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Printed
POISON

JULY 1933

Part 2 of the OCCULT THRILLER
"the DEMON-HAUNTED CITY"
by Henry Ponopscotch



also in this issue, fiction by Brian Cain
Richard K Lyon and Andrew Offut
and a new KIRBY ADVENTURE by
Jack Draper and Ron Fortier!

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

Printed Poison is a bi-monthly (struggling to be monthly), pulp-inspired webzine. We are seeking fiction and art submissions.

Our guidelines are as follows:

FICTION

- We are looking for pulp-inspired, two-fisted fiction. Mystery, adventure, horror, science fiction, and western are all welcome.
- 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!
- Violence and sex in your story is fine. But try to keep it to the level you'd get in old radio dramas – the Shadow, Sam Spade, X Minus 1, and the like.
- If the term “pulp” is new to you, check out the article “Pulp Paper Master Fiction Plot” by Lester Dent in issue 1 of *Printed Poison*. The stories we accept do not have to conform to this master plot, but it captures some of the soul of what we're after.
- Writing quality should be good but we're not expecting works of genius. We want pulp-inspired stuff, so we're shooting for Dent, not frickin' Joyce.
- Word count: 1,000 – 10,000 words, but we can accommodate longer and smaller pieces.
- **Please spell-check your work!**
- 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
Art Director }

Contributing editor Jack Draper

Publisher Martin Scribbler

CORRESPONDENCE

Please direct all *Printed Poison* correspondence to:

printedpoison@yahoo.com

Printed POISON

Volume 1, Issue 2



July 2003

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THIS ISSUE'S AUTHORS IN 25 WORDS OR LESS:

BRIAN CAIN is 27 and has been writing since his teens. His work as a print and broadcast journalist in the San Francisco Bay Area provides inspiration for his stories.

PROFESSOR DEADMOOR hopes that by revealing the secrets behind great stage illusions others will learn how to use magic to entertain, astonish, horrify and disgust.

JACK DRAPER is an author, pilot, professional boxer, and adventurer. He splits his time between his homes in Toronto and Tangiers.

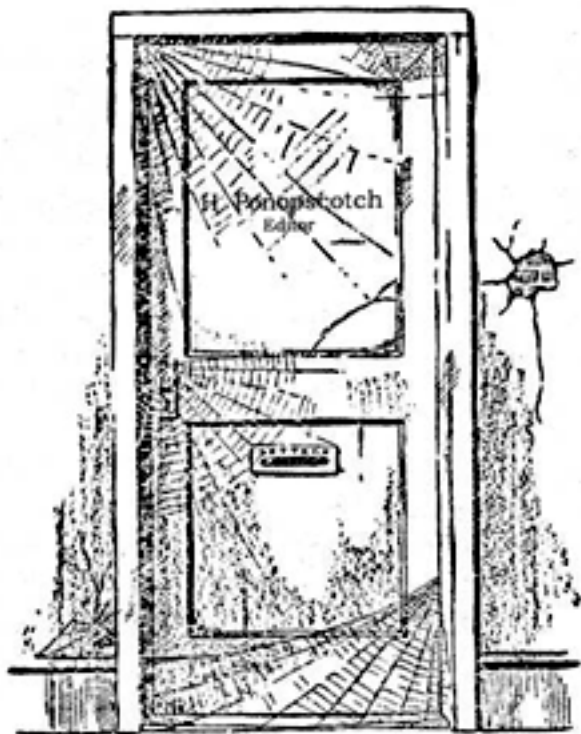
RON FORTIER is a comic-book, sci-fi writer with a love for the old pulps. He is best known for his *Green Hornet* adventures at *Now Comics*.

RICHARD K LYON is a scientist by training, a writer by hobby, and had a great time working with Andy committing this and other stories.

ANDREW OFFUTT is a professional writer, twice president of SFWA, and a great lover of mischief.

HENRY PONOPSCOTCH is the editor of *Printed Poison* magazine. He resides in New York City circa 1933.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK...



Last issue we said that we'd only put out another *Printed Poison* if some of you sent us fiction to print in it. We called it "write-ware," and seeing as you're reading our second issue, it must be working.

In addition to our usual crew of penny-a-liners (that's myself and Jack Draper – you can blame him for the lateness of this issue), we also have a few new hacks ponying up some of their own purple prose.

First up, we're honored to announce that the winning (and indeed only) respondent to our "What do you think happens next?" blurb is none other than renowned pulpateer Ron Fortier. As such, he gets a co-author credit on the new Kirby story.

In fine Edgar Rice Burroughs fashion, we have some barbarian fantasy from the mighty Richard K Lyon and Andrew Offutt. In addition, we have a little sci-fi piece that's also penned by Mr Lyon (or is it...?)

And just when we thought that'd be all, the prolific Brian Cain dropped a grim tale of hardboiled vengeance on our desk.

Not a bad turnout. Not bad at all. Remember, if you like what you read here and want to see an issue 3, write us something: either some pulp we can publish or an email to say "Hey there, mack."

Thanks for reading.

Henry Ponopscotch
Editor-at-large

LETTER OF THE MONTH

"Give this a dust. I think you'll like it." Sally said as she dropped the stack of papers on my desk.

"Printed Poison" the top sheet said. It looked like a stack of pages from an old penny dreadful. I leafed through to get a quick slant on it. "The Demon-Haunted City" was the first thing to catch my eye. Well, after the palooka lookin' to get his bean boiled on the cover, that is. A pretty good yarn, I'll give it that, tooled by some moe named...Hopscotch...or something like that. Problem was, there wasn't an ending. "Continued" it said, just like the print of a weekly Republic serial.

So I skipped over to "The Phantom Plumber". Of course I had to read that one, too. A moniker like that really catches your eye, which is exactly what it intended to do. Same thing here - no ending - the jack who wrote it was even taking shots on where the story should go next. Nice touch.

Naturally, since they had me hooked at this point, I had to get the next issue.

That's when I realized Sally played me like a bunny. She knew I wouldn't dust the fine-print first and see the Chinese angle the editor has

pitched. "Write-ware" is what he called it. I read it. I liked it. Now I was obligated to send him a letter, or write 'em a pulp, to say so. If I don't, the whole thing may just be a trip for biscuits. "I think that's fair", the editorial said. I got no kick with that, but I know Sally wants to find out what happens next as much as I do and I also know she won't do anything about it. She grifted it off on me, knowin' I'd be the weak sister and couldn't nix on writing 'em a letter.

The bim'll buzz me later, 'though. If for no other cause than to try and sneeze my copy of the next "Printed Poison", then scam out on her getaway sticks.

But I'll be ready for the jane next time. I'll print two copies, and cheese one away where she won't find it.

- Scott Moore

Thanks Scott. And give Sally a kiss for us, will ya? She's the tops.

And thanks to everybody else who sent us letters. There'd be no issue 2 without you.

The Demon Haunted City

by Henry
Ponopscotch

Dark forces are gathering in New York. Tragedy has already struck. Can the city's five greatest magicians thwart an even greater catastrophe?

CHAPTER TWO: THE MAGICIAN'S GUILD

Backstage at the Emperor's Own theatre there is a little elevator in an iron cage. When it goes up, it disappears among the catwalks, ropes and rafters and if you didn't know better you'd assume it led to a booth that controlled electrical systems or stage effects or something technical like that. In fact, it led nowhere of the sort. Instead it stopped at a landing just outside a metal door that was almost always locked; the mechanism was elaborate and could only be opened by an equally elaborate key. Behind it lay one of the secrets of the Emperor's Own: up here above the stage and the auditorium seats, above the racks of lights and concealed apparatus used in the creation of special effects, there lay an entire floor of richly appointed apartments. It was here that Professor Deadmoor made his home. He owned the entire theatre and that was why he only ever performed here, even though the largest and most famous stages on Broadway would welcome him eagerly. He had built the Emperor's Own himself and had it designed specially for his purposes.

Printed Poison



Tonight, less than two hours after he had heard a distant explosion from the stage door, he was joined in his library by four others. They were, like him, renowned practitioners of the conjuring arts, and each of them wore an expression of profound grief.

Seated in a leather armchair there was the mentalist, Swami Jim, whose skill as a mind reader had made him a star in New York, his adopted home. His real name was Rahul Khan and he had left Bombay, India when only a child. On stage, he always wore an embroidered cloak of Persian design over a tuxedo and atop his head he wore his trademark: a turban of fine silk. Tonight, though, he wore rumpled casual wear as he had been awakened by tragic news and summoned here.

Next to him, on one end of a settee that sat under a window built into the arching wall of the library, there was a muscular man with unruly brown hair. Though he was very probably the youngest in the room, deep lines had worn their way into his skin and his particularly grim visage made him appear much older than he was. At one time, his name had ap-

peared on posters and marquees as Jack Grey, the Man Who Cheats Death, for he had been an escape artist of enormous talent. In his day, he was called the rival of Houdini, and to anyone lucky enough to have seen both these men perform there was little doubt: Jack Grey was the more skilled. But what he lacked was a flair for self-promotion and today few remember him. Eventually, he had tired of performing and traded in his career on the stage for one in the church. Now, instead of a tuxedo, he wore the black suit and white collar of a priest and went by the name of Father John Sheppard.

On the other end of the settee sat an old woman in a tight, scarlet dress. Though she was very thin and appeared to be in her seventies, there was nothing frail about her; her eyes shone with the strength of a woman in her twenties. Professionally, she was known as Mama Quixo but those who knew her well called her Rose. She was a fortune teller and medium who had for as long as anyone could remember operated out of the same weather-beaten shop-front in a hidden corner of Manhattan. Among those prone to believe wild rumors and urban apocrypha, it was whispered that she had been working in that spot since the days when New York first became a city. Though her reputation was mysterious, there were a few among the rich and powerful who sought out her advice and it was said that even the current mayor had availed himself of her wisdom.

The final member of this group stood by a bookcase smoking a Gitanes while in an ash-tray on the shelf next to his elbow there burned another cigarette, half-smoked, forgotten. His name was Randall Diamond, the Amazing Hypnos. He wore an immaculate white tuxedo as he had been summoned here directly from Club Hex, a nightclub which he both owned and performed at. On Thursday and Saturday evenings, the Amazing Hypnos amazed and amused with his skill as a mesmerist; but on Fridays and Sundays, Randall Diamond sang jazz standards with the Winston Tricks Orchestra. Tonight, a Friday, the suave crooner was nowhere in evidence. He picked at a stray flake of tobacco on his tongue then spoke. "What do we do now?" he asked, addressing no one in particular, "I mean, has this ever even happened before?"

"Doctor Dragon," Mama Quixo said calmly, "December 31st, 1899."

"That was before any of us joined the Guild... 'cept you Rose," said Jack Grey.

"I will not accept this," said Swami Jim. "He taught me to cheat at cards. A man of such

skill does not get slaughtered by street thugs. It is unthinkable."

"Thinkable or no," said the Professor, who leaned against a broad oak desk in the centre of the room. "I saw the body myself. I wish it were otherwise, but Manhattan Max is... erm... dead."

After hearing the explosion, Professor Deadmoor snuck away from his fans as quickly as he could, then with Gertrude, he had taken off in his car to investigate. After searching for some time, they found the site of the gun battle five blocks from the theatre. It was just within a grimy alleyway, and as they pulled up, they found they were not the only ones drawn here. Though it was a desolate neighborhood, its few denizens used to the sounds of foul play and night-time commotions, this conflagration had shocked all the nearby residents from their sleep: women in slippers and overcoats thrown over nightgowns, men who nervously smoked cigarettes and craned their necks to get a better view. Two beat cops had cordoned off the scene of the crime and were struggling to maintain calm until reinforcements, detectives and medical examiners could arrive.

Professor Deadmoor worked his way through the crowd but as he got near the entrance of the alley, a rough hand from one of the police officers held him back. This effort was unnecessary for at that moment his legs would not have propelled any further even if he had wanted them to.

He saw limp bodies—nine in total—hanging from the balconies of fire escapes that zigzagged up the sides of the buildings on either side, blood drooled down from them and pooled on the pavement below. Everywhere was blackened and scorched; charred garbage and debris had been blasted into every corner; but, just outside the radius of where the explosion had occurred, there lay a single body. It was still, lifeless, and the shabby brown suit it wore was streaked with blood.

Manhattan Max.

The Professor tried to push forward, but the officer wouldn't let him proceed. He was a rookie, the Professor could tell—so young he couldn't have been on the beat for more than a few months, and he was clearly horrified by what he'd seen. But still, he knew his duty and that was to keep the crime scene uncontaminated. Professor Deadmoor would not be allowed to pass yet, not until after the detectives had been there. So, he had returned to the Emperor's Own and summoned his own rein-

forcements: the remaining members of the Magician's Guild.

"What about the card, Ben?" asked Jack Grey.

"To be frank, I'm presently baffled," replied Professor Deadmoor. Only these four people used his real name, Benoit; and with the passing of Manhattan Max, only Jack and Mama Quixo knew anything of the secret he hid behind the pseudonym of Deadmoor. "Rose? Any ideas?"

"Ace of hearts? Depends who your mark is. True love. Family. Heart trouble. A vacation in the future. Can mean any of a thousand things. I think it's a dead-end, Ben. Max wouldn't have been thinking like that."

"So we don't know anything then," said Randall Diamond.

"No. Not at present," said the Professor.

"Then what do we do?" asked Rahul.

"Ben," said Mama Quixo, "it's your call, kiddo."

The Professor said nothing for a long time, he merely stared at the floor wrapped in his thoughts. Then he nodded and said: "Rose, go to the crime scene, see if you can get a sense off the place. Randall, you go with her. She needs to get in close, so the Amazing Hypnos will have to get her past the police tape."

Randall Diamond and Mama Quixo nodded.

"Rahul," the Professor continued, "if the bodies aren't already in the morgue, they'll be on the way. Go down there and see what you can find out."

"Always happy to visit my good friend, Coroner York," said Swami Jim.

"And Jack, you and I will go to Max's place...."

"I can move faster on my own," said Jack Grey.

