

Baffling Murder
Novelet

Terror Panics the Crime Quiz

By David X Manners

Satan took over radio's Murder Quiz with a high explosive bang. And Perry Sherwood, surviving crime expert, had to answer the devilish \$64 killeroo or take the next bomb for a booby prize.

CHAPTER I

THERE was a sign in the subway advertising: Dignified Funerals—\$150 Up! For some reason that slogan kept doing a ring-around-the-rosey in my brain as I faced Flo, my secretary, across the beers in the Cedar Tavern.

"You sweet, simple fool?" Flo shook her beautiful blonde head despairingly. "You won't listen to reason." Her hand grasped mine across the booth table. Her dark-lashed grey eyes looked as if they might be ready to sputter tears.

"Darling, I tell you it's too dangerous a business. You may be next!"

I patted her hand, and did my best to grin reassurance. Then I took my paw away quickly just in case she might feel its jitter, and discover I was getting the whips-and-jingles myself.

"I drop out," I said, "and the program really will fold. I can't let the others down, Flo. Besides"—I tapped my chest—"how would it look if the brain-poppa of the toughest detective characters in fiction ran like a gazelle the first time somebody said boo?"

The program I was referring to was the Murder Clinic radio quiz. Because I, Perry Sherwood, was a writer of mystery thrillers, they had me on the quiz board as one of the experts. Flo wanted me off the show, because Skinny Sam Simms, the ace criminologist who really made the show, had just been murdered.

Flo thrust her suds-ringed beer glass out of the way. "If you call getting blown to bits just boo—then stick with it!" Her angry grey eyes suddenly softened. "Oh, darling, the things you stir up on this Murder Clinic aren't rose petals. That bomb blew poor Skinny into so many pieces, they haven't even found his shoelaces."

I laughed, but my throat was a clogged drain. "You're scared, Flo. We don't even know for sure Skinny was killed. They haven't found any trace of him, most probably because he's gone into hiding

after this murder attempt and will come up with the villains."

I put down a frogskin in payment for the beers. Flo looked at me sidewise. "Sometimes I think you write too many of those stories!"



But she really wasn't mad. I sauntered her out of the Tavern.

"I don't think you ought to walk me home." She stopped me as we reached the sidewalk, bright with evening lights. "I'd feel much happier if you let me walk you home this time."

"Now wait a minute," I said. "Just because one person on the Murder Clinic might have been killed is no sign any of the rest of us will be. Besides there are two others on the program more dangerous than me. How about Les Warren? He's a detective. Or Victor Right?"

I didn't like the way Flo was stirring up doubts in my brain-pan. I was already worried enough. This Murder Clinic had started off as a straight quiz program, with questions exclusively on crime. But we had branched off onto discussions of cases the police hadn't been able to solve. When we had

actually cracked a couple wide-open right there on the air, our radio rating had jumped like mercury on a summer day.

This Skinny Sam Simms was really the wonder boy of the show. He had no official legal capacity—being a professor at a local college—but the FBI and Military Intelligence both frequently consulted the prematurely silver-haired expert.

Personally, I didn't think his work on the program had resulted in his death. He'd been working on a case involving an escaped war prisoner—a German rocket-warfare expert. And his death, apparently, had been from a bomb so devastating it left no trace of its victim.

I TOOK Flo to her Washington Place apartment and said good night. She regarded me woebegonely for a moment. "Darling, I don't like to think of you walking home alone in the dark. Promise me you'll be careful? That you'll go straight home?"

What could I do? Her eyes had me. I kissed the tip of her up-tilted nose, nodded.

But down the street I realized how empty my promise to go straight home was. I'd done some snooping since Skinny had been blasted two nights before. I'd do more snooping. I had to. Skinny had been my friend. If I had my way, I'd name his murderer on our next Murder Clinic.

I stepped into a storefront doorway, debating what I could do. It was a small Eighth Street dress shop, with a long panel mirror. I looked at the reflection of my puss.

It was not a particularly engaging image. Due to sitting at the typewriter all day, I had a tendency toward pouchiness. And I had a Satanic mustache and clipped Van Dyke which I'd nurtured so that my readers would be suitably impressed when I lectured on crime at their club luncheons, or autographed their copy of my latest thriller.

A car moved into my mirror's reflection. The car stopped. My heart began to trip. I remembered Skinny's fate. The sort of pulverizing bomb that had blown him into nothingness could be tossed from a taxi like this one.

The hulking figure of a man stepped from the taxi. I whirled, hands held tensely wide.

The man leapt toward me. "Perry!" He grabbed my arm.

The breath gusted from me as I recognized him. "Pull-lease!" I held a hand to my chest. "You'll

gimme a weak heart, Vic."

Victor Right was tall, handsome, in the shadowed nightlights. You couldn't tell his hair was flax-blond under his Homburg.

"I was just at the brauhaus." He looked worriedly over his shoulder. "They told me you'd just left, so I cruised around looking for you."

I suddenly became aware that Victor Right's sharp-featured face was paler, more strained than I'd ever seen it. His usually placid eyes were humorless.

I tried to be cheerful. "You look like you swallowed a porcupine."

His face went bleaker yet. "Will you get in this cab with me? I've got a lead that's going to take us right to Skinny Simms' killer."

