

The Invisible Killer

by Emile C. Tepperman, 1899-1951

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It seemed physically impossible, yet Professor Cassius Parsons saw with his own eyes the man reach suddenly for his throat—and strangle himself to death! The weirdest, most fascinating murder angle ever introduced in a detective story...

Illustration:

The man in shirtsleeves seemed to do a dreadful, macabre dance...

Chapter I

The Warning of the Voice.

THE small laboratory of Professor Cassius Parsons was white and clean, and amazingly orderly. Young Parsons himself was a studious looking, lean man of uncertain age, with an almost apologetic air—which changed to annoyance when his secretary announced Miss Luddington and Mr. Rudge.

As Enid Luddington was ushered into the laboratory, Professor Parsons sighed, as if unwilling to leave his retorts and test-tubes, even for so appealingly beautiful a girl as Enid. He reached for a pair of spectacles lying beside him, put them on. Queerly enough, though he never seemed to need glasses when working upon the most delicate tasks of qualitative chemistry or biological experimentation, he always wore them when talking to people. For him, those specs were a sort of defensive armor against the intrusion of human beings into the private shell of his scientific preoccupation.

Enid Luddington was petite and vivacious, with reddish-brown hair and a small uptilted nose. She looked around the spic-and-span laboratory with evident astonishment. She threw a quick glance to the short, slightly bald man who accompanied her.

"This," she said, "doesn't look to me like the office of a man who makes his living by solving crimes!"

Her escort shrugged. He had a high, intelligent forehead, but his face was thin and hungry looking. There was intense interest in his eyes as he surveyed the highly technical equipment surrounding them. All of it was so compactly arranged as to fit into a space some ten feet long by four feet wide.

"It's a remarkable laboratory," he said.

Enid Luddington's gaze lighted on an instrument in one corner, with a mercury line, and a peculiar stop-watch apparatus. "Ooh!" she exclaimed, putting her hand out to it. "What's this?"

Professor Cassius Parsons had been eyeing them both with disfavor, though his disfavor was somewhat tempered by unwilling admiration for Enid.

"Please do not touch that," he told her stiffly. "It is a sphygmochronograph—an extremely delicate instrument. I use it for checking the movement of my pulse when I am engaged in intricate research. And now, I shall be obliged if you will quickly state your business. I must leave on a trip shortly—"

"Oh, no!" Enid Luddington broke in. "You mustn't go on any trip. We—that is, my cousin, Frank Rudge and I—have a case for you which you *must* take. My father is Eustace Luddington. Between him and my Uncle Norman, they own half the coal mines in Pennsylvania. So you see we have enough money to pay any fee you ask. You *must* come to Black Acres, our estate in Pennsylvania. There's been a murder. My sister Cleo's maid—"

Professor Cassius Parsons frowned. "My dear young lady, I am not interested in the amount of money possessed by your father and your uncle. Neither am I interested in the murder of your sister Cleo's maid. I regret that I cannot go with you to Black Acres, as I have another matter—"

"But," she broke in, puzzled, "aren't you the Professor Cassius Parsons who calls himself *Crime Consultants, Incorporated*? Aren't you the former professor of criminology at Harvard who is conducting independent research under an endowment from a joint fund contributed by the associated Police Departments of all the large cities in the country?"

He nodded. "That is true, Miss Luddington. I evolved the theory of bringing science to the scene of the crime. My crime laboratory truck, which is equipped as a replica of this compact laboratory, brings every device of modern scientific criminology to the very spot where a crime has been committed, thus facilitating the necessary investigation."

Enid's cousin, Frank Rudge, had been looking around avidly. "You've got some wonderful equipment here, Professor. I'm an inventor myself, so I can appreciate all this. Perhaps you've heard of me? I am the man who perfected the mining process by which the Luddingtons were able to make a fortune from practically useless mines."

Enid Luddington didn't give Professor Parsons an opportunity to respond. "You *must* take this case, Professor. Some one is threatening to wipe out the entire Luddington family by—*auto-strangulation!*"

Cassius Parsons raised his eyebrows, "Auto-strangulation? That would be suicide."

"No, no! It's a sort of hypnotism by remote control. We are told we will choke ourselves to death with our own hands!"

Professor Parsons smiled fleetingly. "I should be extremely interested in viewing such a phenomenon. Aside from the fact that it is impossible to compel a subject to commit suicide by means of hypnotism, I assure you that to choke oneself to death with one's own bare hands is an impossible feat."

Frank Rudge, the bald-headed inventor, laughed shortly and bitterly. "That's what I thought, Professor. But Cleo's maid was actually found strangled to death—with her own hands gripping her throat."

"And the *voice!*" Enid Luddington said in a suddenly frightened whisper. "I get cold prickles whenever I think of that *voice*. It calls up on the phone, and we can't trace it, and it tells us that we shall all die the strangling death!"

"You see," Frank Rudge explained, "Eustace and Norman Luddington have made a tremendous fortune out of their coal mines. But many men have died in those mines. Only a couple of months ago, a shaft caved in, and forty men suffocated to death. This—er—voice that calls up seems to want to visit the same sort of strangling death on all the Luddingtons."

Professor Parsons had listened to both of them with lagging interest. His gaze was straying out of the casement window, across the gorgeous vista of the Hudson River. This laboratory of his was located in a small brownstone house in the Washington Heights section of New York City, high above the Hudson. From the window one could see far out into Jersey, and downward at an angle to the George Washington Bridge.

Enid Luddington, following his gaze, went over to the window, where a long-range telescope was set upon a revolving tripod. Without asking for permission, she tilted the telescope downward and applied her eye to it.