"I do not doubt that," said the Professor. "But Max left the card with me. From that, I must assume that whatever it leads us to, it'll be a clue only I can understand it."

"Fair enough," replied Jack.

The five remaining members of the Magician's Guild rose, headed out of the library and down the hall towards the little elevator. As they walked, Randall Diamond spoke up: "One last thing's bugging me. If that card wasn't in your pocket when you went out on stage, how'd Max get it there?"

"I haven't the faintest idea except that it was a masterful bit of sleight of hand," said Professor Deadmoor. "He was the greatest card sharp who ever lived. I doubt we will ever see his like again."

Some time later, in a rundown neighborhood near Coney Island, an old wino entered a ramshackle rooming house. He walked past the manager, who was asleep and snoring in his cage, and staggered as he started up the stairs. By the third step, he'd grabbed onto the handrail, and clung to it as he slowly climbed seven flights to come out on the top floor of the building.

Up here, but one wall-lamp still worked. It was just outside the stairwell, and cast only a dim and flickering halo. Thus, the wino walked his zig-zag path down the hall from a little area of wan, yellow light and into a long, ominous stretch of darkness.

He reached the end of the hall and slumped against the last door, stood up, reached into a pocket, stumbled back a step as he drew from it a single key, then stumbled back again, his hands grabbing a hold of the doorknob. Into the keyhole beneath it, he slid the key he held.

But this was no ordinary key.

It looked more like a long, delicate puzzle made of twisted filaments of brass and when he turned it, a subtle click came from a well-oiled lock. He slid it back out, and with fingers more dexterous than any drunkard should have, he shuffled and rotated the moving pieces of the key, thus scrambling their positions.

He turned the knob. The door opened, and he slumped into the room. But once the door closed behind him, he stood up straight and shed his appearance of inebriation.

The little room was much brighter than the hallway. There was a three-quarter moon outside and its grey light streamed in through the window. The man walked over to a desk, and reached towards a reading lamp upon it. But before he could pull the chain, from the shadows next to it, another hand sprang out and grabbed his wrist.

"Turn on that light and we're both dead," a voice whispered from the gloom.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," said the man in the wino disguise.

"I beat you here by a full seven minutes, Professor" said Jack Grey as he rose up from the shadows.

"That's all? I took my time getting here," said Professor Deadmoor, his voice incongruous from this mass of greasy, tangled hair and dirty, ill-fitting clothes. "So are we really in danger, or was that just your flair for the dramatic?"

"Real danger," said Jack Grey. "On the roof there are two thuggish mugs with tommy guns. Two more on the building south of us, and two on the one to the north. And..." he crouched

down, made his way to the window, and, being careful not to let himself show in it, he pointed east, out across the street. "...on top of that building there, there are three lookouts. One of them with a sniper rifle."

When he turned back around, gone was the wino who'd entered this room. The unruly beard; the over-large, pockmarked nose; the overalls and layers of jackets, all were gone. In their place stood Professor Deadmoor in a trim, pin-striped suit, his hair precisely combed.

"I wish you wouldn't do *that*," said Jack Grey.

"What's that?" the Professor whispered back as he bent down and joined Jack by the window.

"That quick-change thing. Gives me the heebie-jeebies."

"You should be used to it by now." He surveyed the other building. "They must know this was Max's neighborhood, but aren't certain which room is his. They aren't the police then, I presume?"

Jack sniggered derisively. "Fat chance the cops could get this close to Max's hideout. Whoever these guys are, they're good."

"You know what I'm thinking?"

"That they're after something Max had?"

The Professor nodded. "Or...?" he said.

"Or they're waiting for one of us to show up here and this is an ambush?"

"Or...?"

"Or both."

"Yes. Exactly. I don't like this at all."

"Great, we're in agreement," said Jack Grey.

"So, what do you suggest we do now?"

"Well, we could wait til dawn and search the room when the light's coming in and turns the glass opaque from the outside. Or we could blunder about in the dark now and risk being spotted."

"Time's a wasting. I'm up for the blundering."

"Good," said Professor Deadmoor, and the two men shuffled away and started to quietly search the room, all the time being careful not to let their silhouettes appear in the window.

After a few minutes of searching, Jack was standing before a framed show poster. "Here, what's this?" he said. Across the top it read: "The Marvellous Manhattan Max: Master of Many Magics!" And down the side was typed: "With cards, coins, balls and rings, Manhattan Max is the undisputed Master of Close-up Magic. Amazes even skeptics. Delights children. August 17th, 1920. The Mermaid Theatre. Also appearing: Mister Ash the Fire-Eater and the comic antics of Pongo and Zoot. One night only. Doors at 4pm." In the center of the poster there

was an etching of Max—it was a pretty good likeness in fact—depicting him holding up a fan of cards, the foremost of them was the Ace of Hearts.

"I think I've found it," Jack said, and slid the frame to the side, revealing a small metal safe set into the wall. "Excellent. A safe. I love opening safes." With genuine glee, he reached for the dial.

"Wait," said Professor Deadmoor. "Don't touch that."

Jack's hand stopped. He let the picture slide back into place.

"He wouldn't hide something like that. It's much too obvious. Let me see it." The Professor snuck across the room and examined the poster.

"This is all wrong. A fake. Max must have had it made up special."

"What do you mean?" asked Jack.

"The Mermaid Theatre show didn't happen on the 17th, it was the 12th. The doors opened at seven and on the original poster, Max was holding up a different spread of cards."

"How do you know all this?"

"I was Mister Ash."

"But Mister Ash still performs on Coney Island," Jack protested.

Professor Deadmoor nodded.

"Then you're—?"

He nodded again.

"That's impo— How many careers do you have, anyway?"

"A few." He looked closely at the illustration of Max's face. "Look at this: his eyes aren't looking straight. If you're getting a poster made, you always get your face drawn with the eyes staring right at the reader. His are down and to the right. What are you looking at Max?"

Professor Deadmoor turned around, and with his head level with the poster, he looked down and to the right across the room. He was staring into a corner at a carved molding: a block with a circle in the middle.

Both men dropped to the floor and crawled across the room, moved up close to the molding.

"Jack?" the Professor said, and Jack closed his eyes, reached out and touched the carved circle with fingers used to circumventing all manner of locks, shackles and prisons—fingers that understood the subtleties of mechanical devices.

"There's something here, alright. Feels like this disk rotates. Probably like a combination lock. But my guess is, Max built it himself because I've never felt anything like this before."

“He must have hid the combination in the poster,” Professor Deadmoor said, then thought for a moment. “Alright, let’s see. The first discrepancy was the date. The new poster says the 17th, but the real date was the 12th... so that’s five back. Try turning it five to the left.”

Jack shrugged, then gently turned the dial counter-clockwise—*click*. “That feels right,” he said, then continued rotating it—*click, click, click, click*.

“Okay,” said the Professor, “next was the time. The poster said the doors opened at four, but it was really seven, so that’s three more. Try three to the right.”

Jack turned the dial clockwise—*click, click*—and his practised hands could feel that the third turn was slightly heavier than the others—it was definitely a *clack*.

“Something fell into place there,” he said, “I think I can open whatever this is now.”

“Wait a moment. We’re missing something.”

“Can I try it?” Jack asked.

The Professor shook his head. “Wouldn’t advise it. Whatever Max has hidden here was important enough for somebody to kill him over. Moreover, it was something he was willing to kill to protect. Doubtless, this compartment is booby-trapped and will do something unpleasant to anyone who gets the combination wrong.”

“So what’s next then?”

“The last discrepancy was the spread of cards. All of them were the same in both posters, except the front card. Ace of Hearts in this poster. Ace of Spades in the real one.”

“What does that mean?”

“Okay, when you open a deck of cards, Spades are at the top, Hearts at the bottom.”

“So that’s a change of three suits. But do I turn it clockwise or counter-clockwise?”

“I don’t know,” said the Professor. He closed his eyes, pressed the heels of his palms into them, and tried to think like Manhattan Max.

It came to him.

“Max gambled,” he said. “Played blackjack all the time.”

“You mean he cheated at it all the time.”

“That’s immaterial. When a dealer fans a new deck out on the table, he lays it face up on his left, and spreads it to his right. That would put the spades on his right. Hearts on his left.” The Professor smiled. “Turn it three counter-clockwise.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

Jack Grey paused. Reached out and turned the dial—*click, click, clack*—clockwise.

“What are you doing?” said the Professor. “That was the wrong way!”

Jack tugged lightly at the molding. “Max was a gambler,” he said. “Sat on the other side of the table.” The square of wood swung open silently.

“Of course. Bravo. You slipped me aces.” said Professor Deadmoor, using a common bit of magician slang which meant: “You really saved my bacon there, thanks.”

Behind the molding, there was a little aperture in the wall which contained a leather-bound book. Jack examined the door and the little compartment before removing the volume. There was nothing else in there.

“You were right,” he said. “Looks like there’re copper leads strung through the hinge. Probably would’ve detonated explosives in the wall.” He handed the book to Professor Deadmoor. And at that moment, a pane of glass in the window shattered, plaster fell from the wall opposite it. A instant later, they heard the distant *Crack!* of a gun shot, and another pane splintered inward.

“How’d they spot us?” said Jack Grey as he pulled himself to cover against the outside wall. Both of these men had already searched every inch of the tiny apartment. They were two of the most skilled magicians in the world, experts in the design of apparatus that could be hidden and used in subterfuge and illusion. Had there been a concealed listening device, a spy hole, or any occult means of observing their activities, even in the dark, these men would have found it. And yet, neither had.

“Don’t know. There’s something uncanny about all of this,” the Professor said as he followed. “They must have known we were here all along. Waiting for us to find the book.”

Jack reached under his jacket and pulled two black automatic pistols from his shoulder holsters.

“May I have one of those?” said the Professor.

“Nothing doing,” said Jack. “You’re a worse shot than I am. Those goons are going to be coming down off the roof any second. I’ll lay down a covering fire in the hall, but you’re going to have to find a way back to the Emperor’s Own.”

Professor Deadmoor nodded, and slipped the book into a hidden pocket in his suit jacket. “You’ll be okay? There’s nine of them all tolled.”

“Please... I’ve escaped from far worse,” said Jack, as he smiled broadly.

The moment Jack Grey opened the door of Manhattan Max's room, a peel of tommy-gun fire shocked through the hall. He poked his head out and saw at the far end a little window that led out to a fire escape. On it, there was one of the thugs from the roof, taking cover under the sill and intent on killing whoever entered the hall.

Jack swung his right arm out and fired: once, Crack! and shattered the window, a shower of glass rained down on the sniper; twice, Crack! and hit the frame, splintering the wood and lodging it so that the whole pane fell and smacked against the nozzle of the tommy gun.

"Go!" he shouted as he stepped out into the hall and brought his other gun into play, alternating shots from left hand to right hand from left hand to right.

Professor Deadmoor sprang past him and hit the stairs before the disoriented assassin on the fire escape could take aim again.

And, dressed in priestly black and nearly invisible in the dark of the hallway—only the flashes from his gun muzzles sporadically lighting the snarl on his face—Jack Grey continued firing. Bullets slammed into the wall, lodged in the carpet, careened through the window to pulverize brick on the building across the alleyway, and ricocheted off the metal rail of the fire escape. And when the pistol in his right hand came up empty, he continued firing with the left while he released the spent magazine onto the floor, tossed the gun in the air, drew a fresh cartridge from a pocket and held it out. The falling pistol landed grip-first onto the new magazine, and he dropped his hand and slammed the mag home on his thigh. Then he resumed firing with this weapon while performing the same juggling trick with his left hand.

His bullets smashed into the one lit lamp in the hallway, shredded wallpaper and exploded plaster, split a cold-water pipe that ran through the ceiling; never once though, did they find their mark in the body of the assassin on the fire escape. Not that it mattered. He crouched beneath the window sill, paralysed with fear at so furious a barrage. And when the storm of lead finally ceased, it took him a moment to finally muster the courage to peer into the hallway. His heart thumping, his tommy-gun ready but unsteady in his quaking hands, he looked into the gloom and found it empty save for smoke and the smell of gun powder.

Down in the lobby, the frightened residents of the rooming house were gathering and shouting nervous questions at one another. The manager was yelling into a telephone, demanding that the dispatcher on the other end "tell those coppers to get here faster." The sounds of gun-play on the top floor were barely audible over the staccato din of a fire alarm.

Into this chaos burst five tall, muscular men brandishing tommy guns.

"Nobody moves," one of them shouted as they made their way through the crowd of hardluck cases and decrepit alcoholics. They grabbed at everyone in arm's reach, looked them up and down and searched them. All the while, the sound of a police siren grew closer.

"They're not here," shouted another of these men.

"Coppers' are getting close, Turk. Time to call it," shouted yet another.

