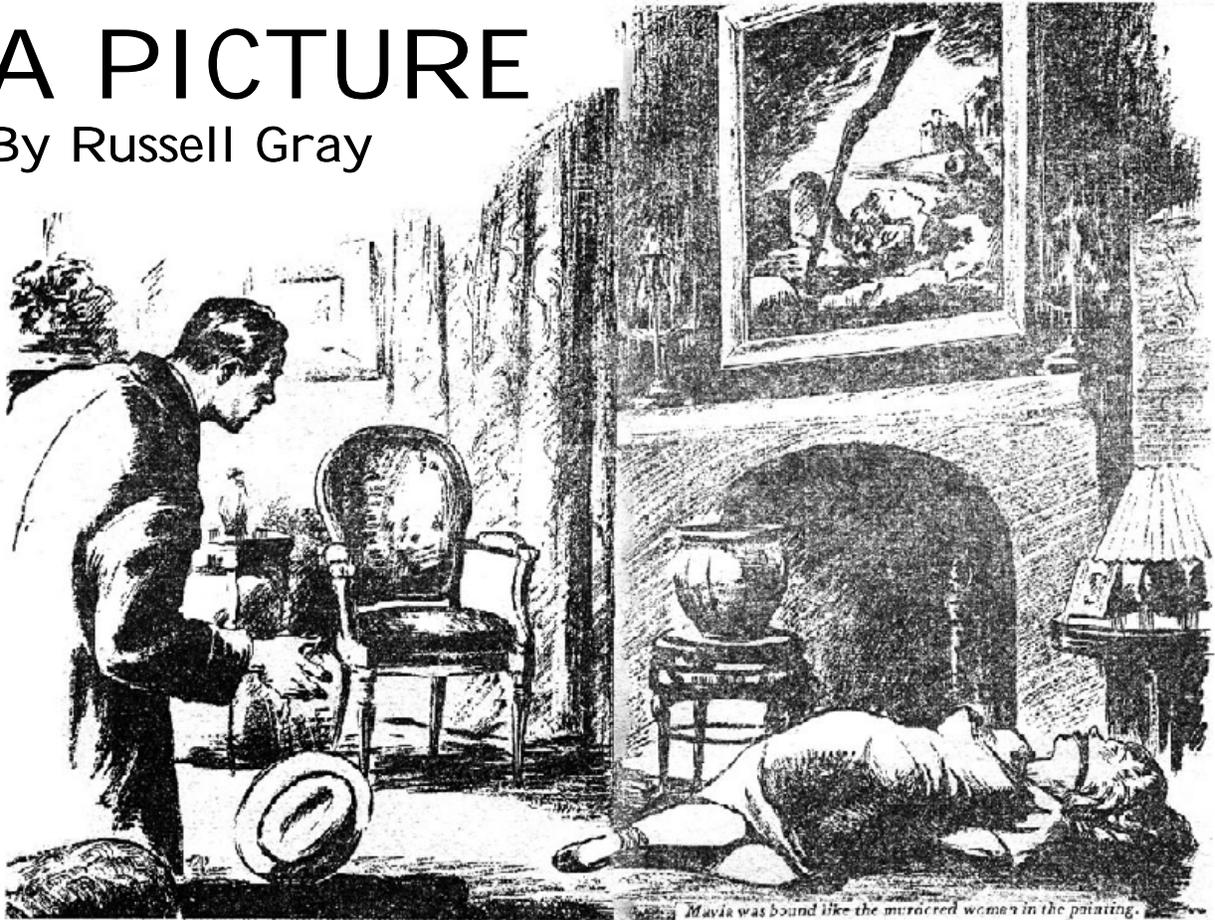


DEATH PAINTS A PICTURE

By Russell Gray



A Suspenseful Novel of Diabolical Doom and Paintings That Inspired Murder

CHAPTER I

Murder Imitates Art

FROM the vast lobby of the Art Center, I heard jerky sobbing on my left. A museum is eerie enough at the dead of night, but that half-muted sound of human anguish made my skin prickle. As my feet echoed hollowly over the stone floor, I found myself glancing over my shoulder at the reproductions of Greek sculpture and suits of armor placed in niches about the lobby, and at the inevitable Egyptian mummy in a glass case near the main door.

No, I didn't expect the mummy to pop up and embrace me, or an armored ghost to hack at me with a sword. I left that to the movies. But when I was dragged out of bed at four in the morning by an urgent phone call, something highly unpleasant was sure to be waiting.

I passed into a smaller room hung with ancient maps and etchings of Morganville just after the Indians had been driven still farther west. The sobbing girl was sitting on a plush-covered bench, a young man had an arm about her shoulder and was trying to comfort her.

There was thick carpeting on the floor, so they didn't hear me until I was nearly up to

them. The girl emitted a frantic little screech and jumped a foot off the bench. That was what told me that her tears were due to terror rather than grief.

She sank back with a deep sigh. She was a trim little thing with a mass of brown curls—nice-looking in spite of her unnatural pallor. The man with her was so handsome that he could be called pretty. His fingers caressing the girl's shoulder were long and graceful.

"Are you the detective?" he asked.