"Dad is coming here to see you," she told Professor Parsons. "I made him promise. When he comes, he'll *make* you agree to come out to Black Acres with us."

"Why don't you consult the local police?" Cassius Parsons asked testily. "They should be able to protect you. I am not a bodyguard—"

Frank Rudge laughed hollowly. "Don't be silly, Professor. The Luddingtons are a law unto themselves out there on Black Acres. They'd no more think of calling in the local police, than of riding in the subway. Enid's father, Eustace, always rides around with a special guard anyway."

THE phone rang just then; and Professor Parsons picked it up. A queer mouthy voice at the other end said, "Professor Parsons, do you believe that I could compel you to strangle yourself to death with your own hands?"

The Professor frowned into the instrument.

"Emphatically no!" he said. Almost magically his hands began to work with deft, efficient speed. He moved a peculiar-looking instrument along the bench, and screwed a rubber tube with a metal flange on to the end of the telephone receiver. "However, your theory intrigues me. I should be glad to hear more of it." He now had the strange-looking apparatus hooked up to the receiver, and four automatic pencils, propelled by metal arms each on a separate cable, began to trace wavering lines on four sheets of graph paper in the machine, as the voice of the other end chuckled and proceeded.

"I see that you are an unbeliever. You will want to be convinced by an actual demonstration. After the demonstration, Professor, I suggest that you turn down the request of Enid Luddington to come to Black Acres. Otherwise, I assure you that you will strangle yourself with your hands, just as all the Luddingtons are going to do. I mean to wipe them out, to make them suffer as those poor miners suffered. And if you insist on butting in, you shall share their fate!"

Professor Parsons was watching the moving pencils on the graph chart.

"My dear Mr. Voice," he said, "I had no intention of accepting this case before you called. But now I am growing interested."

"Well, forget your interest, Professor. I suggest you turn your telescope on the George Washington Bridge—in about two minutes. You will see what I mean."

There was a click, and the wire went dead. Enid Luddington and Frank Rudge were watching the four graph pencils in the machine with puzzlement. Cassius Parsons explained.

"This is a *vocalometer*—a device which I myself perfected. By means of this instrument I can measure the vocal chords of anyone talking on the phone, so that I have a permanent record—not only of his voice—but of the structure of his throat. In this case, either by comparison with these graphs, or by examination of the throat—if such an opportunity should arise—I shall be able to identify the man who just spoke to me."

Enid Luddington stared at him, goggle-eyed. "But—but how can you do all that—"

Parsons smiled. "By applying the principle of ionization to the voice vibrations, and analyzing the fibres of those vibrations. But never mind that. Do you, or Mr. Rudge, know who just called me?"

"Why—why—should *we* know?"

"Because," he told her gravely, "unless I am the victim of a practical joke, that man was the one who has been calling your family. He threatened me. And he warned me that he would give a practical demonstration of his powers, on the George Washington Bridge down there within about two minutes."

Enid Luddington's face went white. "Why—Dad's coming across that bridge! He's coming here from New Jersey. He promised to meet me here at your laboratory!"

With trembling hands she seized the telescope and applied her eye to it. "There! There are the cars! See, he always travels with a bodyguard. Nathaniel Kimber—that's my brother-in-law, Cleo's husband—is in the first car. And that long, black twelve-cylinder job is dad's car. And behind him is the small sedan with two of the Special Police from the mines."

PROFESSOR PARSONS swung out an arm of the telescope, which opened into a periscope device allowing two people to look through the telescope at the same time. The powerful lens brought those three cars up close, and he could clearly see the driver of the first, whom Enid had named as Nathaniel Kimber.

"Nat is the general manager of the mining properties," she explained as they both watched the procession. "See how Dad is crowding him? Nat never likes to travel fast, so Dad always makes him drive ahead, and then honks him till he gets him up to eighty or ninety. They must be going seventy across the bridge now!"

In the second car, they could clearly see the hawk-like countenance of old Eustace Luddington, Enid's father. And suddenly, without warning of any kind, they saw Eustace Luddington do a mad and inexplicable thing.

He seemed suddenly to squirm in his seat and to thrust himself upward, with his foot pressing against the accelerator. Then he deliberately took both hands from the wheel, raised them to his throat, as if he would strangle himself to death!

The heavy coupé, without any direction from the wheel, roared ahead like a thunderous projectile. It sideswiped the sedan of Nathaniel Kimber, just ahead. The glancing blow deflected Luddington's car from the road, sent it flying at a tangent across the bridge toward the far railing. It jumped the concrete curb there, smashed into the railing, tore through it with an explosive crash. Flames burst from the car as it went hurtling end-over-end off the bridge and down, down into the waters of the Hudson River.

There was a vast sputtering and crackling as the water engulfed the lurid flames. And then it was all over, and there was nothing on the surface of the water. Up on the bridge they could see Nathaniel Kimber running crazily toward the bridge rail to peer over, and the two Special Police from the last car running to join him, and a Bridge Authority Patrol Car racing to the point of the accident.

Professor Cassius Parsons took his eye from the telescope. There was a queer glint in it. He turned and saw that Enid Luddington had fainted, and was in the arms of Frank Rudge, her cousin.

Absently, Professor Parsons took down from a rack above the bench a vial of carbonate of ammonia which he handed to Rudge. "Let her inhale that," he said. And then he added, "You know, I think I shall go to Black Acres. I have just witnessed the impossible. But if the impossible is possible, then science is fallible." He sighed. "It is a direct challenge to the scientific mind. Yes, I shall go to Black Acres. Tomorrow, after my lecture before the Police Chiefs of America!"

Chapter II

The Voice Commands.

