway, and corners the villain or somebody in:
3. A physical conflict.
4. A surprising plot twist, in which the hero preferably gets it in the neck bad, to end the 1500 words.

DOES:

- It still have SUSPENSE?
- The MENACE getting blacker?
- The hero finds himself in a hell of a fix?
- It all happens logically?

These outlines or master formulas are only something to make you certain of inserting some physical conflict, and some genuine plot twists, with a little suspense and menace thrown in. Without them, there is no pulp story.

These physical conflicts in each part might be DIFFERENT, too. If one fight is with fists, that can take care of the pugilism until next the next yarn. Same for poison gas and swords. There may, naturally, be exceptions. A hero with a peculiar punch, or a quick draw, might use it more than once.

The idea is to avoid monotony.

- ACTION: Vivid, swift, no words wasted. Create suspense, make the reader see and feel the action.
- ATMOSPHERE: Hear, smell, see, feel and taste.
- DESCRIPTION: Trees, wind, scenery and water.

THE SECRET OF ALL WRITING IS TO MAKE EVERY WORD COUNT.

Lester Dent (1905–1959) was a rancher, business man, pilot, and treasure hunter, but he will be forever remembered for a writing career which spanned 30 years. His works appeared in magazines, pulps and paperbacks, and on television and the radio. But it was under the name of Kenneth Robeson that he wrote the 43 Doc Savage novels for which he is most renowned.

FOURTH 1500 WORDS

1. Shovel the difficulties more thickly upon the hero.
2. Get the hero almost buried in his troubles. (Figuratively, the villain has him prisoner and has him framed for a murder rap; the girl is presumably dead, everything is lost, and the DIFFERENT murder method is about to dispose of the suffering protagonist.)
3. The hero extricates himself using HIS OWN SKILL, training or brawn.
4. The mysteries remaining—one big one held over to this point will help grip interest—are cleared up in course of final conflict as hero takes the situation in hand.
5. Final twist, a big surprise, (This can be the villain turning out to be the unexpected person, having the “Treasure” be a dud, etc.)
6. The snapper, the punch line to end it.

HAS:

- The SUSPENSE held out to the last line?
- The MENACE held out to the last?
- Everything been explained?
- It all happen logically?
- Is the Punch Line enough to leave the reader with that WARM FEELING?
- Did God kill the villain? Or the hero? ☹



Illustration from the *Squeaking Goblin* by Lester Dent.



The Phantom Plumber

by Jack Draper

Down, in the dank tunnels of the city's sewers, Kirby, photographer of the supernatural, is on the trail of a murderous spectre.

Some people say I've got a talent with the flashgun. Others would call me the king of the double exposure. Me? I don't care what they say one way or the other. All I know is that when you put a camera in my hand, weird things start to happen. And by weird I don't mean your wife runs off one day and joins the circus as Ling-Ling the Dancing Monkey Girl either. (I'd prefer that kind of weird—if I had a wife, that is—it'd keep her out of my hair.) No, by weird I mean spooks lining up around the block to get their pictures taken like I'm some kind of portrait artist for the afterlife—literally—that kind of weird.

It's not a problem so much anymore, now that I'm not a cop. I don't spend so much time around dead people. Instead, I traded in the badge and now I work for a guy with no soul: the paper's called the Daily Pages, the editor's name is Harvey Bratz. And yeah, I'm a photographer there, but I try to stick to sports and local interest stuff. It's not so bad. I like baseball, and get to go to all the games free. And, last week, I covered this big dog show in upper Manhattan, and let me tell you, it's just the cutest the way those pampered pooches can get their noses all over your lens. I'm telling you, *adorable...*

Okay, so a life of adventure it ain't. But at least there aren't so many spooks and spriggans, ghosts and goblins messing up my shots nowadays. And that suits me fine.

