



Casque of Death

by Clifford D. Clevenger

Eternity was a split-second to Detective Nick Chant when the arms of the dim past combated the murder method of a twentieth Century assassin.



A SMALL CROWD waited on the platform at Clyde, but no brass bands were playing and no banners waving when I stepped off the train. Instead, a weary anxious look awaited me, and after appraising me seemed to say hopelessly: "What can he do?"

And I thought the same after a little time. But Ben Hedley came running to meet me and shook my hand and patted me on the back.

"Why, Nick Chant, you old rascal, you're looking even better than you did on that Dryden Case."

Ben is my one great admirer. "I want you to meet the local law celebrities," he added and led me over to where they stood in a small group. I shook hands with Sheriff Haddon, Mayor Dwight, and a list of lesser lights.

"If you're half as good as Ben claims," the sheriff said with a questioning glint in his eye, "you'll have this thing solved by night."

"I wish I were half as good," I said. No one likes to have an outsider barging in on his

case, but Ben had insisted and Ben has quite a bit of influence around Clyde.

"I want Nick to meet my sister and uncle and then we'll be over to discuss this thing," Ben said and led me toward a large open roadster waiting by the platform.

Ben's sister, Nancy, had the Hedley chin, but that was as far as the resemblance went. Where Ben was hale and hearty, Nancy was aloof. Not a snobbish aloofness, but the real thing, high-minded and all that. Ben's hair was coarse and dark; Nancy's was a soft blonde mistiness that made you think of moonlight on water and soft breezes.

But why go on? You guessed it. I fell for Nancy, and what I mean, I fell hard. But I knew she was not for me. Here I was just a plain private dick. Sure, I was making plenty of jack. I'd got a lucky break on the Dryden Case and picked up plenty of publicity along with the twenty-grand reward, but—

A hooded bird sat on a rest at Nancy's shoulder. "This a pet of yours?" I asked to keep the conversation going.

"That's Gurud, one of Uncle Ranee's falcons," Nancy explained. Uncle Ranee Murdeau sat beside Nancy in the car. "Uncle trains falcons and ships them to people all over the world. He thinks falconry the greatest sport of all time."

"Any sport which has survived for five thousand years is great," Murdeau declared.

He spoke with but the slightest accent. I remembered now Ben's saying Murdeau had married his father's young sister and came to this country to live, even staying here after his wife's death.

I STARTED to say something, but a car roared around the station, stopped with a jerk, and a young man catapulted out. He was in shirt-sleeves, hatless, with dust clinging to his sweaty face which seemed pale under the tan.

"Sheriff!" he shouted. "Dick Bluedike's murdered in that field beyond Smith's Ford. I

found his body. It's—it's all blood. I—I—" He grabbed the car door for support.

"The third one in a week," Ben cried.

"Come on, Chant!" Haddon shouted, and for the first time seemed glad to have me there. We piled into cars, roared away. The pale young man sat between Haddon and myself.

"Is it same as the others, Benton?" Sheriff Haddon asked the pale young man.

"Yeah," Benton gasped, and went on muttering. "I parked my car and started across the field to take a swim in the hole below the ford. There was his body right out in the middle of the field. Cut all over the head and chest, and blood flowing all over the place. Quarts of it."

"Ben," Haddon called to Hedley who sat in the front seat. "Didn't Bluedike work for you sometimes?"

"Not for me," Ben answered, "for Uncle Ranee. Bluedike was good with animals, and Ranee like his help with the birds. But Ranee had to get rid of him."

"Why?" I asked.

"Bluedike had a way with the girls," Ben explained. "He was always getting in fights with other fellows for taking their girls. Never seemed interested in a girl unless she was going steady. When he started to shine up to the chauffeur's wife, Ranee fired him."

Ben was silent for a moment and then turned toward us again. "By the way, Benton, didn't you have a fight with Bluedike last spring over that little redhead who works at Smith's?"

"I gave him a good thrashing," Benton declared, but suddenly turned even paler. "But you don't think—" He turned to Haddon pleadingly. "I tell you sheriff, I never had a thing to do with it. I don't carry a razor. I—I—I—"

"Maybe Bluedike was fooling around with your girl again," Ben suggested. "Why miss a good chance to get rid of him permanently with the blame on the unknown murderer?"

Benton gulped for air and passed out. I held him as we bumped through Smith's Ford. He was coming to as we stopped on a rise beyond the ford.

