

The Devil's Race Track

A SPINE CHILLING CRIME NOVELET

by CYRIL PLUNKETT

It was Satan's own race course on which young, lovely, stark nude maidens ran, racing to their doom in a scarlet murder pit of hell itself, and the dark-eyed girl that Breezy Quinn adored was one of the racers, while Breezy himself was captive to the list-filled demon whose unholy crimes had already sent ten desirable young girls to a terrible death.



His gun roared, catching the killer in the knee, but he held on to the axe and started to crawl toward the detective.

SOMETHING always happens when you're in a hurry to get away. First Olga Stephani phoned. I told her I was as busy as a dozen moths in a new fur neckpiece, and that there wasn't any use coming up anyway because both my arms were crippled with arthritis.

Conners, Homicide Skipper, turned around and laughed.

"Is your face red, Breezy?"

"Vascular system's out of order," I snapped. "I'm taking pills for it." I reached for my hat and started for the door.

"Hey, you blushing violet!" Conners yelled, "I want you to check those fingerprint reports from Washington."

That guy picks work out of his teeth. "Conners," I snarled, "there's been ten girls kidnaped and electrocuted—murdered—in the past several months. The newspapers are screaming for convictions and for all you know about it, you might as well be in China. Am I right or am I right?"

"You're right," he admitted. "So what?"

"Well, I got a hot lead, and it's a swell night to follow it. Guzzle this, Sherlock: Has it ever trickled through your fat head that it takes juice to run a private hot-squat? If a check with the electric company on the juice consumption of private users showed—"

"Say!" Conners gasped.

As a matter of fact, the juice gag hadn't occurred to me before, and it sounded silly now, but I got away with it, and it was a swell night—for a murder. Chilly enough to get into your bones.

I reached the street and shivered. It had been raining, but the rain had stopped and fog, like long curling dragons, waved over the glistening pavement. It struck me then that something was wrong. Nothing tangible, nothing that could be put into words—but a curiously anxious feeling impossible to shrug off. But Sue Severance, my big moment, was probably gnashing her pretty teeth at our usual meeting place down the street, and I swung up the walk. A black sedan, gears meshing, its fog lights two yellow eyes in the heavy mist, rolled swiftly by in the early darkness.

Let's get the records straight. I'm Larry Quinn, Detective Second Grade. I'm twenty-eight, raw-boned, husky, blond. I've been on the force five years and I should have been a captain half

that time ago. Breezy—? Well, they call me that because I guess I talk that way.

The Stephani dame I mentioned is anybody's guess. I met her a couple of months before, and she's been trying to make me ever since. She's blonde, throaty-voiced and neat, but I'd already lost my head and heart to one Sue Severance.

One hundred pounds of dynamite, Sue. Five feet two, curly black hair, eyes like little pools at midnight. She's private secretary for a ginzo named Braxton, a lawyer to be exact. She claims a second grade dick's salary couldn't keep her in chiffon hose, so the answer is "No!" every time I pop the question. Anyway, Sue had phoned me at headquarters at around five-thirty. Said she was going to get a snack en route and meet me at the corner by six-thirty. Said it was God-awful important. And her voice sounded jerky, frightened.

Maybe that's what worried me now. Not the meeting place, but the way she'd talked.

I looked at my wrist watch. The luminous dial said six-thirty-four. I quickened my steps, came abreast of the vacant lot. Sue should have been parked there, by the curb. She wasn't. The side street was silent, empty. I stopped, frowned—and heard a groan from deep within the lot. It came again, low, sobbing, and I dived for the sound.

The fog parted, revealed a car, Sue's car, lights out, doors hanging open, parked in the middle of the lot. My feet hit something soft, and I stumbled, fell whirling, grabbing for my gun. A second later I knew the gun wasn't necessary, but a flashlight was. I found my pencil flash and pressed the button.

Gasp? I almost fainted. The white light, like an eerie finger, played over a wizened, hunchbacked body. Twisted legs were sprawled out as though clutching in the mud for drive to push them forward. Both hands were curved, raised imploringly. Both eyes were naked, empty sockets!

It was Benny, the news kid, a friend of mine. Benny, lips parted, panting, face oozing blood. More blood stained his jacket front. The jacket was fluttering, and his torso, abdomen to chest, was ripped open!