My heart was going biddy-bump, biddy-bumpy but I got in the taxi with Vic. Victor Right mentioned meeting Skinny's killer as if it were going to be a cinch. But, then, Vic was six foot two and weighed over two hundred. I made a mental note to use him as the hero of my next thriller.

We started up. Vic looked back over his shoulder out of the cab's rear window. I looked back, too. A block away was another taxi, but there was no way for me to tell if it were following us.

"What is this tip-off, this lead you mentioned?" I said.

Victor drew his lips back tautly to show an even row of teeth. His eyes went positively maniacal.

"There is no tip-off." He laughed a little crazily. "I said that just to get you to come with me." He lifted a thumb to the rear window. "That's the killer back there. He's been trailing me all evening."

I shot another hurried look back at the following cab.

"You intend meeting up with him"—I snapped cold fingers—"just like that?"

Vic Right held out a rolled up newspaper. "I've got this for protection. Since Simms was killed I've carried a lead-weighted rubber hose inside this paper."

Our cabby ground around a corner. The other taxi followed. My scalp grew all tight and prickly. I touched Vic Right's sleeve. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find out for sure who's in that cab. There's an off-chance it may be only a plainclothes police detail watching me. But if it's—if it's not, I don't want to face him alone. That's why I asked you along."

Before I could stop him, Vic tapped on the window cutting off the cabby's compartment. "Pull up here, Jack. We're getting out."

Vic tossed some money up front in payment. The taxi stopped with a quick jolt.

VIC RIGHT thrust out. I followed, wondering how a poor, innocent writer ever got mixed in a business like this. A mass of heavily foliated trees and shrub-studded walks loomed ahead of us. City Hall park. This was a section busier than picnic ants during the day, but it was certainly sleepy now. Over toward Park Row a couple of Bowery citizens were taking beauty naps. A lone cop strolled under the distant shadows of the El.

Vic darted toward concealing shrubbery. I didn't need any urging to do the same. I remembered that subway ad about the funeral for \$150, with all the trimmings. I was almost praying there'd be enough of me left for a funeral.

I peeked back. Our own taxi was just pulling away, it having taken a moment for the driver to enter the fare on his tally sheet. Now the cab Vic Right had said was following went by. If it were following, why hadn't it stopped now when it saw we did?

The clock in the City Hall tower clunked midnight. Clutching the hose wrapped in newspaper, Vic Right started cautiously down the park path. He might be heading directly for grief, but I couldn't stay behind in the dark. I followed.

"In those bushes!" He turned back with a quick jump that made me trip over my own feet.

Something *was* stirring in the shrubbery! A sea breeze? Or was it—?

"Look out!" The flat of Vic Right's hand thrust against my shoulder.

I stumbled again. I saw Vic raise his left arm, as if to fend against an assailant. He swung his rubber hose in a powerful downward arc at whoever was concealed in that shrub!

Then it happened.

Boom!

The earth opened up in a preview of hell. I was blinded by light. A flaming convulsion paralyzed my brain. Dazedly, I fought back through darkness. I was flat on the walk. My body felt stepped-on.

I remembered then, and staggered up.

I looked about. "Vic!"

That had been one of those bombs. A bomb like the one that had made small peanuts out of Skinny

Simms!

Shrubbery shook in a quick threshing movement.

"Vic?"

A dark figure lurched out at me. I grabbed the man with murderous fury. "You killer!"

A blow behind the ear spun me. My attacker was a cop! Other police erupted from behind every tree and building. Viselike hands grabbed me.

"Here's our bomb-tosser!"

A cop wrenched an arm behind me. He thrust a finger at my goatee. "An anarchist! Maybe tryin' to blow up the City Hall, huh?"

Whistles shrilled. A siren spiraled up through the night sky. Footsteps beat toward me in a closing trap. City Hall, this heart-center of New York, was one of the most heavily guarded zones in town!

"I wasn't here by myself." I had to make them understand. "My friend, he—"

"A confederate, huh?" One cop holding me looked around.

I glanced at the walk where surely a yawning crater must have been blown by the blast. I did a double-take. There was no mark of an explosion! There was no mark of anything!

"Leggo!" In some mysterious fashion Skinny Simms had been blasted into nothingness. And now—Vic Right! My throat hurt with the words. "The man you're after is getting away!"

But to tell cops to let go of a suspect once they have their mitts on him, is like trying to tell a bull-terrier to quit playing with a rat once he's caught it!

"Nuts!" was all I could say, realizing the hopelessness of it. "Nuts!" But I was almost crying.

CHAPTER II

LIEUTENANT SOL O'MALLEY waved his chunk of fist under my pudgy proboscis in the windowless basement room in police headquarters.

"We should have hauled you in long ago!" he blatted like a tired vulture. "You been threatenin' to do this for too long!"

Sol O'Malley didn't love me. My being a writer somehow cooled his passion. Even my having a Van Dyke annoyed him. And my being a member of the crime-exposing, police-belittling Murder Clinic positively gave him ulcers.

He'd been out to get me anyway ever since the time I'd given a talk on how I'd commit the perfect crime. I had laid down as the cardinal principle for

would-be perfect-crimers, to kill somebody they had absolutely no reason to kill—preferably some stranger they didn't even know.

