

Doctor of Doom



*He reeled, staggered
and then pitched for-
ward.*

By H. Q. Masur

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The mystery of the headless cadavers hurled Assistant Coroner Craig into a sleuth role—with a slab setting. And he was chosen to fill the corpse cast when crime's curtain fell on Satan's last act.

THE cop guarding the door let me into the shabby hotel room. Instantly the sickening odor of burnt flesh struck me like a blow. Lieutenant Reirdon, standing over the corpse, had a handkerchief against his nose. I kneeled to draw back the sheet, and the homicide men averted their faces. I can't say I blamed

them.

I've been an assistant medical examiner only six months, but I've seen death in many forms. Yet this one sickened me.

The body was nude up to the neck—and there it ended. All that remained of the head were fragments of charred bone structure. It was as though some incredible

gust of intense heat had blown across his face.

I straightened wryly, asked Reirdon: "Who is he?"

"An old chap by the name of Sidney Frome. Character actor out of work. But that wasn't the name he registered under."

"Looks like he's had his head in a smelting furnace," I said. "I've never seen anything like it. Whoever killed him wanted to conceal his identity. Not even any dental work to trace him by. How'd you find out who he was?"

Reirdon took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to me. "I got this down at the desk. It came in the morning mail. You can see it was addressed to his phony name."

All the envelope contained was a check—for a thousand dollars. Drawn to the order of Sidney Frome. And then I emitted a long whistle. Because of the signature at the bottom of the check. For Dr. Stephen Thorpe was well-known in the medical profession, maintaining his own private sanitarium right here in the city.

REIRDON was watching me with a grin on his seamed face, anticipating my request. He knows I'm a bug on criminal psychology, and has often insisted I should've been a cop instead of a doctor.

"Well," I said, moving right into the investigation, "mind if I see Thorpe with you?"

He nodded and we went down to the street where a squad car was waiting. Had I known what I was letting myself in for I might not have been so eager.

We found Dr. Thorpe in his office at the sanitarium, a richly furnished room. He sat behind his desk, heavysset, graying around the temples, distinguished-looking.

Reirdon inclined his head and I said without preliminary: "Sidney Frome was murdered last night. What do you know

about him, doctor?"

Thorpe stiffened; his face muscles became rigid, then he relaxed. "What are you talking about?"

"Murder—Sidney Frome's. We have the check you sent him. Too bad it came too late for him to enjoy. What was it for?"

Thorpe's brown eyes narrowed. He was silent a moment. Then he said quietly: "It's purely a personal matter."

Reirdon thrust out his chin. "You'll talk and you'll like it. If you can shed any light on this thing I aim to drain it out of you."

Reirdon's like that—blunt. No subtlety, no tact. Yet sometimes he got results.

Thorpe's face was expressionless. He gazed at us appraisingly. "All right, gentlemen, I'll give it to you straight. Frome had been blackmailing me. So I paid him off. That's all there is to that check. If he was murdered I know nothing about it. Surely you can't think I'd send him a check and kill him at the same time."

"What did he have on you?"

Thorpe smiled thinly. "Sorry. I refuse to divulge information which might tend to incriminate me."

And there he had us. Of course we couldn't make him tell. I asked: "Can you account for your time last night?"

"As a matter of fact I can. One of my patients, Anton Brule, died last night. Coronary thrombosis—heart failure," he added for Reirdon's benefit. "Brule, you know, was president of the Miner's Trust. I called his relatives and remained with them at his home. The funeral was held this morning at ten o'clock. I took full charge."

Reirdon looked doubtful and nodded toward the door. We walked out of the office and down the long white corridor to the reception room. Behind a desk sat a trim little nurse at a telephone switchboard. I gently removed her headset and placed one of the phones against my ear. I plugged into Dr. Thorpe's office. Sure enough, he

was on the wire.

“You broke your promise,” he was saying. “Dr. Craig from the medical examiner’s office and a tough cop named Reirdon just left me. They’re investigating Frome’s murder.” At the other end a metallic voice demanded: “What happened?”

“Nothing,” said Thorpe. “I gave them a cock and bull story about blackmail. Be careful.”

The receiver clicked and the line went dead. The nurse was spluttering. I knew she’d rush in and tell Thorpe.