I nodded and he waved a hand toward a door.

I entered the main exhibition hall. Three men were huddled near the door as if afraid to get too far away from each other. A slight man with finely molded features advanced to meet me.

"Mr. Keel?" he said. "I'm Harold Wallis, curator of the Art Center."

He led me over to the others and gravely introduced me. One of them I'd seen around: Frank Powell, sixty and suave, prominent Morganville businessman and chairman of the Board of Directors of the Art Center. The stringy, hatchet-faced guy turned out to be the New York art critic, Winston Delattre, who had come out West especially to see the Van Eyck painting.

"You were pretty mysterious over the phone, Mr. Wallis," I said.

The curator nodded and without another word started toward the other end of the hall. His shuffling walk told me that he was forcing himself to go forward. Powell and Delattre were coming along, but slowly, as if they would have preferred not to.

The ceiling was reinforced by two white pillars on opposite ends of the rectangular room. It wasn't until I had rounded the farther pillar that I saw the body. A heavy wooden plank had been nailed across the pillar, forming a cross on which the man had been crucified.

I almost slipped in the thick blood which formed a pool at the base of the improvised

cross. With a snort of disgust, I backed away, then gingerly stepped around the pool and went close to the body. Spikes had been driven through the palms and ankles; hours of agony must have passed before the man had bled to death.

What a way to kill somebody!

I lit a cigaret and drew smoke in deeply.

"What time does the museum close?" I asked Wallis.

"At six for the general public. I was in my office until eight. From that time on Quigg was alone."

The corpse wore the blue uniform of a museum attendant. I asked: "Was this Quigg?"

"Yes. The night watchman."

I MOVED a couple of feet away to avoid blood touching my shoes. "What do you make of it?"

"It's madness. A hideous jest."

"A jest is funny," I said. "This isn't."

Wallis was staring at the wall directly in front of the pillar. I followed the direction of his eyes and saw what he meant.

The oil painting was in such a position that it was all the tortured man had been able to see in his dying hours of torment. The picture was an artist's conception of the Crucifixion, except that instead of Christ on the cross, a man in modern clothes was depicted. I suppose it was meant to symbolize present-day man still suffering after nineteen centuries, and as such the artist had done a pretty good job. Against a black background and a dimly indicated cross, that pain-contorted, bleeding body and tormented face was high lighted.

Through my mind flashed a phrase I had heard or read somewhere: Life imitates art. That was true, horribly, in this case, for the murdered watchman might have served as a model for the painting. Except that it had been the other way around—the painting had been a model for the murder.

I said: "Why would anybody want to kill

Quigg?"

"I can't imagine," Wallis whispered. "And especially to murder him so fiendishly."

Frank Powell and Winston Delattre were standing a little way off, watching us in strained silence.

"Who painted that picture?" I asked.

Wallis gulped and turned a couple of shades paler. Powell snapped: "What has that to do with it?"

"Don't you want to answer my question?"

"Certainly," Wallis said hastily. "The fact that Lew painted it means nothing."

"Who's Lew?"

"Lew Larsen, the foremost of our local artists. He—" Wallis' Adam's apple rode up and down in his throat—"he's in the next room with Mavia."

"Mavia?"

"My daughter."

I set fire to a fresh cigaret from the stub of my old. The three men were watching every move I made.

I said; "What were all you people doing here at four in the morning?"

Powell answered for them all: "Mr. Delattre arrived from New York on the eleven-forty train. He came two thousand miles especially to see our famous Van Eyck. We went to my house for a little party. Before we knew it, it was three o'clock; we were about to break up when I suggested we come here to show Mr. Delattre our Van Eyck."

"And you all came?" I didn't try to hide my skepticism. "Couldn't you wait until morning?"

Winston Delattre handed me a tight-lipped, supercilious smile. "Evidently you don't know art lovers, Mr. Keel."

"But I know murders," I said sourly, "and there's never been one without reason. Why not robbery in this case?"

The curator's head jerked up. "But that's absurd."

"Why? I read in the Bugle that the Dutchman's painting is worth a fortune."

"What could a thief possibly do with it?" Delattre shook his head over my dullness of mind. "Every gallery and collector in the world would know it had been stolen. It could never be sold."

"Is it still here?" I insisted.

"Certainly," Wallis said. "Come this way."

The three of us went to the side of the room. The picture had nearly a whole wall to itself.

I knew all about it, as did nearly everybody else in Morganville. The Art Center had originally been established primarily to display the products of Midwestern artists, especially home talent; and as such few people had paid attention to the place. Then a rich duck who had been born in Morganville died and left the Art Center a painting which a Dutchman named Van Eyck had torn off half a thousand years ago. Value; one hundred and twenty-five thousand. It was the price tag on it that sent the local pride of the townsfolk, who couldn't tell a Rembrandt from a Rube Goldberg, up to fever pitch.

THE Van Eyck couldn't have been more than fifteen by twenty inches in size—a Madonna and Child done in brilliant red and blue and gold. It looked pretty good to me, though one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars is a lot of fish.