Sol O'Malley carried all the law he needed in his two bumpy fists. Significantly, every knuckle of those fists had been broken in line of duty. He'd been rawhiding me all the preceding night and most of that day since Vic Right had exploded plunk into nowhere.

Now O'Malley was really getting tiffed, because his fun was about at an end. He knew that without a corpus delicti there was no crime. No trace having been found of Right, he couldn't hold me much longer. The cops hadn't even been able to find evidence that any bomb had exploded!

If I'd been in the mood, I could have heckled O'Malley. But I kept thinking about Skinny Simms, and now Vic Right. How they'd been such lively guys one moment, and then dried-up soup the next.

"It's that perfect crime staff of yours!" O'Malley was a big, two-pawed, red-faced bear in front of me. His repeated complaint was beginning to sound like the broken record. "Blowin' people up so there ain't no body to pin a case on."

"It's not possible," I breathed. "A man can't be blown into just nothing."

"Oh, no?" O'Malley wagged his cropped, brown head up and down. "Sure, and maybe you didn't read about the ammunition ships that blowed up out there in California? Three hundred and fifty men aboard. Only four of 'em was ever found at all!"

The shiver that traced up my spine was hardly delicious. But there had been no trace of a bomb either.

I thought of a fantastic way in which a murder like this might be rigged in a mystery story. "Maybe it's something that's put in their food," I said, thinking aloud. "Like dynamite in a keratin capsule. Stomach fluids have no effect on keratin. The capsule wouldn't be dissolved until it reached the intestinal tract. Then—"

I made an explosive gesture with my two hands. "But why?"

O'Malley looked at his watch. "Bah!" He stalked away, turned back. "You done it all right!" he growled wearily. "But if I was to clap you in a cell now, newspapers would probably grab it as sure proof that the Police Department was just slappin' at your Murder Clinic bunch for rubbin'

'em raw."

The big copper planted a finger of his fist under my nose. "All right, Sherwood. Clear out. But hand out more advice about perfect crimes, and you'll find yourself pratin' through a coffin lid!"

A GUARD handed me my coat and hat. Another turned a key in a door lock to let me out. They weren't letting me go. I knew better than that. They were letting me out, just so I might make the misstep that would sew me up for keeps.

I started up the corridor. The bowed figure of a young woman was in the waiting room. I couldn't see her face because she was blowing her nose.

I stopped, stroking my chin beard thoughtfully. "I beg your pardon."

The young woman raised her face out of the hanky. Her grey eyes went wide. "Perry!"

"Flo!" I caught her between my hands. "I almost didn't recognize you."

"They're my widow's weeds." She indicated her black getup, sniffed, and the tears were perilously close again. "I thought at first you'd been blown to bits, too! Oh, Perry!"

"But you see I'm perfectly okey-doke." I took her arm masterfully.

She pulled away. "If you think you're taking me home—*no!* I'll take *you* home this time. First it was Skinny. Now Victor Right. Perry, can't you realize this isn't a gin-rummy game?"

Weary as I was, I couldn't argue. For some reason, apparently, someone did have it in for the Murder Clinic. Just being on it marked you for death by that someone. But who was it? Maybe it was some unknown pal of a criminal who was sent up because of our investigators. My underpinnings were ready to wobble at any moment.

"Lead forth," I said.

"Perry Sherwood," a voice spoke behind us.

I turned cautiously. Les Warren, the private detective who, besides myself, was the only remaining member of the Murder Clinic, stood near the exit.

"You sure look like your whiskers have been through a wringer, Perry," He clapped my shoulder encouragingly. He had fish eyes, a mustache, and ears like water-wings. "You still game?"

I felt Flo's grip tighten on my arm. I had once done a takeoff on Detective Warren in a mystery yarn. The villainous character hadn't exactly won his heart.

“Game for what?” I asked.

“The radio broadcast tomorrow night. The studio’s goin’ ahead with it, even after what happened to poor Vic Right.” He shook his head unhappily and rubbed a flappy ear. “I got no ambitions to join Vic and Skinny up at St. Peter’s pearly, but I sure can’t crawl out now if the studio’s goin’ ahead.”

“You mean,” I gasped, “just the two of us are gonna carry on with the Murder Clinic?”

For some reason I no longer had the slightest desire to be on the Murder Clinic.

“They’re ringing in a couple kid actors in the vacant spots.” Les Warren reached into his inside pocket and brought out a folded script. “So the kids won’t appear dumb, we’re all goin’ to use scripts, the questions and answers all written out for us. Here’s yours.”

When I died, I wanted a coffin, and to be all in one hunk. But before I could say anything, Flo sighed, took the script and put it in her patent leather bag.

“Very fine,” she said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, Mr. Warren, I’m taking the little one home and putting him to bed.”

Flo hadn’t even given me a chance to crawl out. She was beginning to think I really was a hero!

I was so tired I hit the hay just as soon as Flo got me home. Flo was a sweet one to look after me this way. Someday I’d marry little grey-eyes, I knew, when I could convince myself I could make her happy as a writer’s wife—if I survived that long.

I couldn’t sleep. Lying in the dark, I kept seeing Skinny Simms and Vic Right.