I cried: "Benny! Benny!" Hopelessly, miserably—and understood at last his upraised hands. Like two unwinking agates, he held in those trembling hands his own eyes!

MAYBE but a few seconds passed. I don't know. It seemed like hours, centuries that I stared, fascinated at that horrible figure beneath me. I could feel my heart, pounding breathlessly; my mind, screaming: "Sue, what of Sue?"

"Is that—you, Breezy?" Benny whispered.

I answered him something, God knows what. I tell you I was like stone, numbed, transfixed.

"I—I tried to reach the—the sidewalk," that crimson mouth went on. "They'd thought they'd—killed me, but—"

Killed him? It was only an amazing will that had stalled off death so long. Minutes only, quite true—I remembered now the black sedan with the fog lights, winding up in second, racing. The only car that had passed. The car without a doubt, fleeing. But there wasn't time for thought now. I said: "Benny, who was it? What happened? Quick!"

"I was—across street—didn't see me. Car stopped by girl parked. Two men jumped—her, made her—drive into lot. I—I thought robbery and sifted closer."

"She didn't scream?"

"Couldn't. Stuff over face. She fought. I—knew kidnapping, and made sound. They—they saw me, got me." Those ghastly sockets closed, breath gurgled in Benny's wretched throat. A spurt of blood geysered up from his torso. His body shuddered.

"Benny!" I pleaded. "Benny—?"

"Said I wouldn't—see them again." A whisper now, so low I could barely hear it. "Knew I recognized—them."

"You did? Who?"

"Don't know names. Hideaway, Breezy, at Hideaway."

He died, cradled in my arms, died with a last convulsive movement, and I stared at his mangled body, stared and felt fury burning through me.

I laid him on the ground, and got up. Terror came out of the dripping night and clawed at me. Icy claws. I swear I felt them at my throat. I couldn't swallow, and my teeth began to chatter. Killers? God, they were fiends!

"Sue—?" I whispered. "Sue—!" They had her. Why, I didn't know, and then abruptly I did know and I held my breath. Ten missing girls before her, young, lovely girls from all strata of society. Never a ransom asked, never a clue. The same diabolical force had struck again, this time with a new and horrible vengeance!

I staggered toward Sue's coupe, still trying to

tell myself she would be here, that she had to be here. The coupe was empty. I played my light over the seat, hoping frantically to find something, anything, which might be a clue. Her purse lay on the floor open, empty; nothing else. But outside, the car, half under it on the ground, was a sausage-like cylinder of glass.

A tiny printed label read: Ethyl Chloride. The reason Sue hadn't screamed. Anesthetic. And then I saw the capillary point hadn't been broken. This vial, at least, hadn't been used.

Perhaps hadn't needed to be used? That had a chilly connotation. Had they killed Sue instantly? It was possible, and yet the position of the vial pointed that it had been kicked under the car, bearing out Benny's dying statement that she had struggled. That she must have been taken alive. I shoved the thing in my pocket and backed away, began to run. Not to headquarters, even though it was so near. Conners would want facts and Conners could be damnably long winded. Time now was infinitely precious.

My own machine was parked on the next street. I raced into a drugstore, dived for the phone booth. I called headquarters, and waiting for the connection, remembered what Benny had said. "Hideaway..."

Did it mean they had one, unnamed? That could be. Yet Benny had said, "At Hideaway." And suddenly I remembered the exclusive club outside the city. The Hideaway. It didn't make sense. Membership to that club was tantamount to millions, or so I'd heard. Still—Conners' gruff voice came over the wire.

"Larry Quinn," I said.

"Not the Dizzy Dean of detectives?" Conners interrupted, chuckling.

"Cut it, Skipper. There's murder on the corner." Swiftly I told him what I had found. I said finally: "You got it, Skipper? You understand?"

Conners roared: "You get back to that lot and wait!" But I jammed the receiver back on its hook and ran for the street, toward my car. With Sue involved, Conners and his orders could go to hell.