"You are astonished because the canvas is so small and the value so high, Mr. Keel?" Delattre let loose another patronizing smile. "Ah, but Jan Van Eyck's Ince Hall Madonna is only six inches by nine and valued at a quarter of a million dollars. Note that in spite of the fact that this was painted five hundred years ago, the color is as fresh as if it had just left Van Eyck's brush. Remark the perfection of the finished surface, the clean. . ."

"You didn't drag me into this for a lecture on art," I broke in. "I'm private law, and murder is police business before it's mine."

Wallis looked at Powell to carry the ball. The chairman of the Art Center said: "You

must understand, Mr. Keel, that we are in an unfortunate position. We have devoted much time and money to make the center a success. If this brutal murder becomes public, we may be forced to close down."

"So you want me to dispose of the body and eliminate traces of the murder?" I suggested softly.

"Oh, dear, no!" Wallis exclaimed. "But we are aware of your reputation for ingenuity, Mr. Keel; we thought that perhaps you could advise us how to handle this matter with the least publicity before we call the police."

I could take my choice. They were either fussy old innocents who didn't know any better, or they wanted to cover up murder in order to save their skins.

I said: "Compounding a homicide mightn't mean anything to you gentlemen, but it does to me. I'm calling the police. Where's a phone?"

Mavia Wallis was still on the plush bench when I passed on my way to the office. Her tears had dried up, but she made a picture of dejection sitting forward with her hands between her knees. Her pretty boy friend was gone.

"Where's Lew Larsen?" I asked.

She looked up at me and then down again. "He went to get a drink of water," Her voice was utterly flat. More than the shock of walking in on a hideous murder was affecting her. Why, I wondered, should she be so badly scared?

I phoned the office right off the lobby, roused Lieutenant Tighe out of bed. After the first couple of sentences he broke in nastily, as I'd expected him to: "And what the hell are you doing there before the police are told?"

"They figured I'd take a look, ask a couple of questions and then tell them who the killer is. It's comforting to find my reputation as good as that."

"Yeah?" Tighe hung up.

I turned to the door and stopped dead, listening to the silence. I don't think that even

a grave can be so utterly hushed as a museum at the dead of night. The voices in the main exhibition room were too far away or else had ceased. The silence was so intense that it had a physical substance, yet something was wrong.

Then I heard the steps again. They must have sounded in my subconscious before to have made me tense. Footsteps shouldn't have been strange with five people beside myself in the place, but these were. They weren't walking the way honest feet should; they barely whispered over the stone floor, so softly that only in that deep silence would I have been able to hear them.

Why should anybody be sneaking on tiptoes in the lobby outside?

CHAPTER II

The Birth of Fear

MY GUN fell into my hand. In two jumps I was at the door, looking into the lobby. He'd heard me, of course, but I thought I'd be on him so fast that it wouldn't matter. The trouble was that he was all the way at the other end of the lobby, toward the statues and the armor.

He leaped behind one of those suits of armor. There was just a single night-light in the vast lobby, but momentarily I had a glimpse of a shadowy, distorted back, and I probably could have plugged him with a snap shot.

But I'm not one to throw lead indiscriminately; I stood against the door-jamb peering into the shadows. Nothing stirred.

"Better come out," I said. "I have you covered." My answer was a shot. It would have been too bad for me if he had been able to handle a gun better, because the light in the office splashed over me from behind. Luckily the slug was too high. I slid around the door-jamb, clicked out the light switch and came out to the lobby again. Something stirred behind the armor. I shot and heard the hollow

ping of the slug ploughing through the metal.

Then he ran. Actually it was only a twist of his body away from the suit of armor and through the arched doorway which was a couple of feet away. I tossed a second bullet, knowing that it was too late.

As I raced across the lobby, I heard Mavia's voice rise stridently and distantly; in another part of the museum a man yelled something. I got through the door through which the gunman had gone and found myself in another exhibition room. I kept going, and in the next couple of minutes found out a lot about the Art Center. Four or five exhibition rooms, in addition to the office and the rest rooms, went off the lobby and doors connected each of the rooms with two or three others. It was like a maze. I could go tearing around all night with him always one room behind me, or in front, or at the side.

When at last I came back to the lobby, the four men and Mavia were there, huddled together. They gaped at my gun.

"What in the world were you shooting at, man?" Powell said.

"At a guy who shot at me first," I told him. "He was sneaking across the lobby."

"The murderer?" Larsen gasped. "Is he still in the place?"

"Maybe," I said. "He might have doubled back and gone out through the door or slipped out through a window, or maybe he's in this lobby right now."

Wallis looked apprehensively at the shadows around him, but Delattre knew at once what I was talking about. He handed out another of his smiles which made my fist itch. "Are you accusing one of us?" he purred.

"I don't know," I said. "Where were all of you when the first shot rang out?"

Their answers didn't enlighten me. Larsen said he'd been in the washroom. Delattre claimed to have been studying the Van Eyck he had come so far to see. Powell stated he had gone into the smaller office in the rear of the building to phone his pal, the police

commissioner, to see what could be done about hushing up the crime. Mavia Wallis said she and her father had been sitting on the bench.

I would have liked to have searched them for guns, but I hadn't the right. Anyway, the gunman would have ditched his weapon during the chase. So we stood around in the lobby, not saying much, waiting for the police.