Although, every once in a while, I'll get a call. Like take for instance there was this time a couple weeks back... It was a Thursday. I remember it because I woke up feeling like a construction crew was digging up my brainpan. Not that *that* is particularly unusual, but you see, I'd taken an exceptionally good shot at a Yankee's game that week (Tony Lazzeri sliding home after an in-the-park homer that brought in three runs and won the game—it was a thing of beauty—forget Gehrig, forget the Babe, Lazzeri was on fire that afternoon) and the paper had been able to sell it nationally. This meant a big bonus for me and a chance to pay off some pretty ominous debts. Of course, after news like that, I had to celebrate. Toss back a few in Lazzeri's honor. And that Thursday morning I was waking up to the realization that thanks to said celebrations I could no longer afford to pay off said debts.

If it were physically possible, I'd have flushed the entire day right down the toilet, and come to think of it, in the end that's sort of what I wound up doing.

Anyway, that's the state of mind I was in when the phone rang.

"Kirby, that you?" said the voice on the other end.

That's my name, by the way, Kirby. My last name, and no I'm not telling you my first. We haven't been properly introduced.

"Who is it?" I replied.

"Toller."

Detective Toller, that is. We joined the force at about the same time. Only, while it was determined early on that the blue suit didn't quite "suit" me, so to speak, and I was sent to languish over in forensics as a crime-scene photographer, Toller was making a name for himself as a beat cop and was soon promoted to "murder police"—that's what we call the homicide unit, it's not something they were encouraging him to do.

"Why are you waking me up, Toller?"

"It's almost noon."

"And..."

"And nothing. Look, if you're not too busy, I could use your help on a case. Can you meet me at Sharkey's in like an hour?"

I didn't have any assignments I couldn't forget about for a while, and what can I say? I like Toller and I like the way he pays me twenty bucks a day to cover expenses on these little jobs of his. And I like the coffee down at Sharkey's Diner. And the eggs. And, more than anything, I have to admit I get a kick out of playing seamus every now and then. So even though I knew it probably meant cavorting with the undead, I said yeah.

Dumb move.

It was more like an hour and a half by the time I got down to the diner. Or maybe it was two. Toller was on his second coffee and looking a little miffed when really he should have been thanking me for taking the time to wash up first. I settled into the seat across from him, ordered a coffee and a hamburger from a waitress who looked like she'd been carved out of old chewing gum and painted up by Picasso's insane half-brother, and it wasn't long before Toller was giving me the skinny on his case.

"You read the papers lately?" he asked me.

"Now that I work for one, I never touch them. Except for the funny pages. Rest of it's all lies."

"Then you haven't heard about the Phantom Plumber murders then?"

"Can't say that I have. What's it all about?"

Toller cleared his throat then started into it: "Begins like a ghost story then just gets weirder. A city crew was doing some maintenance down in the sewers around 23rd Street and Long. And the whole time they're working, they keep hearing these strange noises and seeing shadows moving around just on the edge of their light. Once or twice they even think they catch sight of a guy lurking around down there with them, but when they chase after him, he dissappears. After a couple days of this, they start calling him their Phantom Plumber—you know, just as a joke."

"Probably some bum hiding out, maybe?"

"They thought that too at first, but these were experienced sewer workers. They were used to tracking down trespassers in the tunnels. For some reason though, whatever it was kept elluding them. Finally, they had to put it out of their minds just so they could get their job done. That seemed to work fine and they were able to

get through the week without an incident. Then their shift ended Saturday morning—”

“Morning?”

“Sewer workers work at night. The plumbing is less *active*, if you follow me.”

“Right.”

“So it’s Saturday morning and they all have a few days off, so they head out for some libations—”

“Libations?”

“It was a gin joint.”

“On a Saturday morning?”

“They knew a place, alright? Anyway, after a few hours, one of them, a Carl Macon, gets a little more in him than he should have and starts ranting about how he’s going back to the sewer to hunt down the Phantom Plumber once and for all. His chums try to dissuade him, but he shrugs them off and leaves the club. Nobody is too worried because they figure he’s too drunk to lift a manhole cover anyway, so they let him be.”

“When does he turn up dead?” I asked. The punchline seemed obvious.

“Monday night, when the next shift came on. And he wasn’t alone either. They found two bodies snagged on some piping a couple hundred yards from where the crews had been working. Both male. That one of them was Macon we could only tell by his clothes: he was wearing his work coveralls and hip-waders over the outfit he had on at the bar. The other body fortunately had identification papers in a money belt about his waist, otherwise we wouldn’t have had a clue who he was.”

