

The Talkie Murder

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Sudden Darkness—the Grim Hand of Death Strikes
And the Unknown Murderer
There on the Movie Lot!

ON THE sound stage of the Ajax Picture Studios the members of the cast had resumed the exact positions they had occupied before lunch. Chalk lines, resembling the outlines of so many pairs of feet, enabled them do this to the satisfaction of the exacting Tad Boone.

It was the climax of »Processional«, from the play of the Russian master, and the famous director, after six weeks of tireless effort, was confident that he had achieved the great picture of his career. Momentarily the tense look left his face, and his smile embraced the eleven characters. Then he frowned once more. „Lights!“ he barked. „All set!“ A dazzling shower of light fell on the stage, and from the sides a battery of Kliegs projected their blinding shafts.

„Miss Storme,“ he said, in more gentle tones, as he looked at the still-faced leading woman, „your cue is *you lie!*—and then you denounce Leonid... You work yourself into a fury gradually—your motions become more violent— in the end you are like a creature demented... And then you break—the storm of your words ends in mad gibberings—you fall at the feet of the man who has betrayed you!“

HELENE STORME gazed at him somberly, but as he finished, a gleam of fire came into her dark eyes. In her lovely husky voice, she started to recite the words of her role. Slowly, then, as she faced the camera, her burning eyes uplifted, her lips parted as if about to speak the solemn words of the heroine.

But the words were never spoken. For at that instant the lights flashed out, leaving the stage and studio in pitch darkness.

For a moment there was dead silence, then out of the Stygian blackness came a piercing, shattering scream of agony, a frenzied cry that froze the blood. Then a thud, as of a falling body.

Again dead silence, timed only by wildly-beating hearts. Then another scream, smothered, this time in a different key. As it echoed, the lights flashed on, their pitiless rays revealing the frozen faces of those present.

Tad Boone was the first to partly recover his wits. With a dazed look, he lurched onto the stage to stare at the crumpled figure of his leading woman stretched on the floor! His eyes dilated with horror as a crimson splotch showed on the bodice of the snowy evening gown and slowly spread. He dropped on one knee and gropingly felt for the pulse as the life blood continued to well from the heart.

„Dead!“ he choked, looking wildly about at the ring of terror-stricken faces. His eyes settled on an assistant director. „Call—call the police!“ he croaked. „This—this is murder!“

He jerked to his feet and faced the company. „None of you are to move from your places!“ he cried. „Some one has killed Helene Storme!“

So frozen with horror were the cast that none of them had moved. Then from out of their ranks, despite the orders of the director, one of them tottered—Miriam Foye, a blonde slip of a woman who still managed to play youthful roles.

„The—the murderer brushed by me, Tad!“ she quavered. „That’s why I cried out. Crawling across the stage—“ Her voice died out and she clutched at his arm for support.

„Some one crawled past you?“ barked Boone. „When?“

„Right after that terrible scream ... I felt a body against my legs in the dark ... I was—“

„In what direction was it going?“

„Towards the left side of the set, I think,“ she said shakily.

„Jock!—Danny!“ the director shouted to an assistant and a property man, standing woodenly behind his chair. „One of you circle the set, the other see that the gates are closed and no one allowed out!“

THE sound of running feet caused him to jerk about. Several studio executives were hurrying towards the scene, in their rear a throng of crowding players.

„Stay where you are!“ yelled Boone. „No one can come on this set until the police give the word! Some one has killed Miss Storme!“

And none of that terror-stricken crowd did move for what seemed to them, in their chattering excitement, an eternity, until there came the heavy tread of feet, and two towering bluecoats forced their way through the huddle of players and came striding towards Stage A.

„Stand back, all of yuh!“ vociferated one of the policemen, as he caught sight of the body. He lumbered towards the stage as if to brush aside the players with his club.

„One moment, Officer!“ called Tad Boone, bolting after him. „These people were standing where they are when this happened. Some one close at hand must have attacked Miss Storme, so I thought—“

„And quite right, too,“ remarked a quiet voice at his elbow; then: „Officer, you and your team-mate can rope off the space about here, and keep everybody out until further orders.“

INSPECTOR COROT, head of the Homicide Squad, shot a swift glance at the dead woman on the stage. Then his gray eyes swept the members of the company and returned to the pallid face of the director.