Lieutenant Tighe sailed in, in front of the Homicide detail and in back of his potbelly. His belly was really something to see; all of him sloped down and up and sideways to it. He ordered some of his men to herd the five into the main office and gave me the nod to show him the cadaver. Tighe was as tough as they come, but he blanched when he saw it.

"Give, Joey," he said.

There wasn't much except for the guy who had tried to liquidate me. He clucked his tongue and said: "You working on this?"

"I doubt it. I didn't deliver in the first few minutes, and now that I've called the coppers I assume they've dispensed with my services."

"Hang around, Joey," he said.

IT WAS a couple of hours after dawn before Lieutenant Tighe was finished with the five in the office. Presently I saw them leave, Powell and Delattre striding out together and then Mavia Wallis hanging onto the arms of her father and her gorgeous boy friend.

At the door she glanced back and our eyes met. Her lips parted; she started to pull away from her father and Larsen to come over to me. Then she checked herself, and a moment later they were gone.

I looked after her, wondering if what I had seen in her eyes had been the fear of death, or fear for somebody else. I had taken no more than two steps after her when Lieutenant Tighe called me into the office.

Tighe dropped into a modernistic chair behind a streamlined desk and thumped his belly. "What do you make of it, Joey?"

"Wallis was the last to leave Quigg alive

at eight; at least he says he did. Wallis might have done the job before leaving. It must have taken Quigg a long time to bleed to death.”

“That’s a big help,” Tighe said sourly. “Powell has no alibi either up to the time he left home to meet Delattre at the station. Delattre is out; he didn’t get to town till eleven-forty and then was with the others, though he might have come in on an earlier train. Anyway, we’re wasting time considering those three; I can’t see them murdering. That leaves Lew Larsen.”

“No alibi,” I guessed.

“That’s right. He was alone in his studio painting till it was time to rush to the station to meet Delattre.” Tighe leaned across the desk. “And he has motive.”

“So there’s method in this mad murder?”

“There always is,” Tighe declared. “I phoned Vernon Davidson, who’s art critic of the Bugle. Lew Larsen was just another dabbler until a year ago. That was when an artist named Mario Farr disappeared after he’d been banged up badly in an auto accident. This Farr was so much ahead of his field that nobody paid much attention to Larsen. Now, with Farr gone, Larsen is the number one artist of the state, but that doesn’t mean more than that a handful of people know that he’s alive.”

“I get it,” I said. “Larsen’s painting of the Crucifixion was the model for Quigg’s murder. Now that picture will be reproduced in hundreds of newspapers and magazines in connection with the murder. Larsen will be famous; people will speak about him and know his name when they hear it.”

Tighe leaned smugly back in the chair. “What other motive is possible? But keep it under your hat, Joey. I can’t put the pinch on the lad because of a beautiful theory.”

“Good hunting,” I said and went home to make up for lost sleep.

At noon the ringing of my phone woke me abruptly. It was Mavia Wallis, and she sounded scared. “Mr. Keel, would you mind coming right over to see me?”

“Anything happen?”

“I’m not sure, but I must talk to you.”

“Expect me in ten minutes,” I said.

I don’t believe in premonitions or any such mumbo-jumbo, so why did I slip the hackie a couple of bucks extra to step on it? I was even sore at myself for not having stopped off to do justice to a steak. There was plenty of time for a talk and I was hungry, but all the same I was in a hurry to get there.

The neat little white house was set back from the road. As I went up the walk, I saw that the front door was partly open. That probably meant nothing, but it might mean something, and I wasn’t buried six feet under years ago only because I don’t like to take chances. There could be traps, and somebody had tried to burn me down a few hours ago in the museum.

So I slipped around to the side of the house to have a peek in a window or two. Suddenly a dog started to howl.

He belonged to the house next door, and was a cross between a police dog and a collie and the devil. He had foam on his mouth and blood in his eyes, and he was raging because the chain to which he was attached prevented him from getting at my throat. .

A woman stuck her head out of a window of the house next door. “Quiet, Caesar. That man is just going to visit that nice Miss Wallis.”

In the Wallis house somebody ran. I heard the front door slam shut, but by the time I returned to the front of the house there was nobody around. Bitterly I cursed the dog.

I had reached the front door when I heard the sound. It was like somebody screaming who had no tongue.

MAVIA WALLIS lay on the carpeted floor. Her hands and legs were tied; there was a blindfold over her eyes and a gag in her mouth. She was lying as still as death, but those weird, muffled whimpers trickled through her gag.

I dropped down at her side and touched her. Her torso arched upward in fear of impending death. "You're all right," I said. "I'm Joey Keel."

She subsided. I tore off the blindfold and gag. "Thank you!" she breathed. "You came just in time." She pushed the back of her head against the floor and looked up at a big oil painting on the wall behind her.

I'm less than an authority on art, but didn't take much to be gripped by the power of that canvas. It was an artist's plea against war. In the background, the mechanized weapons of modern mass destruction were depicted flowing away from the shambles of a city. In the foreground lay two corpses—a soldier and a woman in white. A bayonet protruded from the soldier's heart, and one of his outflung hands lay across the woman's bosom. She was tied and blindfolded and gagged, obviously depicting Truth or Justice or something like that. Blood poured from her severed throat.