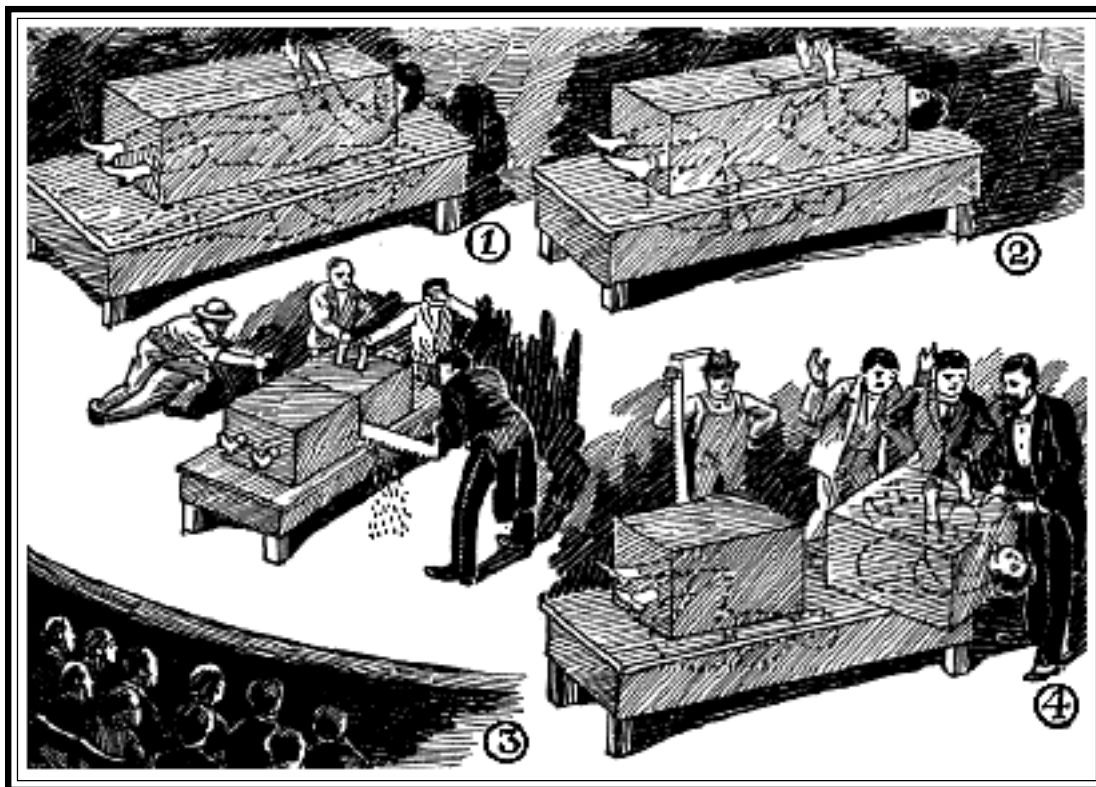
The tallest of these men hollered, "Nuts!" at the top of his lungs, grabbed the nearest of the residents and smacked him hard in the nose with the butt of his tommy gun. "Alright! Let's go boys!" he said and all five of the men ran out into the street, climbed into a waiting automobile which then sped away.

Less than a minute later, four police cars arrived. Officers spilled from them; some set up a cordon around the building, while others rushed in to aid the terrified residents.

As this new commotion developed, an old woman shuffled out of the building and past the ring of police. Though she wore curlers in her hair; a ratty, pink housecoat over her sizeable frame; and floppy, white slippers on her feet, she managed to sneak off unnoticed to disappear down an alley that was just a block from the rooming house. The whole time she fled, she kept a hand pressed against a bulge concealed under her clothing.

And though she walked with stealth and silence—and though she doffed this disguise after travelling a few blocks and reappeared as a staggering wino—a black, inhuman shape followed after. It moved like a shadow cast upon the pavement or the bricks of buildings, its tenebrous form snaking on relentlessly. And no matter what guise Professor Deadmoor took, and no matter how cleverly he travelled the streets of New York City, he would not shake this pursuer.

...continued next issue. ♀



Saw a Woman in Half

by Professor Deadmoor

The origin of this trick is a matter of some controversy, though most agree it was invented first by master illusion designer P.T. Selbit (b.1881) and later refined by the great Horace Goldin (b.1874). Their rival claims to this trick led to a feud between the magicians that lingers through to today.

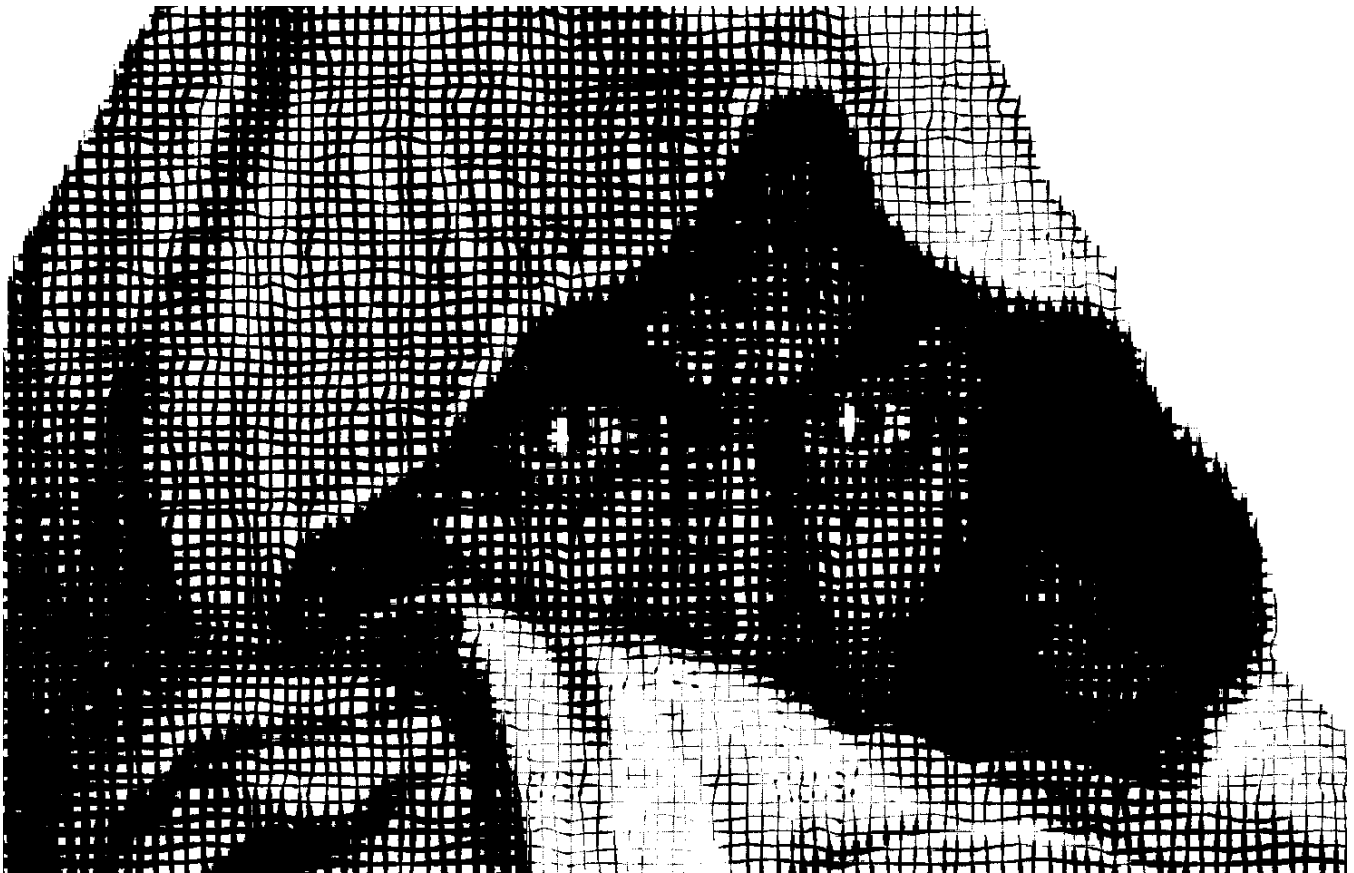
In a restaurant some years ago, I observed an encounter between these two great illusionists. To prove his mastery of the magical arts and thereby his claim to the “Sawing through a Woman” illusion, Selbit cut apart and then restored to one piece Goldin’s hoagie sandwich. An impressive feat considering it was an accidental meeting thus leaving Selbit little time for preparation. Goldin, never one to be upstaged, responded by taking a pair of scissors and cutting Selbit’s thirty-dollar tie in two — and left it that way.

As should be obvious from the illustration above, the secret of this trick is fairly straightforward. Two assistants are used: one the audience sees lie down in the box, the other in a concealed compartment beneath it (Fig 1). The

first assistant pulls her knees up to her chest and the second assistant, through the use of a trap-door, puts her feet through the foot-holes at the bottom of the box (Fig 2). The box is then cut in two (Fig 3), the halves separated and the audience is amazed (Fig 4). Simple.

No trick should be performed in so bland manner, however. The real abracadabra of an illusion comes from the subtle touches you weave into it. Personally, I like to have actual volunteers manning the saw and have the concealed assistant place a large roastbeef in the spot through which the saw will pass. There is nothing like the look on a person’s face when he thinks he is *actually* sawing through your assistant’s midsection. (I once had a volunteer become physically ill on stage. Priceless!) I also find it effective to include a large bladder of pig’s blood inside the box that will burst when the saw tears into it thus drenching the stage in gore.

As to the question of restoring the assistant to one piece, most magicians will include this step. I, however, believe it is optional. Where’s the fun in ending every trick happily? ☹



Devil on My Stomach

by Richard K Lyon and Andrew Offutt

Imprisoned by Marlas, merciless ruler of the mighty Nation of Selis, Bjaine the Barbarian must face the machinations of the sorcerer Shijamarshi if he is ever to regain his freedom. But can a savage sea-wolf of the far-north outwit this fiendish wizard?

Marlas, Autarch of Selis, Protector of the Sacred Web and Conqueror of Atea, Kran, Mesara, and Thilland, chose his steps carefully in his descent of the dark dungeon stair. The ruler's clothing was ordinary. There was nothing about the face or form of this man — who had crushed whole nations under his iron foot - to catch the eye or make him stand out in a crowd of four.

He who walked so quietly behind the autarch was easily remembered in nightmares. The short bloated body was topped by a yellow toad's head whose eyes were pools of dark wisdom. Since it walked on two legs, it could for want of better term, be called a man.

Marlas strode to a scarred oaken door banded with iron. Smiting it, he bawled out, "Zark! You lazy plagul, open this door for your master!" The autarch blinked then, for at his blow the door swung quietly open. "Hmp! That's odd; Zark normally locks the door when he has a victim to play with."

Autarch Marlas stepped through the doorway and glared about. The shadowy, pain-haunted room was littered with the instruments of Zark's filthy trade: clamps and pincers, the pails end funnels for various water tortures, other ugly apparati, the large cradle whose inside was lined with spikes, and a box with the

image of a woman painted on it, the Iron Maiden; A couple of toes strewn the floor, and the walls were darkly splashed.

On the rack in the chamber's center was stretched a man. His mighty limbs were distended by the evil machine.

Tall and powerfully built was this victim, fair of hair and complexion. Welts and burns pocked his body. Icy blue eyes fixed their gaze on Marlas with primitive hatred unmitigated by any hint of begging for mercy. Marlas was uncomfortably reminded of a wolf he had recently helped slay for the sport of it; every aspect of this outsize man was that of a trapped beast. The animal had fought with intense fury to the very end, determined to wreak what harm it could before its death. Marlas saw the same mentality here.

Not unnatural that this man reminded the Selisid ruler of a wolf; he was of that race of sea-wolves of the far north whose rapine and savagery made them a terror to the southern coasts.

Staring at Marlas, the Norther shook his head so that the tangled blond mane flew. "Well, jackal king," he roared, "I see you brought your pet toad to watch my execution!"

"Silence there, northish plagul! Show respect for your betters. I am still your lord. And this man is Shijamarshi, first assistant to the mighty Ekron, chief wizard of Naroka."

"Titles, titles. Hmp - couldn't afford the chief mumbler himself, eh? Ah, but I do humbly beg pardon, my lord Carrion Eater! But - why should a man under sentence of death mind his manners like you enlightened civilized folk?"

"Because, Bjaine," the autarch signed, "I've come to pardon you and grant you an exalted position." Marlas raised his voice. "Zark! Come free this man."

"You're lying," Bjaine said. "Exalted position, is it? Aye - you've come to laugh while I ride the one-legged horse!"

For a moment both ruler and pirate gazed upon the bloodstained shaft several feet from the rack. Rising up out of the floor to a height of some four feet, the pole was three inches in diameter, and sharpened on top.

"By the Cud and by the Web," Marlas said, "I swear I have come here to pardon and to free you."

Bjaine, blinking, thought on that. Marlas hadn't sworn properly by the Back of the Turtle that Bore the World, but still ... the Great Web did mean something to these spider-lovers. "What, uh, persuaded you of my innocence?"

Marlas snorted. "Bjaine, Bjaine! I doubt you will ever understand the ways of civilized men! L..

"I hope not! I might begin to act the same way, if I understood!"

"Um. Yes. I knew you were innocent of the charge when I sentenced you to be broken on the rack and ride the horse."

"Oh," Bjaine said equably. "Now condemning an innocent man I can understand! Even uncivilized folk do that, sometimes."

Harlas shook his head, smiling. "My sister, dear Luquila, accused you of trying to rape her."

"Anybody who'd believe that would suck eggs in the henhouse!"

"Precisely, Bjaine, and I would not. Had you possessed the wit to plead guilty and beg mercy...

"Plead? BEG!"

Marlas sighed, glanced at Shijamarshi, continued as if he'd heard nothing: ". . . on the grounds that her great beauty inflamed you, why then I'd have ordered you flogged and let it go at that."

Marlas raised his voice above Bjaine's laughter. "I would not waste a useful man for my sister's vanity. But Bjaine, Bjaine! You denied it! In front of my entire court and council you stated that a charge even of attempted rape was absurd for - how charmingly you put it! For when I want a woman I take her and there's naught she can do save to enjoy it! Now I might have passed over your calling my royal sister a liar, Norther. But not your saying that she is so ugly she frightens gryffons and no man would want her unless he was blind and leprous!"

"Tis true," Bjaine said, and shuddered at thought of Luquila's face.

"You claimed that what truly happened was that you ordered the royal princess to fetch you wine. When she naturally did not obey, you beat her! That shocked my court and council, Bjaine - naturally. And then you proceeded to discourse at length on the natural superiority of men over women, whose place is to serve man, while every man has the right and duty to beat any woman to teach her her place."

"So I did. I'd said so plenty of times before, and you laughed and never disagreed!"

"True... but what you did and said day before yesterday was in public, and was a direct public insult to my sister's birth, and her royal blood - and thus my blood."

"Ah!" Bjaine's blue eyes brightened and stared ingenuously at the autarch. "I see. Was you I insulted, then. Now I understand that but I don't understand why you have come here. With

ole hop-toad, there.” Bjaine winked at Shijamarshi. “K’gung!” he said, in a fair imitation of a large frog.

Shijamarshi stared levelly at the bound Norther and slowly blinked - from the bottom up. Bjaine’s eyes widened still more. He was about to invite the wizard to repeat that fascinating art, when Marlas answered his question.