“Why’s that?”

“It was pretty grim, Kirby,” Toller shook his head. His face seemed to go pale at the recollection, “and I’ve been in homicide for a while now. If you don’t want to see the photos I’ll understand.”

I wanted to say no. I should have said no. But I like to pretend forensics prepared me for everything. “Don’t be a sissy, Toller,” I said and held out my hand.

He drew a manilla envelope from his a leather satchel and passed it over to me. Inside I found

a series of crime scene photographs, the same kind I used to take; so, I didn’t have to pull them out all the way to get the idea. All I can say is I’m glad the waitress is as slow with the food as she is homely. I wouldn’t have wanted to try eating eggs after that.

“As you can see,” Toller went on, as I sat there dumbfounded, “the rats got to them long before we did. Faces, hands, most of the front part of each torso, all chewed away.”

“They were eaten alive?” I asked, horrified, perhaps a bit too loudly. A bunch of heads turned and looked shocked at us.

“No, shhh,” Toller started speaking more quietly. “Nothing like that. Each had suffered a severe head trauma from a large blunt object. Judging by the markings on the back of Macon’s neck, it was a plumber’s monkey wrench. From all indications they were killed first then laid out somewhere so the rats could...” he let that sentence trail off. “Then they were rolled into the sewer water. Our murderer is definitely human, but like the mysterious stranger the city crew had seen before, he’s left no clues as to who he is or why he did this. The press caught wind of the workers’ stories and so they’re calling him the Phantom Plumber too.”

“And that’s where I come in?”

“We’re getting a lot of heat from on high to clear this up quickly but if there was a bum lurking around down there, he’s long gone now. And frankly, we’re running out of leads. I’m hoping you might find something in your photos that we can’t.”

Funny thing about Toller: he doesn’t believe in ghosts, but he does believe in results—and truth and justice and all that. And me and my camera have helped him achieve all three on a few occasions. So while he’ll call me in now and then, he tries not to think too hard about what it is that I *do*, if you know what I mean. I think it would shake him up too much. So yeah, we’ll go down to a murder scene and I’ll take some pictures, and when the film’s developed there’ll be these fuzzy impressions of the victim waving, or pointing to some key bit of evidence, or just mugging for the camera—I don’t know if



KIRBY, SUPERNATURAL PHOTOGRAPHER

you knew this but ghosts *really* like to get their pictures taken—and he'll look at all these things and nod sagely but never acknowledge the philosophical ramifications of what he's seeing. I admire that about him. A rational man in an irrational universe.

As for me and the subject of ghosts, I'm of the same mind as Coleridge: that is, I've seen too many uncanny things to believe in such superstitious nonsense.

...What?

I *can* read.

Anyway, back to the case at hand.

"Toller, you know better than this," I said. "Ghosts don't kill. They can't."

"I know that. That's not why I need you. I have a funny feeling that the two people who were murdered were not the people we think they were. Somebody went to a lot of trouble to make those corpses unidentifiable, and if you go to that much trouble, you don't overlook a money belt. You see what I mean?"

I saw what he meant. "So you want a picture of the deceaseds' ghosts to confirm or deny your suspicions?" I said.

"Exactly. And since it'll mean traipsing around in the sewers, I can go up to forty-five bucks this time."

"Sold! So who was the other guy?"

"Hunh?"

"On the identity papers. Who was the other guy?"

"Well, that's the really queer bit. And that's why I'm getting so much heat from up top. It was the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Nova Zembla."

Okay, I was showing off with the Coleridge quote. No sense in pretending like I'm some great scholar. And that's especially the case where geography's concerned. Like every good born-and-bred New Yorker, my knowledge of the subject extends to the edge of the five boroughs, and beyond that there be monsters as far as I'm concerned. So, understand that I'm getting all this from Toller:

Apparently, Nova Zembla is a little island nation of a couple hundred thousand people in the sea south-east of Finland and west of Russia. Politically, it's a monarchy that managed to stay neutral during the war, and presently

there are various opposition forces within it that are trying to bring the monarchy down. Normally, no one would give a fig about such a tiny little island, but its got a lot of oil and where there's oil there's scratch, as any Texas cowboy'll tell you. Not surprisingly then there's this big power struggle in Northern Europe over who'll control the little country. Toller says it comes down to the Russians against the Finns and things are very tense between them; each is sponsoring their own revolutionary force in the Zemblan capital. Seeing as this standoff could be settled in the next few months, you can see how a dead Zemblan ambassador in a New York sewer could be a bad thing.