THE Hideaway Club was a half mile off the highway, at the end of a private lane. The building itself was big, four-storied, with a colonial-mansion front. It was painted white and looked like a many-eyed, sheeted monster in the fog. I cut my lights and edged along the parking space. There seemed to be no outside attendants; there seemed, moreover, nothing amiss inside, for

weaving past the windows on the lower floor were forms dancing, and I could hear the muted strains of an orchestra. Upstairs, the second floor, lighted too, appeared to be a dining room. Waiters bearing trays passed the wide windows. But the third and fourth floors were quite dark.

I was getting quietly out of my car when a limousine whined up the drive. It stopped at the entrance and a woman got out. She was dressed in flaming red; her hair gleamed, honey-colored. It was Olga Stephani, the dame who had been making a play at me for weeks!

Olga dismissed the car and turned toward the entrance. But she didn't go in. She paused a minute, fumbled in her purse. I could see one bejeweled hand clutching a small card, and suddenly she walked swiftly off the porch, to the side of the building. She rang a bell at a door I hadn't noticed before, flashed the card and entered.

I gnawed my lip and tried to figure the thing out. If the Hideaway did mean something, then amazingly so did Olga's interest in me. To discover what I—the police—had known about the disappearance of those ten girls? It fitted all right, but it still didn't make sense. Because why in heaven's name would Olga, the Hideaway, want ten girls, anyway, if no ransom was involved?

Still crouching uncertainly, I saw three other cars arrive. The occupancy of two of them, laughing youngsters, went to the main entrance. The third party, a middle-aged man in evening clothes, hurried toward the same door Olga had used! And he, like Olga, flashed a card in entering!

Two entrances—a phony setup. I knew what I would do. It required ten minutes until the right man came, drew up near my car. A guy, alone, my build. Breezy wasn't taking any chances now, so I hit twice with my gun butt, hard. The guy gasped, crumpled, and I shoved him back in his car, climbed in after him.

He had a wallet crammed with bills, and a card. Square red pasteboard. On the face of it, printed with deeper red, was a devil's head, and around the head, like a little red track, a circle!

I stripped my captive from topcoat to shorts, and got into his clothes, transferring everything from my own pockets to these I'd donned. There was a snub-nosed thirty-two automatic in the glove compartment of my hack—a little matter of precaution I am never without—and among other things, a roll of adhesive tape. I gagged the guy, taped his hands and ankles. And then I went to work on myself.

The small automatic I strapped to my right leg, on the inside just below the knee. I always carry a pocket knife, and this I taped across the small of my back, low down. Five years on the force had taught me that a guy who didn't take precautions was plain nuts. Maybe I should have hi-balled back and called the squad—but I had no proof of wrong within the Hideaway, and raiding a place like that without proof would bring new faces into the homicide division within twenty-four hours. Millionaires mean politics—and pull.

So it was Breezy Quinn on his own, whatever happened, and I didn't care much what happened so long as I found Sue. I shoved my service revolver under my arm, beneath the full dress coat, and started for that strange side door. There was a feeling like I was walking toward the gallows, like the licking fog had hands, warning me, trying to hold me back. The night seemed breathless.

I reached the door, saw a button, pushed it. The door opened and a man said, "Good evening."

He was a blot in the dark hallway, but a misshapen blot. All arms and head and shoulders. Like a huge ape. I flashed the card, and a tiny light in his hand focused a bare instant on it. The card was right! He cut the light, apparently uninterested in my face, murmured silkily. "Shall I take your coat and hat?"

I went on down the hall, tense, right hand near my armpit and the Police Positive; came then to a door, opened it. The room beyond was furnished in quiet grandeur, and a dozen men were at tables, playing bridge!

They looked up, ignored me. But a curious something struck my mind suddenly. There had been laughter, music, in the front of this queer building. Here, except for the flutter of cards, was utter silence!

In the next room there were more men, all unknown to me, standing around a roulette table. The wheel was turning, ball clicking softly, and for the first time I became aware of the light in their eyes. It was almost a glare, a greedy fascination, when everything pointed to complete uninterest in their game! They weren't watching the wheel!

A liveried attendant touched my arm. "Drinks, sir?" he asked, holding a tray. I took a glass of amber fluid, held it. He leered at me: "It won't be long now, sir."

Long? What? This infernal politeness, this gloss of suave servitude was torture. Worse than a physical beating. My heart still pounded, pleading for action; my mind knew frustration, for the next

door I tried refused to open. Was I wrong in my guess about the Hideaway Club? I wondered frantically about that, and still, this unusual tautness in all men present, the flunkey's "It won't be long now, sir," the presence of Olga Stephani whose interest in me for weeks had had me guessing, pointed to something definite.