THE great Luddington house at Black Acres was all of stone. Built out of the sweat of thousands of grimy miners in black and noisome shafts, it somehow mirrored the hardness and the ruthlessness by which Eustace and Norman Luddington had acquired their immense wealth.

And now that Eustace Luddington was dead, it was characteristic of Norman Luddington that as he sat here in the huge vaulted living room, he mourned not nor did he weep; but he gave all his thought to his own safety. He sat in the great plush armchair near the fireplace, and his cold grey eyes studied the rest of his ill-assorted family that was gathered there.

Enid Luddington was there, and Cleo her sister. Cleo was as different from Enid as it is possible for two sisters to be. Tall and statuesque, she always preferred to stand rather than sit, because it showed off her figure to better advantage. Frank Rudge was there, sitting at the other end of the room, with his eyes on the rug. In the presence of old dour Norman Luddington, Frank Rudge was always sullen and brooding. Brilliant chemist that he was, he had developed many processes for improving the coal from the Luddington mines; but he had never been permitted to break away on his own. Now, at forty, he was still dependent upon Norman Luddington's whim. Nathaniel Kimber was there, gaunt and sallow-faced from lack of sleep. It was he who had failed to protect Eustace Luddington from death on the

George Washington Bridge the day before. His voice was shaking now as he retold the terrible story before the assembled Luddington family.

The sixth person in the room was Basil Fellowes. Fellowes had married into the Luddington family five years ago. He had married a daughter of Norman Luddington, who had died shortly after. He still regarded himself as a member of the family. He was tall, heavily built and broad-shouldered, but he affected a foppish manner of dress, and considered himself a much better man than Nathaniel Kimber. The only other member of the family who exhibited any liking at all for Basil Fellowes was strangely enough, Kimber's wife, Cleo. Even now she was standing at the window with him, engaged in animated but low-voiced conversation, and paying little or no attention at all to her glowering husband, Nathaniel Kimber.

Kimber had just finished telling the story of how Eustace had died, and there was a dead silence in the room. Then old Norman Luddington pushed himself out of the chair by the roaring fireplace. He stared around the room from one to the other of the uncomfortable occupants.

"You all know the situation!" he rasped. "Two weeks ago we began to receive these telephone calls, which could not be traced. The man who called seemed to have a grudge against the Luddington family."

He paused, and glared viciously at Basil Fellowes, who had snickered. "It won't be very hard to find people with a grudge against the Luddingtons!" Fellowes said. "The trick would be to find people who *like* them!"

Norman Luddington's face grew purple. He took a half step forward and then stopped, when Nat Kimber put a hand on his arm. The old man shrugged and went on as if he had not been interrupted.

"This mysterious voice has said the same thing over the phone every day. '*You shall all die like the miners who died to make you rich.*' He meant of course, the regrettable incident where forty of our men were caught in a slide in Mine Number Sixteen, and suffocated to death."

Fellowes interrupted again. "You omit to mention, dear father-in-law, that those forty miners died because of the criminal negligence of Eustace and yourself, in forcing them to work in a shaft which should have been condemned as unsafe."

Nathaniel Kimber left the old man's side, crossed the room swiftly and faced his brother-in-law. "Close that mouth of yours," he snapped, "or I'll close it for you! And get away from my wife!"

Cleo Luddington threw a glance of hatred at her husband, and then gave Basil Fellowes a smile. "Don't be a boor, Nat. If you had half the manners of Basil, you'd never talk to him like that."

Nat Kimber's face was twisted in anger. "Yeah? Well let's see how he likes this!" He swung with his right, and caught Basil Fellowes in the side of the jaw. Fellowes fell backward, caught himself against one of the drapes, and regained his balance. His hand darted to his hip pocket.

"Damn you, Nat, you can't do that to me!" He brought out a small pistol, started to raise it. But Cleo put both hands on his arm. "Don't, Basil! Please be sensible!"

Fellowes hesitated, scowled at Kimber, felt his jaw, and slowly put the pistol away. "All right, Cleo. I'll let it pass—this time!"

Kimber grinned crookedly, and walked unconcernedly away.

It took several minutes for the excitement to subside. During all of it Frank Rudge, the chemist, had not even once raised his head from his hands. And slim little Enid Luddington had watched it all with wide, troubled eyes. Old Norman Luddington stood very still, with a grim smile of expectation upon his thin lips. When the flare-up subsided, he resumed talking as if nothing had happened.

"As I was saying, this mysterious caller has threatened us daily, and though we have made every effort to trace his calls, we considered them the efforts of a crank. But then one of Cleo's maids was found, strangled to death in her room, with her own hands at her throat. It was then that Eustace and I provided ourselves with armed protection. Now it seems that the threats of this unknown are being fulfilled. We must take steps to protect ourselves, and to apprehend—"

Frank Rudge suddenly looked up. "You don't seriously think that some one made Eustace strangle himself by mental suggestion, do you?"

Norman shrugged. "I don't know how it was done. But Eustace is dead. And the rest of us—"

He stopped at a discreet tap on the door, and roared, "Come in!"

An aged, grey-haired manservant entered. "*That man* is on the phone again, Mr. Norman," he said to Luddington. "He wants to talk to you, sir. Shall I plug in the extension?"

He was carrying the extension phone and the cord, and at Norman Luddington's nod he plugged it in.

Nat Kimber whispered, "By God, keep him on the phone. I'll trace his call, all right!" He raced out of the room, and they heard him issuing orders to a couple of the Special Police stationed in the hall.

In the meantime Norman Luddington took the instrument. His hand was shaking. Everyone in the room was tense. Here was the same call they had been receiving every day for a week. And right on the heels of Eustace Luddington's death!