„As you were saying, Mr.—er—“

„Boone is my name. I am the director.“ He caught sight of a younger man behind Inspector Corot. „Oh, hello, Dawson,“ he said weakly. „Have the newspapers already—“

„Just happened to be calling at the precinct station with the inspector when the flash came,“ the Blade reporter interjected.

„Am I to understand, Mr. Boone,“ remarked the inspector, „that no one has left the scene since this happened?“

„Absolutely no one—except two of my men I sent on errands.“ He told of the precautions he had taken, gave a hasty outline of the tragic occurrence.

„In the dark—and a knife,“ observed Corot quietly. „I take it you have not found the weapon?“

„I have made no search,“ said the director jerkily. „I rather thought I might bungle things up.“

„Ah!“ breathed the officer. „If there were more like you, a copper’s lot might be easier.“

He walked across the stage and bent his slight form over the body of the dead actress. Then he straightened up, his keen eyes darting in every direction. One moment they appeared to be measuring the distance between some players and the body, the next following different angles from the cameras and batteries of standing light. The arrival of the Medical Examiner interrupted these proceedings. He walked back to where Tad Boone stood, waiting.

„I imagine your actors are about ready to drop,“ he commented to the director. „Suppose we assemble them somewhere where I can question them later... We may have to make a search, you know.“ He called two uniformed men to him. „Escort the members of the company to the room Mr. Boone shows you,“ he ordered „and don’t let them out of your sight.“ To Detective Sergeant Moody, one of his aides from Headquarters, he added: „Those fellows—cameramen, electricians—so on—get them together somewhere; Detective Carroll will take charge.“

THE Medical Examiner glanced up. „Death instantaneous, Inspector!2 he exclaimed. "A savage wound, a thrust through the heart! Why, man, the slayer had to work the blade up and down before he could withdraw it!"

„The man?“ „Only a man—with the strength of a brute—could inflict such a wound," vigorously asserted the examiner. „It's demoniacal!"

„Then that lets the women out," said Corot, with a short laugh. „Except as accessories. Can you figure out anything about the size of the knife, Doctor?"

„An unusual one," was the startling answer. „If I were back in the Philippines, on my old job, I'd swear it was made by a bolo."

„A bolo!" repeated the head of the Homicide Squad.

„A. terrible weapon," explained the physician. „Really a cane-knife, but used by the Igorottes in war—and head-hunting!"

„Then it was not a knife that one ordinarily would carry?"

„Lord, no! The blade was more than a foot long—that I'd swear!"

Inspector Corot appeared to be mentally mulling over the words of the Medical Examiner. Then he turned abruptly and made for the room where the members of the cast awaited him.

„Circulate about the studio," he said to the reporter who strode after him, „and see what you can learn about the Storme woman's past."

LITTLE had ever been known about the strange young leading woman who called herself Helene Storme. Tad Boone had spotted her in the cashier's cage of a side-street cafeteria in New York. She was the very type he was seeking for his new picture. So it was that the young woman, without previous experience, had found herself under contract, and in the Ajax Studios in Astoria.

Stony-faced, some had called her at her first appearance upon the lot. But under the magic touch of the director, some spark of life had kindled, to make of her a creature of flame and passion. However, when not acting, she was passive, unresponsive, like a woman buried within herself. But she had vindicated the judgment of her discoverer.

However, they were salty details of the girl's life that Inspector Corot looked for—marriages, men, morals! So the Blade man headed for the publicity department. But even Don Clark, its head, knew nothing more of Helene Storme.

„She's a mystery woman, I tell you, Dawson," he wailed. „No one, not even Tad, knows anything about her past—Lord, feller, I tried the old-home-town and mother-dear blab on her to get a story of her life, but I drew a blank, a blankety-blank. Poor sister, she's dead now, and can't help it, but she's making the first page."

Pandemonium reigned in the executive offices, as on the lot. Only one stage—Stage B—the one next to Tad Boone's—was in service, where a „western" was being made. But from the distraught attitude of the performers, it was plain that little would be accomplished that day.

The men of the company were being questioned as the Blade man rejoined Inspector Corot in the small room to which the witnesses were being admitted one at a time. However, the police learned little in the beginning. The stories of the players were as alike as two peas, only differing in their emotional points of view. That is, so far as the male performers were concerned.

The examination of the women was saved to the last. Before they were led in, Inspector Corot turned to the reporter.