We went out to the street. Reirdon listened to what I told him.

“Too bad we can’t trace that call on a dial phone,” he mused. He ordered the driver of the squad car to tail Thorpe and then drove me back to the hospital.

For the rest of the day I was busy. There were a couple of post-mortems and a lot of other work. So it was not till quite late that I finally got home and went to bed.

WHAT it was that awakened me I cannot say. All I know is that I was on my back, the realization slowly dawning upon me that I had just come out of an anaesthetic. There was a strangely thick feeling in my head and my tongue felt swollen and starched. I had a notion I’d been chloroformed.

I had been dreaming, dreaming of headless corpses, surrounding me, hemming me in. I seemed still to smell the fetid odor of burnt tissue. It was the most realistic dream I ever had—in more ways than one.

For suddenly I was sitting bolt upright in bed. And the skin on my scalp had tightened and was beginning to crawl. There was something lying there in the bed beside me, something that gave out that sickening odor of broiled human flesh.

I had a moment of cold panic. I couldn’t stir, my muscles were dead, wooden. And then, as if drawn by a lodestone, the fingers of one hand crept out and touched a soft shape. The blood started pounding in my temples.

I was powerless to stop my hand from turning on the reading lamp. And then I was staring at the thing lying beside me above the counterpane. A huge body up to the neck—and from there nothing but charred blackened dust.

It seemed an age before I could regain control of my legs, and they carried me lurching across the floor to the open window, where I stood gulping and sucking in great breaths of fresh air.

Sure, I’ve seen all kinds of bodies, torn, mangled, crushed. I’ve cut them open by the dozens in the mortuary, and not felt a thing. But to wake up in the dead of night and find a horribly ravaged corpse right beside you in your own bed—ugh!

Finally I put a handkerchief over my nose and took another look. The suit was familiar. I extracted some papers from the pockets. They had been purposely left there to make identification easy. I was staring at all that remained mortal of Dr. Stephen Thorpe. Clearly a warning to me which said plainly: Mind your own business.

That settled it. There’s a type of criminal that has to be treated like what he is—a dangerous and ruthless animal. My teeth clenched down hard and I picked up the phone and called Reirdon’s home. His wife told me he had been called out on official business. I got headquarters on the wire. Reirdon’s voice was tired and outraged. I told him what had happened.

“You think that’s something?” he said. “Well, get a load of this. The Miner’s Trust has been cracked, the night watchman killed, and close to two million dollars in cash and securities stolen.”

I whistled. "How is that possible? The place must have been studded with alarms."

Reirdon snorted. "Nothing went off. The entire circuit had been disconnected. Even an emergency storage battery hidden in a secret place. No one knew about it but the vault people and Anton Brule, the president of the bank. And Brule died last night and was buried this morning at Fairview Cemetery."

"How was the watchman killed?"

"Same way, head burnt to a crisp."

"And the vault?"

"Opened with an oxyacetylene torch. It was a time box and could not otherwise have been opened till morning."

I said excitedly: "Listen, Reirdon, pick me up here right away. Don't ask questions. Drive over here as quickly as you can."

I hung up, went to my bureau and took out an old .45 calibre army Colt. It's a good weapon, shoots straight and hard and I'm used to it from considerable target practice. I was waiting in the street when Reirdon drove by.

"Up Linden Avenue," I told him.

"Where we going?"

"Fairview Cemetery."

"What in heaven for?" His voice was peevish.

I said slowly: "Get this. Both the watchman and Dr. Thorpe were murdered in the same fiendish manner. Unless it's a coincidence, that means Thorpe was connected in some way with the bank. Now, Anton Brule knew how to get into the bank and cut off the alarms. But he's dead and it was Dr. Thorpe who signed the death certificate. Let's take a look at Brule's body; I wouldn't be surprised if he, too, was murdered."

REIRDON didn't answer. I saw his jaw muscles bunch whitely over the glow

from the dashboard. He stepped on the gas and the tires sang against the concrete. We were outside the city limits when Reirdon spoke through the side of his mouth.

"There's a car tailing us."

I looked back. Twin headlights were moving up, focusing sharply. Reirdon's nerves, I thought, were getting jumpy. I was wrong. The car, a black sedan, sped up behind us. Suddenly the night air was shattered by the sharp staccato of a machine gun. Lead splattered against the police car. A web of cracks jumped into the windshield; then another.