Imagine any ordinary college prof being called “Skinny!” It showed the affection in which all held Simms. Who wanted him pulverized? I scoured my skull for an answer. Before Vic Right had been blasted, I’d felt fairly sure it had been Skinny’s investigating that escaped war prisoner—that rocket bomb expert—that had brought his end. Now it could be only some enemy of the Murder Clinic that wanted him dead.

RELIEF from the heat had been promised for tomorrow—in the form of rain. But that wasn’t helping me sleep now. Ever since I had moved up from the floor below, to get more space and light, I had been bothered by the top floor’s heat. Besides, the radio in my old apartment was

turned up blaringly loud.

I wasn’t the only one being disturbed by that loud radio. Every time I started counting sheep, I was interrupted by someone yelling, “Turn that blank-blank thing down!”

“Turn it down!” a new party took up the tirade now.

But still the radio blared. That was very funny, I thought suddenly. I sat up in bed with a startling hunch. In all the stories I wrote whenever a radio was turned up like that, it was to cover the sound of murder!

Footsteps grated just outside my window on the fire escape! I rolled out of bed. Through the open window, the head, then the body of a man appeared, hurrying up the flight!

I had a fleeting memory of Vic Right grappling with someone in the City Hall shrubbery just before the explosion.

“Hey!” The shout sprang uncontrollably from my throat.

The man on the fire escape turned, ducked under my open window. A black silhouette against the bright square of the opening, he leapt, grabbing for my throat.

The impact bore me backwards. I was aware of the man’s immense weight, and that he was masked.

Crash! Down I went.

Bong! My head hit the sideboard of the bed, bounded off into interstellar space.

I shook my head. Loose, broken light bulbs rattled around in it. I blinked my eyes. Suddenly I realized my assailant was gone! I jumped up. That rap on the noggin must have put my lights out for a minute!

“Hey, turn that radio off or I’ll call the cops!”

The radio downstairs was still blasting. Someone had yelled that threat from across the court. The intruder must have come from the apartment the radio was in!

I slipped into my robe. I got my Woodsman Colt out of a drawer. Now I was getting more muddled with mystery than ever. Did that intruder have anything to do with the other murders? If he did, what had he been doing in the apartment below?

I never had used the gun before. I’d wanted it because having it had supplied me with an authentic feel for the weapon in my stories.

I ducked out my bedroom window, moved

down the escape. The window to my old apartment on the floor below was open. The room was dark except for the illumination thrown by radio tubes against the wall from the small set on a bedside table. The set certainly made a lot of holler for its size.

I squeezed carefully through the open window into the room. I turned on a lamp, looked about. Bureau drawers were pulled open, contents scattered on the floor. That meant robbery was at least a partial motive. That didn't tie in with Skinny and Vic Right's deaths. Or did it?

The bed had been slept in. The fellow who'd moved in down here was a kindly, old grey-haired codger, Mr. Button, who lived alone.

I stepped through the doorway into the dark room adjoining. I stumbled over something on the floor. I gasped involuntarily. "Mr. Button!"

It was the body of the old, grey-haired fellow!

I REACHED for his wrist. It was warm, but limp. His head was twisted at an angle. I touched his throat. I didn't need an autopsy to know his larynx had been crushed. The neck was broken!

A bell whirred! I jumped. "Hey, in there!" Someone pounded on the door panel. "Open up! It's the police!"

Someone must have complained to the police about the loud radio.

My hand touched something near Mr. Button's body as I shoved up. It was a round-necked can with a cork in it. I didn't know that it had anything to do with this murder, but now it had my fingerprints on it.

"Hey! You openin' up this door or do we got to beat it down?"

I snapped off the bedroom light. In my stories, in a situation like this, the hero was always implicated. I turned back through the bedroom toward the window taking the can along. I grunted out the window, up the fire escape.

The intruder—the killer who slugged me—was surely long gone. It would be useless trying to chase him now, I conveniently convinced myself. I ducked back into my apartment. I put aside the can, hid my gun. There wasn't enough air for me to breathe in my apartment. This was a situation in which Lieutenant Sol O'Malley would just clap his hands to find me.

Crash!

That must be the cops breaking down the door

to the apartment below. The radio snapped off. Yep. The cops had broken in. On top of two murders, there was now this third one. And the victim didn't always die by bombs!

A minute later sirens were weeping down on the street. The police had discovered Mr. Button's body, had flashed word to headquarters.

I scratched my chin-whiskers in thought. The sound of milling men grew more pronounced in the apartment below. I reached for my phone.

"Flo," I said when my sweetie answered. My voice reached a high pitch and cracked like the Liberty Bell. "You know the old apartment I used to live in on the floor below? For some reason there's just been a murder there."

"No, Perry!"

"I just wanted you to know what's happened to me in case the authorities pull me in again."

"You say the man was killed in your old apartment?" Her gasp was audible. "Oh, Perry, don't you see the connection? You used to live there! Whoever killed him must have meant to—*to kill you!*"

"Hah?" I felt my eyes beginning to bulge. Hey, maybe there was something to that!

"Now don't let that bother your little blonde head—" I began. I broke off as I sensed I didn't have her attention. "What's the matter, Flo?"

"Just a minute," I heard her voice say. "Somebody at the door."

She put down the instrument and I heard the click of her retreating heels. I waited one minute, two minutes. She certainly was taking her time at the door.

Then suddenly I realized Flo was never coming back!

