

# Death Dummy

by **Belton O. Buck**

*It was a strange means by which killer and victim seemed to disappear into thin air.*

PATROLMAN PAT GANNISON hunched up his big shoulders and veered in closer to the cold brick wall of the factory building. On cold nights like this, Pat envied the guy with the indoor job. Like the headquarters men—that snooty Inspector Gordon, for example. Or even the night watchman at the Royal Marine Products Corporation, right here in this big building. Not that a soft snap like that offered much of a future. But flatfooting on a lonely factory beat didn't either, when nothing ever happened to give a guy a break.

Mechanically, Pat glanced at his watch, then at the light from the street-level window up ahead. That crabby old laboratory guy was working late again. Pulling down a pile of jack for tinkering all hours of the night with the fiber stuff that went into Royal Life Preservers. Howard Latting, the Royal outfit's big shot, would be working at it, too—that was his coupe at the curb. Well, it was warm in there, anyhow. Pat heaved a frosty sigh, then suddenly stiffened.

The door up ahead was opening. A man's head and shoulders appeared. The man looked down the wet street, then back toward Pat. At the sight of the patrolman he stepped quickly to the sidewalk and shouted.

"Officer! Hurry! I need help!"

Gannison reached for his flashlight, double-timing it up to the doorway. He peered closely into the pale, frightened face of the other man.

"Yeah, Mr. Latting. What seems to be the trouble?"

The President of the Royal

Corporation was perspiring, in spite of the cold. "Plenty!" he panted.

Pat leaped through the doorway, then stopped in his tracks at the sight of the prone body on the floor. As he knelt, he heard Latting's voice.

"It's Ralph Parkin, officer. Night watchman. Found him like that in the door of the laboratory. Nobody else around. I didn't know what to do."

Pat Gannison straightened up slowly. "Who slugged him, Mr. Latting?"

The Royal executive shook his bald head jerkily. "Don't know. But he'll be able to tell us as soon as he comes to."

Patrolman Gannison's expression was grim. "No, Mr., Latting," he stated quietly. "I don't think this man will ever tell anybody anything." He frowned. "They don't generally do much talking, with the back of their heads caved in. Parkin is dead, Mr. Latting. Where's your telephone?"

TEN minutes later, Patrolman Gannison quietly turned away from the other four men in the little Royal laboratory and looked curiously at the charts on the wall. It was getting on Pat's nerves, the way this Inspector "Blackjack" Gordon, from the detective bureau, kept barking questions, then wisely nodding his shaggy head, no matter what the answers were.

Gordon, as usual, was talking now.

"What's all this milkweed stuff around here?" he asked Latting.

Gannison turned. He had been wondering about that, too.

Howard Latting gestured nervously. Funny, Pat reflected, how this little guy's head kept bobbing and jerking around on his skinny neck.

"That's kapok," Latting said. "The fiber we use in our life preservers. Imported from Java. Six times as buoyant as cork, but a lot more expensive. Craig's been working on a process to cut our costs of treating it."

"Who's Craig?" Inspector Gordon demanded.

"Craig? Simon Craig. Our Director of Research. Eccentric chap. But certainly a genius." Latting frowned. "Craig was the only one in the building tonight, except the watchman and myself."

Gordon nodded wisely. "So? Then he's still bottled up. No rush. We got a man at every door, and he wouldn't have the chance of a snowball of sneaking out."

He pointed to the bulk under the blanket, over in the corner.

"This Craig guy have any reason for doing that?"

Pat Gannison, paying little attention to the conversation, was looking keenly around the little laboratory. Fluffy kapok fiber all over the place. Strips of colored canvas and samples of thread. Quilted vests that floated you in the water for hours, even days. Charts all over the walls and papers all over the desk. Life-size dummies wearing life-saver vests and hollow, adjustable heads like divers' helmets. Fantastic looking things. Pat's speculative eyes surveyed the short iron bars piled over there in the corner and labeled with poundage figures. Those would be used to weight down the dummies to the approximate poundage of a man. One of those weights, Pat conjectured, would make a swell weapon to smash a man's skull.