Norman cleared his throat and said, "Well?"

The voice at the other end could be distinctly heard all over the room as it crackled out of the receiver.

"One of you has died! He has felt the doom of suffocation, like the poor devils who have given their lives in the mines for your comfort. *And he did it with his own hands!*"

Norman Luddington demanded hoarsely, "Who are you? What do you want?"

There was a brittle laugh from the phone. "I want nothing, except that every last one of your accursed house shall taste of the strangling doom. At a word from me I could cause every one in that room to throttle himself to death. But it is better that you should do it slowly, one at a time. So you, Norman Luddington, shall be next. I command you now—*strangle yourself to death, and know the horror of suffocation!*"

Already, the others in the room had noticed that Norman Luddington was acting queerly. His hands, holding the phone and the receiver, began to shake as if with palsy. And suddenly he uttered a choked cry and flung the telephone away. A dreadful, smothered scream forced itself from his lips. And then both of his hands flew up to his throat and encircled it awkwardly, squeezing and kneading, pressing at the Adam's Apple in a desperate, unbelievable endeavor to strangle himself.

Basil Fellowes rushed to his side, and Frank Rudge sprang across the room. Nat Kimber, hearing the cries of Enid and Cleo, came charging back among them. The three men crowded around Norman Luddington, trying to tear his hands away from his throat. But to no avail. It was as if those gnarled, bony hands of his were welded there.

And in less than a minute Norman Luddington, the second of the two great coal tycoons, lay mottled and dead on the floor, victim of an unknown's command to strangle himself.

IT was the next evening when young Professor Cassius Parsons drove his small half-ton truck up to the entrance of the Luddington Estate. Black Acres could be entered only by one road, across a small bridge that spanned a natural ravine. At the head of this bridge there was a small guard house, with a man on duty day and night, armed with a rifle.

Professor Parsons descended from the truck and made himself known to the guard, handing the man one of his neatly engraved cards which read,

CRIME CONSULTANTS, INC
NEW YORK CITY

The guard phoned back to the house, and in a moment he came out and opened the gate. "Drive right up to the house, sir." His tone was a trifle more respectful than it had been on first seeing the small truck.

Professor Parsons adjusted his glasses, thanked the man, and drove in. The grounds were well patrolled. Three times he saw armed men with rifles moving about among the numerous outbuildings which surrounded the big house.

As he swung into the gravelled driveway and under the porte cochère, he was met by the entire family. He returned Frank Rudge's grudging nod, and accepted Enid Luddington's hand. She introduced him to the others.

"My sister Cleo. And her husband, Mr. Nathaniel Kimber, whom you met the other day when—" there came a quick catch in her voice, which she mastered at once—"when dad—died. And this is Basil Fellowes—poor Uncle Norman's son-in-law."

Professor Cassius Parsons looked with favor on Enid Luddington, but he acknowledged the nervous greetings of the others stiffly.

"Before—ah—going into the house," he said, "I should like to ask you to place one of your armed men here to—er—guard my truck. It contains very valuable equipment."

Nathaniel Kimber shrugged. He called over one of the Special Police, and stationed the man at the truck. Only then did Cass Parsons permit himself to be led into the vaulted living room.

Enid Luddington seemed to warm to him, and her eyes lost a little of their sombre sadness as she talked to the quiet young professor of crime.

"The body of Uncle Norman is in the library," she told him. "He is to be buried in the morning. We have our own private cemetery, here on the estate. If—if they ever recover dad's body from the Hudson River, we'll—we'll bury him here too. The undertaker has just finished with Uncle Norman."

Professor Cassius Parsons blinked. "You—ah—still persist in not calling in the local police? You have not allowed them to make an autopsy?"

"I should say not!" exclaimed Cleo Kimber, who was standing next to Basil Fellowes. "One of the reasons why we allowed Enid to persuade us to call you in, was because we wish to have no scandal. We do not wish it known that Uncle Norman committed suicide."

The Professor calmly looked at Cleo Luddington Kimber. "Your uncle did not commit suicide, Mrs. Kimber," he said flatly.

"But look here, old fellow," Basil exclaimed. "We all saw him choke himself to death. We couldn't tear his hands away from his neck."

Nathaniel Kimber said, "You don't think this voice over the phone could have exerted some power of suggestion—"

"No, Mr. Kimber. In both the case of Eustace as well as Norman, there was a very lethal agency which brought about death."

Chapter III

The Choking Death.

KIMBER glanced humorously at the others. "After all, Professor, you just got here a few minutes ago. How can you be so sure?"

Professor Cassius Parsons said mildly, "I suggest that you try strangling yourself with your own hands, Mr. Kimber. You will understand what I mean."

They all looked at each other, startled. They had been so close to the two deaths, had actually seen Norman Luddington strangle himself, that it had not occurred to them that it was impossible.

Nathaniel Kimber swore to himself, in a low voice.

Frank Rudge, the chemist, looked interested for the first time since last night. "You think it was poison of some kind?" he asked.

Cass Parsons studied him for a moment. "You are a chemist, Mr. Rudge. What is your opinion?"

Rudge dropped his eyes. "I wouldn't know about poisons. I deal only with industrial chemistry."

"You have a laboratory here on the grounds, I understand?"

Frank Rudge threw a quick glance at Enid, then at Nathaniel Kimber.

"I see some one's been talking to you about me!"

"Only what you yourself told me the other day—plus a bit of investigation on my part." Parsons turned to face the others. "I—ah—should say now, that I have investigated each of you to some extent."

"But why worry about us?" Cleo demanded. "Why don't you find this mysterious voice that is killing us to take revenge for those filthy miners?"

