

Killer's Carnival

A Complete Novelet

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STERLING

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"The Devil's at the Door," etc.



Vezel was angrily scolding Ilma under his breath as he started to whirl her about



CHAPTER I

NO BLUNT INSTRUMENT

WHEN Gil Vine laid three cents on the cigar stand in the lobby of his office building and said: "Times," he noticed a pair of legs. Good-looking legs they were, encased in sheer chiffon, standing by the elevator bank. He glanced up, but the fur collar of her coat was pulled up around her face so he could only see a pair of hazel-green eyes watching him intently.

When the tobacconist gave him his morning paper with the greeting, "Looks like a real snowstorm, Mister Vine," the proprietor of the Vine Investigating Agency saw the girl start violently. And after he'd entered the up-car and the girl followed, there was no further doubt in his mind. This girl was waiting for him and she didn't want anyone else to know about it

He got off at the fourth. The girl tagged along a few feet behind, all the way down the corridor.

"Come on in," he said without turning his head.

"Nobody around."

She gasped. "Gilbert Vine?" she said, softly.

"Yeah." He acted as if it was an every day occurrence for a smartly-dressed girl to trail him cautiously to his office door. "Close the door. That's right. The armchair, there, is for clients. Sit down and catch your breath."

He was doing his best to put her at ease, but she didn't react. She sat down, threw open her coat and waited, white-faced and grim. When he had slid into the swivel chair behind his desk, she said:

"You used to know Bill Corinth, Mister Vine?"

"Sure. Bill and I worked out of the same office for the F.B.I. Bill send you to me?"

The detective saw her lips tremble.

"Not exactly. He used to talk about you a lot. He always said if he were in a jam, he'd rather have you working for him than the whole police force, so . . ."

Gil Vine grinned. When he grinned, a network of crinkles formed at the corners of his eyes and his long bony face seemed suddenly to contradict the

Gil Vine Suspects a Death-Defying Skate Troupe of Putting Murder On Ice!

steel in his gray eyes and the iron in his grizzled hair.

"I'll buy Bill a drink on that."

"You can't—not anymore."

Tears welled up in her eyes. Her voice was unsteady.

"I didn't know." He reached over and patted her sleeve. "Want to tell me about it? Bill was a damn good friend of mine."

She looked miserably down at her lap.

"He was a good friend of mine, too. We were going to be married."

VINE waited. There was something more to this than heartbroken distress. He couldn't figure what it was. She pointed to the folded newspaper he had laid on the desk.

"It's in there. He was killed. Last night."

Vine flipped the paper open, found the heading:

CUSTOMS INSPECTOR
BEATEN TO DEATH
Police Puzzled By Brutal
Crime at Society Rink

She went on, and her voice was husky as she spoke.

"The terrible thing is, the police think I killed him."

He rattled the paper without looking up.

"It doesn't say that here, Miss . . ."

"Estabrook. Louise Estabrook. It's almost as bad as that. It says, 'a citywide search is under way for the young woman who accompanied Mister Corinth to the skating rink at the Radio City Plaza last night.' I was with him. But I didn't . . ."

"Of course you didn't," he said, soothingly. "Probably the police don't believe you did, either. But they have to say something to reporters. And they will want to question you."

"They'll arrest me," she insisted, "but I don't care about that. It doesn't make any difference what happens to me, now Bill's dead. The only thing I want is to see that the person who murdered Bill is made to pay for it. So I've come to you."

He stood up, walked over to the window and watched the snow for a minute, with his back to her. Then he said:

"I'll do what I can—on one condition."

She nodded. "Anything."

"It'll be tough. You'll have to give yourself up."

"Go to prison for something that I didn't do?"

He made an impatient gesture.

"You're a long way from a cell. Even if they hold you without bail, I wouldn't worry. Look at it this way—if you *had* murdered Bill, sooner or later, they'd shove you in the jug, anyway. Since you didn't, your being arrested may throw the real murderer off his guard for a while. Now"—he tapped the newspaper with his forefinger—"tell me the straight of it. What did they leave out here? How much of this is on the level and how much is hoke, made up by someone on the rewrite desk?"

She thought for long seconds before replying.

"What they've got is true, as far as it goes. Bill called me for dinner last night. We went over to one of those steak places, off Broadway. He didn't seem to have his mind on the meal at all. Once, when I asked him if there was anything wrong, he said"—she caught her breath—"Not between you and me, there isn't, hon. Don't mind me. I'm just trying to dope something out.' Then, after dinner, we walked back through Fiftieth Street. Out of a clear sky, Bill suggested we go down to the glass-enclosed restaurant beside the skating rink at the Plaza and have a couple of drinks."

Vine made his swivel chair squeak.

"Seems to me I read something about an ice show they've got there this week."