Reirdon let go the wheel. We slewed off the road, lurched crazily across the adjacent field, stalled against a rock.

I slid out and ducked behind the radiator. The Colt was in my hand. The sedan had braked momentarily to throw a last burst at us. The Tommy gun squirted crimson flashes as though from a fire hose—a lethal tap dance of raining lead. Sod spurted from the ground near my feet. The Colt bucked in my hand and I triggered till it was empty.

Silence for a second. Then the sedan roared into action and disappeared into the darkness. Reirdon got up from the floor, cursing.

"Never argue with a machine gun," he said grumpily. "Stay under cover. There's no glory in being a dead hero."

"Not me," I muttered through compressed lips. "I'm not sticking my head in the ground while some mental cripple pours lead into me."

But Reirdon was right and I know it. He jockeyed the car back onto the road and we continued the short distance to Fairview.

A dim light burned in the small office building by the gate. Reirdon's shield gained us admittance and got the night watchman to lead the way to Anton Brule's final resting place, a small Italian marble

mausoleum. High on one side was a small stained glass window that had been broken.

The watchman went back to the gate. Reirdon gazed dourly around at the uneven sea of headstones, touched up by a thin hazy moon fading into a gray dawn, and shuddered. "I can leave graveyards alone," he said. "Especially at night."

I tried the bronze door. It was locked. "Let me have your gun."

He stared. "You can't tamper with this thing without a court order."

"Sure," I said impatiently. "And that may take a couple of days. Somebody doesn't want us to get into this tomb. I'm a curious sort of a guy and I want to see why not."

I took his police positive, stuck it against the lock and pulled the trigger. The shot echoed hollowly around the cemetery, leaving a doubly thick silence. Reirdon darted a furtive look around, as though he expected to see a dozen skeletons stick their skulls out of the dirt to tell us to shut up.

The heavy door creaked open. Reirdon's flashlight pointed a yellow light inside, swept up and down the row of sepulchral vaults. He started and almost dropped the light. I stopped short. One of them was drawn three-quarters open like a drawer in a bureau.

We stepped closer for a look and Reirdon started swearing at me. I felt let down. For there, under the light, lay the immobile, colorless face of Anton Brule; bald-headed, waxen, with the neat chin beard tilted upward at an angle.

"Well," Reirdon was growling, "there it is. You pulled a smart trick this time. Damn it, Craig! You can't go around cemeteries at night, shooting doors off vaults, defiling the dead. I should have known better myself. Now, what the hell am I going to tell the commissioner?"

I said lamely: "Maybe an autopsy will

show—"

"It'll show nothing," he burst out. "I suppose you'd like to slit him open right now. Come on, let's get out of here. I feel like a ghoul."

"Look," I persisted, "clearly something's wrong here. The crypt should have been shut and sealed. A gang of murderous ruffians gave us a lead bath to keep us away. Can't you see all that?"

"I can't see anything. All I can see is—"

And what he saw stopped him so short he choked on his own words. My eyes were riveted on Anton Brule's face, glued there in horrible fascination. For what I saw was ghastly, incredible.

ANTON BRULE'S pale lips had given a convulsive twitch. From his throat gurgled a low rasping sound. A bubble of saliva squeezed out of his mouth and drooled down over the stiff little beard.

Icy chills went cascading down my spine, prickling the hairs at the back of my neck. I was rooted to the floor, impaled by shock. I sent a swift glance at Reirdon. His jaw hung loosely; horror had struck like a whiplash across his face. And then, as he caught a strangled breath, I turned back to the corpse, denying credence to my eyes. Because what happened was impossible, utterly unbelievable. . . .

Anton Brule's shoulders had hunched up convulsively, his hands jerked out, his whole body began twisting and writhing in uncontrollable spasms. It was as if a powerful spring that had been coiled up inside his body had suddenly been released. Color flushed his cheeks. His face and mouth grimaced hideously. A racking sob strangled in the throat. His lids popped open and the glassy eyes bulged out in their sockets.