"That will come in due time, Mrs. Kimber. Now, I should like to have your permission to perform an autopsy upon the body of Norman Luddington. You need have no fear of my bungling," he added hastily. "I have a degree in medicine, and I have had considerable experience. I should like—"

"Never!" Cleo shouted. "I'll never agree to cutting up Uncle Norman!"

Nathaniel Kimber looked sourly at his wife. "Why do you object, Cleo?" he asked sardonically. "You never loved Uncle Norman very much. In fact you were only waiting for him and your father to die, so you could divorce me and marry Basil!"

"That's a lie!" Basil Fellowes shouted.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" Professor Cassius Parsons reproved very mildly. "I beg you to remember that there is a dead body lying in this house!" As the two men subsided, he sighed, and said to Enid, "Then I shall forego the advantage of making an autopsy upon your uncle's body. It handicaps me—"

He was interrupted by a hoarse shout from one of the armed men outside the house. Almost at once an alarm bell began to ring somewhere, and two powerful flood-lights were switched on by someone outside on the grounds.

Nathaniel Kimber and the others all rushed to the window, and there, bathed in the floodlights, they saw the thing that had caused the alarm. It was the figure of a man. He was running from one of the outbuildings. He was in his shirtsleeves. His face was purple with bursting blood vessels, and he had both hands clamped tightly about his throat. Those hands were squeezing, squeezing, throttling the life from his body!

Cleo screamed, and fainted, and Basil Fellowes caught her as she fell. The others watched, fascinated, while that man in shirtsleeves seemed to do a dreadful, macabre dance, then fell, thrashing his legs, to the ground. And all the time his hands kept choking, choking.

Three or four of the armed guards had run over to him, and they looked helplessly on while the unfortunate victim completed his own destruction.

Nathaniel Kimber shouted hoarsely, "Good Lord! That's Sitky, one of my Special Police! How—"

Of all the people there, Professor Cassius Parsons was the only one who acted with decision. Almost before the others realized what was the matter with Sitky, Parsons was in motion. He threw open the French window, leaped the low balcony to the ground, and raced across toward where the man thrashed in dying convulsions.

BUT he was too late. When he thrust himself roughly through the group of guards to kneel at Sitky's side, the man was already dead, with his hands clamped at his throat like a vise.

Professor Cassius Parsons came to his feet, and crackling orders issued from his lips like the staccato rapping of a triphammer. In response to his commands, two of the guards lifted the dead man and ran with him toward the little truck, parked at one side.

Parsons was there ahead of them, unlocking the sheet-steel rear door. He let down the tail-board, instructed the men to place Sitky upon it, face up, and disappeared into the interior of the truck. In an instant he reappeared, wheeling a pulmotor machine. With the assistance of the guards he set it up, and within two minutes of the time when the first alarm was given he was administering resuscitative treatment.

Everybody there knew and recognized the pulmotor, for it was standard equipment at every coal mine, where it has more than once saved the lives of

miners nearly dead of suffocation. But in this case there was no response. Sitky was dead.

Enid, Nat Kimber and Frank Rudge had come out of the house, and were tensely watching Professor Parsons' efforts. They had left Basil Fellowes to revive Cleo by himself.

Finally, Cass Parsons stopped using the pulmotor. He looked at them somberly. "I am afraid there is no hope," he said.

Nathaniel Kimber exclaimed, "But there's no reason for it. There's no sense to it. Why should anyone want Sitky to strangle himself? He wasn't a member of the family. He had nothing to do with those miners who died—"

"Didn't he though?" the voice of Basil Fellowes reached them. He was coming toward the truck, leading a pale and gasping Cleo. But Basil was enjoying himself. "Wasn't Sitky one of your men, Nat, when you broke the strike in Number Sixteen Mine, and forced the miners to go back to work in a condemned shaft? I wouldn't be surprised if every last soul on this estate died like this!"

He looked sardonically at the group of armed guards who had gathered around the truck. The men shifted nervously. Their morale was beginning to break.

Frank Rudge shifted uneasily. "This thing seems to be striking indiscriminately. And there was no warning this time!"

"And we don't know who's to be next!" Basil Fellowes shouted. "For my part, I won't stay another minute. I'm going into town and take a room at the hotel. Maybe I married into this family once, but I don't want any part of it now!"

"Not even the piece of money that Eustace must have left you in his will?" Frank Rudge asked sardonically.

"Not even that!" Basil exclaimed. "I'm leaving now!"

He started to stride away, but Nathaniel Kimber's sharp command halted him.

"Stop!"

Kimber came up close to him. "No one leaves these grounds until we've cleared up what goes on here. You'll stay, Basil, and like it!"

"To hell with you!" Fellowes snarled, and swung away.

Nathaniel Kimber motioned to two of the guards, and they quickly stepped to either side of Fellowes, seized his arms.

Cleo exclaimed sharply, "Leave him alone, Nat!"

But Kimber only smiled crookedly.

"Leave him alone to escape?" He waved to the Special Police. "Take him down to the store-room in the basement, and lock him up. Here's the key."

Cleo started to protest, but Basil Fellowes was strangely quiescent. "At least if I'm safely locked up," he said, "you won't be able to accuse me of these killings. I'll go."

He took the small pistol from his hip pocket, and gave it to Cleo. "You will know how to use this," he said significantly.

The guards led Fellowes away.

Frank Rudge grimaced. "I don't like you personally, Kimber, but I think that's the only thing to do. No one should be permitted to leave."

Kimber, as an afterthought, said, "I hope the professor approves." He grinned. "After all, you're an expert—"

"Hello! Where's the Professor?"

Cass Parsons had disappeared from the truck.