„You might run out now,“ he suggested, with a meaningful look, „and see what Moody is about.“

THE detective-sergeant was on his hands and knees behind the set of Stage A.

„No one crawled out through the left—or the back—as that Foye dame thinks,“ he grunted, as he scrambled to his feet. „There’s no tracks below those dummy windows. The getaway was through that door on the right or the open stage front.“

„It must have been the door, then,“ said Dawson quickly. „For the director and his assistants are certain no one could have passed between them and the players.“

WELL, I don’t know about that,“ Moody rumbled. „There was two actors in front of that door, and they’re just as certain that nobody passed them in the dark. If everybody’s right, then the murderer didn’t run. He’s still with us!“

„How about the knife?“ „Yeah!“ said the detective-sergeant weakly. „Of course we’ve still got to find that. But once we dig it up—“

„Well, Tom,“ intruded the quiet voice of the inspector, unexpectedly. „Anything doing?“

„The search was a frost,“ admitted the assistant. „Not so much as a penknife on any of those babies, though there were plenty of corkscrews.“

„Well, well,“ came from Corot impatiently. „What else?“

Moody hurriedly repeated his conclusions in regard to the escape of the murderer from the stage: „It looks as if he’s sticking around,“ he said, then burst out: „Say, to hear that Miriam Foye talk, half the men around the studio were nuts about this dead woman. It’s pretty sure some of ‘em hated her because she wouldn’t give ‘em a tumble.“

„Yes, I’ve heard about all she had to say on that score,“ remarked the inspector wearily, and added the gist of what Miriam Foye had told him. „But of course you realize that a lady scorned is not to be trusted too implicitly. However, I am sure that her tongue is her only weapon, and—“ He wheeled as Tad Boone hurried up.

„It’s okay, Inspector,“ panted the director. „All arrangements are made to re-enact th—er— that scene for you this evening. Of course the timing of the lights will be mere guesswork, but—“

„We may work that out—through a consensus of opinion,“ nodded the inspector. „By the way,“ he added, casually, „I’ve been listening to a little scandal. About this Clifford Holmes, for example—“

The director reddened, then paled. „There is Holmes, himself,“ he said. „Why not—“

„Let me talk to him!“ blurted Moody, shoving out his jaw. „I’ll tell him.“

It was known that Corot used his sergeant for the rough stuff, but even the reporter was astonished at the latitude allowed the big detective-sergeant by the head of the Homicide Squad as Moody accosted the leading man of the Ajax Company.

„Look here, Holmes!“ he bellowed, as he burst into the man’s dressing room. „You threatened to kill Miss Storme, didn’t you? We got the goods on you! What’ve you got to say?“

The slender, light-hearted actor appeared about to collapse.

„God!“ he moaned, his face twisting. „To think I should be accused of that! Why—why—Helene meant—“

His voice died away and he slumped down onto a chair.

COROT touched his sergeant lightly on the arm, then drew a chair up in front of the agitated actor.

„Now, Mr. Holmes,“ he said softly, „no one is accusing you. The police have to tar that way at times to obtain information. But you can help me by answering a few questions... You were fond of Miss Storme, I believe, but quarreled with her recently.“

„Good Lord, yes,“ Holmes half gasped. „I was in love with her, but she wouldn't take me seriously. I—I—maybe I did say some things—I never meant... Damn that little she-devil, Miriam Foye!“ he burst out. „She said she would get me—when she heard—Listen Inspector, I—“

THE inspector arose and turned away with a shrug. „We may have some more to say later,“ he remarked coldly, „about—that lover's quarrel.“

Tad Boone gave the inspector a startled look as the men went out the door. „Surely,“ he protested, „you don't think Holmes—“

„We might be said to suspect anybody—and everybody—at this stage,“ said Corot mildly. „But that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Usually a matter of elimination, you know. Holmes will be watched of course, though—like the rest.“ He chewed at a match for a moment. „What did Miss Storme tell you of her past?“ he asked.

„Not a thing,“ answered Boone bitterly, „or I might be able to help you. All I could figure out was that she had gone through hell, and wanted no reminder of it. I sensed that the first time I looked at her. It was that,“ he said hesitantly, „rather than her strange beauty, that attracted me. It was the tragic look, coming and going in her eyes, the twisted smile that tried so hard to be real, and the voice with its harsh, almost defensive note.“

„You were very much in love with her,“ suggested the inspector in a soft voice.