“I would put my hand in any cesspool to extend and protect my empire,” Marlas said, low and intense. “I pardon you because I need your services.” Again the autarch glanced around. “Zark! You lazy pig, where are you?”

Bjaine smiled boyishly. “I doubt whether he hears you. He is entertaining a lady.”

“What? I pay the knave to work at his trade, and he dallies with whores? I’ll have that Mesaratan plagul rocked in his own cradle!”

For the first time, the wizard spoke. “I fear, my lord Autarch, that rocking Eark thusly would be ... somewhat redundant.” He gestured at the Iron Maiden.

With a start, Marlas took note that the device was closed. Normally it stood open, displaying its spiked interior to impressionable subjects of Zark’s art, to be shut only when occupied. Now it was not only closed, but was indeed leaking scarlet at its base. Marlas started to speak; instead stood open-mouthed.

With a sudden muscular effort that was hardly credible even to staring eyes, Bjaine stretched himself even farther - and slipped his wrist-chains off their hooks. Apparently the chains at his feet had never been chained to anything at all, for he stepped forward unhindered. He bowed to the ruler, very slightly.

“How may I serve your autarchship and what will you pay?” As he spoke, smiling so boyishly, he reached behind the rack to draw forth a long and shining sword.

“I - I do not understand,” Marlas stammered.

“I believe I do,” Shijamarshi, said. “Your torturer underestimated our friend here. In consequence, Zark is in the Maiden’s embrace. Bjaine doubtless expecting you to come and witness his horse-ride, laid himself on the rack with his sword hidden to hand. A moat clever ruse, and trap.”

This time the smiling Norther’s bow was more profound.

“B-but Eark had four strong assistants!” Marlas protested.

The ruler’s voice was weak, for he realized the gravity of his situation. He was unguarded. He had previously admired this warrior’s stature and mighty physique - as he might have admired a caged beast. Now the beast was free.

Its claw was three feet long, and steel. Though Marlas was no short man, his head rose just above the corded plates of muscle that swelled the Norther’s broad chest. And Bjaine’s bright blue eyes stared down at the king.

Yet those eyes contained, not hatred, but calm speculation. Marlas had wondered at the seeming rule that all Northers had to be unconscionably tall. Now he wondered if they were all barbars after all. Civilization was as a patina on this man, and when he spoke, his words were smooth. Suddenly he did not seem so manipulably stupid. And his grin was that of a wolf.

“True enough,” Bjaine said, “there were four assistants. And do not forget the three Selisid army guards, lord Autarch! One of them thought it would be humorous to torment me with my own sword. Those are his toes, there, and his ugly little organ is lying about someplace. I fear your Highness will be at some small expense to replace those men. But — no use weeping over cracked eggs. Let us discuss the service you want of me, and my payment.”

The yellow toad of a man spoke in a calm and buttery voice. “I am told a session on the rack can create a ... great thirst?” From within his robes he produced a wine pottle which he deftly unstopped and put into the Norther’s eager hands.

Bjaine handed it back. “After you, topaz.”

He watched while the wizard tilted up the container. Once his adam’s apple moved, Bjaine snatched it away. “Here, not all of it, you damned greedy Narokan toad!” And without a word of thanks, Hjaine drained the leather-clad pottle in a few mighty swallows. “Ahhhhhhhh!”

“Now, my friend from the far north, it is well known that you handle a ship better than almost anyone asea.”

“What d’you mean, almost anyone?”

Shijamarshi said, “Well, there is a certain Tiana. She is for Marlas.”

“A *girl*?”

“A woman, actually,” Marlas said. “She is above the age of twelve, after all.”

Bjaine shrugged while the wizard said, “A certain chest of jewels aboard her Vixen is for me.”

“Umm. Tiana, hm? I’ve heard of that one, of course. From what I’ve heard she might come close to being enough woman even for me! And my lord Autarch wants her, eh?” Bjaine put his head on one side, grinning at the king.

Marlas smiled thinly. “I want her dead and off the seas, where she raids my shipping, and Naroka’s.”

"Suppose I bring you her head, then, if the price is right? I may have use for the rest."

"No, no," Marlas said, "I want her here, alive, Bjaime. I will do the killing. After I wed her; she does happen to be bastard daughter of a certain Ilani duke, long dead. An interesting claim for me to present to King Bower of Ilan."

Bjaime blinked. "Very complicated." Then he laughed. "Sounds like a cannibal I once knew. He claimed to inherit a farm because he'd eaten the owner! Well. How soon can you have a ship and crew ready? Treasure seldom remains in one place long, you know, and I'd hate to find this seafaring slut a few minutes after someone else did."

"The Stormfury is already provisioned," Marlas said with some smugness, "and a picked squadron of Imperial Dragons is boarding her, in addition to the best of crews. All have instructions to follow your orders."

"Hmm. Didn't old Iron Althax try that once, for Naroka?" Bjaime's chest seemed to swell another few inches. "But of course he was not Bjaime the Mighty!"

"Of course not," Marlas said. The Autarch of Selis felt ready to join the Thespians' Guild. He had managed to maintain a calm front, but now he was relaxing, sure the barbarian would not be difficult. Doubtless the wight was angered by the abuse he'd taken, but like any other sensible man he put his ambitions ahead of his feelings.

"Ah," Shijamarshi said, "my medicine!" And he drained a small phial from the sash of his robe.

"You sick, sorcerer?" Bjaime asked.

"An allergy," Shijamarshi said. "I cannot bear the scent of blood."

Again Bjaime laughed, and shook his head so that dirty, sunny hair flew. "Well then Autarch, there's only the matter of my recompense, and I sail to plunder a pirate. Hm - little challenge in tangling with a mere g. .woman."

"Do not, Bjaime, underestimate Tiana called Highrider, also called Queen of the Pirates! I said an exalted position for you, and I meant it: the throne of Fran. It's a rich land, but rebellious. I need a man to rule it with a hand of iron. Bring me the pirate Tiana, alive, and you shall be King over Fran."

"Why thank you, Highness. That is a most generous offer. But I did have my heart set on the payment given me by the cannibal I mentioned."

"Above a crown? What payment was that?"

"There is but one payment for a blood insult: my dears, I am going to take your heads." Bjaime

took a pace, the great sword coming up. "So sorry you are allergic to blood, wizard."

"But - I offer you a throne!"

"I do not sell myself to be tortured, Marlas, even for a throne."

The Norther's sword caught the torchlight and reflected on his face; it seemed the personification of Dood, lord of demons. King and mage stood motionless. The former was quite unmanned by this eventuation, and ready to kneel. Shijamarshi, strangely, seemed amused. The sword's blade was a flash of lightning as Bjaime whipped it high - and dropped it to ring on the stone floor. Bjaime followed, toppling stiffly like a great tree struck by lightning.

Shijamarshi chuckled at Marlas's amaze.

"The wine, of course, was drugged," the toadish mage said in his soft voice. "I quaffed the antidote, just in case. I am proud of the drug, a most unusual one. The victim feels nothing until he makes any violent motion, at which point he is instantly and completely paralyzed."

With a grunt, and then another, the wizard turned over the Norther's huge body. Beads of sweat stood forth on Bjaime's brow and his eyes were blue fire.

"I know you can hear me," Shijamarshi said. "You are going after that damned pirate who slew Derramal. I am taking a small guarantee that you will return her and her box of sorcerous gems back to us."

Kneeling beside his victim, Shijamarshi removed various small jars and phials from his robes. "Yes, yes... good... I have all the staples I require. The only perishable needed for the spell is a cup of blood from a freshly murdered man. Marlas, do be a good fellow and fetch me such. You should encounter no difficulty, since from our bearish friend's account there should be no less than eight corpses secreted here and there."

An angry reply died in the autarch's throat and he swallowed its corpse. He resented being first-named and treated as a fetch-boy. Yet he was also aware of the realities of power in the present situation, He moved off on his grim task, taking the tin cup used to water - or more usually to taunt - this place's temporary residents. Shijamarshi, smiling down at the stricken Norther warrior, held before his eyes a small bottle of black liquid.

"Ink," he said equably. "The formula is a mite unpleasant and some of its properties odd, but it is essentially ink like any other."

First showing the prostrate man a brush, he commenced to draw on Bjaime's stomach. "Damn these muscle ridges! These marks are

far from indelible. If you have care, they will last a reasonable time - long enough for you to complete your mission and return to us with Tiana and the valued chest."

Just as Shijamarshi finished the drawing, Marlas returned with the cup of blood, not quite cold. Appearing more than ever a great yellow toad, the Narokan mage added to the blood from this jar and that phial. He stirred, muttering, and painted a few strokes on the muscular stomach of his human canvas. Again he added arcane ingredients to the blood, muttering words Bjaine could not distinguish. For the Norther could hear, and feel. When he tried to focus on the mage's voice, though, it remained an impossible blur.

Bjaine stared up at the Narokan. He was sure it was no longer a resemblance he saw; the wizard was a great fulvous toad. In its black robe it squatted crouched beside him, making obscene noises while pointing with its hand-like forepaw. The torchlight paled. It seemed to shiver while whispers hissed from the shifting shadows. Bjaine knew the stones beside him formed an outside wall, beneath the very earth. Nevertheless he heard a knocking, as if something on the other side of that wall sought admission.

From the toad's horrid throat croaked a single clear word: "Come."

What came was total darkness, and Bjaine thought he was falling into an abyss.

If someone wearing white gloves, Bjaine felt, were to hold a ball of snow an inch from his eyes, he'd not be able to see it. He strove to move. He could not.

And then the dark was gone. Again the chamber was lighted and normal in appearance as normal as could be such a place of torturous horror. Shijamarshi was only an ugly misshapen man in a voluminous robe. Bjaine discovered that he was able to move, though he was weak as a child of civilization. And Marlas was staring at Shijamarshi with horror-filled eyes.

"You - you changed."

"Only an illusion, lord Autarch. Sometimes, during a Summoning, the inner nature, the soul, of my master Ekron. . . becomes visible."

Bjaine tried to rise and was too weak. At least he could move his lips: "Wizard... what did you summon?"

"Why, look at that so-muscular belly of yours, and see."

The Norther was just able to raise his head and look down. On his stomach a pentagram had been drawn, in black ink. Within it had

been painted, in blood and only gods knew what else, a demonic face. A fanged red thing whose eyes were filled with an avid hunger. For a moment Bjaine thought his sanity had fled. The eyes of the painted image moved to stare back at him - and its lips parted in an evil grin.

"You...have painted a...a devil on my stomach!"

"In a way. It is a real enough demon. When you bring us Tiana and the little box I require, I shall remove the demon. Serve us and you will live to be a king. Otherwise, before very long, time and wear will do away with part of the pentagram that holds the devil there, and it will be freed. I don't believe that you will enjoy feeding it."

Looking up at his captors from the floor, Bjaine saw the triumph in their eyes. His anger burned to a demonic heat. Slowly, testing his muscles, he levered himself up. He stood. Though he appeared no stronger than a newborn, the volcanic rage that fulminated in him was melting away the weakness. Cunning bade him conceal his returning strength. He forced his voice to calmness.

"Marlas. . .you have me like a dog in an obedience collar."

"What a lovely analogy!" Marlas chuckled. "A collar lined with deadly spikes! They tear the throat out of an animal that fails to give prompt heed to its master's commands. Aye - the teeth of that demon are like spikes, in truth!"

"And, Autarch. . . do you not remember what happened when your trainer tried to use one of those collars on a wolf?"

Marlas remembered. His face paled. Heedless of its own terrible pain, the beast had mortally wounded itself in order to gain a single moment's freedom, just enough to slay its would-be master. Marlas had had to find a new trainer. Looking now into the Norther's icy eyes, the autarch saw that same bestial rage. It noted neither pain nor death with that a fatal blunder had been made.

"Shijamarshi, damn you, you've..."

With an animal snarl the Norther lunged at the ruler. He grasped him in two huge hands, and whirled him up into the air with awful ease. He brought the autarch down almost delicately, astride the one-legged horse. Marlas' shriek was cut off by his indrawn breath of profound agony.

While Marlas, ruler and conqueror of a dozen lands, writhed in his last consummate anguish, wizard and warrior faced each other.

"That," Shijamarshi said, "was rather foolish. By slaying the autarch, barbarian, you have thrown away the sapphire-set crown of Fran.

Gain sense now, for attack me and you forfeit you life. I am invulnerable.”

Bjaine did not reply. Snatching up the great iron sword, he thrust at the toad-like enchanter's belly. Like a stick thrust into water, his sword bent - and went whistling past its target. With a snarl he whipped the weapon back. He aimed a furious wide arcing cut that could not miss and that, impossibly, did.

“You do insist on dying, then,” the toad-wizard croaked. “So be it.”

His or rather its eyes were great pools of liquid green light and its reaching, fingered paw was darkness itself. Even as Hjaine swung his sword in a desperately mighty two-handed stroke, that darkness thrust at him. The sword struck nothing; the darkness touched his hands for a single instant of awful cold.

The sword fell from paralyzed fingers.

“Now you die,” the toad-wizard croaked.

Bjaine didn't wait. Weaponless, his hands now clumsy useless paws, he attacked in the only way he could. He lunged forward to grasp the toadish thing in a furious bear-hug. Though his embrace had oft crushed powerful opponents, this one was as a great chunk of solid stone. The Norther felt his strength waning, sucked from him by cold occult forces. The wizard slipped in his embrace. Bjaine strained. The toadish head was forced downward, down.. .into the pentagram on Ojaine's stomach.

The ghastly howl of dismay and horror was cut off. Summoned by the wizard himself, the devil devoured the wizard's head. Bjaine's grip was broken by a spasm of irresistible force. Even as he staggered back, the darkness vanished and he felt his strength surging back into him. As for Shijamarshi of Naroka; arms flailing like the wings of a decapitated chicken, the

mage's corpse danced wildly about the room to collapse at the now motionless feet of Autarch Marlas.