ENID LUDDINGTON was the only one who had seen where Professor Cassius Parsons went. The others had been absorbed by the clash between Kimber and Fellowes, but Enid's eyes were all for Parsons. So she saw him nod to her, and smile, and then climb out the front of the truck and fade away toward the bunkhouse from which Sitky had come staggering.

Professor Parsons did not go far, for he found what he sought on the ground, just outside the bunkhouse entrance. It was a still smoldering cigarette with an inch-long ash. It was lying right in the path Sitky must have taken in coming toward the spot where he fell.

Carefully, Professor Parson scooped it up in a small cellophane envelope which he produced from one of his pockets. The ash fell apart, but remained in the envelope, together with the stub of the cigarette. He raised it to his nostrils, took a quick whiff, and nodded. Then he prowled around the bunkhouse, looking into the windows. He saw a room where there was a coat and shoulder holster hanging on a hook. And on the floor he noted a crumpled, empty cigarette package; the same brand as the one in the envelope. He climbed in through the window, picked up the package with a pair of pincers and placed it in another cellophane envelope.

Quite contentedly then, he returned to the truck.

Cleo and Enid, and Frank Rudge and Nathaniel Kimber had already gone into the house. Two of the guards had removed Sitky's body, and Enid had left one of the Special Police to guard the truck.

Professor Parsons acquired this information from the guard. Then he climbed into the truck and closed the door, lighting an electric lamp inside. There was a bench along one side of the interior, with test-tubes, retorts, and rows of chemical vials. At one end was a complete fingerprint set.

He dusted the package of cigarettes carefully, tried it for fingerprints, and frowned when he found only one set— undoubtedly Sitky's own. Next, Professor Parsons began to work on the cigarette. He crumbled it, placed fragments in four test-tubes, and proceeded to add chemicals, then place them over Bunsen burners. At the end of fifteen minutes he seemed to be satisfied. He took one of the test-tubes and placed it in a small closet, which he locked. Then he carefully washed his hands and left the truck. As he entered the house, his studious forehead was once more wrinkled in thought.

They were all gathered there in the great living room, shivering in spite of the fact that a huge log was crackling in the great fireplace.

"Tell me," Professor Parsons said to Enid, "Did your Uncle Norman smoke at all?"

She shook her head. "No. Neither did father. They both hated tobacco."

Parsons seemed to concentrate in thought, while Frank Rudge watched him tensely, and Nathaniel Kimber looked at him with tolerant amusement. "I had to lock Basil Fellowes up in the storeroom downstairs," Kimber told him. "He wanted to run out on us."

Cass Parsons seemed scarcely to have heard. Suddenly his eyes sparkled behind their glasses.

"Show me exactly where Norman Luddington was standing when he began to choke himself to death!" he snapped.

They pointed out the spot, perhaps ten feet from the fireplace, near a small refectory table. "Wilkes brought the phone here, and Uncle Norman stood near the table," Enid informed him.

Cassius Parsons dropped to his knees, as he had done in the road earlier in the evening. With his eyes close to the deep-napped rug, he examined every inch of space around the table. Suddenly he uttered a short exclamation, and picked up a small piece of transparent material that looked like mica. Then he picked up another, and another; the pieces were so small that it was difficult to handle them as he slipped them into a third cellophane envelope.

Frank Rudge laughed nervously. "What have you got in those envelopes? Clues?"

Parsons nodded seriously. "They contain the threads of a noose which I am surely weaving around the neck of a murderer, Mr. Rudge!"

CASSIUS PARSONS got to his feet, his eyes fixed on the chemist. "Tell me, Mr. Rudge. What kind of experiments are you conducting in your laboratory?"

Rudge said, "Well—I'm working on a process to purify coal. If the impurities are removed from bituminous coal, it will burn forty percent longer."

"And what does that process consist of, Mr. Rudge?"

The chemist's lips tightened. "I'm not talking about that! For ten years I've been working out special processes for Eustace and Norman. They've made millions on my ideas—and given me an allowance! This process is going to net me ready cash. When it's perfected, I'll *sell* it—not *give* it away!"

Professor Parsons nodded. "I can well understand your feelings in the matter. But will you tell me only this; does your process include running the raw coal through a chlorine bath?"

Rudge's eyes narrowed. He hesitated. "Well—yes—"

"Thank you, thank you," said Professor Parsons. He opened the envelope containing part of the remains of the cigarette he had picked up outside the bunkhouse. "I can now tell you how Sitky was murdered. This cigarette has been impregnated with *chloropicrin*, which is a compound of chlorine. Chloropicrin was used in the later days of the world war, as a strangulatory gas. Its effects are horrible and ghastly, as you have all seen. When Sitky inhaled the fumes of the cigarette, the *chloropicrin* immediately attacked his lung tissues and all the walls of his pulmonary system. It caused acute *oedema*."

He paused and gazed around at the staring group, then went on calmly. "Oedema is an intense swelling of the membranes, caused by an effusion of watery fluid from the blood vessels. You understand that the feeling a victim has is such that he believes his throat will burst apart. He will naturally, then, attempt to prevent that by pressing his hands against his throat. That is why you thought Sitky was strangling himself."

Enid Luddington was white-faced. Cleo was looking with queer, frightened eyes at Frank Rudge, and Nathaniel Kimber stepped behind the chemist, putting a hand on the gun in his pocket.

Rudge muttered hoarsely, "Are you accusing me—"

Professor Parsons raised a hand. "I am not accusing you or anyone—yet. I have no proof that it was you or anybody else who placed a package containing one impregnated cigarette in Sitky's room."