She nodded. "The St. Moritz troupe. Fancy skaters and a couple of those daredevils who jump through blazing hoops. Anyway, we got a table where we could watch, but before the waiter brought our order, Bill got up and said, 'I'm going to make a couple of phone calls, honey. Don't worry if I'm not back right away'."

"What time was this?" asked the detective.

"It must have been half-past nine when he went away and that—that was the last time I saw him."

"You didn't see him meet anyone? Talk with anyone?"

She bit her lips to keep from crying.

"No. I just waited there for him to come back. He never did. I watched the troupe do their set and then got dizzy following the crowd on the ice, skating round and round. Finally, when the music stopped and the lights went out and everybody went home, I decided Bill simply wasn't coming back, so I paid the check and went home, too."

"Didn't you try to get in touch with him?" Vine asked.

"Oh, yes. I phoned his hotel half a dozen times.

He hadn't come in. I was worried, of course, but it never occurred to me anything serious had happened to him. Then I opened my paper this morning and learned he'd been found in the lower courtyard of the Plaza, his head crushed in and the ice underneath him all . . ."

SHE flung her arms on the desk, buried her face and wept soundlessly.

He let her cry for awhile.

"We better get it over with, Miss Estabrook."

She lifted her head, dully.

"If I'm going to be arrested on a charge of murder, shouldn't I get a lawyer?"

He shook his head. "Don't bother with that, yet. They won't charge you with homicide. Worst they'll do is hold you a couple days for investigation."

They went down to the street, and walked over to the Forty-seventh Street station. Just before they went up the steps between the green globes, he gripped her arm.

"You're not holding anything back, are you? Because if I'm going to work on this thing, I need to know all there is to know."

"I haven't the slightest idea why Bill was killed or who did it—or anything," she said. "He never talked to me about his work."

"He wouldn't," Gil Vine said. "Government men get that way."

They went in.

He asked for Captain Dougherty, introduced the girl, turned her over to the station matron.

"Cheer up!" He patted her shoulder. "You're doing the thing that'll help most. Don't forget that, if the going gets rough. I'll keep in touch with you."

Then he got Dougherty to one side.

"She didn't know what to do, Cap, when she read about it, so she came to me. You can ask her all the questions you want. She'll tell you everything she knows, which is next to nothing."

"Thanks, Gil," said Dougherty. "I'll see she gets a break with the press boys. We haven't anything on her. It just seemed peculiar she ran away."

"She didn't," objected Vine. "She was practically the last customer out of the restaurant. Corinth had left her, saying he'd be right back. So she waited until they closed the place up. She didn't know anything had happened to him, so she went on home."

"Okay," answered Dougherty. "I'm just trying to crack this thing because the Federal boys are boiling over. Where do you stand on it, Gil?"

"Bill and I both wore the same badge for a long time," said Vine simply.

"Sure." Dougherty nodded. "Well, I won't be able to turn over anything my plainclothes boys pick up, but right now you start even. We haven't got a thing to work on."

"How about a permit to view the body?" Vine asked.

"Go right ahead. I'll phone the morgue, now."

Vine picked up a cab, went downtown, and east. In the chill, damp, receiving vault of the city morgue, he stood stone-faced, while an assistant medical examiner described the injuries.

"No blunt instrument this time, Mister Vine. This was sharp, pointed. But about a quarter of an inch thick. He was hit three times. Only blow that counted was this one—right on top of his head. Penetrated the skull, clear to the brain pan. This one nearly tore off the top of his left ear, and that one ripped the fleshy part of his neck—that's where the blood came from. But those others wouldn't have been fatal."

"What would you say the wound was made with?" asked Vine thoughtfully.

"Now you've got me." The doctor pulled at the tip of his nose with thumb and forefinger. "Looks something like injuries I've seen made with the sharp corner of a spade, but it's too thick for a spade. Anyway, that's not my job."

CHAPTER II

MURDER WEAPON

AFTER the rubber sheet had been replaced, Gil Vine got out to the street and rode uptown to where the towering buttes of Radio City threw shadows across the great sunken plaza. Vine spent the time wondering about those wounds, particularly the one on the head. What kind of a murder weapon could it be?

The rink of artificial ice wasn't open to the public at that hour, but the restaurant was open for business. Vine slid into a chair at one of the round tables, ordered a sandwich and coffee.

The waiter was eager to discuss the crime of the previous evening.

"I, myself, never see this gentleman until he is dead. I notice the lady, sure. She is sitting by

herself for so long. She was at one of Morris' tables. Morris is not here now. The police took him to Headquarters."

"That so?" Vine was only mildly interested. "Do they think Morris killed the man?"

The waiter snorted. "Not Morris. He will not even kill a fly on the tables here, in the summertime. But Morris saw this dead man talking to someone."

"Man or woman?" Vine asked the question disinterestedly.