The director looked the police official squarely in the eyes.

„I was,“ he admitted. „I considered myself engaged to her—for a time.“

„The engagement was broken?“ „It was,“ said Tad Boone shakily. „By Miss Storme.“

„And the reason?“

„She gave none,“ said the director, almost too quickly.

„Of course you asked her if there was— another man?“ queried the man-hunter smoothly.

„She—she said,“ breathed Boone, after an inward struggle, „that there was. I had no wish to know who he was. All I wanted was to see her happy. I asked her, in the event she remained in pictures, to stay under my direction. For I have been all over the world, and never expected to see her like again.“

„You have been in our Eastern possession, then?“ queried Corot.

„Oh, yes; Hawaii, the Philippines, all that.“

„You know what a bolo is?“ came the casual tone.

„Of course; I have one in my rooms. I made a silent picture—The Black Virgin—and—“ He stopped, with a terrible thought. „I see,“ he faltered, „just what your questions are leading up to. Just—just what do you want of me?“

„You say you have the knife in your rooms?“ remarked the inspector noncommittally. „Suppose I send Detective Carroll along to fetch it to Headquarters.“ The director nodded dumbly as the inspector turned to the newspaper man who still tagged him. „Think I’ll take a little stroll about the lot. Anything being shot today, Dawson?“

„Not much,“ said the reporter. „I saw ‘em at work on one picture—just a Western.“

But as he strolled about the lot, Inspector Corot seemed to have little interest in picture-making. He was bored with the taking of the „Western,“ seemed hardly to hear young Dawson talking. He never even gave a second glance to the Ajax’s new cowboy star, Ned Lane, resplendent in snow-white sombrero and jeweled belt. He did give a moment’s time, though, to admiration of the cowboy’s beautiful Great Dane. Corot liked dogs.

„Fine dog,“ he commented, and passed on, after a pat on the Great Dane’s head, towards the studio gates.

„Tom,“ he said to the detective-sergeant who stood near the entrance, „you and Carroll had better check up on all the players present, as well as any stray visitors, first chance you get. Might as well play safe. You can tell them in the office to let the bars down now, but see that a careful tab is kept on all those leaving the studio. I’ll be running down to Headquarters now, after a bite.“

„Okay, Inspector,“ said the sergeant succinctly and lumbered away.

Dawson of the Blade was still with Corot when the police car came to a grinding halt in front of New York’s sombre Police Headquarters. But all his questioning of the inspector on the way downtown had got him—exactly nothing. Not until Corot was in his swivel chair in his private office and had lighted his pipe was he ready to talk to the reporter.

„YOU say you’ve got to know what I think of this case?“ he asked. „Well,“ he went on frankly, „at this minute that murder is as much of a mystery to me as it is to you, Dawson. In fact, the element of time—the lights could not have been out but a few minutes—and the whereabouts of that peculiar knife, one not easily concealed, are the things we’re butting our heads on.“

The head of the Homicide Squad puffed thoughtfully at his pipe.

„Of course there must be a motive for murder,“ he continued. „But there are motives—and motives! For admission, we have the admission of the director, Boone, that he was in love with his leading lady, had thought her favorably inclined to his proposal of marriage, until she suddenly turned him down. And she did tell him there was another man! Moreover, there’s the bolo. We’ll learn about that later.“

„On the other hand we have Holmes—also in love with the leading lady—though he admits his case was hopeless from the beginning. He quarreled with her—threatened her that if he couldn’t have her nobody else should. Likewise, he stood near the victim.“

„It’s one of them!“ put in Dawson. „It looks like it would have to be!“

„There’s still another,“ interjected the inspector softly, „if we’re to believe Boone, the other man! Who was he? When did he come on the scene?“

„But he’s out!“ exploded Dawson. „If she gave the others the gate for him, everything would be jake. Why should he want to bump her off? Think the guy was nutty?“

Corot only smiled and shook his head.

„You’ve only Boone’s word for it that there was another man,” objected the reporter eagerly. „And who wouldn’t lie to save himself from the hot seat?”

The buzzing of the phone interrupted them. Corot picked up the instrument near his hand. He listened for some minutes, snapped „Good-bye,” and looked at the reporter. „Carroll just reported,” he said. „Boone can’t find his bolo—said he must have loaned it to some one or forgotten.”