"But," Enid managed to say, "what about Uncle Norman—"

Cassius Parsons smiled. "He was killed by the same gas of course. But it was administered to him in a more subtle fashion. The murderer placed a small capsule of *chloropicrin* in the telephone instrument, in the small crevice above the bar upon which rests the receiver. When Norman Luddington removed the receiver, the bar slid upward, shattering the capsule and releasing the gas. He inhaled it as he talked."

Frank Rudge glanced nervously behind him at Kimber, who had his gun out. "I never did it!" he breathed.

"What about father?" Cleo asked. "He was in a car by himself. And he wasn't smoking. How was *he* killed?"

Cass Parsons frowned. "I can't work that out as yet. There was a faint odor of *chloropicrin* on the roadbed of the George Washington Bridge—"

Abruptly he snapped his fingers. "Ladies and gentlemen, I believe I shall be able to produce definite proof of the murderer's identity within five minutes! Kindly excuse me!"

Chapter IV

The Murderer's Hand.

LEAVING everyone gaping, Professor Parsons dashed from the room. He headed directly across the grounds toward the huge garage which was capable of accommodating twenty cars. It was dark in here, and he found the switch, flicked it on. He stooped alongside the nearest car, and examined the rear end, sliding almost underneath to do so, disregarding the fact that he was soiling his neat grey suit with grease. Then he moved from car to car, inspecting the rear end of each. He had reached the fourth or fifth automobile, when suddenly all the lights in the huge garage went out.

Professor Cassius Parsons frowned in the darkness, and felt for a flashlight which he did not have. Then he smiled. He reached into one of the cars and switched on the headlights. This gave him enough light to continue his examination of the other cars in that row. As he slid under the next to the last one, he drew in his breath quickly. His exploring fingers had found a protuberance alongside the universal shaft which did not belong there.

He tapped it and found that it emitted a slight hollow gurgle.

He climbed out from under the car and jotted down the make and license number. He was just about to turn away when a reflected flicker in his right eyeglass made him aware that there was something moving behind him.

His lanky body swivelled and twisted instantaneously, and it was that high-speed action of his which saved his skull from being crushed in by the heavy tire-iron which came swishing down upon him.

As it was, the massive tire tool missed his head, smashed into his right side, temporarily paralyzing his arm. He fell against the car, and needles of pain shot through his back. The headlights of the car at the end of the row blinded him, and he could not see his assailant. But the man leaped upon him silently, swinging the tire-iron once more.

Cass Parsons sensed, rather than saw, the tool coming down. He clamped his teeth shut against the pain in his side, and dived low under the blow. The iron struck the car, viciously resounding clangorously.

Cass flailed out with his left fist, and felt solid bone under his blow. The other man danced away, keeping out of the glare of the headlights, and while Cass limped around in a pivot, the man smashed in at him from the right, hurling him against the car, and then gripping his throat. At the same time he brought a knee up to Cass Parsons' groin.

The professor gasped with the sudden agony, and doubled over. But at the same time he reached behind him with his left hand, seized one of his assailant's trouser cuffs, and heaved mightily.

The man uttered a hoarse croak, and went hurtling backward, letting go his grip on Parsons' throat. He fell to the floor, rolled over twice away from the professor, and ducked behind the second car to the rear.

Cass heard him open a car door, and at once the headlights went out. The unknown assailant had plunged the place in darkness once more.

Cass started to move warily after him, dragging his right leg a little. He heard scuffling footsteps, then saw a shadow slip out of the garage into the night. At the same instant he caught the faint sound of breaking glass, down near the door.

Professor Parsons stopped stock still. He waited a moment, and then took a tentative sniff. His lips tightened.

It was the already familiar smell of *chloropicrin*!

THE murderer had stolen in here no doubt with the idea of partially throttling the professor, then pressing the open bottle of strangulatory gas to his nostrils, and leaving him to strangle. But, having been beaten off, he had tried in a different way. He had smashed the whole bottle of *chloropterin*, allowing the fumes to permeate the garage. They would kill anything living within those four walls.

Actual experience in the world war had shown that a solution as weak as 1:50,000 would cause death *in the open*, if breathed for more than one minute. How much more deadly would it be within the confines of this garage!

Professor Cass Parsons looked about him in desperate search of another exit. There was none, and the windows were too high to reach unless he found a ladder—and by that time he would never be able to climb it.

Before the *chloropicrin* could spread effectively to the spot where he stood, he drew in a great, deep breath. Then he clamped his mouth shut. With fingers moving in desperate speed he removed his eyeglasses and forced the ends of the nose-piece close together so that they formed an effective pair of pincers. These he forced across the tip of his nose in such a way that they clamped the nostrils tightly together.

Holding his breath thus he darted toward the small open door in the larger double doors. These larger doors were closed, and the only method of egress was

through that small opening. But now, as Cass headed toward it, he saw that some one was shutting it from outside. Almost before he had taken another step, he heard the latch click, indicating that he was locked in.

To attempt to break that door open with his fists, or even with a tool would have been suicide, because he could not have managed to hold his breath that long.

Cass Parsons stopped running. With the cool detachedness of a true scientist, he went over the situation in his mind, seeking a solution to his predicament.

The breath was almost bursting in his body when he decided on the one proper means, involving the least element of chance—though that means was far from certain.

There was a single limousine standing in the middle of the floor, facing the door. He leaped into it and turned on the ignition key, stepped on the starter. Then, with his head far out of the window, and still holding his breath, he put the gear shift in first, let up the clutch, and pulled the hand throttle all the way out.

The heavy limousine sprang forward like a hurled javelin. There was only some thirty or forty feet to the door, but when the limousine hit them like a clap of thunder, they parted in the middle as if they had been held by a cardboard lock.