"Oh, a man. But such an investigation will be no use. Morris does not even remember what the other man was like. You see so many people every day, on a job like this."

"I can imagine."

Vine pointed to a colored placard of an entrancingly slim girl in a Hussar's costume, pirouetting on skates. In flaming red type was inscribed:

TROUPE OF SAINT MORITZ

Internationally Famous Daredevils
and Dancers of the
Silver Blades

"When do they go on next?"

The waiter cocked his head on one side, sadly.

"It is a pity. No more. Last night was the last. Do you know what I think about this murder?"

"No. What?"

The waiter leaned over confidentially.

"A crime of passion. No less. A beautiful and mysterious woman, a jealous lover." He snapped his fingers.

"I never thought of it like that." Vine showed his astonishment. "You ought to be a detective." He sat motionless and silent for half an hour, his sandwich untouched. Then, he left a tip, went to a phone booth. He talked with the sporting editor of a metropolitan daily and was finally given a name and a number. He hung up, dialed again.

"Want to talk to Mike Prouty," he said into the mouthpiece. "This Mister Prouty? This is Gil Vine, private investigator. . . . Yeah. . . . You're handling the publicity for this St. Moritz skating troupe? Like to see you about it. . . . Right away? Fine."

Ten minutes later, he was sitting in a hotel bedroom, accepting a light from a breezy, well-tanned young man who wore a light gray suit, a black shirt and a cherry-colored necktie.

"You realize, Mister Vine, I got to be careful what kind of stories get printed about my clients. Just what makes you think they might know something about this here Bill Corinth?"

Gil Vine held up a finger. "Corinth was killed at the Radio City Rink. The St. Moritz troupe were at that rink when he was killed."

He raised a second finger. "Corinth was a customs man. His job was to see travelers from abroad don't put anything over on Uncle Samuel. This skating troupe just checked in from Le Havre four days ago."

"For God's sake," muttered Mike Prouty, "that's jumping a hell of a long way to conclusions."

Vine held up a third finger. "The wound in Corinth's skull was made by something sharp and pointed—probably of steel and about a quarter of an inch thick." He saw the apprehensive glint in Prouty's eyes. "That's right. You guessed it. A skate."

Prouty squirmed in his chair and laughed a little uncomfortably.

"Sounds pretty thin, fella. You don't even know that this dead man ever *saw* any of my troupe, to say nothing of having had a fight with any of them."

Vine stared at him coldly.

"This wasn't a fight. If there'd been a fight, someone else would have been smashed up, too. Corinth was that kind of a guy. This was murder."

"What the hell do you want me to do about it?"

"Tell me where your troupe is," Vine said. "Fix it so I can see them, talk to them, without their suspecting anything."

THE publicity man seemed very unhappy.

"Look, Mister Vine. I have a call from Dick Wilson over at the paper about you, and if he says you're a leveler, it goes with me. But suppose you're wrong about this? I think you *are* wrong. If you make any accusations or stuff like that, it's gonna wreck all the bookings I've made for these people. I just closed a week in Chicago for them, this morning."

Vine swore heavily. "I'm not going to make any accusations. There won't be a peep out of me unless I put my hands on proof. Don't try to stall me or I'll sic some of the Washingtons on you."

Prouty held up two fat palms.

"Pull over to the curb, brother. I'm not trying to

stall you. I've got an income to protect, but gee whiz, I don't want to make my dough off a killer."

"That's better. I'll go up as a reporter. Get an interview."

Prouty turned his head from left to right slowly, then back again.

"Wouldn't look right. All the interviews were here in town, three weeks ago. If you went clear up there for one, they'd be sure it was phony. But maybe I could"—he opened a closet door—"here. Tell you what . . ."

"What?"

"I could loan you this, if you'd take good care of it." The agent brought out a square, black leather case. "Can you use one of these things?"

"I can fake it."

"There's a book of instructions that may help." Prouty fished it out of the camera's carrying case. "I'll stick in some flash bulbs, too. You can say you're from some news syndicate and you wanted to wait until you could get them in the appropriate surroundings. That'll sound okay."

"How many are there in this skating company?"

"Just four. Here—" Prouty pulled a folder out of his pocket. "Here's a brochure I got up on 'em. They're really terrific. Best in the world. You look this over and I'll answer any questions you've got, going up on the train."

"Where's the troupe now?"

Prouty glanced at his watch. "Just about pulling into Lake Placid. They took the sleeper right after they got paid off last night. There's a train leaving about eleven tonight, gets us up there in time for breakfast."

"First rate," said Vine. "You take it."

Prouty looked puzzled. "I thought you . . ."

Vine slung the shoulder-strap of the camera box over his head. "I'm going over to the airport. There's a kid over there has a charter plane. He'll put me up in the Adirondacks in a couple of hours."

A worried crease showed between Prouty's eyebrows.