It was a lonely spot. The dirt road skirted one side of a sixty-acre alfalfa field and disappeared in wooded hills beyond. Timber along the creek enclosed two other sides of the field. Not a house or building was in sight.

We piled out of the cars. "Just a moment," I called loudly. "Sheriff Haddon and I will have a look first."

THEY OBEYED reluctantly, and I started across the field followed by Haddon. The alfalfa was ten inches high and showed our footmarks plainly. We approached to within ten feet of the corpse.

Bluedike's body was a bloody mass with deep gashes in the head and chest. He had struggled some. His arms and hands were also cut, but the grass was mashed down in only a small circle around the body. He had hardly moved from the spot in which the attack took place.

We circled the spot. Bluedike's trail led in from the north. "Where is Smith's house?" I asked.

"Just north of the creek beyond that hill," Haddon said.

We circled further. Benton's trail came in from the southwest. He'd walked in, stopped about ten feet from the body, and then ran back, for his steps going were twice as long as coming in.

"Benton's story holds," Haddon said. "The swimming hole is just around the bend, and this would be the shortest cut."

We approached the body. Bluedike had been dead for an hour or two. "How does this compare with the others?" I asked.

"About the same," Sheriff Haddon replied. "Last Saturday afternoon the first one occurred. A six-year-old girl was killed in an isolated field a couple of miles west of here. Tuesday morning it was a twelve-year-old

boy. And today, a week later it's a grown man."

"Did you have a chance to check footmarks in those other cases, sheriff?"

"They were in mowed fields."

I looked around at the heavy timber along the creek and on the hills. "But why kill people out in open fields when all this cover would be so much better a place for murder?"

"When you know the answer to that you'll know something," Haddon said. He looked back at the group waiting at the cars. "Benton couldn't have killed the little girl for he played in the ball game at the county fair Saturday afternoon. I'll have to check up on him for last Tuesday."

"It could have given him the idea," I said.

"That's what Ben thinks," Haddon remarked, and looked at me closely.

There was nothing more here, so Ben drove me to his uncle's home. Nancy and he usually stayed there during the summers.

Ranee Murdeau's place was a large French chateau built on a high bluff overlooking the valley. It was furnished with period stuff. Suits of armor stood in the halls; swords and shields hung on the walls. Ranee Murdeau had a suit of armor apart explaining it to Nancy when we arrived.

He obviously lived in a sort of dream world of chivalry, knights in armor, and falconry. He'd married money when he married Ben and Nancy's aunt, and lived the life of a European country gentleman. But Ben had told me Murdeau had lost quite a bit in foreign exchange fluctuations lately and had borrowed from him.

Nancy greeted us with her lovely smile. "Do you have any clues, Mr. Chant?" she asked.

"Hardly time for that yet," I said.

BEN HAD an errand in the village and drove away. Murdeau went to look after his birds. I had a large-scale map of the district on which Haddon had marked the

scenes of the three murders.

I walked out on the terrace to study it. But the map didn't make any more sense than the murders. Three people killed, and no connection between them. It looked like the work of a maniac.

I looked out over the valley. It was a lovely place even late in the evening. I didn't blame Murdeau for liking it.

I heard the phone ring, and distant voices murmuring. A minute later a car roared in front of the chateau, and I stepped to the end of the terrace. Nancy, her soft blonde hair flying in the wind, was driving at breakneck speed down the hill.

She didn't take the road leading to the village, but instead took a fork going west. I was alarmed. Suddenly I could see her lying in a field with deep gashes on her face and throat.

I ran into the house, shouted for the maid. "Where did Miss Hedley go?" I demanded.

"I don't know, sir. There was a phone call."

"Who was it from?"

The girl shook her head.

I grabbed the phone, demanded of central who had just called. She did not know, was sure there had been no call. I cursed all phone girls. I was frantic. I ran out into the hall stumbled over the suit of armor Murdeau had apart, the one he was showing to Nancy.

Suddenly my first idea on the case came. I grabbed up the helmet—one of the kind that had steel mail hanging from the headpiece, covering the shoulders—and ran outside. A car stood there with the key in ignition lock. I leaped in, started the engine and roared away after Nancy. She was out of sight, but I followed the dust cloud left by her car. It was getting dark from low lying clouds in the west hiding the sun. I skidded around corners, swung off the road on curves, but I knew I was gaining on Nancy. The dust was less settled. And then I saw her car on a hill a mile ahead.