„Why don’t you arrest him, then, and—“

„And depend on getting a confession to clinch the case, eh?” drily remarked the astute man-hunter. „No, Dawson,” he went on between puffs on his pipe, „those methods won’t do in this case. We are not dealing with an ordinary murder—or an ordinary murderer!”

WALTER DAWSON had just reported to his office the next day when Inspector Corot called him on the phone.

„Promised to keep you posted on the talkie murder, Dawson,” he laughed. „Always try to keep my word. Can you meet me uptown?”

A mad dash for the subway, and twenty minutes later the reporter was facing the police official over a table in a modest chop house in the West Forties.

„The murder scene at the studio last night,” smiled Corot grimly, „was not what is termed a smash hit so far as the police were concerned. A lot of nerves were shot to blazes, a couple fainted, but our eagle eyes failed to discover a guilty face. However,” he went on, dropping this sardonic humor, „we did learn one thing, which was the main purpose, and that was the time element. The consensus of opinion, as we clocked the time, was that the lights were not out more than three minutes, though one or two estimated as much as five.

„So, to all appearances, the lights could not have been switched off and on, with the murder sandwiched in between, by one and the same person. I say to all appearances, but this is a mystery within a mystery. Were we to solve the modus operandi of the murder, we would still be confronted with the problem of the slayer.

„All that I have really got is one thing from the dead woman’s maid. About a week ago, Helene Storme received a phone call that left her faint and sick. Her words, according to the maid were: ‘No money can repay me for my sufferings. I will make you pay in my own way.’“

„By Jove!” exclaimed Dawson. „That looks like she was out to get somebody—and somebody got her!”

COROT nodded slowly and studied the ash on his cigar. „I’ll tell you, Dawson,” he said presently, „I am not at all satisfied with myself in this case. I feel I am overlooking something that may be right under my nose. I—“ He stopped suddenly, his eyes burning. „By the Lord!” he shot out sharply. „I’ve got it! I believe this is a trick murder! And I’m going to find out!”

He was out of his chair, rushing into the street and leaping into his car as Dawson catapulted himself into the rear seat. But not another word was spoken by Corot on the way to the Ajax Studios, and Dawson was reporter enough to know when to remain silent.

Inside the gate they encountered Detective Carroll.

„Inspector,” he said in a husky whisper, „we’re checking up on everybody who was in the studio, but we couldn’t find a trace of that knife, though three of us searched all night.”

„You would not, if my conjectures are right,“ was his superior’s mysterious comment. „How about visitors?“

„That’s our one break—it just happened that none were about the studio at the time of the crime.“

„So at least, we have our murderer within four walls,“ the inspector’s nod said, as if to himself. „Perhaps, after all, we may not make such a muddle.“

He hurried on towards the main building, but suddenly saw the Great Dane again, and stopped to admire it.

„A fine animal,“ he remarked to a near-by property man.

„Yeah!“ was the rejoinder. „Only if I had my way it would be kept off the set when it wasn’t needed.“

„How is that?“ „It’s always in the way for somebody to fall over. Why, if Ned Lane so much as goes off for a drink of water, that big mutt runs around like a rodeo.“

„Upsetting people, eh?“ „You said it. The lummoX spilled me on my bean only yesterday. Say, I thought I was being murdered myself!“

„Didn’t you tell me you knew the press agent here?“ Corot asked Dawson as they hurried on towards the executive offices.

„YES—Don Clark. An old friend. Can he be of any assistance?“

„He might help with some information I greatly need. First, I would like to know the pictures every actor in the studio has appeared in for, say, the past few years. Second, how soon can those pictures be assembled for me to view them?“

„You want to see all the pictures in which all these players have appeared?“ Dawson’s voice held astonishment.

„Exactly,“ Corot answered, grinning at the young man’s expression. „I shouldn’t think there would be so many, would you?“

„Gosh knows!“ Dawson slowly breathed. „But if you’re serious, of course I’ll ask Clark, or anyone else, for that matter.“

„I was never more serious in my life,“ soberly assured Corot.