CHAPTER III

A NXIOUSLY I whistled into my mouthpiece, thinking Flo might simply have forgotten about me on the wire. A whistle would be the easiest thing for her to hear. I knew I was connected for after a while I heard her typewriter clicking away. That meant she was all right. *Or did it?*

Discarding my weariness, I got into my clothes. A cordon of police might already be surrounding my building. I might not be able to get to her.

I went out in the hall. I heard the cops on the floor below. I went up the one night to the roof. I

crossed quickly to the adjoining room and then the one beyond that. I went down to the street.

A fourth police car was just joining the three already parked in front of my building. Lieutenant Sol O'Malley piled out of it. I beat a hasty retreat up Ninth Street.

The crazy fog of recent events was thick soup in my mind. I had to stir it up a bit in order to know where I was. It had started, I had to remind myself, with our Murder Clinic quiz showing the cops a few details they had overlooked in certain unsolved crimes. That had offended both the police and the criminals involved. Then good old Skinny Simms, doing criminology investigations on his own about an escaped rocket bomb war prisoner, was blasted by a powerful explosive that literally turned him into thin dust on the walk.

But if that "war prisoner" angle had anything to do with his death why had Victor Right, a handsome young fellow we had on the program for laughs more than anything else, gotten blown up, too? I didn't know anything about any war prisoners, yet I had grappled with an intruder who'd killed the kindly old codger, Mr. Button, downstairs, apparently thinking it was me.

And now this mysterious caller had knocked on Flo's door, and she'd given me a stand-up on the telephone.

Flo's apartment was on Washington Place, just two blocks from where I lived. It was a neighborhood of north-light artists, vocalizing musicians, and alleged intellectuals. For my money, it was now strictly a district where, at any moment, a killer would step out from behind a lamppost and carve my sirloin.

Number 77's lobby door was open and I walked in, up the short flight of stairs to her door, and knocked. There was no answer. I tried the knob. The door was open. I took out my Woodsman and shoved cautiously on the panel, thrusting that little Colt corpse-maker in ahead of me.

I looked about the empty, lamp-lighted living room.

"Flo!"

The room turned back my echo like a lead nickel. I poked my sniffer into her red-ruffled chintz dressing room, then her bedroom. I muttered an inaudible prayer and goose-bumps began to prance around on my upper arms and back. There the phone was—on the windowsill, the receiver off, lying just as poor Flo must have left it when I'd

called her.

Two other people disappeared just like this without a trace. There had been a bomb mixed up in it in unwholesome proportions.

I blundered into her bathroom. I even opened the bathroom's broom closet.

"Flo!"

She *was* in there!

Flo nodded a disheveled blonde head. Clothesline was wound about her ankles and her shoulders, binding her tightly to a cold steam-pipe riser.

I pulled the gag out of her mouth. Her dark-lashed grey eyes batted. "That man! I answered the door, and he pulled a gun on me!"

"Who was he?"

"He was wearing a mask. A Halloween mask."

I took out my pocket knife and cut her loose. The fellow who'd attacked me from the fire escape had worn a mask. That masked man must be the killer we were after all right.

We stumbled together back into the living room. Everything here seemed in perfect order.

"I heard typing after you left me at the phone," I suddenly remembered.

"Typing?" Flo gasped. "I heard that, too! That wasn't me!"

"Now wait a minute—" I gripped her arm. "Does a man have to hold a girl up and tie her in knots just because he wants to use her word-chopper?"

Flo turned abruptly to her patent leather bag, lying open on a chair. Quickly she rummaged inside, then looked up more puzzled than ever.

"I didn't remember my bag being open, Perry. For a moment I thought I might have been robbed."

I took her bag and looked in it. There was nothing much of significance in it except my radio script for the show the next day.

I went back in the bedroom and put the phone receiver back in its cradle. I thought of that masked killer who had surely accounted for three victims already.

"Let's get out of here," I said to Flo. "I'll take you to that little hotel down the block. After what's happened, I don't like the climate here for you."

She did not think the climate in my apartment would be so healthy for me, either. I convinced her it would be dubiously reputable for us both to stay in the same hotel, but I swore by my ancestors that I would take a room at the nearby Hotel

Woodborne.

BUT after I left her I went straight home. If the killer who had done for old Mr. Button had really meant to sponge me off, I really should be on hand in case he returned. I guess writing about heroes all the time had infected my thinking. I was going to be a hero, too.

I went up to my apartment. The one cop on duty in the hall on the floor below me did not stop me. I made no effort at sleeping. It was too hot. Rain wasn't due to bring relief until late the next day. That my own murder might be brewing didn't bother me. Oh, no. I was a big, bad hero?

I picked up the strange can I had found downstairs just after Mr. Button's violent demise. I pulled out the cork and took a whiff. It smelled pretty good, sort of sweet and cooling, the stuff in there. I took another whiff. It seemed to clear my head and rest my nerves. It must be liquid menthol, I decided.

I suddenly wanted to lie down. I did, and took another wonderful breath of the stuff.

Green liquid seemed to swirl above me, going round and round. I felt as if a hand was pushing me down, down, to the bottom of a bubbly swimming pool. . . .

Someone hammering on my apartment door roused me. I struggled up dopily, blinked my eyes. Rain was pouring down outside my window. It wasn't supposed to rain until tomorrow.