"You act as if you had a grudge against my performers, Mister Vine," he said.

The detective's face was expressionless.

"Bill Corinth saved my life once by putting a slug through a guy who had a tom gun in his hands and a load of coke in his system." He went to the door. "I'll be looking for you up there, tomorrow morning."

PROUTY didn't answer.

The investigator found his man at the flying field. An hour later, Vine was the lone passenger in a four-place cabin plane winging its way northward under a thousand foot ceiling of snow clouds. As the snaky length of the Hudson slipped beneath the plane, the detective ran through the booklet of instructions on the Graflex, practiced making a few adjustments so that he could bluff at being professional. Then he turned his attention to the brochure.

There were three men in the Troupe de St. Moritz, one girl. The featured performer was a short, stocky blond youth by the name of Wolf Rachau, referred to by Prouty as the "Neck-breaker." According to the leaflet, Rachau had fractured his spine twice and received many other injuries in the course of a short but spectacular career as a stunt skater. It was Rachau who did the barrel-jumping on flashing steel blades, leaped through hoops of fire, raced over hurdles on the ice. He had the appearance of an irresponsible adolescent.

The girl in the troupe, Ilma Brant was the one who had been pictured on the advertising poster at the rink-side. By her photograph, she was a diminutive and graceful elf, billed as:

"Holder of more first awards for fancy figure-skating than any other woman in the world."

Ilma's features were those of a mannequin off the boulevards.

The picture of her partner, Jon Vezel, showed a short, dark man with a figure like the Winged Mercury and a sinister slit of a mouth, like that of a devil cheated of his victims. The eyes were deep-set in hollow sockets, the cheek-bones high and protruding, giving an effect of macabre gauntness. Gil Vine thought Jon Vezel would need plenty of make-up under floodlights.

But the face which held the investigators attention longest was that of Charles Lagand, featured as "The Daredevil Supreme." This tall, handsome, mustachioed individual was advertised to skate blindfolded on a foot-wide, ice-covered beam twenty feet above the ice.

But it was not this publicity of Lagand which arrested Vine's faculties—it was the recollection of a face which Vine had seen in the Federal Grand Jury room a dozen years before. Gil Vine was no "camera eye." He depended upon accurately compiled files of "Wanted" individuals rather than

his ability to classify types. But there had been something about the complacent assurance of that witness which had registered permanently on the film of his memory.

The plane slid to a stop in a spray of snow on the mountain-circled lake and he paid off his pilot. Yet it was not until he checked in at the Evergreen Club that Vine was quite certain about Lagand.

Down the rustic staircase into the log-walled lobby came the four members of Prouty's skating troupe. The tall man holding Ilma's arm was undoubtedly Charles Lagand. Just as certainly, a dozen years ago, he had been "Cherbourg Charlie," youngest and most notorious of all confidence men on the trans-Atlantic liners.

CHAPTER III SOMETHING TO SHOW YOU

VINE strolled over, accosted Lagand.

"Like to come along and take a shot or two, if you people are going to the lake, now. Mike Prouty said you'd be glad to run through a few routines so I can get some action stuff. Maybe a little leg art."

He smiled sardonically at Ilma, who wore a chartreuse costume that was meant to show her shape.

"Marvelous." Lagand beamed. "We make you welcome, eh? Any pal of Mike, he is a pal of us, also."

Vine was made acquainted with Ilma, with Wolf Rachau and Jon Vezel.

"We do our new jitterbug number for you." Ilma smiled with her eyes, "The man from the newsreel, he call it 'Ice-Trucking'. It is ver-ee crazy. You will like it." She clutched the black skate-bag under her arm gleefully.

Their equipment had not yet been set up, the Neck-breaker growled, they wouldn't be able to demonstrate the hurdle race or the "tight-rope" skating until the evening. Vezel suggested slyly that the cameraman might like to take pictures of the intrepid Wolf Rachau going off a ski-jump on skates. Vine said it would be great. Rachau's lips thinned. He made no attempt to conceal the sneer in his voice.

"But certainly. One picture of Rachau, he is worth a dozen of Vezel's posing. Anyone recognize this. I will be glad to oblige."

The Neck-breaker obligingly hurtled down the

steep incline of the small ski-jump, rocketed precariously down an ice-encrusted runway of boards—while Gil Vine frantically snapped the shutter of a filmless camera. . . .

Vezel and Ilma stood at the foot of the ski-run. He kept his back turned toward the hair-raising performance of his troupe-mate, but he paid plenty of attention to the girl.

Then Vine fiddled with shutter and focus adjustments for nearly an hour while Ilma and her partner executed rhythmic swoops and curvettes on the glassy surface of the lake. While this impromptu rehearsal went on, Rachau contented himself with caustic comments about Vezel's appearance and ability. But he never once mentioned the lovely Ilma.