Howard Latting was talking again, in that curious, jerky manner.

"Simon Craig kill Parkin?" He stuttered again with his bald head. "Well, it's

possible, of course. Craig hated Parkin, I guess, as much as Parkin hated Craig. He swore that some night he'd—"

Latting broke off, mopping his forehead nervously. "You see, the watchman had orders to look in every department every hour. Well, Craig often worked with his door locked. Secretive sort of a chap. And bitter." Latting shivered. "Every time Parkin banged on his door, Craig had a fit. Still it wasn't the sort of a thing he'd kill a man about."

Pat Gannison, back by the desk, nodded to himself. Many a time, out there on the sidewalk, he had heard those two shouting angrily at each other.

Inspector Gordon looked sage. "Maybe not. Hey, dumbkopper!"

Pat Gannison turned slowly, flushing.

"What time was it when this thing broke? Or was you too dumb to even look at your watch?"

"Exactly six minutes past eleven, sir," Speaking to blustering Blackjack Gordon, Pat always surrounded that "sir" with a fringe of frost.

Gordon pondered that heavily, then turned to Howard Latting. "The trouble is, until the coroner gets here we can't tell how long this Parkin guy had been dead."

Pat Gannison spoke up unexpectedly. "Why don't you ask him, sir?"

Gordon wheeled angrily. "Hey, who asked you to butt in, flatfoot? And what do you mean, ask him? Hell, the guy's dead, ain't he?"

Gannison nodded, then quietly crossed the room and fumbled under the blanket. He rose and extended something to the inspector. "His punch clock, sir. Most watchmen carry 'em at their belts. It will tell you when and where he rung in last time."

Gordon's face clouded. Then he looked at the two other grinning headquarters men and shrugged lightly. "Exactly what I had in mind, copper."

He fumbled with the clock for a moment, then nodded his head. "Parkin's last call came from department sixteen, wherever that is. And here's something else. This guy rang in at eleven o'clock right on the dot."

**P**AT GANNISON'S drawling voice broke in again. "Parkin rang in, inspector? Or did the murderer ring in for him?"

"Listen, flattie," the inspector snarled. "I asked you to keep your trap shut, didn't I? One more crack out of you and I—"

Howard Latting jerked his head forward.

"It would have happened as suddenly as that," he interrupted thoughtfully. "Six minutes. I was working in my office upstairs. Heard a racket down here. Worse than usual. Lots of bad language. Only two other men in the building, as far as I knew. Craig, the laboratory man. And Parkin, the night watchman. Remembered bad blood between them. Ran down here. Found Parkin stretched out in the doorway. No sign of Craig. Ran to the door to call for help. Found this officer, outside. He phoned you. That's all."

Latting sank back into the chair, panting excitedly.

One of the other detectives spoke up thoughtfully. "Makes it look bad for Craig, all right, chief. Murder. And the guy's still loose in the building."

"Still loose," Howard Latting repeated, parrotlike. He shrank back deeper in the chair. "Lurking in the dark somewhere. And gentlemen, there never was a more dangerous man. Knows all the tricks. Chemicals. Explosives. And clever as the devil. Men, I warn you—Craig will get us before we get him!"

Pat looked at the skinny man thoughtfully. Latting was in a yellow funk. Completely unnerved.

Inspector Blackjack Gordon drew

himself up to his full height.

"Is that so? Well, don't you worry. We'll get him. And we'll get him alive. Come on, men. You, too, flatfoot. Where do we start, Mr. Latting?"

Unexpectedly, Pat Gannison spoke up again. He had been studying the correspondence on the missing Craig's desk.

"Start at department sixteen—if you're sure that's the last place the watchman rang in alive."

Gordon bristled, then stopped it short as he caught the amused glances of his two associates. "Of course that's where we start," he grunted. "But what's department sixteen, Mr. Latting?"

The neurotic executive rose to his feet, then sank back again. He was breathing hard.