* * * * *

Vengeance swiftly taken in direct action did sometimes present problems, Bjaine mused next morning, well out to sea. Once again luck, that beautiful goddess whose many incarnations he ardently worshiped, had smiled upon him. The late Marlas had departed this life with no opportunity to countermand his order that Stormfury was to sail with Bjaine in full command, and the big Norther had gratefully accepted fortune's gift. What he would do with this crew of foreign seamen and squad of marines - and for how long - only time would resolve; Bjaine did dislike thinking.

Likewise time and his ardent worship of the Fickle Goddess would surely, somehow, resolve the bothersome problem of the demon now imprisoned within its pentagram on his stomach - which was well-swathed against friction and salt spray. Who said wizard's spells died with them?

Bjaine knew the wisdom of living for the moment. He was dimly aware that others, nighted, brow-furrowed people, might well consider the devil to be certain eventual death, once one line of the pentagram was broken. Bjaine's mind did not work so. For the moment he was in no danger. Indeed, as recent events had demonstrated, a devil on one's stomach could even be quite useful. It would retain that potential, and present no danger so long as he did nothing to disturb the containing pentagram.

That should be no problem; he had Shijamarshi's phial of black ink and besides, the mighty barbarian seldom bathed anyway. ☹



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Real Tough

by Brian Cain

*The daughter of
a mob boss and a
mysterious enforcer.
How far will they go
to save the life of an
innocent boy?*

"Is this Mr. Pierce?"

"Yeah," he said into the phone.

"We haven't seen each other in a long time, but you know who I am. Tracy Lugano?"

"How's your father?"

"He and I don't say much to each other anymore."

Pierce had nothing to say to that. He said: "What's up?"

"Can I buy you a drink?"

Pierce said nothing.

"Viva's okay?" she said, naming a speakeasy outside the city, hidden behind a truck stop. One that wasn't controlled by her father. "It has to be somewhere out of town," she said.

"What about?"

"What do you think? I have a job for you."

Pierce said okay, hung up, grabbed his car keys.

Tracy Lugano joined Pierce at the table in the rear of Viva's fifteen minutes after he'd arrived. Pierce remembered her as a ten year old kid with pig tails chasing a ball in her father's driveway; she'd grown into a petite young woman, her brown hair tied back, wore a white dress that made her blend in with the crowd in the club.

As she slid into the booth across from Pierce, a swing band started up on the bandstand, bartenders busy filling glasses, waitresses buzzing, the place packed.

"Thanks for coming," she said.

Pierce said nothing.

"About my call." She pulled an envelope from her big purse, the purse seemingly bigger than her. Pierce wondered if she had a Tommy gun in there with a fully loaded drum, it was so big.

A waitress came to the table. "Getcha drinks?"

"Scotch and soda," Pierce said.

"Martini," Tracy said. The waitress left.

Tracy Lugano pulled a picture from the envelope. Pierce looked at the two men featured.

"Do you know them?" she said.

"No."

"Chet Boon and his friend Sid."

They were young men in last year's clothes, Boon a dark-haired kid; Sid sported blonde locks, leaning against a newsstand, facing the street, trying to look tough.

"They work for your father?" Pierce said.

"His protection racket. They've been around the house more in the last few months. Boon's tried to hit on me several times. He's repulsing."

"What's the problem?"

"Boon and Sid shot a man the other day. In a barbershop. A bar owner who hadn't paid protection in months and they'd been threatening him." She pulled a folded newspaper clipping from the envelope, showed it to Pierce. He scanned it quickly, nodded.

"The man's seven year old son saw it happen."

The waitress returned and set their drinks on the table. Tracy handed her a folded five and told her to keep the change. The waitress smiled, pivoted, walked away.

"You're generous," Pierce said, eyeing her over the brim of his glass as he took a drink, frowning, because the scotch/soda mix wasn't right.

"Dad's money. Who cares?"

"You were saying about the boy?"

"He identified Boon to the police. Boon's going to kill him to keep him quiet."

"You're sure?"

"I know it. You know Carl Grissom, the crime boss in Los Angeles?" she said. Pierce nodded. She said, "He and my father are setting up a booze connection between here and California. Dad makes it, ships it to Grissom. They're finalizing everything. Dad's afraid the cops are going to be all over them if they follow the barbershop shooting too far, and I overheard Dad saying he wanted all loose ends tied up before they continue."

"You're father isn't dumb enough to order a child's murder," Pierce said. "And he has the cops in his pocket, what's the big deal?"

"Boon is dumb enough to think Dad wants the kid killed, and the newspapers are playing the kid's story up like crazy. Come on, all this happening after they found the Lindbergh baby dead? The public wants this case solved; no amount of bribery is going to stop them. Listen, Mr. Pierce, I don't care what my father is doing, but I don't want anything to happen to that little boy."

Pierce sipped his drink and looked at the picture of Boon and his buddy again. His stony expression betrayed nothing of his thoughts.

"Why do you care?" he said.

"What?"

"About the boy. Why do you care?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, but he didn't break eye-contact.

"He reminds me of my little brother," she said.

"The one who died with my mother."

Pierce nodded, remembering the car accident she referred to.

"Where can I find them?" he finally said.

"Boon deals hop on the side. He buys a house out on Touriga. Two thousand okay?"

"Daddy's money?"

"I can get more."

"It's enough," Pierce said.

The next night, after he finished cleaning his matching pair of Colt .45 automatics, Pierce drove to the single-story house on Touriga Avenue where Boon picked up his hop. Parked his car across the street, shut off the car.

Pierce sat for thirty minutes watching the house and the other homes in the quiet cul-de-sac. He opened the door, slid out of the car. He'd disabled the overhead light that morning so it didn't come on when he opened the door.

He crossed the street, hustled up the path to the door, knocked, stepped to the side to avoid the peephole.

A sleepy woman with tousled hair answered, covering a yawn, and Pierce drew one of his .45s. The girl almost screamed but Pierce sent an enraged kick into the door, forcing her back, the door slamming against the wall. Pierce stepped inside and kicked it shut.

The girl sprang up from the floor where she'd fallen, hands out, ignoring her open bathrobe. Over her shoulder, "Benny!"

"What!" a man shouted, entering.

Pierce smashed the barrel of the .45 across the forehead of the man, let him crumple to the floor unconscious.

Pierce pivoted and aimed at the woman's face. "Chet Boon," he said. "You're insane!" "Chet Boon." "Do you know who you're messing with?" "Chet Boon."

The girl started breathing fast as Pierce inched closer. "Stay back! I don't know where he is!"

Pierce stopped with the business end of the .45 inches from her face.

"You're lying," he said.

"No! He's talking about splitting town!"

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know!"

Pierce lowered the gun. "You and your boyfriend have ten minutes to clear out."

"You louse!"

"Make it five," Pierce said as he slipped out.

Late the next afternoon, after just returning from a long lunch at a nearby seafood restaurant, criminal defense lawyer Sam Rocklund looked up from his desk at the two young visitors entering his office. The window behind him showed the city in its afternoon glory.

"Hey, Chet," he said.

Chester Boon and Sid Rawlins sauntered over to the desk and Boon plopped down in the chair facing Rocklund's desk. Sid stood like an obedient dog behind him.

"Get that address, Sammy?"

"Now, Chet," Rocklund said grinning, smoothing down the front of his red silk vest, "this isn't as easy as you think."

"I want the boy's address."

"Now, Chet - "

"Give me the address."

"Do you know what I had to do to get it?"

"I'm sure you risked your reputation."

"I had to bribe - "

"I'm not going to ask again, Sam."

As if on cue, Sid pushed his jacket back to expose the nickel-plated revolver on his hip.

"Show me the money," Rocklund said.

"You're not funny," Boon said. He pulled a fat envelope from inside his jacket and tossed it on the desk. "Five grand."

Sam Rocklund tore a slip of paper from a notepad, wrote quickly, and passed the paper to Boon, who snatched it.

Seven-year-old Nathan Dorf liked playing kickball with his two friends. The three of them kicked a ball around in the front yard of

Nathan's house as Pierce watched from down the street.

The morning newspaper sat on the passenger seat of Pierce's coupe. The front page story told about the police raid on the hop house he'd visited the night before. Both the man and woman had been carried out of the house in their bedclothes.

A park sat across from the Dorf's house, its playground packed with children and watchful parents, but Nathan's mom had told him not to go over there and came to the front window every few minutes to check on the kids.

There had been no sign of Boon or Sid all day. Pierce knew they wouldn't have left without making a play for the boy, unless Tracy's concerns were all in her head.

After a few hours he drove down the street to a small grocery store, went to the pay phone, called Tracy.

"I've been keeping an eye on the boy," he said, "but nothing's happened. What's that other lead you mentioned when we talked this morning?"

"Sam Rocklund," she said. "Boon's lawyer. Got his bail reduced after the barbershop murder. Here's his address."

Pierce copied it down, hopped back in the car. He figured he could make it to Rocklund's office within ten minutes.

Big mistake.

The rest of Sam Rocklund's day passed slowly. Clients called, clients visited; he squared away court dates for later in the week. At five o'clock Sam loaded his briefcase with files and thought about which restaurant he'd go to for dinner; which of his favorite hooker friends he'd call up for an evening's entertainment.

The office door squeaked open.

Rocklund frowned at the tall, black-suited figure kicking the door shut behind him.

"Sam Rocklund?" the man said.

"See me tomorrow."

Pierce just smiled. "We'll talk now."

"What do you want?"

"Your voice isn't shaking, counselor."

"Should it be?"

"Maybe."

"Tell me what you want."

"Chet Boon."

"Never heard of him."

Pierce took out one of his guns. "Don't lie to me."

"You've mistaken me for another attorney."

"No I haven't. Keep your hands on that briefcase."

"Wha - what was that name again?"

"Now you sound nervous."

"I don't like guns pointed at me."

"Chet Boon."

"Starting to sound familiar. Maybe you can refresh my memory."

Pierce fired once and the lamp sitting on the corner of the desk exploded. Rocklund jumped back, bumping against the window. Pierce fired again and the window shattered, Rocklund crying out as he dived to the floor.

Cool wind rushed into the room. Rocklund rose to his hands and knees, ignoring the shards of glass that had fallen across his back. Pierce went over and kicked him. Rocklund slammed against the wall wheezing.

Pierce leveled the .45 on Rocklund's head. "The next round kills you."

"I can't hear anything!"

"Temporary. Want something more permanent?"

Rocklund caught his breath and started talking, rattling on for two minutes straight. "That's all I know!" he said when finished.

Pierce smashed him over the head with the .45 and Rocklund fell unconscious. Pierce took an incendiary stick from inside his jacket, tugged out the pin, tossed it across the room. The explosive bounced off the wall, a tongue of flame licking out one end, and hit the floor. The fire caught right away and started spreading across the floor, climbing the walls.

Pierce gave Rocklund's body a final glance and walked out, not caring if the lawyer escaped alive or not.

Nate Dorf rested in a medium-sized casket while his mother occupied the full-sized casket next to him.

Mourners packed the church. The pastor wrapped up the memorial service; the attendees started filing out.

Pierce sat in back of the church. Tracy Lugano stepped into the hall and slid into the pew beside him.

"So," she said, "what do we do now?"

"I'm going to kill Boon. Then I'm going to kill your father."

She stared at him.

"No comment?"

"I won't stop you."

"Remind me never to get on your bad side," he said, cracking half a smile.

"Why do you care?"

"Touché."

"I'm serious."

Pierce shook his head, looked forward. Tracy waited a moment and said: "You arrived at the house as Boon and Sid were getting back in their car?"

He nodded. "I got over there as fast as I could after Rocklund told me he'd given them the kid's address, but it was too late. I chased them two blocks. They crashed their car and opened fire on me. I shot back but I don't think I wounded either of them. They took off into a park. I would have followed but two beat cops were running our way so I had to take off."

"I have more money if you need it," she said.

"Forget it."

"They said on the radio that Rocklund escaped his office with some serious burns."

"Too bad."

"What's your plan now?"

"Rattle some of your father's cages," Pierce said. "Somebody knows where Boon is."

Flashing lights, loud music, gentlemen seated at tables around a stage occupied by a tired burlesque dancer. Pierce gave the men a glance as he stood in the entryway of the club, turned left, headed for the bar. Leaning against the bar he waved the bartender over.

"What can I get you?"

"Ted Warner."

"He ain't here."

"Tell him it's in his own best interest to see me."

"Says who?"

"Get Warner out here."

The bartender tossed the towel in his belt on the bar, turned and knocked on a door behind him.

Pierce looked around. No other customers except the guys watching the dancer. No gunmen in sight.

The dancer wrapped up her routine, hiding behind huge hand-held feathers, strutting back stage as the music ended. The guys gawked, whistling.

The bartender returned from the back. "Ted don't wanna see you. Do your worst."

Pierce smiled, walked to the wall at the end of the bar, took out a .45 and smashed the fire alarm. The bell shrilled; the bartender reached under the bar and leveled a sawed-off shotgun at Pierce's chest. Pierce fired once. The bartender's head snapped back. Pierce leaped over the

bar, went to the door the bartender had knocked on, ignoring the noisy customers as they scrambled for the door, and kicked the door open with his twin .45s leading the way inside.

Four pistol-packing hoods rose from a card table. Pierce worked his trigger fingers, the .45s roaring, the hoods dropping.

Pierce pivoted left, another shooter coming out of an office. He fired the .45 in his right hand, then the left, and the shooter hit the floor.

From behind a desk in the office, stocky Ted Warner stood up with a .38. Pierce fired his right-hand gun, Warner screaming as the bullet shattered his shoulder. He collapsed back in his chair.

"I want a friend of yours. Chet Boon."

Warner glared, his face beet red.

Pierce aimed his left-hand pistol at Warner's face.

"He's split town!" Warner said.

"Where?"

"South. He went south. With Ben Grissom in LA. Ben Grissom in LA!"

Pierce watched the wheezing Warner bleed for a moment, the man eyeing him expectantly. Slipping his guns under his jacket, Pierce turned and walked out.

Ben Grissom, crime boss of the City of Angels, stood in his mansion's back yard, staring out at the green Valley view.

His house guard opened the sliding door behind him and shouted, "They're here, boss."