No? Neither could I, but Toller says it's bad so I'm going to have to listen him.

Of course, some would argue that listening to Toller is the root of all my troubles and something I should be getting out of the habit of doing, because not eight hours after our lunch date there I am in a labyrinth of stone tunnels sixty feet underneath the biggest city in America, disconcertingly close to a reeking river of its liquid waste. But, as our guide, one Marco Dinelli, assured us, the New York sewer "is-a da number one, super-toppa, mosta clean-a, big-a moderno sewer in-a da whole-a da world. See-a dis here-a sewage here? Dis-a is-a no-a problemo, is-a over ninety percento clean-a water."

Needless to say, despite this I felt decidedly unassured, and looking back on this experience, I have a few things to say regarding Mr Dinelli and his assesment of New York's sewage:

First, I never want to have to smell the *second* cleanest sewer in the world.

Second, I think the percentage Marco quoted was a bit off. I say this because it was pretty clear to me that the most plentiful thing down there was not water, but rather, *rats*. Giant, black, could-corner-a-doberman-if-they-wanted-to *rats!*

Third, and finally, that had to be one of the worst Italian accents I've ever heard. It owed more to Chico Marx than it did to Rome and the fact that Marco Dinelli was about as Italian as Herbert Hoover I'd figured out by the time we'd climbed down into the sewer. It didn't help his deception any that the whole way down the ladder—all sixty feet of it, that is, which adds up to 117 rungs (I counted)—he just couldn't

shut his mouth and with every single word my suspicions only grew stronger. He told us how he'd only been working at the Department of Sewage and Waste Management for a couple of months, and as foreman in charge of Macon's crew "those-a young-a men of-a Unit 92" had already become "like-a de sons to him"; that he liked to call them his "little meatballs"; how he thought that Macon "should be made a saint, a Santus Carlus"; and how he hoped we'd catch the "filthy cock-a-roach-a dat-a did-a dis-a terrible ting to my-a boy."

No joke.

I guess he must have figured that Detective Toller, of the "Conneticut Tollers" and his "mick" photographer Kirby wouldn't catch on. Toller clearly hadn't... his family is from Conneticut, after all. I, however, was raised in Brooklyn, right on the border between an Irish neighborhood and an Italian one, and so I knew that no Italian sane enough to know pasta from pinocle referred to *anyone* as a "meatball."

Seeing that we were a couple of city blocks *beneath* the nearest city block with only this shady character as a guide, and seeing as this shady character had our best source of light in the shape of a lantern-sized, battery-powered lamp, I decided to stay close with my suspicions until I was sure about him. And so I was keeping a close eye on him as we marched through that evil-smelling maze of subterranean tunnels.

But seeing as most people never get the pleasure of visiting the sewer system of a major city, allow me to paint the picture for you: The pipe we were in was a channel where storm water from the level above us mixed with raw sewage before being flushed through to a treatment center and from there out into open water. Consequently, it was a large tunnel, being over thirty feet wide in most places. The walls of the sewer were made of brown brick-work growing black and slimy over time; in places the surrounding earth and stone showed through where bricks had given way or been actively scratched free by the giant rats I was telling you about earlier. Even though we came equipped with hip waders and leather coveralls, we were able to avoid actually walking through the sewage itself by travelling single-file—Marco in front, then me, then Toller coming up the rear—along stone ledges that ran along each side of the tunnel. They were narrow

and crumbling in many places, but as long as you kept yourself bent to match the curve of the wall you could move pretty easily down there.