I admit it, my knees were trembling, knocking together. I heard Reirdon breathe, "Heaven help me!" His gun was in his

hand and he crossed himself with it; then he held his fist out stiffly, pointing the muzzle pointblank at Anton Brule's contorted face.

My reflexes snapped into action, my mind was again working. The gun went off, but I had slammed his wrist down and the bullet chipped the floor. He stared at me, dully, expressionlessly. My voice was raspy:

"This man isn't dead. Shoot over to the office and call an ambulance."

Reirdon nodded, white-faced, and ran out, glad to get away. It was a mistake to have separated. And not till he was gone did I realize we might have carried Anton Brule away in the police car. But of course I didn't know then that there was no more police car.

The banker's paroxysms had ceased. The gray smudge of dawn came through the open door, and in its half light he lay quite still, unconscious. Beads of perspiration condensed on his forehead.

My mind was trying to form a plausible explanation of the strange phenomenon I had witnessed when my ears detected a faint shuffle behind me, and then something hard jammed viciously against the small of my back. A low purring voice said quietly:

"Easy now, Dr. Craig. Hold still."

I stood rigid while a hand explored my pocket and extracted the big Colt. I turned slowly, my elbows up and away from my body.

The man who faced me was of medium height, wiry, with a wisp of red hair combed over from the side to cover its thinness. He had a soft, bland face, but it was his eyes that held my attention. Cold and gray, like chips of granite; eyes that had nothing human in them.

Behind him was another man, short, squat, with a swarthy face and massive shoulders. He carried a brass instrument in

his hands which I immediately recognized as an oxyacetylene torch.

"So," said the first one softly, "being an assistant medical examiner does not quite satisfy your craving for excitement, eh, doctor? You find it necessary to meddle in police investigations. You should have heeded my warnings, doctor. What made you pay a visit to our friend, Anton Brule?"

"A hunch," I said. "I thought he had been murdered. I see now that he was never even dead."

"Ah, but he soon will be. We were merely waiting for the proper time." His gray eyes flickered over the tomb. He chuckled. "Strange, isn't it? This is a mausoleum, yet I am about to convert it into a crematory."

The squat man was fumbling over his apparatus. Then he said: "About ready, Lassour."

I stared. The name Lassour was familiar. An inmate for five years at San Quentin, he'd only recently been released. Former stock broker, confidence man and counterfeiter.

"Lassour. Glad to meet you," I said. "I've been wanting to for some time. Your type always interested me."

HE bowed. "Well, Dr. Craig, here is a rare chance to see how I operate, to watch my work at close quarters. At very close quarters. Oh, no need to watch the door. Your friend, Lieutenant Reirdon, is being well taken care of. If you're interested you may watch him get the same treatment Brule is about to receive."

He nodded to the squat man. "All right, Wilkes."

Wilkes did something to the oxyacetylene torch, and a hissing lance of blue flame shot out. My eyes contracted at the blinding glare. It would be useless, I knew, to try anything, the gun covered me so alertly. I watched. And it seemed a tight

metal band was being drawn about my chest.

Wilkes lifted the torch, spraying the hissing flame over Anton Brule's face.

The unbearable stench of scorched flesh that had become familiar to me again battered my nostrils. Instantly the skin of the banker's countenance blackened, shriveled and dissolved under the intense heat. The bones of the skull crumpled and turned into brittle black soot.

The whole operation took only a few seconds. How could tissue and bone stand up under heat fierce enough to drill a hole through a thick wall of solid steel!

Wilkes stood grinning at us. Lassour had pocketed his Luger and was holding my big Colt, his free hand pressing a handkerchief against his nose. His voice sounded a little muffled.

"Neat work, eh, doctor? But I must give the credit to Wilkes. It was his idea—to conceal the identity of our victims. And yet you discovered that the first one was Frome, anyway. Because of that blundering idiot, Thorpe. Wilkes is quite handy with that thing, isn't he? Quite a number of banks out West have melted like cheese under it."

I didn't say anything. I was feeling sick again. And yet, being a doctor, I should have been able to stand the sight of the gruesome corpse as well as they. Lassour jerked a thumb toward the door and spoke to Wilkes.

"Get Klinger and tell him to bring the night watchman and Reirdon back here. We've got a lot of work for your torch tonight." Wilkes propped his torch against the wall and went out into the early dawn.