"Lord!" I breathed. "Again!"

"Yes," she said hoarsely. "I was going to die the way the woman in that picture had died."

Then I saw the straight-edged razor. It lay near her head. Maybe, I thought, it was the dog that had saved Mavia's life. If his barking hadn't scared the killer into flight, I might have entered the house too late to have saved her.

I took out my claspknife and sliced through the rope which bound her. "Who was he?" I asked.

"I didn't see him. I came into this room and he stepped out from somewhere, grabbed me from behind and held a hand over my mouth so I couldn't make an outcry. He didn't let me turn my head until I was blindfolded." Her breath was still ragged. "I—I remembered this picture. I knew that he was going to cut my throat."

I helped her up to her feet. She swayed against me and I wound an arm about her to support her.

"Did he wear gloves?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "I felt them against my mouth."

There'd be no prints on the razor. I looked up at the painting. It was telling me something which wasn't clear.

I said: "Did Lew Larsen paint that?"

"No. An artist named Mario Farr."

"I heard something about him today," I said. "He was supposed to be pretty good. And he disappeared."

A light came into her eyes which made me drop my arm from about her. I know love when I see it.

"He was a very great artist," she said in a tone of pure worship. "But last year he had a horrible auto accident. He was a fine, sensitive soul and he couldn't endure people he knew looking at his deformity and pitying him. Then one day he vanished; nobody has heard of him since."

"And you still love him?"

She turned her head away from me. "I don't see where that's any concern of yours."

"It is if you want me to help you."

"I'm sorry I spoke like that." She tried to smile up at me, but got only a wan, pinched effect. "Mario and I were to be married."

I was still studying Farr's painting, trying to understand some hidden message that it contained.

"Why did you call me this evening?" I asked. "Did you know your life would be in danger?"

For long moments she gnawed on her lip. Then she said: "Lew Larsen phoned me. He was very excited. He said he had got hold of something startling, but couldn't bring himself to tell the police until he had a talk with me. He's supposed to be here soon. I wanted you to be here to show him how absurd his idea is."

I said quietly: "You think he's going to accuse Mario Farr of Quigg's murder? That's what's been frightening you all along."

"How ridiculous! Mario was so badly

crippled that he couldn't walk. How could he have overpowered Quigg and then have done those horrible things to him?"

"But it's bothering you?"

She looked away. "I have a sense of something horrible closing in on all of us. Why would Mario have murdered an innocent man? Why, above all, would he want to kill me?"

"He's jealous because Larsen took his place in your affections,"

"But that's not true," she protested. "Lew and I are merely good friends."

Besides, I told myself, Quigg's murder would only enhance Lew Larsen's fame, if not his reputation, as Tighe had pointed out. And that war painting on the wall was still bothering me.

Then I got it. The killer was a stickler for following the broad death patterns of the paintings. There were two dead people in Farr's, canvas, yet the killer had used it only as a model for Mavia. Had he intended to complete the reproduction of the picture with live models when Lew Larsen arrived?

Or perhaps he had planned to separate the murders into two sections—one here, the other at Larsen's place.

I leaped to the phone and told Lieutenant Tighe to meet me at Larsen's. He demanded details, but I snapped I hadn't time and hung up.

Mavia had been listening. She leaned white-faced against the wall. "I'm going with you."

"Of course," I said. "I'm not leaving you out of my sight."

CHAPTER III

Models for Death

WE BEAT the police up to Larsen's walk-up apartment because we were nearer. I went up two steps at a time with Mavia panting behind me. I listened at the

door and heard somebody inside. Probably Larsen. Possible not.

I took out my gun and shoved the door in.

We were too late. Lew Larsen lay sprawled on his back with one arm outflung as had the soldier in Farr's painting. Blood soaked his shirt at his heart.

But the bayonet wasn't in his body. Frank Powell was holding it in his hand. He stared stupidly at me.

"Don't try anything," I said.

Powell blinked and wet his lips. "You don't think I murdered him?" The ceiling light glistened down on the wet blood which covered the bayonet.

"That's not a toothpick in your hand," I said.

Mavia moaned. I caught her as she swayed.

"Look here," Powell said hollowly. "I came up here to visit Larsen. We were to discuss a painting of his which he was trying to persuade the Art Center to purchase. I found him—dead."

"And you decided to take the bayonet for a souvenir."

"I wasn't sure he was dead." His voice was desperate. "Without thinking I pulled out the bayonet. I suppose I had an idea that I might be able to save him."

Feet pounded outside. Lieutenant Tighe burst into the room, trailed by his squad.

In that studio room, with the medical examiner going over the body and flashlight bulbs flaring and fingerprint men doing their routine, Tighe listened to my story and then to Maria's. I kept my arm about her; she was in a pretty bad way.

"How about letting me take her home?" I suggested.

He glanced at where Frank Powell sat slumped on the couch with palms pressed against his temples. "It's an open and shut case, Joey," Tighe said, "but I want you around just the same. I'll send one of my men with Miss Wallis."