I sat down, ditched the drink, and felt sweat running down my side. Sue was in danger, horrible danger. Yet I couldn't do anything but wait for proof that Sue was here. And waiting was sheer agony. Suddenly a buzzer sounded. The croupier said: "That's all, gentlemen." The men turned away, toward the door I'd tried.

Their faces expressed naked lust!

They stood by that door, silent until it finally, automatically slid open. They passed through, and I followed them quickly; abruptly tense at what I saw beyond.

SURE I gasped. The room was easily a hundred by fifty feet, and four stories high. We stood on a narrow, chair-filled balcony that surrounded it. A fine steel mesh rail was around the balcony about three feet high, partitioning it half way at one end. Steps entered the pit from both ends; a steel ladder coursed the right wall, pit floor to ceiling and a visible trap door. But it was the pit itself that astounded me. Covering the floor, fifteen feet below, was a bewildering, gigantic maze!

The thing was a circuitous pattern of six-foot dividing fences, open at the top to the balcony onlookers, its walls a diabolical confusion of full-length mirrors and false, taut velvet-draped chambers. Similar in comparison to the sort of thing you find in practically every resort madhouse.

I began to understand its ghastly significance the moment I saw, nearby on the balcony, the wires, the transformer, the bakelite panel front with its array of gleaming brass switches. The sweat of terror trickled down my spine, my body trembled, as next my eyes fastened upon the blackboard, directly opposite, and its enlightening symbols. Here was a miniature system of racetrack betting!

Even as the trap opened in the floor at the very center of the maze and the head and shoulders of the first girl emerged, I knew that I was witness to the devil's own race course, upon which human beings ran, goaded by depraved, sadistic throngs above them. Men who paid terrific prices for the devil-headed admission card, whose bets were made against the house with percentages favoring

the house. Whose winner spelled murder.

A hooded man came to take his place beside the panel switches. The man could be only executioner! Death ran Satan's racetrack, death doubtless to the loser to spur the runners frantically onward. It explained the ten missing girls, the electrocuted bodies we had found far removed from this place. It explained, in part, the whereabouts of Sue Severance.

I should have watched the balcony, but there were five girls huddled now below. Young, lovely girls, stark nude, faces white masks of terror, eyes like frightened, blazing jewels. I couldn't take my eyes from them, and unconsciously, my hand stole toward the service gun, clutched its butt when the scream came. Not from below—from beyond the meshed partition.

I whirled, an instant later drew the gun. Olga Stephani, a tall masked man beside her, was pointing at me. Shrieking: "It's Larry Quinn, the dick"

I had the gun out all right, trigger finger ready to fire, but I wasn't fast enough. A guy leaped on me from one side. I blasted, knew I'd missed. Simultaneously something hard cracked my head from behind. I heard jeering laughter, and then nothing.

A low humming drilled upon my brain first. Pain came drumming after it. I was sitting, leaning against the balcony wall, my feet tightly bound. So, too, were my hands behind me. The maze was visible through the mesh railing.

Aglow with snaking red neon, twisting, winding, maddening in those countless mirrors, the floor was a scarlet, writhing murder-pit, hell itself! Blue flame sparkled from it, and the naked bodies of the five moving girls glistened weirdly. They were racing to their doom! Racing through the wild maze, trying to find the way to the finish.

Horrible though it was, the macabre spectacle fascinated me, and for a long minute I stared, unable to pull my eyes away. The girls began to scream, and a greedy roar went up from the watching crowd. Someone cried: "Number four is going to win!" And I saw then the branded figures on each white back—burned into their flesh. I saw their bodies crashing helplessly at the countless false leads. I saw that they were stumbling frantically toward the course's end.

A bell began to ring and there was movement near me. The hooded executioner was pulling a switch. Below, a ball of brilliant blue appeared, glowed wickedly, spitting, leaping, following like

jagged lightning the planted wire-leads in the floor. It zigzagged as though a thing alive, and the dry burnt odor of electricity suddenly suffused the room.