Lassour was wearing a tight little smile. He said almost pleasantly: "Handy chap, Wilkes, but hard to handle sometimes. Used to work in a steel mill. Good at it, too, I understand."

I took a step toward Lassour. "You

know," I said, "I think you're a fool."

"Yes?" He lifted his brows.

"I think you're highly overrated, Lassour. I think that if you didn't have a gun in front of you, you'd be scared. And I'm going to prove it."

I moved forward again, knotting my fists. He waved the gun meaningly, still smiling that tight little smile.

"Easy, Craig, even if I was a bad marksman, which I'm not, I couldn't possibly miss at this distance."

I went for him then. Not a muscle in his face flickered as he pressed the trigger. He didn't even stop smiling. And then I hit him. He tried to duck, but I caught him on the side of the jaw. It was fine. I could feel the bone crunch under my fist.

The Colt had clicked on an empty shell. Sure, I knew it wasn't loaded. Hadn't I emptied it at the black sedan a short while back?

LASSOUR sagged forward, and I nailed him again, snapping his head back like the recoil of a gun. He slumped sideways to the floor. I took the Luger out of his pocket. It fitted my palm nicely. I felt better. And then, just to make sure Lassour would not soon be making trouble again I tapped him over the head with it.

Then I ducked out to the side of the mausoleum, sucking in a breath of fresh air. I waited. Soon Wilkes and another man came down the path, pushing Reirdon between them. The lieutenant had a bloody hand against his shoulder. I could see that much in the indistinct haze of dawn.

Wilkes' voice floated over to me. "We'll have to go back for the night watchman."

"What for?" demanded the stranger. "He's finished. I let him have it when he made a break for the phone."

Reirdon stumbled, tripped and went down to his knees, his face drawn and

white. The stranger kicked him. I saw red then. What followed on my part was purely automatic. I raised the Luger and fired twice.

The man jerked erect, arched his back, a bewildered look suddenly spreading across his face. He twisted slowly, then his knees collapsed and he was dead before he hit the ground. Ordinarily I wouldn't kill a man in cold blood, but what I had seen the last few hours left me with no such compunctions.

Wilkes dived headlong, taking cover behind a headstone; shoving the snout of an automatic over the top and firing rapidly. Reirdon kept flat against the path. I let the mausoleum shield me and aimed carefully for a small section of Wilkes' leg which was sticking out. But I held my fire.

Because a few feet behind him I saw Reirdon slowly rising. In his hand was a jagged rock he'd picked from the ground. Wilkes must have sensed what was happening because he rose and spun toward Reirdon. The lieutenant being also in the line of my fire I had to keep the Luger silent, meanwhile holding my breath. It seemed that they both let fly at the same time. Reirdon with the rock—and Wilkes with lead.

But it was Wilkes who went down, and as I later determined, with the cartilage in his nose smashed and the frontal bone of his forehead fractured. Reirdon scooped up the automatic and staggered toward me and we entered the mausoleum. Lassour was still on the floor.

Reirdon pinched his nose at the sickening acrid odor. "Glad I missed the show," he commented dryly.

I bent over Lassour. "Let's get the boys back to town. I'll have to probe your shoulder."

"No need; the bullet went right through."

Lassour blinked his eyes, stirred

slightly. "Get up, Lassour," I ordered. "We're getting out of here." And a strange voice said:

"I don't think so. Keep your hands where they are, gentlemen."

I straightened. Reirdon drew in a gasping breath.

For the man was bald-headed and wore a brisk chin beard. His eyes were twin pools of flame.

"Anton Brule!" I breathed.

For it was he—come out of his tomb—and back to life.

And yet it was certainly not the same man I had seen destroyed. For this one was alive and whole, while his double still reposed in the open crypt—a gruesome, headless corpse.

"Yes," he said, "Anton Brule." And then he laughed, without moving his lips, a dry, cracked sound. "You are a doctor, Craig, and so naturally you don't believe in spirits. A shame. But you are now looking at the ghost of Anton Brule, former president of the Miner's Trust."

"A ghost with a gun." I wet my lips. "Nonsense. You're as real and alive as I am."

His eyes flicked toward the burnt corpse. "Look at me in there. I was interred today. A hundred witnesses were at my funeral."