"Sixteen is across the corridor. Craig's pet layout. He's got a built-in tank of water over there, Murky. Creepy." He pointed to the dummies with the grotesque helmets. "Puts his life-saver vests on those things, filled with his processed kapok. Weights them to around a hundred and eighty with those iron bars.

These vests turn a man over, the minute he hits the water. On his back, head up. Got to support him for so many hours, to meet government specifications. Craig's probably got half a dozen of them in there now, floating around under test."

Latting shivered, obviously afraid of anything that had to do with Craig.

"The damned room gives me the creeps," he chattered. "So does Craig." He glanced at the blanketed form of the watchman. "And so does everything else."

Gannison started to say something, saw Gordon glaring truculently, thought better of it and went back to his study of the littered desk.

Blackjack Gordon beckoned grimly to the other two detectives.

"Creepy, huh? Well, that's our meat.

Come on, you guys. If they got a government tie-up here, we got to get Craig before a Fed comes snooping around and shows us up. Lead the way, Mr. Latting. Come on, copper—if you're through reading that guy's mail.

**W**ITH Inspector Gordon in the van and Patrolman Gannison trailing, the five men tramped across the corridor and paused in front of the iron door to Simon Craig's experimental tank room. Pat Gannison was thinking hard. There was more to this than met the eye. True, a genius like this Craig guy was just the kind to fly into a rage and smack the watchman down for interrupting his work. But from what Pat had heard, Simon Craig was also the cool customer that would go right ahead with his work after he did it. Craig would scarcely go into hiding. There was something bigger than the death of a watchman.

Howard Latting's undisguised terror, for one thing. Latting certainly was deathly afraid of Craig. Why? There were other things, too, unnoticed by blustering Blackjack Gordon. Faint, watery tracks to the tank room door, now almost dried up. Had the murderer made his escape through that department? Was he still lurking somewhere in this eerie old factory? But any way Pat looked at it, the same old question bobbed up again and again:

*Why was Howard Latting so desperately afraid?*

Inspector Gordon had his gun out. "Darby," he barked, "you stand guard here in the hall. Nobody gets in or out, understand? All right, Mr. Latting—open that door!"

The life-preserver man shrank back, then seemed to pull himself together. But his hand was trembling as he fumbled with the knob and swung the door wide open.

Pat Gannison heard a startled gasp up front. In the light that filtered dimly into department sixteen, he saw Latting totter two

steps forward, then suddenly crumple to the floor. Had Pat heard the sodden impact of a blow? He couldn't be quite sure.

Pat's gun was out now. He was plunging through the group into the semi-darkness of that dank room. Was the murderer lurking there in the shadows?

Pat's foot struck Howard Latting's prone body and he hurtled headlong. Arms flailing, he struck the icy water. He gurgled down into the tank, then fought his way sputtering back to the surface. Something bulky and clammy brushed against his body. There was another man there in that tank! Pat reached up and over with his left arm, hampered by the draggy weight of his service uniform. His right hand clamped over his own left wrist, and he put every ounce of his strength into the grip. Bright lights flashed on in the room. Pat heard a concerted gasp, an excited shout, then Inspector Gordon's voice calling acidly.

"All right, clumsy. The necking party is over. You're more than a match for any dummy in that tank."

Gannison splashed over on his side, looked once and released his death gap. Hands reached out and helped him up to the edge of the tank. Pat flushed. He was wet, cold, thoroughly miserable. Shivering, he looked back into the murky water. There it was, a shell like a diver's helmet. An effigy, now without a head. One among half a dozen or more of Simon Craig's floating dummies.

"Proving," Gordon's voice snapped sarcastically, "that a dumb flatfoot feels most at home when he's all wet."

Pat flashed angrily, then bit his lip. He watched the detective help Howard Letting to his feat. The life preserver man was staggering, his palm held tight against the back of his head.