The trailing girl sent up one cry of soul-searing terror as that glowing ball struck her naked heels. She became a mass of twitching flame, a living pyre. The stench of roasting flesh, a thin wisp of smoke, floated upward.

I closed my eyes, almost unconscious to the yells around me. A droning voice called the winner, a brief interval to the next race. Next race? Then there would be more, another ghastly murder! Another—it hit me like cold, icy water.

Sue would run that race course!

My brain whirled. I turned and saw Olga Stephani and the masked man eyeing me. They were close to the mesh grating that separated them from the balance of the balcony. Olga said: "But we don't know how he came here, or how many others know and may be around here too."

The man chuckled. "With no interruptions? Rest easy, Olga." His voice was like a file, a voice that oddly startled me.

"You're not going on in spite of the danger?" Olga gasped.

"We've taken these men's money, haven't we?" he snapped, "We've got to produce. Moreover, Quinn barging in may mean we might have to close up permanently." He caught my eye, laughed softly. "Do you want to bet on Miss Severance, Quinn?"

I swore at him, and he laughed again. He said: "A passing thought, Quinn. You're not going to fry. It's much too easy for a dick. Remember the hunchback? Something like that, something that hurts!"

I didn't answer, couldn't answer. The identity of the masked man, the "head" of this fiendish layout, taunted me in its elusiveness. I knew that voice, but I couldn't place it. Knew too, suddenly, that death for Sue—and me—was not only near, but seemingly inevitable. For all eyes had turned back toward the pit. The trap was opening once more, and the first head through it was Sue's!

I believe I lost my mind in that moment. I know I tried to tear my bonds in frenzy. They cut my wrists, and frustration bred increasing terror in my heart. I lay back panting, completely ignored, and saw three other girls emerge, quaking, panic-stricken. I began to pray, babbling words even I did not understand.

And suddenly I felt pressure near my knee,

something turmoil hadn't let me realize before. They'd hit me, tied me; they'd taken my Police Positive. But they hadn't found the automatic strapped to my leg!

Faint hope, combined with desperation, cleared my mind. The gun—and the knife I'd plastered to my back!

A MAN appeared below with a charcoal brazier, a second man followed him from the trap. They caught the nearest girl—I bit my lips, tasted blood. I heard that girl scream. When I opened my eyes, she was cowering, sobbing, and a small red 3 had been burned upon her back!

My brain fought on for reason, stood stark still when Sue's turn came. Her scream ... her fair flesh branded. God, I almost fainted—but frantic fingers had found the knife, opened it. My hands were free!

A warning bell sounded and all eyes again were on the racetrack. The hooded man jammed home a switch. Snaking neon, cries, greedy eyes—all the madness reenacted as the race with death once more began. My hands were like streaking light, slashing at the ankle ropes, up then for the automatic. Once grasping it, strength welled within me.

Caution now? Caution at this time would spell death! I shot squarely for that hood. A neat round hole appeared at ear level. The man fell, I gained the bakelite board and pulled the switch, before anyone realized what had happened. Beneath me Sue's voice cried: "Larry! Oh, God—Larry!"

There were at least four more attendants scattered over the balcony, plus the "Head" and Olga. Two of the former, nearby, leaped for me. I shot twice more, and strangely I was never calmer in my life. However small the caliber of my automatic, those men dropped!

The Head roared, "Back! Get guns!" I vaulted the rail, dropped fifteen feet into the maze. The Head's cry pounded through me. They, momentarily at least, were without weapons!

From within the maze, its diabolical ramifications were blinding, unknown. But I'd seen it from above. I hit the floor, knowing exactly where Sue crouched. The knife ripped velvet drapes until I reached her side.

"The switch!" rang a frenzied order.

I caught Sue up, whirled as light leaped around me. The first mild voltage tore through my tingling body, and I remembered that blazing blue ball. Knew it was even now on its mad way to

overtake us.

One breathless leap carried me to the maze's outer edge—barely in time. Behind, three girls I could not aid screamed shrilly, instantly aflame. One leap ... and one quick look. The Head had his back turned, was jerking a fire-ax from the wall. The one stairway up, on his side, was still free. The other way, the other stairs ... men were pouncing down the steps, armed men, their guns spitting lead.