But it was light, I suddenly realized. This must be tomorrow! I must have slept the whole night through in my clothes!

The pounding continued on the door. I lurched up. Cobwebs were tangling my thinking apparatus. It was worse than that pea-soup fog.

"Whozit?"

The sharp clear gasp of relief carried through the door.

"Perry?"

I unlocked the door.

"Oh, darling, where have you been?" Flo flew sobbing into my arms. "I went to the Hotel Woodborne. They said you'd never registered there! I've been frantic all day."

"All day?" I said.

"Yes, it's almost seven. You didn't answer your phone here. Finally, I came over now."

Almost seven? I'd slept all night and all day! Whew! I must have been tired. And I still felt awful

dopey-like. My tongue felt thick.

"Say," I blubbered. "If we don't hurry I'll be late for my broadcast. And I haven't even had breakfast."

"You sure you don't want to call it off?" Flo pleaded hopefully. "The broadcast, I mean."

She batted her lashes over those grey eyes and she almost had me. I kissed the tip of her nose.

"With the killer still loose?" I shook my head. "He still *is* loose, isn't he?"

Flo nodded. "The police haven't found out anything."

She had a cab waiting downstairs. I rushed into it without even taking time to comb my whiskers. I took the broadcast script she handed me from her bag.

Five minutes before on-the-air time, Flo led me into the studio. Detective Les Warren's fish eyes lit up when he saw me.

"Thank heaven!" he said. He was green around the gills and nervous as a counterfeit dollar. "We were already wondering if you hadn't been blown into last Tuesday like Skinny and Vic."

I went right on by him to Ted Shuttleworth, the M.C. of our program.

"I don't like this," I said, "being given the answers to the questions."

"From the looks of you, you'll need them." Shuttleworth growled harassedly. He was a tall guy with a short temper and a green suit. "Sit down at a mike. By next week maybe we'll be able to round up some new experts. But meanwhile we got to maintain our high standards. On account of the murders, everybody who can get at a radio will be listening tonight."

Les Warren looked at the two who were filling in temporarily in the spots made vacant by Skinny Simms and Vic Right. "Bah," he said. "What do kid actors know about crime?"

But he took a seat, too. Flo found a vacant folding chair on the far side of the studio.

THERE wasn't even time enough for the engineer to take a test level on my voice. With a scream, a crash of glass, and the chatter of a Tommy-gun the Murder Clinic was on the air!

Maybe I was fuzzy, but I couldn't make sense out of my script. Then I got mad. At least if they were giving me the answers, they should give me the right ones.

Strangely, Ted Shuttleworth acted annoyed, too.

“Where was the piece of wood found,” he asked, “that resulted in the conviction of Hauptman in the Lindbergh case?”

“At Hauptman’s home,” I answered, “corner Masefield and Old Dorp Road, Staten Island.”

I was astounded even as the words dripped off my tongue. Any imbecile knew that Hauptman had lived in the Bronx, and that the piece of wood that tied the kidnap ladder to him was found in the attic there.

Then, “Where did Jack the Ripper work, when, and what was his weapon?”

Any chump knows he worked in the White Chapel section of London, circa 1882, and his weapon was a knife.

“Jack the Ripper worked in the Northwest corner of London,” I read my answer. “The time, 8:40 on Wednesday night, and his weapon was a Tommy-gun!”

Geronimo! What would all my story fans think of me when they heard me spout lamebrain answers like that?

I jumped up the minute the program was over. I went at that Shuttleworth guy.

“Say, what kind of goof answers were those I gave?” I demanded.

“You should know.” He stared icily back at me. “You gave them. You shoulda stuck to the script instead of trying to act funny. You had all the right answers there.”

“I—what? Look here, I’m not—”

Flo was tugging at my sleeve. I stopped. I saw the light in her eyes.

“My bag,” she whispered. “Remember?”

I suddenly remembered her open bag on the chair the night before, my script in it. The typewriter clicking after the masked intruder had tied her up. I caught what she meant.

“I’ve got it!” I blurted.

“Huh?” Detective Les Warren rubbed an oblique ear.

I got Warren aside.

“This said Masefield and Old Dorp Road, when it should have said the Bronx,” I whispered urgently. I pointed at my wrong answer. “It said Northwest corner, 8:40 Wednesday night. A Tommy-gun. Which was all wrong, too. This script has been altered. It gives the tip-off, apparently, that something is to happen at the Northwest corner of Masefield and Old Dorp Road at 8:40 tonight. It must be connected with what got Skinny and Right

killed.”

Warren was too old a hand at his business to waste time arguing. But what I’d told him would have choked a giraffe.

I had to spiel more fast chatter before I convinced him he ought to call the cops and that I’d better hustle off to the scene myself.

He headed out of the studio. I started out, too, but Flo grabbed my arm.

“You can’t go, Perry. I won’t let you.” Her eyes were bright with terror. “I heard what you said to Les Warren. But it’s all a trick of some kind to lure you to your death.”

“Look, angel”—I couldn’t have her tagging along after me into danger—“the changes in this script prove the whole job is an inside caper. It couldn’t be any other way. And who is left to do an inside job but Les Warren?”