Cass Parsons expelled his breath in a great, whistling *whoosh* as he tore the glasses from his nostrils and pushed down the clutch. He transferred his foot to the brake, and the limousine came to a stop almost with its nose against the rear of the great house.

Several of the armed guards came running, and Professor Parsons, breathing rather quickly, asked them if they had seen anybody come out of the garage. They said they had not.

Parsons nodded and sent them back to their posts. Then he went to his truck. He unlocked it and climbed in, and worked fast for five minutes, picking from the shelf of chemicals two vials whose labels bore the terms: *sodium thiosulphate* and *sodium carbonate* respectively. He also opened a container of cotton padding in layers, from which he took a handful.

Then he left the truck, locking it behind him, and went into the house.

THEY were all in the living room—even Basil Fellowes. Nathaniel Kimber had his gun out, and was covering both Fellowes and Frank Rudge.

"One of these two is the murderer," he said. "I'm playing safe and holding the two of them. Cleo stole my key and released Fellowes, and I caught him outside on the grounds just now."

"I did no such thing!" Cleo shouted. "He thinks he'll get grounds for divorcing me by claiming that I did it!"

Kimber grinned at her. "You wish you had me locked up down there, don't you?"

Enid Luddington looked at Professor Parsons questioningly, and at the mushy looking objects he was holding in his right hand. His left hand was in his coat pocket.

"So," he said thoughtfully, "I suppose all of you men were outside the grounds in the last few minutes. There is no way to know who attacked me in the garage?"

Kimber exclaimed, "Attacked? How did you get out? Was that the racket we just heard out there?"

Professor Parsons did not answer him. Instead he asked, "To whom does the sedan with the following license belong— F21-799?"

Kimber walked across to the door, turned the key and put the key in his pocket. Then he faced them with the gun in his hand. "That's my sedan," he said in a curious flat voice.

"Then you are the man who murdered the members and servants of this family," Professor Parsons told him matter-of-factly. "You have an extra tank attached to the under-side of your car. It contained *chloropicrin*, which you stole from Rudge's laboratory. You were directly in front of Eustace Luddington's car, coming across the George Washington Bridge. You released the gas by pulling a wire which opened the cover at the back of the tank. The deadly gas escaped along with the exhaust fumes from your car, and were sucked into Eustace Luddington's car by his fan, causing him to strangle to death.

"You killed Sitky probably because he was your co-conspirator. It was he who phoned me at my laboratory. You had him cut into one of the telephone wires here on the grounds, and make his telephone calls of warning. You killed him because you wanted no one to be able to talk. Eventually you would have killed all the other members of the family, until the vast Luddington estates came into your possession!"

Nathaniel Kimber smiled. "Perfectly reasoned, Professor. You couldn't have known better, if you'd done it yourself."

"I'm glad to see you do not attempt to make a denial," said Cassius Parsons. "Because the tire-iron in the garage, with which you attempted to kill me is still there—with your fingerprints upon it."

Nathaniel Kimber was still smiling. "I knew the crisis was here when I failed to get you. I heard those garage doors smash open, and knew you'd gotten out somehow. But if you think I'm licked, you're mistaken."

He kept the gun wavering from one to the other of them, and brought out a vial of greenish-hued contents. "You're all going to strangle yourselves to death here in this room. And I'm going out and say that the *voice* got you all!"

HE raised his hand and hurled the bottle of *chloropicrin* at the fireplace, where it shattered, releasing its fumes.

"Notice that the French windows are all shuttered!" Kimber crowed. "You can't get out for at least five minutes. And then it won't matter!"

Out of his pocket he brought a small flexible mask with a filter across the nose and mouth. He raised it to his head, trying to adjust it with one hand, while keeping them covered with the other.

Professor Parsons had not been idle. He raised one of the cotton pads to his mouth, swiftly passed the others out to Enid, Cleo, Fellowes and Rudge. "Breathe through that as I do!" he ordered.

They caught the idea at once, having heard and read of gas mask filters.

"I expected you to do something like this, Kimber," Professor Parsons said before placing the filter over his mouth.

Kimber didn't have his mask adjusted yet. His eyes were open wide with hate and frustration. He raised his gun to shoot.

And Professor Cassius Parsons fired through the pocket of his coat—once.

The shot caught Nathaniel Kimber in the right shoulder, spun him around, hurling the gas mask from his fingers.

By this time the fumes of the gas were spreading throughout the room, and they reached Kimber. The choked scream that burst from his lips was like the terrified death-bleat of a trapped animal.

And while they all watched, fascinated by the horror of it, Nathaniel Kimber strangled himself to death just as he had caused the others to do.

It was Cassius Parsons who fished the key from the dead man's pocket, and led them all out into the open.

Enid Luddington smiled up at him, wanly, while Cleo and Frank Rudge and Basil Fellowes huddled together in whispered talk.

Enid put her hand in that of Cassius Parsons. There were little globules of moisture in her eyes.

"Whatever fee you ask," she said, "is yours of course. But—but you'll stay a while anyway?"

Professor Parsons shook his head.

"I must be off," he told her. "I only stopped here on the way, because the nature of the case challenged my scientific instincts."

"You were going to handle another case?" she asked.

"Yes. I am headed for the Blue Ridge Mountains—to solve the case of the Whirling Dervishes."

"You'll come in on the way back?" she asked him.

He shrugged. "If I am alive. I understand that these Whirling Dervishes appear out of the night and breath fire into a man's face, literally roasting him to death."

"I wish you—the best of luck!" she whispered.

And she stood there a long time, watching his laboratory on wheels cross the bridge over the canyon, on the way to unknown adventure.