"Slugged, huh?" one of the men grunted. Gordon nodded absently, his eyes staring fixedly at the floor in the far corner of

the little room. He strode abruptly around the tank, stooped suddenly and picked up something that glittered in the light. Then he came back, pushed Gannison roughly aside, and held his hand in front of Howard Latting's pale face.

"Ever see these before, Mr. Letting?"

Latting stared and staggered back another step. The whites of his eyes were showing. From somewhere deep in his throat he forced out the words.

"Glasses. Spectacles. Gordon, those belonged to Simon Craig!"

Pat, forlornly cold and dripping, looked at the narrow staircase in the corner. He nodded slowly, thoughtfully. Gordon's reasoning, as far as it went, was right. With the corridor door guarded, there was no other possible way out of that room. Gannison's eyes resumed their moody study of the dummies in the tank.

Gordon was staring grimly at the staircase.

"We've got him trapped like a rat in a hole. Come on. You, too, Mr. Latting, if you're able to navigate." He flung a withering glance back over his shoulder. "You stay down here, Gannison. We're not going dummy hunting this time."

Left alone in that clammy room. Pat Gannison hunched up his shivering shoulders. Absently, he counted the dummies in the tank, checking from memory with the charts he had seen on the laboratory waft. One, two, three—Pat Gannison's breath whistled through his chattering teeth. No other way out, Blackjack Gordon had said. Right. But how about a hiding place for a cornered man? Pat sloshed his way over to the foot of the staircase and picked up a grappling hook. Intently he studied the figures in the tank. There! That one! Pat leaned far out over the dark water and reached out with the hook. There was a sudden noise on the staircase, then the sound

of a footfall. Pat straightened up slowly and half turned around. Something thumped hard against the back of his head. He felt himself pitching forward and shouted with all the breath in his lungs. Running feet were clattering across the floor above the tank room. The three men up there were coming down. Then, for the second time in ten minutes. Pat plunged into the cold water. And all the lights in the world went out at once.

PAT GANNISON sat up and coughed. How long he had been out, he did not know. The back of his head hurt; he touched it gingerly and withdrew his hand stained with diluted blood.

Gordon's voice was rasping in his ear. The inspector's face was purple with rage. "Of all the clumsy stunts, Gannison, I'd think one bath would be enough."

Pat sat up. Things were all out of focus. Cold water was dripping into his eyes. He peered into the tank, then turned his throbbing head to look about the room.

"Where," he croaked hoarsely, "is Howard Latting?"

Darby shook his head blankly. "He didn't pass me at the door." Inspector Gordon looked wildly around the room, then down at Gannison. Pat stared back, look for look.

"Craig finally got Latting," he stated quietly. "Just what I've been afraid of. Just what Latting was afraid of, too."

The sneer was gone out of Gordon's voice.

"Got him? Where is he? Where are they? Hell, Gannison, with us at the top of the stairs and Darby at the door there, not even a roach could have got out of this room."

Pat Gannison nodded silently, seriously.

Gordon looked at him keenly. "All right, Gannison. If this is a guessing game, I give up. Who slugged you? What do you

mean, Craig got Latting? How'd they get out? And where are they now?"

Gannison coughed liquidly, then spoke up again. "Simon Craig hit me, just as he must have hit the watchman. Then Craig slugged Latting, not three minutes ago. And he's still loose, inspector. How he got out, I don't know." Pat paused a moment. "Craig got away again. But Howard Latting is still in this room."

He pulled himself to his feet and pointed into the tank. "Fish out that second dummy over there!"

Gordon stared a moment, then full realization dawned upon him. He leaped for the grappling hook and bent over the water. Darby and the other detective came to his aid. They heaved; the figure swung up over the water and thudded to the floor. Gordon dropped to his knees, his stubby fingers busy with the dummy's ball-shaped mask.

"That," Pat Gannison said quietly, "will be Howard Latting, I think. Dead. Clever way to hide a victim. Fast, too. But Craig's a fast worker."

Inspector Gordon gave a final yank. The mask rolled grotesquely across the floor. Pat heard the inspector gasp. The other two men straightened up, their strained faces looking at him strangely. Something in their expressions caused Pat to leap across and look down.