I handed her over to a plain-clothes man. She managed to get her chin up and hand me a weak smile. Then she was gone. I stood looking at the door, feeling uneasy. She'd have plenty of protection, I assured myself, but just the same I ought to be with her.

Lieutenant Tighe was listening to Powell repeat in a flat, lifeless voice what he had told me.

"It stinks!" Tighe roared. "You learned that Larsen got wise that you murdered Quigg and that he'd told Mavia Wallace about it. So you decided to rub them both out. Keel kept you from finishing off Miss Wallis, but you had plenty of time to rush here and do the job on Larsen."

"No." Powell was a tired, crushed old man. "Why would I want to kill anybody?"

"We'll find out soon enough." Tighe turned to me with a broad grin. "Well, that closes the case in only a few hours. Even the newspapers ought to be satisfied."

I didn't care for it one bit. "It would have jibed better with Mario Farr's picture if Powell had left the bayonet in Larsen's body."

"Maybe it's his and he was afraid it would be identified." Then he added, scowling: "Anyway, why should I argue with you? You don't even represent anybody."

No, I didn't. But all the same I was in this up to my ears. So when Tighe set out for the Wallis house to have a look at the razor and have the lab boys go over the place, I tagged along.

Maria Wallis should have been there ahead of us. She wasn't, but the plain-clothes man who had been assigned to protect her was.

We found him just inside the door. He was lying face down and the ugly hilt of a knife stuck out between his shoulder-blades. Blood was still coming from the wound. He couldn't have been dead more than a few minutes.

THERE was no sign of the girl. When we stood in the living room, I

said: "What does this make Frank Powell?"

"Powell has an accomplice," Tighe said irritably. The lieutenant had thought he'd had the case all sewed up, and this new complication got under his skin. "Powell had reason to believe that the girl hadn't spilled everything she knew, so he had her snatched to keep her quiet."

"Why not kill her and run less risk? He seems to have tried it before."

"I didn't say I know all the answers," he barked. "Not yet, anyway. Powell has been taken to headquarters. By God, I'll get the truth out of him if I have to—"

A madman charged into the room. Harold Wallis had just arrived home from the Art Center and had heard from a cop outside that his daughter had been kidnapped. Winston Delattre was with him. Then Tighe handed Wallis a couple of more shocks—the information that Lew Larsen had been murdered and that Frank Powell was being held for the crime.

"Not Larsen, that brilliant young artist!" Delattre exclaimed. "And Mr. Powell is the murderer! My word!"

The curator fell back in a chair as if he had been pushed by a giant hand.

I said: "How can anybody in a position of responsibility at the Art Center steal something valuable and then hide the fact?"

Wallis looked dully at me. "I don't understand what you mean?"

"Say, the Van Eyck painting."

"You still harping on that angle?" Tighe growled.

"Sure I am," I said. "According to Mavia, Larsen didn't definitely put the finger on anybody. He just knew that some big shot—perhaps Powell, perhaps somebody else—was involved in some messy business. There's no doubt that the murders revolve around paintings, and the only one around worth killing for is the Van Eyck."

Tighe said: "You're having bad dreams, Joey. The painting's still there."

“How do we know?” I said.

That caused Wallis to lift his head. The curator, the art critic and the lieutenant stared at me to see what the gag was. Then Delattre let loose with his patronizing laugh. He didn't say anything, but the laugh said more than words.

I went on stubbornly: “How do we know that Dutchman's painting—”

“Jan Van Eyck was Flemish.” Delattre corrected me.

I was careful not to lose my temper. “Maybe that painting is a forgery and these killings are an attempt to keep it from coming out.”

Tighe liked that. “A motive for Powell. But how does it tie in with the murders?”

“Quigg found out the picture was a phony and then so did Larsen.”

Delattre stroked his hatchet-face. “Gentlemen, it is barely possible. I will not be the first expert to be fooled by a superb forgery. There is a simple test, employing the use of chemicals, which I shall be glad to make.”

“We've chemists of our own,” Tighe told him.

The session broke up. I was right behind Delattre; he flagged a hack. Luckily a crowd had gathered and there were other hacks around, so I could keep up. I slipped my driver a five-spot to keep the other car in sight, but he didn't earn his money. There was only a mile to go and Delattre didn't seem to be in a hurry.

But I was pretty sure I wasn't wasting my time. A visiting New York art critic has no business in that part of the city. It was a slum section so old that few people lived there any longer.

His cab stopped in front of the worst of the tenements. I leaned forward in my seat, watching him through the windshield. He paid off his driver, looked around, then went up the stoop of the house and disappeared. .

I wasn't far behind him. Every window of

the house was boarded up. I pushed in the door and found myself in a dark vestibule. My gun was in one hand, a pencil flashlight in the other. The place was so still that I would have heard somebody take a deep breath, let alone the creaking of Delattre's feet going up the ramshackled staircase.

Fine, I thought. There was sure not to be any way out from the second story down. Carefully I removed my shoes and started up the staircase. It was pretty tough going because those ancient boards groaned whenever they felt part of my weight. But by keeping close against the wall I managed to cut down sound to a minimum. Fortunately Delattre's feet still sounded on the floor above, so his steps drowned out whatever noise I made.