Chester Boon and Sidney Rawlins, each in new suits and hats, looking slightly uncomfortable, sat in front of Grissom's big desk. With his house guard behind him, Grissom walked in and sat down.

"Tell me about Lugano's trouble back in New York," Grissom said.

"Taken care of," Boon said. "We're clear, no problem."

"We don't need any problems with this deal." Grissom signaled his guard; the man went to a drink cart across the room, poured three glasses of scotch.

"We have a week until we get busy," Grissom said. "All my equipment is ready, and I've got places to stash Lugano's booze that I'll have one of my guys show you sometime tomorrow."

The guard brought the drinks over on a tray.

"Any beer?" Boon said.

"Poor man's swill," Grissom said.

Boon shrugged and drank his drink; Sid followed suit.

Ben Grissom stared at the two men in front of him. "What do I do with you until tomorrow?"

"Beer and girls," Sid said.

"Girls and beer," Boon said.

"You're both disgusting," Grissom said. "I need professionals, Lugano sends me you."

"Hey!"

"Sit still and shut up." The house guard moved behind Grissom, a .45 visible on his hip.

"You two will have nothing and like it." Grissom snapped his fingers. The guard took their drinks away. "Follow Chuck."

The guard stepped back. Boon and Rawlins stood up nervously, following the guard out of the office.

Ben Grissom shook his head and downed his drink.

"Are you sure Grissom will see you?" Tracy said.

"He'll see me," Pierce said.

They stood near the boarding gate in the airport terminal, a silver four-engined prop plane pulling up outside. Pierce took a deep breath as he stared at the plane.

"Don't like to fly?" Tracy said.

He shook his head.

"What do you expect Grissom to do?" she said.

"I'm not sure," he said. "But he won't like what I tell him."

A woman behind the check-in desk at the gate announced over the loudspeaker that flight 284 to Los Angeles was ready to board. Pierce tucked a folded newspaper, his only piece of luggage, under his arm, nodded good-bye to Tracy. She watched him join the flow of passengers heading outside to the waiting airplane.

Pierce sat in the back of a cab as the driver sped away from the Los Angeles airport, his nerves finally settling down after the bumpy flight. At least his seat had been comfortable, and the stewardess knew how to mix scotch and soda.

The cab driver dropped him off at the hotel Pierce had named, and he went inside and checked in. He had the bell boy bring up scotch, soda, and a bucket of ice, tipping the kid a buck. He mixed a drink and stood in front of the window looking out at the city with the mountains in the distance.

Checking his watch, he knew he had an hour before Grissom made his nightly trip to Musso

& Frank's, the popular LA restaurant, for supper, usually with a crew of wiseguys in tow. He pulled up a chair, sat down, put his feet up on the window sill.

The private dining room in the back of Musso & Frank's brimmed with the evening energy of Ben Grissom and his cronies. They argued baseball and ate steak and drank Grissom's bootlegged booze and laughed.

A waiter approached Grissom, bowing a bit. "Sir, there's someone to see you."

"Huh?"

"That man over there."

Grissom looked past the waiter at the black-suited man standing in the doorway of the private dining room and raised his eyebrows. Shouted, "Come on over, Pierce!"

The waiter slipped away as Pierce came over and sat down next to the LA crime boss, placing his hat on the table. Grissom introduced his friends, Pierce nodded hello to each.

"I hope you're not in LA for work," Grissom said loudly, and the others laughed. Pierce unfolded the newspaper from under his arm. Grissom frowned at the date – the previous day, the day after the memorial service for Nathan Dorf and his mother, but he didn't know that – and watched as Pierce tapped a headline. "Read that article."

Pierce passed Grissom the paper; Grissom frowned at the headline, read the article, and his face took on a red tint. He looked at Pierce, waiting.

"Chet Boon and Sid Rawlings killed that boy," Pierce said quietly. "I was hired to stop them but I failed. I figured you would want to know before you completed your project with Lugano."

"They told me this problem was solved," Grissom said.

"In their line of thinking, it was," Pierce said.

Grissom took a deep breath, glanced at his friends, who watched without a word. Grissom turned back to Pierce, said, "Want a steak?"

"No." Pierce pushed his chair back and rose, tapped on his hat.

"In town long?"

"No."

Grissom nodded. "Thanks for the tip."

Pierce turned, went out.

Grissom paced his office, breathing hard.

Chuck, his house guard, opened the door and led Boon and Rawlings in. "Wait outside, Chuck,"

Grissom said, and Chuck nodded to his boss and exited the office. Boon and Rawlings stood there, watching Grissom pace.

"You wanted to see us?" Boon said.

"Shut up!" Grissom grabbed the newspaper Pierce had given him off his desk and tossed it at the punks' feet.

Boon picked it up, saw the date and the Dorf story. Sid let out a curse.

"You're gonna bring the cops all over us!" Grissom said.

"Lugano ordered it!" Boon said.

"Next time Lugano gets in his car, he'll be splattered all over the place. A child and his mother! Are you sick?"

"Kid was gonna finger us!" Boon said.

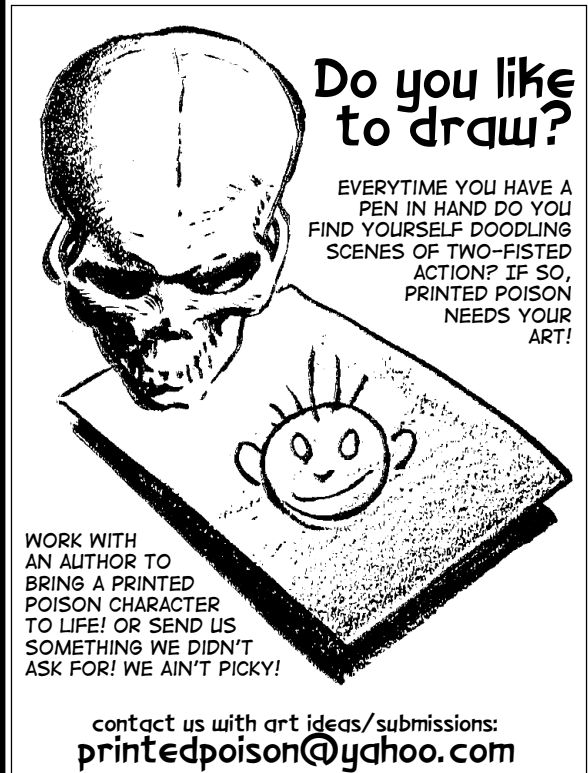
"You coulda beat that rap. We coulda waited on our deal. What's the rush?" Grissom picked up a baseball bat from his chair. Slapped his palm with it.

"There's only one way to fix this."

Boon drew his gun.

Grissom swung.

Chuck, the house guard, stood outside the door. He heard the first smack of the bat, followed by a thud; a scream, another smack, quiet. He frowned, watching the door. Grissom opened the door, stuck his head out, said, "Chuck, get some guys in here to clean up." ☠



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Review of Physics
National Institute for Advanced Study
1177 Sixteenth St. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

February 11, 1933

Mr. John Armstrong
Care of the Harvard Club
27 W. 44 St.
New York, N.Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Armstrong,

After careful examination of your manuscript no 113785, Cavorite, An Insulator Against Gravity, the editors of Review of Physics have concluded that it is not suitable for publication in this journal. This decision is final and further correspondence on this subject will serve no useful purpose.

Since the above may seem somewhat harsh, let me say what I can to mitigate it. The editors do appreciate that you are working under difficult circumstances: when the senior author of a paper is deceased, it is always hard for the junior author to complete the work in an appropriate manner. Also let us assure you that we do believe you. You have told us that with his dying breath Professor Steinhardt handed you his notebook and said, "Have this published in Review of Physics." Such an action would be completely in character for Steinhardt since he was a true scientist. Our believing the alleged circumstances under which Steinhardt made this final declaration (while he was escaping from disintegrator rays wounds suffered during your escape from the City of Disembodied Brains on Altair IV) is a somewhat different matter, but there is no need to discuss that issue. What is important is that you should recognize that whatever the highly emotional circumstance of Professor Steinhardt's passing may have been, they have no relevance to publication in Review of Physics.

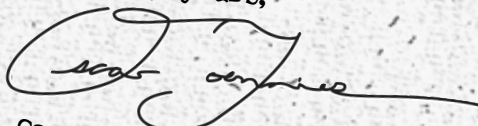
The sole criterion for publication in this journal is the comments of the referees. In your case these comments were highly negative and I must add that I completely agree. Your paper claims the existence of a substance which insulates against gravity, this being the basis of the "etherflyer" by which you and the late Professor Steinhardt voyaged to Altair IV. Such a substance, however, completely violates elementary potential theory and if it could exist at all would have to be totally different from what you envision.

Since, Mr. Armstrong, you profess yourself to be a "man of action," I am not surprised that you find the, above difficult to comprehend. If I may make a suggestion, perhaps you should study any good text in Freshman Physics.

Furthermore while I can readily understand why you wish to visit the referees and personally demonstrate your antigravity apparatus to them, I cannot reveal their identities to you. Referees are anonymous by long standing tradition, one purpose of this tradition being to prevent acrimonious confrontations of the very kind you seek.

Finally I must tell you that your continued visits to the offices of Review of Physics are contra-productive. As you know we are located on the twentieth floor and your floating in and out through our windows is a considerable distraction to the clerical staff.

Sincerely yours,



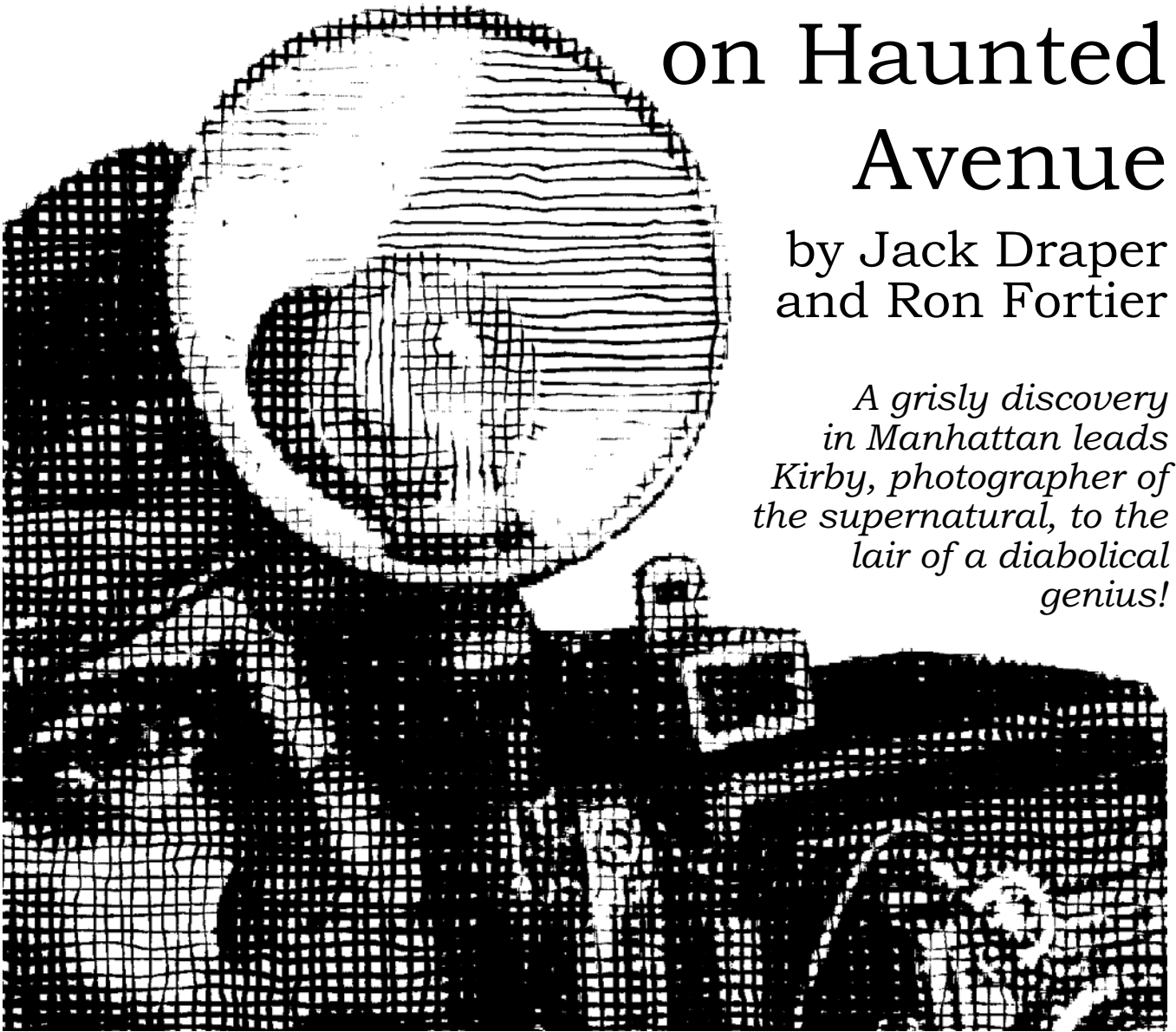
Oscar C. Toennies
Editor in Chief

Here reproduced is an **actual photo-static copy** of a letter from the Review of Physics addressed to one Mr John Armstrong. It was uncovered by **Mr Richard K Lyon**. With regards to how it was that he came into possession of such a curiosity, Mr Lyon has **refused comment**. Frankly, we suspect foul play.

Twenty Ghosts on Haunted Avenue

by Jack Draper
and Ron Fortier

*A grisly discovery
in Manhattan leads
Kirby, photographer of
the supernatural, to the
lair of a diabolical
genius!*



“Kirby! Get in here!” it was my editor, Harvey Bratz, bellowing from his office. I stopped chatting with his secretary, the delightful Imelda, and stepped through his door.

“Yeah, chief. What’s the matter?” I asked.

“What in blazes is wrong with these photos!?”

That’s how Harvey ran the Daily Pages: at the top of his lungs. He was a big man, fat really, bald-headed and mean-looking with a big, unsightly wart right on the end of his big nose in the middle of his unsightly face. And frankly, I suspected he ate babies for lunch, but had never been able to catch him in the act.