Something clicked abruptly in my mind. Fire-ax ... a floor charged with electricity ... and I still carried the vial of ethyl chloride I'd found at Sue's abandoned coupe! Ethyl chloride, an anesthetic—but inflammable, too, and explosive!

The knife went crosswise to my mouth; left hand, free, found the vial. I threw it, dropped with Sue to the floor as a roar shook the walls. Sheeted flame darted up from the velvet drapes, flame that eagerly caught dry, aged wood. The men coming toward us were cut off. But Sue, I saw then with despair, had fainted.

Somehow I got her to my shoulders, staggered for the other stairs, gun ready. Half way up I saw the Head, Olga behind him screaming. The Head's lips were drawn back in a hideous grin. He was swinging the fire-ax, ready to throw it!

I shot, a snap aim, knew the bullet was too low. But it caught his leg, turned him before he could cast his weapon. I shot again, missed him completely, and Olga's bosom showed a spot of red. She disappeared from view, and for the third time I pulled that trigger.

The gun jammed. I threw it, but the Head, on hands and knees, was crawling towards us, laughing! The mask had slipped from his contorted face. The Head was Lawyer Braxton, Sue's employer!

WITH Sue unconscious, no gun; only the knife between my teeth left me; it was suicide to try to pass him, gain the door off the balcony, try then to get through to the outside and freedom. I'd known that all along, mentally provided for it. Even with the balcony was the steel ladder leading to the roof. I lurched for it, began climbing, gained a half dozen rungs as Braxton reached it also. Braxton still had his ax.

"You can't make it, Quinn," he grated. "The roof trap doesn't open easily. You and the girl must die. Only you two are left who know me. Quinn, you know I'll reach you, don't you?"

I knew it, dully, agonizingly. I knew I had to

use one arm to hold Sue; the other to hold myself. I could kick at him as he drew closer, but he could remain out of reach of my feet and still swing his ax. He could sever my feet, drop us both into the inferno already two stories down.

The areaway, now, to the very roof, was painted red. Smoke came in waves, a blinding, choking fog. And between its hot gusts, inescapable as eternity, indomitable as the wind, was the livid face of Braxton, pressing ever closer. I felt Sue's body stir, heard her moan, and through teeth gritted on the knife, my own voice cut into the crackling flames.

"Sue—Sue, you've got to listen!"

She said weakly: "Larry—?"

"Don't talk—listen! Can you hold on to my neck? Have you the strength?"

She must have looked below, for she gasped, and her naked body stiffened.

"Sue, help me!" I cried, and felt her arms around my neck. They tightened!

I reached up for the roof trap door, the hasp—rusted. The door wouldn't open.

Braxton's voice screamed: "You're cornered, Quinn! I've got you!"

There was nothing to do but dare to release Sue, dare the test of her failing strength. It was that or death for us both. She gasped again, hung on, and my one hand, thus freed, caught at the knife between my teeth. I threw it, and we were so close to Braxton's upturned face I couldn't miss. The ax brushed my trousers, fell away as a red blob appeared where Braxton's eyes had been before.

One dazed, groping hand clutched at air. The

writhing face swayed, fell. Flames seemed to rise up for his hurtling body, eager to clutch him to their burning bosom.

Seconds later I had the trap door open, clambered with Sue upon the roof, and our lungs gulped the cold clean air.

I wrapped her in my coat, held her shivering body close. She began to sob. "Breezy, the woman, Olga, came to Braxton's office this afternoon. I went into his private office unexpectedly while they were talking about tonight. I overheard ... things that worried me, something about the Hideaway Club and missing girls. So I phoned you. But Braxton was suspicious, not sure how much I'd overheard, and coming to meet you I realized I was followed. It didn't seem possible anything could happen to me so close to Police Headquarters. Besides, I didn't yet realize they were actually murderers, so I parked, and then—"

"It's over now, darling,"! said gently.

"But it isn't! We're still trapped. They'll shoot us—listen!"

SCREAMS and shots came from below. I said: "It is over. You see Breezy always plays for keeps. We couldn't raid the club without proof, but I told Conners to put a cordon around the place, and if I wasn't out by midnight to tear it apart.

"Honey, does a guy like me rate a kiss?"

I did.

"And a new answer to my perpetual proposals?"

"No!" Sue said. "That is," she smiled, then, "I mean maybe."