When I reached the stairhead, I heard the voices on my right. Naturally I didn't dare snap on my pencil flash. I groped forward until I came to an open doorway. The voices seemed to come from there. I poked my head around the doorjamb and saw the glow of a cigaret. And Delattre was saying to somebody unseen: “It was really very simple. I made it extremely easy for Keel to follow me. And now here he is, right in the room with us.”

I TOOK two steps into the room and pressed my back against the wall and centered my gun at a spot twelve inches below the cigaret in Delattre's mouth. I said: “Don't move, Delattre or whatever your name is. If I see that cigaret budge, I shoot. There's not a chance I'll miss and your pal can't see me at all.”

There was a brittle silence. Beyond the glow of the cigaret I could see the ghostly outline of Delattre's lips. Delattre spoke without taking the cigaret from his mouth.

“Get him, Mario,” he said lazily.

I was set for a shot snapping out at me from the darkness or maybe they'd be foolish enough to send out a light. I was confident enough of my speed with a gun not to be too

worried over that. I wasn't a target at all, and the flash of a light or a gun would give me somebody in addition to Delattre to shoot at. But I hardly expected the attack to come from overhead—by a thing that flew in the air and could apparently see in the darkness.

I heard it swishing through the air above me. "Keep back or I plug Delattre!" I yelled a warning. Then it smacked me and the weight of its body sent my head against the wall.

CHAPTER IV

The Legless Thing

HORROR numbed me as much as the blow. *It's a bird*, I thought wildly. *An incredibly gigantic bird.*

Then fingers closed about my gunwrist, and I knew they were the fingers of a human hand.

The entire weight of the thing was dragging me down. I braced myself against it and tried to turn my gun into its body. But those fingers were steel, crushing the small bones of my wrist, and anybody will tell you that Joey Keel is far from a weakling.

The thing was too close to me to get a blow in with my left. So I whipped my free arm around it, and it was a human body all right. Or rather half of one. My arm dropped down over the hips and then abruptly closed over nothing. He had no legs.

My right arm numbed from the pressure of those powerful fingers. I felt his other hand tug at the gun, and I knew that I couldn't swing the bore against him and that he'd get the gun. So I dropped it.

With the clatter of the gun on the floor, the legless man flew away from me. Or he seemed to be flying.

"What happened, Mario?" Delattre's voice came from the darkness.

He had crushed out his cigaret.

"He dropped his gun," the voice came from overhead. "He's probably groping for

it."

That was right. I was down on my knees, frantically running my palms over the floor. I'd lost my flashlight also.

"Hurry, Mario!" Delattre said.

The gun must be right at my feet—yet it wasn't. Sweat poured down me. Above me something swished toward me and I felt a hand brush the top of my head. I jumped up and flapped my hands above my head like somebody trying to chase an angry bee. Nothing was there.

I stood perfectly still, holding my breath, waiting for the next attack. If I could land my left flush to his jaw, it might do the trick. I kept my fist at my side, like a fighter wading in for the finishing blow, except that I didn't move.

He dropped down from the ceiling on my back. I hadn't a chance. One of his arms hooked around my neck and the weight of him carried me over backward. I clawed at the arm, tried to get my hands around to his face. The pressure tightened. I bucked, then fought myself up to my feet. He stayed on my back like the Old Man of the Sea.

I was through and I knew it. Blood pounded in my temples. My lungs caught fire. My legs folded under me.

"Put the lights on," a voice said in my ear. "And have your gun ready. I don't want to kill him."

"Why not?" Delattre asked.

"Do as I say! Robbery is bad enough. We can at least stop at murder."

LIGHT pressed against my closed eyelids. The strangling arm relaxed. I lay back, feeling breath cool my burning lungs. Then I opened my eyes.

Delattre stood over me with my .45 automatic in his left hand and a snub-nosed .38 revolver in his right. His thin lips were smiling, but it was no longer the supercilious smile which had made me itch to smash his teeth in. It was as deadly as his weapons.

Then I saw Mario Farr. Like a hideous bird, he was perched on the two stumps which extended only an inch or so below his hips. He had thick black hair and sensitive black eyes, but below his eyes his face was a thing of horror. It had been so scarred and battered by the auto accident that you had to look hard to distinguish where the nose ended and the mouth started.

I sat up. A couple of flood lights hung from the ceiling, run by batteries, no doubt, for there was no current in that house. The room contained an artist's easel with a blank canvas on it and a rack of paints and brushes and a bed. And at intervals from the ceiling stout ropes dangled almost to the floor. That was how Mario Farr got around—by swinging from the ropes like a monkey.

"You were a bit too smart for your own good," Delattre grinned down at me.

"Who are you?" I said. "You're no art critic."

He shrugged. "It won't matter to you in a little while. You're too smart to live long."

"If I was too smart you weren't smart enough," I said. "If the attendant Quigg and then Lew Larsen recognized that Van Eyck painting as a phony, then certainly the great art critic Winston Delattre would have. That was why I tailed you, even though I wasn't sure. I had nothing to lose."

"Nothing?" Delattre showed his teeth. "You think you have nothing to lose now?"

"Don't you think the others will get wise?" I said.