„But, look here, Inspector,“ the reporter demanded eagerly, „what is all this about a deluge of old pictures? Do you think a picture has something to do with this murder?“

„Not directly,“ he said slowly, „It’s just a notion of mine. You know,“ he went on confidentially, „you and I know actors. They seldom live outside their calling—continually talk shop and all that—and the sense of the dramatic is always with them. Yes; the drama of make-believe is life itself to most of them, especially those in motion pictures, and that’s where my notion comes in. I stick to it! This is a trick murder, and a premeditated one, and I rather suspect it was suggested by something remembered, probably some incident from a play in the past. So there, my boy, you have what makes my head tick.“

„But the entire cast of the company was on the stage,“ protested Dawson, „and yet someone crawled across the stage—bumped into Miriam Foye. Wouldn’t that suggest—“

„Ah! That body!“ breathed Corot. „Your subconscious mind is telling you something, my boy, and you’re turning a deaf ear.“

DAWSON was still worrying about what it was his subconscious mind was trying to tell him when he hurried back from his office that evening and took a

seat beside the inspector in the projection room. But he was loath to ask for further enlightenment.

By ten o'clock, as reel after reel was run off, the reporter's eyes were watering and he was willing to call it a day, but not so Corot. He stuck it out till midnight, and only quit when the film ran out.

On and off, it was the same next day, and because Dawson was no hog for punishment, he threw up his hands and started to consort with Detective-Sergeant Moody. Under the latter's direction, the network of New York's vast police system was in motion to link up the dead Helene Storme with her buried past.

However, neither this far-reaching enquiry, nor the panorama of past pictures flashing before Inspector Corot, were productive of anything startling that day or the next.

It was on the evening of the third day that the slight figure of the head of the Homicide Squad shot out of the projection room and flashed by so fast that the newspaperman's frantic dash to the lower street level enabled him only to see the retreating tail-light of the police car. On the silent screen in the dark room something had pointed a finger of guilt at the murderer!

He was incommunicado at Headquarters, and it was not until the next morning that the insistent Dawson was finally admitted to his private office. Moody and Carroll entered shortly after him. From a bag he carried, the former carefully removed an object and placed it on the desk of his superior. It was a dagger-like knife, something like the short-sword of the early Roman. Beside the sinister weapon he laid a glass tumbler.

„The glass from the hotel room and the big bowie both have the same fingerprints,“ he said laconically.

THOUGH the man-hunter's eyes danced with a strange light, the only evidence of emotion was his rapid puffing on his pipe.

„Find the other knives?“ he asked abruptly. „Sure,“ answered the detective-sergeant, with a casualness that did not deceive. „Twenty of 'em, with a lot of junk from an old circus act. The circus people raised hell about us breaking open the trunk. Got 'em downstairs, if you want 'em.“

„Yes; bring one out to the car,“ his chief told him, „and see that it is properly wrapped. Carroll, file those exhibits, and don't mess the fingerprints.“

Then he looked at the newspaperman and smiled slowly, „Got our man!“ he said, like one who relieved suffering. „All but the collar.“

„Who—what—how—?“ Dawson spluttered. „You—you—“

But already Corot was on his feet and donning topcoat and hat. In the police car, Moody and Carroll were waiting. „Studio!“ clipped Corot.

As they drew up in front of the Ajax Studios a long extension ladder was being carried to a fire department truck at the corner.

„Fire?“ inquired Dawson of Carroll, at his side.

„Naw! That was my night's exercise,“ the detective husked in a tired voice. „That bloody knife was sticking in a rafter—you had to be an eagle to find the damned thing!“

A plainclothesman spoke to Corot. „All surrounded, Inspector.“

Quickly they passed through the long hallway of the administration building into the darkened interior of the studio.

„You and Carroll know your stuff,“ the head of detectives said, as they neared the door to the big lot. „So be on your toes.“ He passed through the door, and paused to watch the activities of the Western pictures company on outside location.

A DIRECTOR on a platform was megaphoning directions to a group of bandit-like figures on horseback. Cameras and a sound-truck were being moved in the foreground. Far to one side stood Ned Lane, beside the beautiful white steed that was as much a part of his pictures as himself.

Corot appeared aimless in his movements, but presently Dawson became aware that he had an objective. This became more evident as he saw that Moody and Carroll, too, were approaching in a similar manner from different directions. They were closing in on someone. Walter Dawson caught his breath in quick discovery. For the only person within the triangle formed by the man-hunters was Ned Lane!

So intent was the new screen-hero on the action in the foreground that he was unaware of the approach of the detectives. A minute later, the two-gun actor wheeled around and faced an accosting officer.