Vine observed Vezel angrily scolding Ilma under his breath as he started to whirl her about his head, by a grip on one wrist and ankle. Lagand did his best to make light of the poorly-concealed antagonisms but took the part of none.

Finished with his fake photography, Vine observed the troupe ending its practice. He was seated on a bench beside their equipment, watching the flashing blades cut gleaming furrows in the hard ice on abrupt turns and stops. But his eyes had a distant look, as though he was trying to puzzle something out, something that had little to do with the scene before him.

Then the four of them skated over to him, the rehearsal finished. He reached for the girl's black skate bag and, holding it by the tubular runners of the skates within, handed it to her.

"The most beautiful skating I've ever seen, Miss Brant," he said, grinning broadly.

"Thank you," she answered, smiling graciously while her eyes searched his. I hope that the photos, they are good."

The four from St. Moritz never separated long enough for the detective to get into conversation with one of them, alone.

Not until they had tramped back along the snow-packed trail to the club, did the investigator get his opening. Lagand brought up the rear. Vine dropped behind, waited for the florid ex-confidence man.

"Been in America long?" he inquired, casually.

"We leave Le Havre ten days ago. A very bad crossing." Lagand was curt.

"Too bad. I haven't been over the pond for five years," Vine said. "I always used to prefer

Cherbourg.”

Lagand plodded along for a dozen steps before he answered.

“I thought it. You are no photographer. Always you were too easily satisfied. Those others, they made us pose over many times. But you . . .”

Vine made no admission. “You might drop around to my room, 201, say right after dinner. We could talk over old times in Cherbourg.”

“What can I do?” Lagand said. “I will come, naturally.”

HE KEPT his word, knocked on Vine’s door, softly, shortly before eight.

“What is it you want, my friend with the long memory? If it is blackmail, I have not enough money to make it worth your while.”

The detective laughed harshly.

“I’m not going to put the bee on you. I don’t want your lousy money. I want information.”

Lagand blew a cloud of cigarette smoke so Vine couldn’t see the skater’s eyes.

“Information about—”

“Murder.”

If Vine had expected the foreigner to show surprise, he was disappointed. Instead, Lagand inhaled leisurely and let the smoke dribble insolently from his nostrils, before answering.

“I expect this. Actually, I do. It is concerning’ this customs man who was found dead, no?”

“Yes.”

“Ah!” Lagand’s hand turned palm up, as if he expected to catch some of the snowflakes that were swirling outside the windows. “If you are so familiar with my *histoire*, my friend, you will know that never did I break the laws. Never.”

“I know Cherbourg Charlie never got caught. But you were close to the edge, more than once.”

“But certainly. That is excitement, no? To be close to the edge and not go over? That is why I like this skating for stunt. Yes? The same thrill. Only now, I risk my own bones instead of my money. And all I take from those who enjoy watching me, is what your pal, Mike, he gives me.”

“Get to it, Cherbourg. What are you driving at?”

Lagand ground out his cigarette carefully. “This, only. I broke no laws then. I break none now. Especially not one that may one day bring me to kiss the Widow of Paris or, here, to sit in your electrical chairs. No? So I tell you the truth, I know not one thing about this man who died, unless”—he

leaned forward, glanced slyly up from under quizzical eyebrows—“he was a tall man, big of nose and red as to hair? Yes?”

Vine yanked him savagely to his feet.

“Spit it out, Cherbourg, or I’ll knock it out of you. What do you know?”

“This man I have describe—if he is the one the paper here calls William Corinth—he talked with Wolf the last night. Off in a corner, this was. In secret, as you say.”

Vine released him.

“I’ll check on that. It better be on the up and up. I’m not kidding. And you stay here until I have a chat with this Rachau. I don’t want anybody getting tipped off. What’s his room number?”

“Two-naught-five.” Lagand smiled craftily. “It is not for nothing they call him the Neck-breaker. When he is aroused, he is a veritable madman.”

“Yeah?” Vine opened the door. “We’ll be even then. I’m pretty damned mad myself right now.”

He went to 205, but he didn’t knock on the door. It was partly open.

Vine called out, got no answer. He kicked the door wide open quickly and went in.

Wolf Rachau was kneeling beside the bed, as if praying. But his head was resting on the bed and the top of it was a gory mess.

His skin was still warm but he was thoroughly dead.

BESIDE the bowed-down corpse was a green-japanned, metal box about two feet long. The lid was open and on it, as well as on the floor, were scattered screwdrivers, a hacksaw, hammers, mallets and files.

Vine got down on his knees, looked under the bed. He took out his handkerchief, gingerly lifted off the carpet a short, razor-edged cold-chisel. The gleaming metal of the blade was stained crimson for half an inch above the beveled edge.

Wolf Rachau had obviously been down on the floor doing something with that tool kit. Vine cudged his brains, searched the room carefully, found nothing on which such an array of implements might be employed.