"So what? The whole idea is that the forgery will be found out. Then in a few months, perhaps a year, the original will turn up somewhere in Europe, through a dummy art dealer. A hundred and twenty-five grand, shamus, in my pocket; and there'll be nobody to prove that the person who originally donated the painting to the Art Center hadn't been in possession of a forgery all along."

I turned to Mario Farr. "I assume you made the forgery."

Farr's disfigured face twisted. "Why not? Why shouldn't I deserve some luxury? I am forced to live here hidden away from the eyes of men, and live in squalor. Listen! With my share of the money I shall build a home for myself on a mountaintop and there I shall paint powerful pictures."

I said: "And was it worth all those corpses and the ones to come?"

"Shut up!" Delattre rapped.

I knew then what my play would have to be. There wasn't much chance of it working out, but it was the only chance. I took a deep breath and said: "Delattre is going to shoot me, Mario, to keep me from telling you about the murdered men."

Mario turned his black eyes on the phony critic. "No, he won't," he said quietly. "What about them?"

Delattre was watching both of us at the same time. He chewed his underlip in indecision, so I knew that I could at least get started.

"You didn't think, Mario, that this would mean murder," I said. "You'd stop at that. When you could have choked me to death, you said you didn't want to kill me. The real Winston Delattre is dead; this imposter had to kill him to keep him from showing up so he could take his place."

"All right," the false Delattre said. "When you start in on a big haul like this, you can't stop at anything. How could I steal the original Van Eyck without killing the watchman? But simply killing him wouldn't have done any good. The cops would have thought of the Van Eyck right away. I had to rig up the murder so they would get the idea a madman had done it."

"But something went wrong," I put in. "Wallis called me in on the case and I started asking the right questions at once. You decided to get rid of me. What did one more murder mean to you?"

DELATTRE said: "One always expects hitches. Lew Larsen discovered the forgery too soon. I was anxious to get out of town before it was discovered. I might have been suspected for the very reason that you suspected me—why would an expert like me be fooled easier than Larsen? So I had to kill Larsen also." Mario wet his lips and said nothing. I could see those black eyes of his go sick.

"Mario," I said, "you hid yourself away here because you love Mavia Wallis. You love her so much that you couldn't endure to have her look at your deformity."

"Mind your own business!" Mario screamed at me:

But it was Delattre I was watching. His hands holding the guns twitched, but he didn't shoot. He no longer cared how much I said.

"Delattre also tried to murder Mavia," I told Mario. "I arrived at her house in time to save her."

Mario's body jerked. His eyes were livid coals.

"How was I to know she was your girl?" Delattre said hastily. "I thought she was Larsen's and that he had spilled everything to her."

"And you set out to murder them both so horribly that the same madman would be blamed." I looked up at Mario. "He'll never split the money with you. Remember how he said a few minutes ago, 'One hundred and twenty-five grand in my pocket?'" My words were tumbling out now. "He's letting me spill all this to you because it no longer matters. He kidnapped Mavia. She's probably somewhere in this building right now. He's going to kill her and you, too, and when your bodies are found, you, Mario, will be blamed for it all. They'll say your accident had driven you insane; the case will be closed and Delattre will be clear to clean up on the picture!"

Delattre laughed and backed a few steps away from me so that his guns faced both Mario and myself. Mario just looked at him

with his chest heaving. I made a noise drawing my stockinged feet under me, and impulsively Delattre gave me all his attention for a moment.

"Get him, Mario!" I yelled.

Delattre's eyes jerked back to the legless artist. And Mario rose in the air on the rope dangling in front of him. Momentum sent him across the room.

First one, then the other of Delattre's guns blasted. Mario's body shuddered in midair against the impact of lead, but he came on. He hit Delattre's chest at the same time that my dive sent me crashing against Delattre's legs. The three of us piled up, with Mario squatting on the phony critic's chest and myself clinging to his legs.

A hand clutching a gun stuck out of that tangle. It belched flame which seared my pants over the kneecap. I dug my teeth into the gunwrist and the gun was mine. While Mario held him down, I got the second gun the same way.

When I rose to my feet, I saw that Mario had both of his powerful hands clamped about Delattre's throat. I bent and tried to loosen his fingers, but I couldn't do it short of hacking them off.

Then Mario slumped forward and they both formed a single motionless, bloody heap. Death had ended the struggle for both of them. Mario's fingers remained clamped about the other's throat. Possibly, I thought dully, Delattre's last breath had been choked out by the hands of a dead man.

In a corner of a room I found a small roll of canvas. One look at it told me that it was the Van Eyck. I tucked the painting under my arm and searched the building.

Mavia Wallis was in the cellar, lying tied and gagged on a cracked, damp cement floor amid the stench of long decayed things.

As we went up the broken staircase to the street, she threw questions at me in a thick, hysterical voice. I avoided answering by telling her that there would be plenty of time

for talk later.

She would find out soon enough that Mario Farr was dead, but when she did I'd tell her that the man she loved had died as bravely as a man could. And I was glad now that I hadn't tried as hard as I might have to have

saved Delattre from Mario's hands. Every man has the right to a final chance at atonement.

THE END