A troll of a man, our Harvey.

“Nothing. Why?”

I cringed as I said it. They were shots from a game between the Yankees and the Pittsburgh Pirates. I’d come straight from the ball park and gotten them developed in the paper’s lab. I’d wanted to get them into the sport’s desk and myself out of the office early because I had plans for that evening, so I hadn’t really looked the shots over too carefully.

Big mistake.

“In this shot of Pep Young sliding home! I can’t see Pep Young! And why is that, I ask you?!” He paused a moment to chew on his cigar. I wasn’t stupid enough to take the bait and try to answer his rhetorical question. “I’ll tell you why!” he continued, “Because there’s a family

in the shot! Waving like a pack of idiots! Blocking Pep! And you didn't even get them in focus! You want to explain this, Kirby?!?"

He slid the photograph across his desk and I had a look at it. Sure enough, in the foreground there was a blurry image of three people—a man, a woman, and a young boy. Harvey didn't let me answer. He kept on shouting. "And in this one. You've got the kid pointing at Klise Dudley! He's cute! He's excited! He's loving the game! Might've been a good shot only you can't see what Dudley's doing! And the kid's out of focus again!" He passed this one over to me too, then pulled a few more shots off a pile. "A full third of these are useless! Why in the Devil's Drawers were you taking photos of this family?!?"

"They were tourists, chief," I lied. "They just wanted a few keepsakes."

"Again?!?"

"Sorry chief. I was going to take the shots out and give them to them later, but I must've forgotten."

"Tourist photos! Double exposures! Smudges on your lens! I'm beginning to wonder what I pay you for! Do you think film grows on trees?!? The paper pays you for that you know! You can't just take shots of tourists and —"

And thus began another of Harvey Bratz's famous "pep talks." He pulled them out whenever he felt one of his employees needed to pull up his socks. It was a fatherly sort of kick in the pants, really; but where the father was a homicidal-maniac, bury-mom-in-the-basement type. Lot's of fun.

He let me out after about twenty minutes of enthusiastic dressing-down. To teach me a lesson he'd decided he wouldn't pay me for *any* of the photographs, and even though I was broke and needed the cash, there really wasn't much I could do once Harvey'd made up his mind. So much for my dinner plans.

I swear I could smell baby on his breath.

The thing is, I knew what was wrong with those photographs and it had nothing to do with tourists. Or rather it had *everything* to do with tourists except ... well, it's complicated.

You see, I found out later from a guy at the city desk that a family from Pittsburgh—Larry and Mabel Lisgar and their son Daniel—were driving to New York to catch the very same Yankees game that I was taking photographs at. Problem is, they were in a car accident ten miles from the ball park and all three of them died. I guess, after they figured out they'd "shuffled off this mortal coil," they decided to go the ballgame anyway. What else are you supposed to do in the afterlife? Well, they found me there

taking pictures, and decided they'd like to have some shots of themselves enjoying the game. Just like tourists do. Only these tourists had been dead for five hours and I didn't even know they were there.

Stuff like that happens to me all the time. If there's a ghost anywhere near my camera, they can't resist crowding up my photos. Dead people are funny that way. Love getting their pictures taken. Personally, I find it pretty annoying.

When I first figured out I had this talent for taking pictures of the dearly departed I responded like any sane human being would: tossed my camera in a trash can and doused it with lighter fluid.

Torched it.

When it kept happening with the next camera I bought, and every other one after that, I probably should have taken up needlepoint or something. But I couldn't. I'm a photographer. Not a great one, but I'm better at this than anything else I've ever tried in my life, so I decided to stick with it. And besides, thanks to a series of misadventures I had back when I was working forensics, I discovered my talent could actually come in handy now and then.

A case in point...

"While you were in with Mr Bratz, a call came for you, Kirby," said the delightful Imelda.

"Oh yeah? Who from?"

"Toller, over at homicide."

"And what did my good buddy Detective Toller have to say?"

"He said you should take a cab to 23rd and Liscombe right away."

"Did he say why?"

"Said they found something you might find interesting. A present from Zembla."

It's a good thing I wasn't drinking at the time, because if I had been my double-take would have been upgraded to a spit-take. Not the kind of thing that would win the affections of a delicate flower like Imelda. Either way, she noticed my shocked look and asked: "Who's Zembla, Kirby?"

"Not who, Imelda. Where. Nova Zembla. It's a distant, northern land. Cold. Ice cold."

I left it at that: cryptic. Imelda has a library card.

You see, I get a little cranky whenever the subject of Nova Zembla comes up. Stems from a little bit of nastiness Toller and I got mixed up in a few weeks earlier. A couple rat-eaten bodies had been found in a stretch of sewer that, rumor had it, was haunted. One of the

corpses was supposed to be that of a sewer worker named Carl Macon; the other was the Ambassador of—you guessed it—Nova Zembla. And while Toller and I were investigating their murder, we were attacked by a wrench-wielding civil servant name of Marco Dinelli. Toller managed to save both of our bacons by shooting Dinelli, but that stranded us in the sewer for over an hour. Not pleasant.

After we got out, the wrench was examined and it turned out to be the same one which was used to off Macon and the Ambassador, so case closed: Dinelli was a maniac who was killing people and leaving their bodies in the sewer.

That's the official story, anyway. In all of its nonsensical glory.

Thing is, I took a couple photos that seemed to contradict a few things. First off, the rat population down there contained a sizeable community of albino lab rats, which isn't exactly all systems' normal for New York's sewers. And second, I got a shot of the ghosts of our murder victims and they weren't Macon and the Ambassador of Nova Zembla: they were a couple of winos. Now my photos can't be used as evidence in a court of law, obviously, so Toller did a little investigating on his own and heard tell of a couple of local down-on-their-luck cases name of John Frankly and Harry the Lunger who had disappeared recently. Could they be the ones who were actually murdered and then left behind to look like Macon and the Ambassador? Could all this be some plot to cover up a defection or some kind of nefarious covert operation? That was certainly my thinking—Toller's too—and the theory seemed to jive with the coroner's report which showed that one of the murder victims did indeed suffer from tuberculosis. You'd think that'd be enough to reopen the case, but in this case you'd be mistaken. City Hall was afraid there'd be an international incident if it turned out these murders were used to cover up the disappearance of a foreign dignitary, so they stuck to the maniac story.

Stuff like that burns me up, so I was more than happy to head down to 23rd and Liscombe and see what Toller had turned up.

When the cab let me off at the corner, I wasn't surprised to see a few yards down the block a row of three police cars and a little crowd—not more than ten or eleven factory workers on their lunch break—gathering around a circle of police tape. I was surprised though to note that I was only six blocks from the manhole Toller and I'd descended with Marco Dinelli just be-

fore he tried to kill us. Couldn't be a coincidence that bad things kept happening in this neighborhood. I just wish I didn't have to keep coming back here. It was a terrible place for people to hang out. All iron foundries and textile mills. The air stank of industry. I lifted up my camera and snapped off a photo of the crowd and the crime scene in long shot.

I walked up to the police tape and Toller waved to a uniform to let me through. I joined him by a large hole in the pavement. A couple shovels and picks lay nearby, a jack hammer and compressor further on. A crime-scene photographer was crouched down trying to get a good shot of the bottom of the pit.

Down there lay a dusty burlap sack. It was torn open to reveal the jutting ribs of a human skeleton. Tissue still clung to the bones. The body couldn't be too old.

"Look familiar?" Toller asked me.

"No. What kind of a question is that?"

"Look closer."

I bent down and looked at the corpse. The burlap and the pavement had preserved things pretty well. I hadn't worked in forensics long, but I'd seen photos of damage like this before. The flesh had been chewed away.

"Rats?" I asked.

"Artie's been down here himself," Toller said, referring to Arthur York the city's chief coroner. "He'll have to take a closer look down at the morgue to confirm things, but that's what he thinks too."

"Macon?"

"Maybe. Too soon to say. But it looks like this road crew has just dug up a problem the city was hoping would stay buried."

"How inconvenient," I said as I pulled out my camera and took a few photos of my own.

There was really nothing else I could do there, not being a cop any more, or a crime-scene photographer for that matter. So I thanked Toller for asking me down then headed back across town to my place.

I went into my bathroom, pulled the black curtain I'd installed across the door, tacked down some thick fabric over the window, pulled the chemicals from under my sink, and switched the white lightbulb for a red one. Half an hour later, I had developed the photos I'd taken and had them hanging on a string that ran the length of the bathroom.

Murder scenes and grave sites: prime hangouts for ghosts.

The shots I'd taken of the body were ordinary and uninformative, but when I looked at the

picture of the crimescene in longshot, I went straight out to my phone and dialed Toller at homicide.

"What's up, Kirby?" he asked when I finally got him on the phone.

"Keep digging," I replied.

It took a few days to sort things out, but once the picks and shovels had been put away, they'd uncovered twenty bodies in total from underneath 23rd Avenue, all of them in similar shape to the first: flesh chewed away by rats, wrapped in burlap and dumped. Not a pretty scene.

And after some double checking it was confirmed that all the bodies were of homeless males who had gone missing over the last year: drunks and jobless men the city had forgotten and were left to beg the streets or languish in Bowry rooming houses, making their living off petty thefts. And as history had proven, they were men no one would notice had disappeared.

The photo I'd taken told me the cops could expect at least this much. In addition to the cluster of police, city workers and onlookers I'd framed in the center of the shot, there also stood before my lens a row of grim-faced men. It was not hard to tell from their appearance that in life they were hardluck cases who had become angry spirits in death haunting their own unmarked grave.

The question then was how did they get there? And the city foreman who oversaw the excavation was able to fill in part of that mystery. Apparently, the stretch of road where the bodies had been found had only been paved four months ago. The entire street had been dug up to replace a length of damaged storm drain. And they would've never found the bodies, either, except that that last body must have been buried shortly after the roadcrew had started work, and the grave not backfilled properly, because it only took about six weeks for a nasty pothole to form. Hence the need to dig the street up again. More interesting than all this, however, was that when the foreman checked his work rosters to see who had been on the city crew that installed the new storm drain, he found right there in the middle of the list the name of our missing friend, the elusive, the mysterious, the man of the hour, Carl Macon.

All this came out the day the excavation finished and the Coroner's Office released its preliminary findings. That same day, Toller called a little meeting in his office with everybody involved in the investigation. He even invited me down because of my connection to case involving Macon's disappearance. Don't worry,

though. He's not stupid enough to let the other boys-in-blue know about the pics of spooks I'd taken. He said I was a photographer working on spec with the Department.

Anyway, once he'd filled us in on the Macon connection, he gave us the last few details from the coroner's report.

". . . state of decay suggests they were killed over the course of the last year," he said, paraphrasing from the pages laid out on the desk in front of him. "Bodies one through twelve were killed by blunt objects then devoured by rodents. Thirteen through eighteen were killed by some kind of poison then devoured. Nineteen and twenty, however, all evidence seems to indicate were devoured. . . alive." The other officers in the room, four in all, shuffled uneasily and muttered at this. Toller continued: "Teeth marks indicate the corpses were eaten by rats. And, based on how much a rat can consume in a sitting, and how the tissue consumption seems to have occurred over a short period of time, it looks like a large number of rats were involved. Definitely over a hundred. Could be closer to a thousand." He closed the file folder. "That's all we've got for now. But, based on our investigation of the Macon disappearance, I think it's safe to say the two cases are connected. That means we have twenty-two dead homeless men, and a missing city worker and ambassador. It's a bad situation. And whoever is doing this with the rats —Macon or whoever—is a monster. Any suggestions on how we find him?"

The room was silent as the seasoned law-enforcement officers pondered their various options.

"Pity we can't find out where he's buying his rat chow," I offered.

The detectives laughed uncomfortably, thinking I was making a joke. Toller just stared at me.

"I mean," I continued, "he can't just be feeding them. . . people. Can he? Twenty bodies over twelve months for a thousand rats. Doesn't add up."

"Rats breed, Kirby," said one of the detectives. "Creep like this probably feeds' em to each other."

"Yeah, Kirby," said another. "He probably feeds' em garbage or something."

Toller cut in: "No. Wait a second. Kirby's right. Maybe not about the food, but the rats. A thousand rats is a lot to be keeping around. Got to be hard to keep them under wraps. There must be some sign of them somewhere. It's as good a place as any to start. In the meantime —" And he kept on talking about procedure and other

leads and all those “cop things” I never could keep straight. I just half listened and smiled to myself. Waited for everybody to pack it in.

Once the other detectives had gone and I was grabbing my hat, getting ready to leave, Toller said: “Nice work with those photos, Kirby. I’d say we should go for a drink, but I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“No problem, Toller,” I replied. “Another time. Keep me informed how the investigation goes, will ya?”

“Anything juicy turns up, you’ll be the first to know.”

As I was walking home, I just kept thinking about the case. And the rats.

Of course there were cops searching the sewers for more sign of those lab rats we’d seen down there before. They were hoping to find out where they came from.

And of course, the cops had already questioned all the businesses and workers in the neighborhood of 23rd and Liscombe. Probably the second time they’d done that too since they went over that neighborhood with a fine tooth and comb after we were attacked by Dinelli in the sewer.

And of course, I’m not a cop any more, so I’m supposed to mind my own business and take pictures of baseball games. But I couldn’t stop thinking about the rats.

The kid in the building next to mine has a pet mouse. Disgusting thing, if you ask me, but his dad lets him keep it. Even made the kid a little cage out of a wood and screen so he can take the rodent out and show him around. And one thing I remembered about that cage is that he always kept sawdust shavings on the bottom otherwise the animal would smell to high heaven and probably get sick.

Sawdust shavings.

I was thinking about sawdust shavings and rats when I took the cab down 23rd Avenue. There are blocks and blocks of factories and industrial buildings down there, and that got me wondering what if you needed to take care of a thousand rats, what better way to keep them from stinking up your hideout than to put sawdust in their cage? And what better way to get sawdust for your rats than to steal it from your neighbors? So when the cab dropped me off, I headed off to see if could find a saw mill or a wood working shop or something like that.