But on the bureau he found a leather letter-folder of continental make. He went through it. There were many letters of German script, post-marked from Berne and Zurich. And one newspaper clipping. It caught his eyes immediately.

He spread it out flat. Its fine type and light-

faced heading spoke of Parisian journalism:

L'Horreur du Carnaval d'Hiver

There was half a column of it under a Chamonix dateline.

Vine's French was good enough to let him piece together most of it. When he had finished, his jaw set grimly. He searched Rachau's pockets, found the key to 205. Then he went out and locked the door.

Down in the dining room an orchestra was playing: "The Man Who Comes Around." From outside came the jingle of sleighbells fixed to tire chains, Vine stalked down to the lobby, went to the desk.

"Where can I get hold of the sheriff?"

"There's a deputy right here in town, Larry Aker. It's four-one-four, ring two. Want me to phone him?"

"Thanks, I'll take care of it." As he turned, Vine collided with a red-faced man in a tan polo coat, the shoulders of which were dusted with snow. It was Mike Prouty.

"Drove up, Mister Vine," he explained, chuckling. "Couldn't wait for that night train. After you'd gone, it struck me there was something I should've told you."

"If it's anything important," Vine said, "come on over where nobody's going to be listening to your broadcast."

The detective wondered why Prouty hadn't phoned if the message was so urgent, but he didn't say so.

"Well, I don't know . . ." Prouty shrugged out of his polo coat, slapped the snow off his hat. "It might be nothing at all. But when you were talking to me I guess I didn't take in what you were saying about Corinth being a customs inspector."

"One of the best," Vine said shortly. "He wasn't one of the dock watchers. They put him on the big jobs."

One of Prouty's eyebrows twitched nervously. He rubbed his hand alongside his forehead in irritation.

"Maybe I ought to have gone right down to the customs people, but you seemed to be pretty hot on this thing, so I took a chance. What I had to tell you was this—I went down to meet the troupe when they got off the boat a few days ago, and there was some trouble over the customs inspection."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know exactly. Ilma came up to me practically in tears, said that the inspectors were throwing all her nice things all around."

"Bunk!" said Vine. "The boys on the piers know how to handle women's clothes better than women do. What happened?"

"They got it all straightened out, finally. It looked to me as if they were paying most attention to Jon Vezel's baggage. Of course, he and Ilma had an extra trunk apiece because of their costumes. But as far as I could tell, they didn't find anything that hadn't been declared. It just occurred to me that possibly Corinth was still on the trail of something when he came to see the show at the Plaza."

"He was on the trail of something all right." Vine took out the clipping. "Read that."

PROUTY went through it, his lips forming the French words as he read.

"Holy cats," he exclaimed. "Somebody pulled a butchery just like that over at Chamonix. Only this man who was killed. He was a jeweler's messenger?"

"Got the top of his head caved in before he had a chance to deliver a necklace of matched diamonds to some society dame," Vine agreed. He watched curious little beads of perspiration spring out on Prouty's forehead. "Happen to know if this St. Moritz four ever played Chamonix?"

"I think they did. But cripes almighty, Mister Vine, if any of them had gotten away with a hundred and sixty thousand dollars worth of diamond necklace, he wouldn't be skating five-six nights a week for a lousy two hundred bucks."

Vine put the clipping back in his pocket.

"Might. There's a war on over there. The killer couldn't sell those stones in open market, and they tell me most of the fences have shut up shop, now the boys're hanging out the washing on the Maginot Line."

Prouty mopped his face with a silk handkerchief.

"His best bet would be to come over here, try to sell the stones in the U.S.A.?"

"Sure," Vine said. "Don't bother to check in just yet. Have your bag sent up to my room if you want. Come on upstairs, I got something to show you."

CHAPTER IV
CRIMSON SNOW

PROUTY stood by Rachau's body, mouth agape, eyes bulging.

"Same way Corinth was killed!"

"Not quite," Vine said through his teeth. "Murderer used the cold-chisel, this time."

Prouty looked away from the body, gulped.

"What was he doing with all those tools?"

"Safe-cracking, maybe." Vine was enigmatic. "It's a good bet he didn't get what he was after."

Out on the lake, a rocket exploded, sending booming echoes shuttling back and forth between the mountain peaks. A red glare made the snow a crimson mist.

"That's the signal," Prouty said, "for the beginning of the carnival." His eye twitched, spasmodically. "It's the end of it for me—and the troupe."

"Still worrying about your bookings, Prouty? With two men murdered in the last twenty-four hours?"

Prouty shook his head in horror.

"No, no. Of course not. But, aside from business, I liked these people. This Neck-breaker—he shuddered—"wasn't a bad guy. Maybe he pawed over Ilma a little too much, but he'd do anything for you, if he liked you. Lagand's a pretty swell gent, too, when you get to know him."