„Lane,“ Corot asked peremptorily, without any preamble, „where were you when that murder occurred on Stage A?“

Though the player's face whitened, his voice was steady enough as he answered: „Snatching a bite beside the set.“

„Oh, no, you weren't,“ said the inspector softly. „Your dog never leaves your side—he was rushing around in the dark trying to smell you out.“

„I deny that,“ said Lane, and his smile was cool.

Corot's voice became as hard as his eyes. „Perhaps you'll deny that the slain woman was your abandoned wife?“ he rasped.

A startling change came over the actor. His eyes dilated with fear, the hand that rested on the neck of the horse trembled and caused the animal to move unsteadily.

„You married Helen Schneider all right,“ the inspector relentlessly continued, „and you murdered her—with this!“

Like one paralyzed, the motion picture actor stared at the curious knife that was thrust under his eyes. He slumped back against the horse, his hand frantically clutching at its mane. As though his fear had communicated itself to the animal, it suddenly leaped forward, dragging its master at its side. But the next moment, Lane's other hand had obtained a hold and he vaulted into the saddle as the frantic animal headed up the runway to the imitation cliff some fifty feet above the heads of those breathlessly watching.

A few more wild leaps and the horse gained the top and faced the open space that separated it from the cliff opposite. Then, as the detectives' guns barked, the horse was hurtling himself across the chasm that had been lightly dubbed „the leap of death.“

IN mid-air, horse and rider, unhit, appeared suspended for a long moment, silhouetted against the sky. Then the actor put spurs to his mount and deliberately pulled at the reins. The gallant steed quivered and jerked its head back. Strong men closed their eyes as it stopped in that graceful parabola, to drop like a plummet to the earth beneath. They knew it truly had been a leap of death!

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Back in the small chop house, Walter Dawson was hurriedly scribbling as Inspector Corot talked.

„You know,“ observed the veteran detective, „I can't forgive that fellow Lane for sacrificing such a noble animal. It was so needless; he could have jumped off himself.“ He paused to light a cigar. „I wonder what will become of the dog?“

„Funny I didn't get that crack about my subconscious mind,“ chuckled Dawson. „It was the propertyman's talk that set you on the track.“

„Only in a way,“ confessed Corot. „The trick of the murder was responsible for its own solution. Guess I'd better give it to you in sequence, though, for your sensational yarn. Well, Ned Lane's name was really Nate Lavie, and under it he married Helen Schneider, a country girl, in Wisconsin. At the time he was working with a fly-by-night circus as a ballyhoo for the side-show, and a knife-thrower. The circus collapsed in Pennsylvania, where Lane abandoned his girl-wife, who was about to give birth to a child. Eventually he drifted to California and hung about the movie lots. It was his ability as a knife thrower when he was an extra playing a Mexican bandit that brought him to the attention of the director. That, and the acquisition of a performing horse from his old circus boss, and the fact that he had been a cowboy of sorts, put him over. That act that I saw in that two-year-old film was the clue that broke the mystery! It sent me to the old circus owner and along the long trail to the murder on Stage A.

„THE young woman, who was known to us as Helene Storme, was left adrift and penniless. Her infant was born under the most pitiful circumstances, and after a long illness, she made her way to New York. There Tad Boone found her, working as a cashier.

„Then the Ajax Company brought Ned Lane on from Hollywood. Helene recognized him and resolved to expose him. From what her colored maid said, he must have offered her money, which she refused. She could ruin him with that pitiful story—and he knew it. So he contrived a trick murder, based on his old knife-throwing act. From the mezzanine gallery he watched his chance when no one was near, to switch out the lights, threw the knife with deadly accuracy, pulled it back by means of a strong Jap fishing line, and with another throw buried the murderous blade in the rafters above him. Almost simultaneously with that last act, he switched the lights on, the entire episode taking less time than it takes to tell it. Of course it was an easy matter for him to drop to the main floor—he was used to such stunts—in the midst of the excitement.“

Dawson looked up at Corot as he finished jotting down his notes. „It's a whale of a story, Inspector,“ he said. „While I never thought of Lane, my judgment told me Tad Boone could never have committed the crime, and Holmes was too putty-legged.“

The police officer treated the reporter to one of his quizzical smiles.

„You never can tell,“ he observed drily. „The instinct to murder finds itself into brains of all types—sometime or other.“