The area we were in wasn't visited by sewer inspectors often enough to warrant permanent lighting, and the string of electric bulbs that had been set up by the police when the bodies were uncovered had been taken down a couple of days earlier. For light, we had to rely on the broad yellow beam from Marco's lantern and the little headlamps we had attached to our helmets. They were city-issue and guaranteed to last for over half an hour (and we each carried two spare batteries) but the cumulative light we gave off was still so thin and wan it seemed like it had been scared into submission by the darkness: our frightened-puppy electric torches versus the black-mastiff emptiness of the sewer. Needless to say, my mood was not cheery down there and it didn't help matters any that we were trudging through all this gloom to find a murder scene where I planned to photograph the ghosts of the dearly departed.

Marco seemed winded from the climb down, or maybe he was just tired of putting on his act, either way he quieted down finally. I didn't mind; the silence gave me a chance to get my camera out and ready. I already had a roll of film loaded and a spare in my satchel, and as we trudged in silence through the twisting tunnel work, I screwed a flashbulb into the reflector. For a while we worked our way steadily up an incline against the flow of the water. The only sounds down there were our footfalls, the eerie lapping of black water against the stones, and the chittering and scratching of the rats that ruled this netherworld.

We walked all of a hundred yards like that before I couldn't take it anymore and tried to liven things up by discussing my favorite topic: baseball.

"Hey Toller," I started, "You haven't asked me why I was out celebrating last night?"

"You need a reason?"

"Yeah, the Yankees game. You must've read about it in the papers. Big win yesterday."

"It was hard to miss."

"See that picture in the front of the sports section of the Times? That's my byline under that pic. They bought it from the Daily Pages. Copies of that photo are going out to papers all over the country. My editor's hopeful it might

even make the year-end Life Magazine. Hey Marco,” I called out to our guide. “You must be pretty broken up about that game though, eh?”

“I-a sorry Mr Kirby, I no-a big base-a-ball-a fan, see?”

“Oh, come on. It was big news. Your man Lazzeri taking one on the noggin in the first inning. Knocked cold. Made a good photo for me, but sad news for Tony. Hear he might not play the rest of the season. Massimo is supposed to be collecting cards and flowers down at Vito’s Deli.” Okay, so I wasn’t just gabbing about baseball, I was testing his knowledge of the neighborhood. Bad idea? Maybe.

“Oh-a, yes. Very sad-a news about Lazzeri. He’s a good-a boy, our Tony. We very proud.”

Toller stopped. “Wait a second,” he said, “what are you two talking about? Lazzeri didn’t get hit by a baseball, he scored an in-the-park homer in the ninth to win the game. You should know that.”

Let me tell you something about Toller: he’s a smart guy. Went to college and all that. Could’ve been a lawyer but became a cop instead because... well, I don’t know why. I should ask him sometime. Anyway, he’s smart, but lacking in the street smarts department and sometimes he doesn’t know when to keep his yap shut.

This was such a case and I turned around and tried to give the good detective the “ixnay on the alkingtay” sign, but he wasn’t following me.

“Like-a I-a was-a speaking, Detective. I no-a follow de base-a-ball.”

Even in this light I could tell Marco was nervous.

I tried to interrupt and keep things from going any further but Toller just kept talking.

“But everybody knows about Lazzeri’s homer. The Italian American Gazette put the story on their front page—in *Italian*. People were celebrating in the streets outside Dino’s Café on 23rd. Mayor LaGuardia is said to have phoned and personally congratulated him.”

Yes, Toller, every Italian and almost every New Yorker from here to the Vatican knew about Tony Lazzeri’s in-the-park homer except for Marco “the Meatball” Dinnelli. And of course that could only mean one thing, which is... well you finish it for me:

“The only way you couldn’t know that is if you weren’t Italian.”

There, Toller’d said it. In hindsight, I don’t even know if he really meant it; but that doubt that would have mattered to Marco.

Fortunately I was watching him pretty closely, so when he turned around brandishing a long, heavy monkey-wrench that he’d pulled from his coveralls, I wasn’t completely caught off guard. He swung the red-metal tool directly towards my head. And, weaponless, I leaped backward, barely avoiding the blow. Then, knowing I had only one trick I could use against him, and knowing I had to make it count, I quickly aimed my camera at his face and pressed down on the plunger.