Vine picked up the hacksaw, slid it in his coat pocket.

"I've known him longer than you have. I've got him in my room, down the hall now. Let's see what he says about this."

What Lagand said, when he saw Prouty, was:

"Mike, my friend! Now, maybe you fix things so the show, she go on, eh? Jon and Ilma, they just now go down to the lake in costume. Wolf and I, we are due for our act in ten minutes."

Prouty put a forefinger up to keep his eyelid from jerking.

"Wolf is due for a session with the embalmer, Charlie. He's on the floor in his room with the top of his head chopped to mincemeat."

Lagand's eyes narrowed, his lips thinned.

"Who?" he said, softly. "You know who did this?"

Vine climbed into his overcoat, slipped on his hat.

"You tell us who's hiding a hundred and sixty grand worth of glitter, and we'll go on from there. Come along. Get your things on."

Lagand was incredulous. "You charge me with such a crime? Impossible!"

The detective pushed him through the door, along the hall.

"I'm not horsing around with charges, Cherbourg. I'm after proof. Let's go."

The stunt skater made no protest. He seemed more puzzled than worried. When they went downstairs, Prouty and Lagand went first, Vine brought up the rear, hand in coat pocket. He stopped at the desk.

"You better ring that deputy, after all. Tell him to double-time it over here and look me up down at the lake. It's important."

Then the three men went out, joined the gay throng moving down the slope toward the cleared surface of the lake. Red, blue and yellow electric lights, set in five-foot cubes of ice, made a rainbow of the snow-covered ground. A loudspeaker sent over the countryside the rhythmic melody of "Winter Wonderland." All about them bells rang, horns blew, people laughed and shouted.

"Going to arrest the whole troupe, Mister Vine?" Prouty muttered.

"Going to round up what's left of it, Prouty."

L AGAND swore obscenely in French.

"It makes one astonished, you are so certain this killer is one of us!"

"The killer," Vine said sharply "is one of two persons"—he could hear the hissing intake of their breath as they waited—"either the one who has those damned diamonds and is trying to keep anyone else from getting them. Or the one who knows who does have them and is trying to get them."

Across the rink they saw Jon and Ilma. Vezel was kneeling, his head down, lacing tip the girl's fancy-skating shoes. Vine half-paused in his stride, breath hissed through his taut lips.

The man glanced up, saw them coming. Hastily, he finished the boot-lacing, stood up on his skates. The girl had not noticed them. She executed a short outside curve and a ballet dancer's pose, swung gracefully into a dizzy spin. She came to an abrupt stop as she recognized Prouty.

"Michel!" she squealed in delight. She ran daintily toward him on skate-toes, flung her arms

about his neck, embraced him rapturously. "It is good to see you. I did not think you would be here when we open tonight."

The booking agent disengaged her arms, dejectedly.

"We're not going to open tonight, Ilma."

"No. But why? Why? *Nom d'un nom*, Charles, why do you stand there so strange, so solemn?"

She backed away from Prouty, and stared in growing uneasiness from one to the other.

"Rachau's been murdered," Vine said bluntly.

The girl screamed, once, piercingly, put her fists to her mouth in horror. The detective had no time to pay attention to her. He was moving after Jon. Ilma's partner had skated, with casual indifference, a few yards further down the rink. He did a backward inner circle, passed close in front of an iron bench placed at the edge of the rink. As he swung past, he reached down, nonchalantly, and picked up the black leather skate-bag, tucked it under his arm.

"Vezel!" Vine shouted. "Drop it!"

He drew his gun, started to sprint.

The figure-skater had a twenty yard head-start. He made good use of it. He crouched low, leaned his lithe body forward, drove his blades up the ice toward the circular path which had been cleared on the ice for the speed trials the next day.

"You'll never catch him!" yelled Prouty. "He's fast as hell!"

Vine knew he would be outdistanced in a matter of seconds, raised his gun to fire a warning shot. Past him flashed a green-clad figure on flying blades.

"Ilma!" cried Lagand, "*Prenez garde!* He will kill!"

Vine saved his breath and ran. He couldn't keep pace with either of the skaters, but there would be an end to the clear ice and then he would have his advantage in the deep snow.

Far ahead, he saw a vivid pencil of orange flame. The brittle crack of a pistol shot came distantly on the wind.

It was the girl who was shooting. The girl!

"That proves it," Vine muttered, trying to increase his speed over the treacherous ice.

The cold air bit into Vine's lungs like a million needles. The gap between him and the skaters increased at every step. He slipped and slid on the glassy surface but he kept on doggedly.

The cleared track was half a mile in

circumference. Jon and Ilma were floundering in knee-deep snow before the detective got halfway to the far end. He heard another shot. Behind him, an outcry had sprung up, but neither Prouty or Lagand were near enough so he could distinguish what they were saying.