“Huh, but—”

“Sure, I sent him out to call the cops. But do you think he has any intention of doing it? I’m going to trail him now. Flo, I want *you* to call the cops!”

I hurried on down the corridor for an elevator before she could give me an argument. My heart was racing. At last I was in the groove. Before many minutes I’d again be face to face with the killer—or killers—Vic Right had faced in City Hall park.

Luckily, in spite of the downpour, a cab was waiting downstairs. I started for it.

“Perry!” a voice called.

I turned to a black coupe parked at the curb. A familiar-looking face confronted me, then quickly withdrew inside the cab. I choked for want of breath.

“You—?” I gasped.

In that cab was big, blond Vic Right—*alive!*

CHAPTER IV

VIC RIGHT nodded, motioned me inside his car. A second man who’d been standing outside along the building got in the other door, wedging me between Vic and himself as I slid onto the seat. The car’s motor was running.

“I got away—luckily—from that bomb.” The big, blond prankster’s face was serious. “But I figured I’d be safe only if I lay low. I’ve been working on the case. I heard you broadcast. I don’t have to ask to guess you caught on to the tip-off,

too?”

The car started up, headed downtown at a fast clip.

“I was heading for Staten Island now,” I admitted.

Right grinned tightly.

“Just as I figured.” He moved his hand. I suddenly felt something sharp prod my kidney. “You would be the only one smart enough to catch it.”

I twisted away from the weapon prodding my lower lumbar.

“What’s the idea?” I asked.

“You’ll find out,” sneered the savagely browed driver at the wheel.

It was the first time he’d spoken. I was amazed at his voice. It was exactly like Vic Right’s.

It suddenly began to come clear.

“Skinny Simms was working with the F.B.I. on the case of a Nazi war prisoner who escaped,” I said, allowing myself to think out loud. “He was a bomb expert. That’s you. Vic Right. Back in Germany you developed that super explosive, pentolite, for rocket projectiles. Simms was breathing too hotly down your neck, so you had to get out of the way. You did a quick fadeout yourself before anyone else caught on.”

Right’s mouth was tight with silence.

I saw it all now. It had been Right, wearing a mask, who had invaded Mr. Button’s apartment, looking for the script. It had been Right who’d attacked me in my bedroom, knocked me out. It had been Right who’d tied Flo up, found the script in her bag, and made the tip-off changes in it.

We pulled in at the South Ferry slip. We drove onto a boat. Vic Right had figured it cleverly. But what was at Masefield and Old Dorp—that address I’d read off my script? Why had it been necessary to broadcast that address over the air?

On Staten Island side, the car drove out of St. George’s short-hugging business section into dark country. It pulled up finally on a deserted, wooded hill. The rain had stopped.

“Ready, Hugo?” said Right to his companion. Hugo trained a gun on me.

We got out of the car. Now was getting to be the time for me to act. I expected the police here. They would be here any moment.

“It was you,” I said, “who broke into that apartment below me, killed a man there.”

“I didn’t intend to hurt anybody. I thought it

was you, anyway. I just meant to put you to sleep for a bit.”

“And you got the radio script you were looking for at my girlfriend’s.”

“Do we blast him now?” Hugo asked.

“We get our work done first.” Right stepped around to the rumble seat of the coupe, ignoring me. “We want to take no chance on attracting attention to ourselves—yet.”

That was a laugh. He was going to have the surprise of his big, flat head before long.

He opened the rumble seat on the coupe. Only it wasn’t a rumble seat. It was a tilted platform on which was mounted a device that looked strangely like a huge Fourth-of-July rocket!

ITURNED in the direction the rocket pointed. Scattered buildings of what had once been a mental hospital were off in the valley below. It was now, I knew, the home of more than two thousand German prisoners of war.

So that was it! With the war’s end, it would perhaps not be long before these prisoners were sent back to their homeland. But for plenty of them that was the last place on earth they would wish to see again in defeat. They wanted to be in America to start life anew. A defeated country was no place in which to wish to live. And their presence in America would be an ever-sinister peril. An underground army!

The radio tip-off I had broadcast had said northwest corner. Would a rocket-blasted wall touch off a wholesale break?

Right observed my studying the rocket, the weapon that seemed a part of it.

“That’s a Tommy-gun hooked to my little baby.” He grinned. “My friends, my *Landsmann*, are waiting below. With it—”

Vic Right, rocket expert, was making the final adjustments in sighting before he sent that deadly device into the hands of two thousand hate-mad killers!

It was time for me to strike terror in his heart.

“The police have been notified,” I said. “They’re coming here.”

“To Masefield and Old Dorp, perhaps?” Vic Right grinned smugly. “They’ll find it only a barren lot on the other side of the island from here.”

I felt sweat spring to my spine. “You mean this isn’t that address?”

Right wagged his head.

“That was a decoy—just for an eventuality like this.”

The prop I’d relied on had been knocked from under me. But I had to stop that rocket before it was touched off.

“Do you think the police won’t see that rocket when you set it off? It’ll be your finish, Right.”

“They won’t see it—not with the flashless fuel I use.” Right’s eyes flickered briefly to a coiled cord, piled for quick use. “And if they should pull up here before we’re done—we’ll get rid of all the evidence all right.”

That rope could be attached to the fuse of a bomb—a bomb that would probably destroy me, the car and all evidence of the rocket, in one obliteration blast. Otherwise why had his eyes darted unconsciously to that coiled cord?