And I’ll be damned, I found one.

Four blocks off 23rd there was a carpentry shop—built doorframes or something, I don’t remember. It didn’t matter because out back of the building there was a dumpster piled high with wood shavings. I looked around, then

found myself a spot in the shadows where I could keep an eye on things unobserved, and staked the place out. Waited to see if somebody came by.

Now you’re probably saying to yourself this was all awfully lucky. Convenient even, that I just happened to find what I was looking for without too much trouble. I might’ve thought that too as I settled into that smelly corner of the alley and watched the night wear on; but I didn’t, because I figure if the spirits of fortune give you a present, you say “thank you,” and use it to the best of your abilities. Not only is it the polite thing to do, it’s smart. Gift horses, their mouths, and not looking therein... that sort of thing.

And you’re also probably thinking, okay Kirby, you go looking for the woodshop and Bingo! and you found it. You’re the *dio dei dadi*. But there’s no way you’ll luck out a second time and find the badguy’s lair just by sitting in an alley and waiting for them to come by and show you the way.

Not so fast, I reply. You’re forgetting the Monte Carlo Fallacy, which says that just because you rolled a seven a moment ago in no way affects your odds of rolling a seven again.

Well, I rolled dem bones—and you can holler all you want about me using capped dice—but you’ll never guess who came nosing around at 2AM with a dufflebag over his arm...

Okay, you guessed it...

Carl Macon. I recognized him from a picture the city foreman had of the crew. And what was Carl doing lurking about behind a carpentry shop so late at night? Well, he started by climbing into the dumpster, filling his duffel with wood shavings, then he jumped out, and took off down the street.

So I followed him. *Quiet-like*.

And he was slinking in and out of alleys and sidestreets, and hustling through parking-lots and abandoned buildings, taking one of those “make sure you’re not followed” routes. And he was pretty good at it, I’ll give him that, because it only took him about twenty minutes to shake his tail. His tail being me, of course. So there I am, standing in some dank little nook between two fish-rendering plants, scratching my head—*quiet-like*—wondering where he got to, when WHAM! I get sapped from behind and down I go...

I woke up tied to a chair in the middle of a warehouse. My head ached, I felt sick to my stomach, and on top of all that there was this guy standing over me, bent down so he could get his face right up close to mine.

I'd never seen him before, but it was pretty obvious from the way he dressed that he was an aristocratic type: tidy little moustache under his nose, waxed up into two perfect curls; his lips all glossy, red and puckered; his hair neatly oiled and parted; and he was wearing a trim, pin-striped suit. I'll be damned but he even had the monocle. He smiled at me.

"Well, well, well. Our guest seems to be arousing from his nighty-night," he said in an accent I'd never heard before. "Seems your striking of his noggin did not murder him much, Karlus. You're learning. Bravo!"

"Wait. Don't tell me, let me guess," I said. "Zemblan Ambassador?"

"Piotr Svendross, Ambassador to Her Highness, the Queen of Nova Zembla, at your service," he said, bowing. "But you are having me from a disadvantaged position. You, I do not know. I routed through your trousers but nothing was upcoming. No badges of officialdom. No papers of any kind. You carry only a camera and a few bucks. You were intending perhaps to be pressing me?"

I just stared at him, dumbfounded.

"From a *newspaper*, maybe?" he said. "Your editor sent you out sniffing crotches after the missing me, eh?"

"No, I'm a wildlife photographer," I said. "Pictures of birds and lions. That's my game."

"Ha! Look at the harlequin," he said over his shoulder, directing this comment to two men behind him. They were standing by a row of crates—ten in total—and a little booth that had been built against one wall. One of the men was short and older looking, his hair a tangle of grey, and he was wearing a long white lab coat. The other was the muscle-bound Macon.

"Roll out your punchlines if it tickles you," the ambassador said to me. "But you were not sneaking after Karlus because of whimsy. I am thinking it is ratties you are after, Mister Big Game Hunter. Well, you have found that."

He turned around and shouted, "Karlus! Lose the vermin!" And the man I knew Carl Macon stepped to the front of a crate, bent down and lifted a hatch on it. Then, he walked down the row of crates, opening each in turn and as he did, I looked closer and realised that they weren't crates at all. They were rat cages. The sides were made of thick wire screens, and their frames were made of some kind of metal. Inside of each, layers were stacked one on top of another like the storeys of an apartment building, and the floor of each was covered in wood shavings.

Oh, and rats. Lots and lots of rats. Albino ones like scientists keep in labs and like the ones Toller and I found in the sewers. And as

soon as their cages were opened, it only took them a moment to realize they had been set free and they started to leap eagerly onto the floor of the warehouse.

The estimate Artie put in his report must have been conservative, because there had to be thousands of rats streaming from those cages. In only a few moments the entire floor was covered in a moving carpet of white rodents. They skittered everywhere. The braver ones would sniff at my shoes while others wandered under my chair where I couldn't see them.

The Zemblan Ambassador paid them no mind, he merely kicked at them if they got too close.

"They look harmless, no? So cute their twitching noses," he said. Behind him, Carl and the other man stepped into the booth through a door in its side and closed themselves into it. "But you. You seem to have no affections for my pets. Perhaps it is you have some understanding of the devices to which I am putting them?"

"You're killing people with them," I said, not bothering to conceal the fear in my voice. Hey, I'm a sports photographer, not a hero.

"Oh yes. Too true. Too true. But do you know how it is that I inspire them to such murderous deeds?"

"Starve them, I guess," I said, "And let them loose."

"No, no, no, no, no. So crude are you imaginings. Starving rats is useless. They would happily be as cannibals with one another if we didn't feed them. Fortunately, this is an age of science. Our methods are sophistication supreme. Allow me to introduce my conspirators," he said, stretching out a hand to indicate the men in the booth. "You no doubt have intimations of my muscle-boy. You have him as Carl Macon, but he is a native of our land. Karlus Kristianabad is his given name. He has been inserted in you Americans for many years. Plotting for Zembla."

Carl—or Karlus, rather—waved to me through the window in the front of the booth.

"He is mere labor, though. You may ignore him," the ambassador continued. "The real genius in this business stands beside him: Doctor Helge Stantz."

The man in the lab coat waved at me and smiled cruelly.

"You would be amazingly if you knew his brains as I do. He is a wizard. A black sorcerer of the sciences. These rats, you take for instance," he said as he bent down, lifted one up by its tail and held it aloft. "These are no simple pests you can snap in a trap. Helge mixed up a chemical brew and poop!" he mimed us-

ing a hypodermic on the rat, “A needle in the side and they are changed. Sensitive to his radio waves. Tuned to his machine. He flips a switch and this rat becomes as crazy as next Tuesday. Hungry beyond measure. But with a tongue that is only for human meat.” He dropped the rat on my chest. It looked up at me, sniffed at my chin then squeaked and scampered down the length of my body and dropped to the floor. “But until he flips the switch, they are timid as the hummingbird. Drink only nectar from the flowers. It is marvellous this technology, no?”

“But why did you kill all those people?” I asked.

“Helge’s machine wanted testing.”

“That was twenty-two men your rats murdered.”

“How is you Americans say this? One must break a few eggs if they are to make a chicken? And as I am speaking of chicken, it reminds that now it is time for me to break your egg I’m afraid, my friend.”

“What?”

“Kill you, of course.”

He strode across the room towards the booth. I struggled against my bonds, trying to get free, but Macon had tied my feet and hands far too tightly. At best I could tip the chair over, but did not relish the idea of getting any closer to the rats.

“Twenty-two people you killed,” I said. “Your machine can’t possibly need more testing.”

The ambassador was in the booth now with Karlus and Doctor Stantz, the door sealed behind them. He spoke into a microphone and I could hear his voice from a loudspeaker mounted on the wall. “Testing, no. It works lovely. But I cannot just pistol you. I must probe you first. Find out what it is you know. Who you work for. And my rats can be very persuasive in the questioning. Flick the switch on and ask a question. Flick it off when you answer. Simplicity is best with regards to interrogation. And so, let us begin. Flick your switch, Helge.”

I heard the hum of electrical apparatus starting up and saw a red bulb on the front of the booth light up. At that moment, every rat in the stopped what it was doing, sniffed the air then turned to face me. Their eyes were red, the hair on their backs stood on end, and as they surged towards me—an albino tide of rodent fury—they made a horrible shrieking noise.

“Alright! Alright!” I shouted as the first of the rats raced up my pant leg to get at my unprotected face. “I’ll tell you what I know! All of it!”

The red light went out. The rats stopped dead in their tracks. There were four of them on my

stomach looking up at me with what I swear was a look of puzzlement. They got frightened and fled back down onto the floor.

“Yes...” the ambassador said into the microphone.

Over the preceding few weeks I’d come up with a lot of bizarre theories to explain the disappearance of Macon and the ambassador and the presence of lab rats in the sewers. But as ridiculous as my ideas were, I’ll say this for them: none of them involved chemically altered, radio-controlled rats. Still, I had to tell him something so I went with whichever of my theories came to mind first, no matter how insane it was. “It’s about the Russians!” I shouted.

“And...”

“And the Finns!”

The ambassador covered the microphone with his hand and spoke hurriedly with Karlus and the Doctor. They concluded their conversation in a round of nods, then he released the mic and spoke into it again: “Please continue.”

“They’re after Zembla’s oil and are trying to come up with a reason to invade, so you want to terrorize their dignitaries so that they’ll abandon their plans.”

“Go on...”

“So you’re planning to put killer attack rats on pontoon boats and float them through the sewers and release them into the Embassies of the Soviet Union and Finland! To empty the sewers so you could move through them freely you had to spread the rumor that they were haunted by a Phantom Plumber, so you planted bodies there and had Macon fake ghostly phenomena. But once everything was underway you revealed your plans to your government. And they told you it was crazy and cancelled it!”

“Go on...”

“So you had to fake your death so you could defy the queen and carry out your plans in secret!”

“And why would myself, a patriot, want to do this thing? Defy my queen?” asked the ambassador.

I stammered. I didn’t have a clue but I guessed anyway: “You’re in love with her!” I shouted.

“By the Holy Stone of Onhava Castle, he knows everything,” the ambassador said awestruck. “Who have you told this to?”

“Everybody. The police. City hall. The press. They’ll all be here any moment now. I was an advance spy sent to get pictures of your operation and if I don’t report in they’ll send in a squad of cops to clear out the whole neighborhood!”

There was a moment of silence, then the ambassador said finally: “A pity. Then I guess

we may as well let my ratties run wild. Helge. The switch.”

The red light on the booth lit up again. The fury of the rats was ignited. Their murderous shriek went up, and they surged towards me.

I prepared myself to feel the first sting of their teeth biting into me, but then the strangest thing happened.

As the circle of rats closed in, the ones that came close to me would jump away as though frightened, then turn and scamper off frantically. To wave after wave of rats this happened. It was as though an invisible wall encircled my chair—a wall of fear—that the rats could not get through.

Thwarted in their efforts to get at me, loose in the warehouse, angry, and in the throes of an unnatural hunger, the rats raced about seeking some food source to sate themselves.

It was then that I learned something very important: Don't ever underestimate a rat. They may be vermin, but when they are desperate, hungry or frightened, and especially if they've been chemically altered and enraged by a radio signal, they can be clever and resourceful vermin.

It didn't take long, you see, for the rats to realize there were people in the booth—people they could eat—and once they decided to get in, this wall, no matter how carefully constructed it was, would not stand against them.

“Ambassador Svendross,” I heard Karlus shout. “The rats are getting in. They're forcing the boards.”

“No it is impossible,” replied the ambassador. “Stop them. Step on them!”

The screeching of the rats grew louder as they got closer to their prey. They climbed on top of one another in a great mass that crashed against the sides of the booth like an albino wave. I could hear wood split.

“Helge. Stop your machine! Flick your switch, Helge. Flick it!”

“It won't shut off!” I heard the scientist say.”

“Tug the plug, you foolish man! Rip out the wires!”

Helge's head disappeared from the window, as he bent down to reach under his machinery and rip out its guts. The machine hum did not stop, and I heard him scream in agony.

The red light remained on. I could see the boards on the front of the booth spread apart, split. And Karlus and Ambassador Svendross screamed in horror as the rats began to fill up the little space they hid in.

Shortly, their bodies sank from view and I could hear them no more.

Through it all, I sat tied to the chair, helpless. Occasionally, a group of rats would break away from the main hoard and make towards me. But every time they did, they would only get so far, then shriek in terror, turn tail, and run from me.

After a long time like this had passed and the thrashings of the three Zemblans had long since stopped, the red light suddenly faded. The rats in their mindless fury must have done by accident what Doctor Helge Stantz couldn't do in time: break the rat-control machine.

And once it ceased functioning, those rodents became tame creatures once more, and wandered about the warehouse, oblivious to the carnage they'd just caused.

I must have sat there for over an hour tied to that chair, watching happy rodents with full bellies scurry about the warehouse. And after a time I could see what the ambassador meant. They were kind of cute. Even considering the way the fur on their noses had gone all red with Zemblan blood.

Finally, I heard a door get smashed in and a group of uniformed police officers streamed into the room. Toller was at the head of them and the moment he saw me he came over and cut my bonds.

“What the devil happened here?” he asked me.

“I'll explain later,” I said. “First, tell me how you knew to find me here.”

“Anonymous tip. Got a phonecall saying we should get a bunch of cops down here if we wanted to catch the Rat Killer. We got here as fast as we could.”

“You didn't get here nearly fast enough,” I said.

And that was that. Although I did make sure to get a photo of Toller standing in front of the rat cages... as a keepsake.

And of course, you probably already know what I found in that photograph after I developed it so, I don't have to tell you.

But I will anyway: Twenty-two ghosts were gathered around Toller. The ghosts of twenty-two deceased winos and bums and hardluck cases. Their arms were thrown around one-another's shoulders. There was a look of triumph on their faces.

I framed that picture. Keep it next to my bed. The city forgot those men, but I won't. ♪



ENDNOTES

Just have a few last things to clear up:

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