BY THE time Vine reached the end of the cleared ice, there was only one figure plunging through the drifts between him and shore.

It was a hundred feet further on, before he came across a dark body lying in the snow with out-flung arms. It was Vezel.

He was groaning in agony. The snow was flecked with crimson beneath his mouth.

Vine bent over him. The man was beyond speech. There wasn't anything that could be done for him. And, anyway, the others would be there in a minute. The detective ran on, but not until he had made sure the black skate bag was not beneath the dying man's body.

The girl was fifty yards ahead, but making slow progress through deeper snow-banks at the edge of the lake. Vine ran with short steps, knees high, gained rapidly.

Above, on the shore, loomed the forbidding hulk of an abandoned icehouse. Down from the door cut into the lakefront wall of the dilapidated wooden structure, ran a steeply inclined ice-trestle up which the frozen blocks had once been hauled, Ilma readied the foot of the trestle, turned at bay.

She crouched low in the snow, against the gloomy shadow of the icehouse. She was almost invisible. Vine got to the bank, dropped to his hands and knees, crawled toward her cautiously.

She waited until he was within point-blank range, emptied her pistol at him as fast as she could fire.

He counted the shots. When the magazine of her automatic was empty, he sprang up, raced silently toward her.

She dodged around the base of the trestle, ran lightly up it, her skates making the wooden ties resound hollowly.

He followed, went up more slowly, testing the ties cautiously before he threw his weight on them.

From above, she spat vicious curses at him. Once, he had to dodge the hurtling automatic she threw. He put his own gun away. He'd never shot at a woman in his life and he didn't intend to start now.

"Why you not come close?" she taunted, halfway up. "You big, strong man. Not afraid, no?"

"Sure," he gritted. "I'm scared stiff, Ilma—of those skates of yours. They're too close to my skull. I don't want to wind up the way Corinth and Rachau and that messenger at Chamonix did."

There were frantic yells from below, now. Prouty and Lagand had reached the shore, had seen them.

Their arrival made her desperate. If she could reach that high platform there, get through that door!

Vine reached out to grab her ankle. There was a dull splintering of rotten wood, a nerve-shattering shriek.

Then, after a split-second of terrible silence, a fearful thud from below.

When the detective reached the ground, he was drenched with sweat, despite the bitter cold. Prouty and the only remaining member of the four from St. Moritz were kneeling beside the still body.

"Broke her neck," mumbled the booking-agent.

"*Mille tonnerre!*" whispered Lagand. "This little one, she kill three men? Incredible, *non!*"

AFTER a brief inspection to confirm Prouty's verdict, Vine busied himself with the skate-bag. From it he drew a pair of small red-leather boots and a pair of tubular speed-skates. He got out the hacksaw.

"Never knew a figure skater to use this sort of skate," he said, sawing steadily. "When I first discovered she had them, carried them with her, it puzzled me—a *figure* skater carrying an extra pair—of *tubular* skates. Then, when I saw Vezel kneeling to tie her laces, I realized how she could have killed Bill Corinth—and I knew where she could be hiding those diamonds. That was why she always kept those useless skates near her! She hadn't used them. They've never been worn.

"That must have made Wolf suspicious first, that's what he was trying to do with the tool kit in

his room. He'd doped out where she'd hidden the loot, borrowed tools from the janitor at the club, stole this bag. He was ready to get to work when she crept in his room and drove that cold-chisel into his brain."

The saw whined shrilly. The end of one of the tubular runners dropped onto the snow. Vine held up the skate. A twist of cotton batting showed inside the hollow tube. He pulled it out.

Something gleamed like ice against the snow. He stuffed the cotton back, stood up.

"Took Rachau a long time to dope out where she'd hidden these rocks. He must have been the one who tipped off the customs she was bringing in diamonds with blood on them. When Corinth cornered her at the Plaza, she tricked him into bending down to fix her shoelace, and then kicked a hole in his head with her other skate."

"Sure," Prouty said. "That's about the only way you could hit a guy square on the top of his head, with a skate."

"Corinth probably talked with Rachau, first, at the Plaza, to make sure the tip was straight. After he was sure, he must have gone right after Ilma. But he wouldn't have known how the jewel messenger died, at Chamonix. So he didn't guard against those deadly skates of hers."

"But Jon," murmured Lagand. "If he had known where these jewels were, would he not have tried to get them before?"

"Probably Vezel only got wise today. She'd been rattled. She showed more anxiety to keep the skates near her, and since her partner would know she never wore them, he'd get suspicious."

Lagand sighed, wearily.

"At the last, I'm glad she does not suffer, greatly."

"Who says she doesn't," Vine began. Then, at their stares of astonishment, he added, apologetically. "Sorry. I was thinking of another 'she.' I've got to go and send a wire."

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