The bulb went off and in the pitch of the sewers, the bright strobe from my flashgun temporarily blinded Marco. His second swing went wide and I bent my head and drove my helmet into his chest. He slammed against the wall hard, dropping his lamp which rolled into the sewage. It was followed shortly by his headlamp which fell backward, clattered on the stonework and then, splosh, was gone. Both lights were quickly extinguished in the water.

At first, in the dim light, Toller wasn’t sure what was happening, but once he realized my peril, he reached for his service revolver. It took him a moment to extricate it from the layers of protective clothing he was wearing, and by the time he’d gotten it free I’d just discovered that whoever this Marco Dinelli actually was, he was undeniably the strongest civil servant I’d ever encountered. Though I’d winded him and had him pressed against the brickwork with all my strength, he managed to throw me off and hurl me from the tiny ledge and into the putrid flow. Fortunately, it wasn’t deep; I managed to land feet first and keep my camera above water.

I struggled against the current and tried to get back to the ledge, but I watched helplessly in the faint glow from Toller’s headlamp, our last source of light, as Marco turned on him. The detective aimed his revolver carefully and shouted, “Freeze.” But Marco played one last desperate gambit: he flung his wrench at Toller.

There was a blinding flash as the revolver went off.

The last thing I saw was Marco toppling backward, blood shooting from a wound in his forehead, and the wrench he’d thrown glancing harmlessly off Toller’s helmet.

No, the wrench did not injure the detective, but it did knock his helmet loose and it, along with the headlamp, rolled into the sewer. I tried to rush after it and catch it up, but in a second the water had penetrated the battery's paper housing, its light went dead, and we were left in total darkness.

"You couldn't have waited until we got out of the sewers before you called him a liar," I said to Toller.

"I didn't think he'd get so offended," he replied.

Something bumped into me and I started. I reached over and felt the lifeless corpse of Marco Dinelli bobbing in the water. I stepped aside and let it float past.

Getting out of the sewer wasn't quite as difficult as you might think.

Don't get me wrong, it wasn't fun, but it wasn't impossible either.

We knew the direction we'd come from, and seeing as the tunnel stretched in a straight line without any others connecting up with it, all I had to do was follow Toller's voice, climb back onto the ledge, and then we just had to retrace our steps back to the ladder.

Of course, we had to crawl the whole way back because we were enveloped by complete darkness. It was like somebody had come down there with one of those vacuum cleaning machines and sucked up all the light, drove it up-state, opened the catch-bag and released all the brightness someplace nice.

Yeah, that's it.

The worst thing though was that without our lamps around, the rats started getting bold. We could hear their claws skittering on the stonework, their shrill rodent voices squeaking at one another. At times, we could even feel them scrambling up around our hands and knees, sometimes getting so daring as to sniff at a finger or nip at our coveralls.

To scare them off, and also just to give ourselves a split-second view of where we were, I would load a flashbulb into my camera and take a picture every few dozen feet. Really, it didn't show us anything of our surroundings and only left us for a few minutes with annoying yellow splotches on our vision, but it did seem to keep the vermin at bay. And though I'd only brought

a dozen bulbs down with me, that was fortunately enough to get us back to the ladder without the rats ever getting brave enough to do to us what they'd done to Macon and the Ambassador.

And that was that, or so I thought.

Both Toller and I had to make official statements down at headquarters. But once that was done and while a crew of police officers were hauling Marco's body out of the sewer, I went back to my apartment to wash up and to develop my photographs.

As I stood in my bathroom—which I can convert into a darkroom when the need arises—watching blurry images appear in the photopaper, I knew that Toller would find them very interesting.

I found him about an hour later down at the city morgue. Since I used to work forensics, most everybody down there knows me, so they still let me in the back rooms. He was in an autopsy room with the city coroner, Arthur York, who was leaning over Marco's body and searching for identifying marks. He looked up from the corpse as I entered. "Hey Thumbs," he said.

Everybody down at the morgue calls me "Thumbs." It's a long story.

"Hey Artie," I said back.

"You got something, Kirby?" Toller asked. He looked worn out, but he still smiled to see me.

"Big time," I replied. "The photos from our vacation were very interesting." I pulled out a manilla envelope from my satchel and handed it to him. He opened it and removed the stack of pictures.