I gauged my chance. If I dived at Right, Hugo would shoot. But if I was fast enough to tangle with Right, Hugo might not be able to shoot for fear of striking Right.

Who-o-osh!

With a cry meant to bewilder, I leapt. My grasping arms caught Vic Right about the middle, bore him backwards. I’d get Right helpless, use him as a shield.

“Release it!” the big blond man shouted. “Release the rocket, Hugo!”

Hugo wasn’t shooting. Instead he was to set off the rocket—the one act I wanted to prevent!

I glimpsed the flare of a match. The quick sputter of a fuse. Then, like a monster interplanetary ship, the rocket exploded into flight.

A brief sparking glow traced a high, arcing orbit. Then, accurately, the rocket plunged toward the Prison Hospital.

I pounded my fist in despairing anger at Right’s jaw. The blond man’s head snapped back. His hold loosened.

I leaped up as fast as my pouchy build would allow, darted for the coiled rope. It might be too late to stop the rocket, but I would—

I heard Hugo’s cry of alarm.

RIGHT staggered up, but there was no stopping me now. With the end of the trip-rope in my fist, I plunged away from the car.

Hugo and Right saw the deadly peril. They scattered like rats for holes.

Boom!

The earth heaved in a mighty blast of white fire. The explosion rumbled like a heavy truck on a wooden bridge.

A violent vacuum of air smashed me to the ground.

I staggered up. Where the car had stood was not even a crater. The force of the bomb had been a horizontal one. Like the bombs the Nazis had used to flatten English cities.

I saw Hugo and then Right. They had been far enough away to escape the blast. They started to run at a limping gait. White faces constricted in pain, terror, and anger, they saw me come.

Neither of them had escaped unscathed. Blood poured from a gash just below Hugo’s hairline. But he still had his gun. He leveled it.

A shot blasted, but it wasn’t from Hugo’s pistol. It was from the gun of a blue-coated figure running from a police car. Now another, and another car was pulling up!

Police swarmed onto Hugo and Right. Somebody grabbed me as I lurched.

“Good fellow,” Lieutenant Sol O’Malley boomed. “The blast guided us here, Whiskers. We was about a half mile away.”

“The hospital.” I pointed off to the flat below. “Get down to that German hoosegow hospital fast. A Tommy-gun’s just been rocketed into it. A general break’s probably already started.”

“That’s been taken care of,” said a voice.

“What,” I blinked in amazement. “Flo!”

The little blonde smiled sweetly.

“I remembered about that Prison Hospital out this way,” she said. “I didn’t know any place else anyone might want to attack. When you told me to call the police, I figured that was the real place to have alerted.”

Vic Right jerked a hideout gun, tried to use it. Not to escape, but to beat the fate sure to be his for the murders of Skinny Simms, old Mr. Button, and nobody knew how many others.

He was disarmed.

“He was the kingpin of the plot,” I said. “He and his brother must have lived in this country for many years before they went back to Germany to fight for Hitler. Skinny Simms was after a rocket bomb expert named Richtig when he was killed. Right is just Richtig translated, if I remember my German. Richtig’s brother, Hugo here—”

“His brother?” Sol O’Malley gasped, looking from the blond Vic Right to dark-browed Hugo.

Les Warren, the little fly-eared detective, leapt from a still rolling squad car at that moment.

“That rocket ship and the Tommy-gun came in to a perfect three-point landing inside the prison compound,” he announced. “If we hadn’t been there—” He shook his head dubiously.

“Yes, this Hugo here’s his brother.” I went on to O’Malley. “They may not look alike, but listen to them talk. It’s the give-away. You wouldn’t know which of them was talking unless you looked. War prisoners are permitted to listen to radios. That radio was probably the vital, underground link for all German war prisoners in this section of the country. But things got too hot for brother Vic to continue on the Murder Clinic after he’d powdered Simms. So he sneaked away my copy of the program script and altered it to give the final details of the plotted mass break!”

It was another couple hours before the affair was all wound up, with signed confessions from the two brothers. There was a little celebration then. It was quite late before I had tucked little Flo safely in her apartment and made homeport myself.

I turned on my radio to see if the news had anything to say about the goings on. Boy, this adventure had really furnished me with authentic material for a dozen thriller stories! With all this excitement—on top of my insomnia—I knew I’d

hardly sleep now. Besides, I had slept the clock around the day before.

My idle eyes caught the can with the cork in it—the can I had picked up in Mr. Button’s apartment below. Vic Right had said he’d not intended to commit murder, but merely to put me out for a while.

That can was one unexplained clue.

I took out the cork and inhaled a whiff. It smelled sweet and cool, and it made little, giddy, green circles go round and round in my brain. I took another whiff—a deeper one. Then I read the label on the can.

Ether!

I should have read that at the start!

I sagged down on my bed. The fumes were rising out of the can, tantalizing the end of my nose. Right had planned to use ether to render me helpless, while he changed the script. I forced the cork back in the top, but I could hardly feel my fingers for numbness. It was no use shaking my head to try to clear it.

“Turn that radio down!” somebody shouted. They meant *me* this time.

But I knew I’d have to snooze a few hours before I could comply.

I turned over, and did!