There, staring upward out of sightless eyes, was the livid, bloated face of Simon Craig!

**B**LACKJACK GORDON'S face now was cloudy. His voice was ominously soft. "I don't have to remind you, Gannison, that this won't look so good in the reports. Howard Latting is gone. Where? Why? When? You'd have us believe he was killed by a man that's been dead for an hour and a half. Murdered by a corpse, eh?"

The inspector's voice grated savagely.

"I left you here, on duty, Gannison. Latting disappeared right under your nose. You've bungled everything—everything—from the time Latting called you in."

Pat Gannison's head was clearer now. He was thinking hard.

"If he had spent more time helping, instead of looking at those crazy charts," Detective Darby interjected, "we'd have this case on ice by now."

Something clicked in Patrolman Gannison's mind. Those charts!

He looked down into the water at those lifelike dummies, wrapped in Royal Life Preserver vests. Pat Gannison was beginning to understand.

Now Pat knew why that watchman had met his death. He knew the reason for Howard Latting's unholy fear. Why Latting had slumped to the floor, down and out, there at the door. Why Simon Craig had been murdered and hidden in that tank. Why there had been wet footprints in front of the corridor door. Pat even knew where Howard Latting was right now. The thing could never have happened any other way.

Pat turned to Inspector Gordon and spoke distinctly, respectfully, as every good cop should.

"It all fits together now, air. I think I can reconstruct the whole thing. *Latting* killed the watchman. *Latting* killed Simon Craig. And Latting tried very hard to kill me." He strode over and peered into the pool. "We were getting closer and closer. That's why Latting has been so nervous all night."

"But where," Gordon interrupted bluntly, "is Howard Latting now?"

Pat Gannison looked at Blackjack Gordon for a long, full minute. Then, without warning and for the third time that night, he plunged in among the dummies in the tank!

But this time it was no lifeless fiber dummy whose neck Pat's brawny arm encircled. It was a writhing, threshing man.

Gannison towed his captive to the edge of the tank; the three detectives lifted him out bodily. Gordon jerked off the helmet, whistled, then straightened up.

“My apologies, Gannison,” he said quietly. “Hold still, Latting. Two murders in one night are more than enough.”

“The trouble,” Gannison summed it up tersely, “began with Craig’s discovery of a cheaper way to process this kapok stuff they use in Royal Life Preservers. He could practically put Latting out of business that way. Well, something had to crack. The showdown was bound to come. And it did: Tonight. Craig may have started the fight, but Latting finished it. The watchman caught him at it, of course. So Latting had to finish the watchman, too.”

It was Darby who interrupted.

“So,” he said thoughtfully, “that left Latting with two stiffs on his hands.”

“Exactly. The best he could do, with that little coupe of his, was to cart them away one at a time, Latting is smart. He put a dummy outfit on one of them—it happened to be Craig—and dumped him into the tank where nobody would notice. There was a splash; I happened to notice wet tracks over there outside the door. Latting started out with the watchman’s body, intending to come back

and get Craig next trip. But he happened to run into me outside.”

Inspector Gordon was listening intently, his manner less arrogant now. “Gannison,” he said, “I think our pal Latting here might like to know what put you next to the body being in the tank.”

Pat Gannison shrugged, then grinned. “Dumbkopper luck, inspector. I thought Simon Craig was still loose in the factory, same as you did. Latting fooled us all with that fake slugging act a while ago, too. But those charts across the hall showed a record of only six dummies under test. I happened to notice there were seven in the tank. Latting came back down here when he saw me fishing around. He almost made me the eighth dummy, too.

“Then Latting had to hide in a hurry. The room was plugged up tight. He put on a vest and a mask. Quick change stuff. Plenty of air—and those things hold your head above water for days.”

Gannison’s expression was innocent of guile. “The whole thing was, inspector, there were too many dummies around.”

Blackjack Gordon looked at Pat suspiciously, then finally decided to let that pass.