I said: "You mean *he* was interred. Not you. You were elsewhere."

Brule chuckled again. "You're quite clever, doctor."

"Cleverer than you think. That man was suffering from catalepsia. I've seen such cases. The patient goes into a trance, a sort of suspended animation; he loses all muscular power. The appearance of death is simulated to an amazing extent. I've heard of cases where such people have even been buried alive. Where did you get him?"

Lassour sat up, shaking his head. He

rose to his feet, grinning at Brule. Then he collected the guns from Reirdon and myself.

BRULE stroked his beard. "He was a patient in Thorpe's sanatorium. The doctor readily entered our little scheme. Only he was reluctant to commit murder. So he left the vault drawer open, intending to remove the body sometime tonight."

"But the resemblance?" gulped Reirdon.

"Quite simple. We had Frome, the old character actor, do the makeup on the patient. Had to shave his head, of course. Thorpe arranged for his services, too. Unfortunately you discovered his identity through Thorpe's check.

"You see, Thorpe did not know we intended to kill Frome. And after he got frightened we decided to eliminate Thorpe himself."

I shrugged, concealing the tight feeling inside my chest. "But why all the elaborate plans just to rob a bank?"

Lassour laughed. "Didn't you know that the D. A. was preparing an indictment against Brule for embezzling from his own bank?"

"I see. So Brule planned on making it look like he was dead. And knowing the plans and construction of the big vaults in the Miner's Trust he decided to clean the bank out. And somehow got in touch with you."

Lassour nodded. "Correct again, doctor."

I mused: "But didn't Thorpe know that his patient was subject to epileptic fits? Epilepsy is a disease often associated with catalepsy. What would he have done if the patient jumped out of his coffin during the funeral services?"

"Of course he knew," stated Brule complacently. "That's why he doped the man up with morphine. . . . And now if

there are no more questions, gentlemen, I will finish up my business here."

He raised the revolver, pointed it directly at Lassour, and fired.

Lassour seemed for a brief instant to realize what was coming. He opened his mouth to emit a choking sound, and then with the ear-splitting noise of the explosion I heard the bullet thud into his body.

"A very necessary step," said Brule casually. "I don't doubt that he would have done the same to me as soon as we were alone with the money."

Again Brule lifted his revolver. He stared at me. "And now you," he said.

THE room was convulsed by another shot. Instinctively I stiffened against the impact of the bullet. But I felt nothing. A wisp of smoke was curling from the automatic in Lassour's hand. He had, with his last strength, fired at Brule. But he'd missed. And the banker, suddenly unnerved, threw another shot into his partner.

At that moment I jumped.

It was a bit ironical that Lassour, who a moment before intended to kill me, was now giving me a chance to save myself. With a snarl, Brule twisted and pressed the trigger. My forehead scorched from the muzzle of the gun, I hurled myself at him and we went down together.

His head cracked the floor and the revolver went reeling. I got my fingers around his neck and squeezed with blind fury till I felt him go limp. Then I gathered up the gun and rose to my feet.

Reirdon was leaning weakly against the wall. "Doctor," he said, "you were trained to save lives and you just did a beautiful job in saving ours."

"No medical skill needed on this job," I said.

Reirdon seemed pleased. "At least we're bringing one of them back to face

trial.”

“Maybe two,” I remembered. “Wilkes is still outside. I doubt if your rock killed him.”

But Wilkes, I found, was dead. And not from Reirdon’s rock either. But from a vicious blow against the obelion region of his skull; which I concluded had been dealt him by Brule before the banker walked in on us. And then I heard the muffled report of another shot.

I raced back into the mausoleum. Reirdon was still propped against the wall. And a look of vast disappointment was spread across his face. I glanced at Brule on the floor. Where before he had

possessed only two eyes, a third now appeared.

Reirdon pointed to Lassour. The man’s eyes were open and glazed. Tightly clutched in his hand was the Luger pistol.

“Lassour wasn’t dead after all,” said Reirdon with disgust.

But he was now. To my practiced eye that much was plain. It was my fault for not examining him. But then I guess the way it happened was after all only a grim sort of justice.

I shook my head. “This was the double-crossingest gang I ever saw. They kept eliminating each other till there was nobody left to split the money.”