He stared down at the first one, his face stern, concentrated. "What am I looking at?" he asked.

"That's the shot I took of Marco when he was swinging the wrench at me. See those guys in the background?"

Toller tilted the picture under the light, brought it up to his eyes, and examined it at a close angle. "Missing teeth. Straggly hair. Beards. Dirty, worn out clothing. Looks like a couple of winos to me."

"Exactly. You mentioned we were really close to where the bodies had been found when Marco attacked us, so those have to be the ghosts of the corpses. The *real* corpses."

"You certain?"

"We were the only three people down there. I think I would have noticed a couple winos at that point."

"They're not Macon and the Ambassador, that's for sure."

"No. Just a couple of old hobos, and their bodies were dressed up to look like our missing persons—just like you figured it." I pointed at the spectral images. "Look at how angry they both are, though. They're grabbing at Marco, trying to rip his hair and eyes out. They want revenge but can't do anything because they're already dead. It's sad, really."

Toller chose not to dwell on these thoughts and flipped to the next photo.

"Anything else here?" he asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "Only its something I've never seen before. These are the shots I took as we were crawling out of the sewer. See anything interesting in them?"

"I only see sewer... and rats."

"But look at *these* rats," I said, grabbing a couple pictures and indicating specific rodents with my finger. "These aren't just normal sewer rats. See how they're all white and glowing?"

Toller just stared at me, nonplussed.

"Ghost rats!" I said, finally. "Can you imagine? I didn't even know such things existed."

By this point, Artie had taken an interest in what we were saying. He came over, leaned in and looked at the photos.

"Hate to break it to you, Thumbs, but those aren't ghost rats."

"Then what are they?"

"Albino rats. *Laboratory* rats."

"What?" I asked, stunned.

"Scientists breed them for use in experiments. They're a bit smaller than your average sewer rat, but they're the same species. *Rattus Norvegicus*. Somebody must have set them loose down there. I must say, though, I'm surprised they weren't cannibalized by their troglodytic cousins."

I started to ask what the big t-word meant when Toller interrupted. "But why would somebody do that? Release lab rats into the sewer?"

"You shouldn't be asking me that," replied the coroner. "You should be asking *him*," he pointed at Marco's body.

There was a moment of silence, which I finally broke: "So what's next, Toller? Back into the sewers?" I didn't relish the thought of go-

ing down there again, but there were just too many unanswered questions to let things lie.

"Nothing," he replied. "Nothing happens next." "What?"

"To avoid an international incident with the Zemblan government—not to mention the Russian and Finnish ones—the police commissioner has decided this case has to be closed. And so, it has been. Officially, Marco Dinelli will be written up as a homicidal maniac who worked in the Department of Sewers. His connection to the Ambassador will be considered coincidental."

"But that's nonsense, Toller," I protested. "What happens when the Ambassador and Macon show up again? What about the international incident then?"

"The commissioner doesn't care. Officially he doesn't believe my theory. And unofficially, he figures the Ambassador enlisted Macon and Dinelli to help him flee his government. The reasons for this, he doesn't want to explore." Toller shrugged. He looked more tired at that moment than I had ever seen him. "So that's it, Kirby. Case closed. Go home and get some rest."

Believe it or not, that's what I did. I was too tired to protest any longer.

And I'm afraid that officially brings me to the end of the *Case of the Phantom Plumber*—though I never did find out what the Phantom Plumber was. It was a case with more questions at the end of it than at the beginning, and were it not for the fact that I had cause to open up this file at a later date, none of those questions would ever have been answered.

But that is another story... ☹

WHAT DO YOU THINK HAPPENS NEXT?

Who was Marco Dinelli, really? Why were there lab rats in the sewers? What happened to the Zemblan Ambassador and Carl Macon? The author hasn't got a clue. *Maybe you do!*

Send your answers to **Jack Draper** c/o **printedpoison@yahoo.com**. The most creative responses will form the basis of the next *Kirby: Supernatural Photographer* story and receive a co-author credit along with renowned hack Jack Draper!



ENDNOTES

Just have a few last things to clear up:

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