I blasted the horn, but apparently she didn't hear me. Her ear disappeared over the hill. I jammed the accelerator to the floor, roared up over the hill, came to a stop with wildly screeching brakes on the other side.

Nancy's car was parked beside an open field. I grabbed the helmet, leaped out, climbed on top of the fence.

Nancy was running across the field. Suddenly she stopped as though bewildered.

"Nancy!" I called, waving the helmet. She turned. "Lie down where you are! Keep perfectly still!" I shouted at the top of my voice.

I leaped off the fence, ran toward her, fitting the helmet on my head as I ran. "It's Nick Chant!" I screamed. "For heaven's sake, Nancy, lie down. Keep still!"

The clouds in the west parted. A shaft of sunlight suddenly illuminated the field, striking Nancy's white dress, outlining her brilliantly against the dull green of the field.

I had my coat off now, waving it, screaming at the top of my voice, running like a madman toward her. She was bewildered, apparently suspecting me of being the murdering maniac who had already butchered three people, but still recognizing my voice.

But she turned and ran when I was still a hundred feet from her. She leaped into some low brush close by and disappeared. I felt better then. I slowed down.

And then it struck me from behind. I heard sharp steel scratching on the helmet, trying to penetrate the steel mail around my throat. I had the visor closed, which saved my face from the savage thrusts, but they scraped portions of my arms, just below the shoulders, where the steel mail did not protect me. I wrapped my coat about my arms, struck upward over my head, but was only punished more severely.

I sagged down, lay still under the terrible lashing. It stopped. I panted in exhaustion for several minutes, looked up cautiously for the first time.

My attacker was gone. It was almost dark now. I had not seen my attacker, but I was sure now in my own mind. I stood up, removed the helmet, slipped on my coat to cover the blood running from gashes on my shoulders.

I walked toward the brush where Nancy had disappeared.

"Nancy," I called. "Are you all right? Nancy, where are you? It's Nick Chant."

"Over here, Mr. Chant!" Nancy called. "Was that you in that terrible helmet?"

"It was me, but it's not a terrible helmet, Nancy. It saved my life."

SHE CAME out of the brush a hundred feet away, looked at the bloody helmet marked with shiny scars, shuddered. "You're cut on the shoulders," she cried. "I can see blood through your coat."

"It's nothing," I said with a gesture. "Who called you and asked you to come down here?"

"Why, Ben," she said in surprise at the question. "He said he had a new angle and needed my help, that I mustn't tell anyone about it."

I was already leading the way back to the cars. "Ben changed his plans and called again just after you left," I lied cheerfully. "You're to drive as fast as you can to the sheriff, have him come out to Murdeau's place and see me at once. And this is important, Nancy. Tell him not to let you out of his sight till he sees me."

"Shall I tell him about this attempt to kill you?"

"Yes," I said grimly. "Tell him all about it."

Nancy roared away toward Clyde, and I turned back toward the chateau. But I didn't drive up to the front. I turned off the road half a mile away and hiked overland, coming up on the rear of the buildings. There were a couple of things I wanted to look at before Haddon arrived.

The first building I came to was large, about fifty by a hundred feet and thirty feet high. It was built of flimsy material and I could see light through cracks. I tried to look through them, but found it impossible. I moved cautiously along the wall till I found a door.

It was unlocked. I opened it, slipped inside, let it close gently behind me. The lock clicked, a bright light flashed on. A door clicked on the other side of the building, a sardonic laugh sounded outside.

I stood in fright. High above my head at the other end of the building perched a vicious-looking bird. A leather harness was fastened to its head, and this harness held glistening steel blades which protruded out along its beak for a few inches. On its feet were also strapped shining steel blades which made of its talons razor-sharp cutting edges.

This was the murderer, the thing which had killed three people in a week and just missed killing me because of the helmet. My wild guess had had some basis of fact. But I didn't have the helmet now. And if I moved, the falcon would strike.

The bird eyed me but did not move. In its talons was some sort of food, which it was in the act of devouring. It gulped the remainder in a few mouthfuls, eyed me again.

There was no place to hide. The real murderer, the trainer of this huge falcon, had laid this trap for me, figuring I would come here to investigate after the happenings in the meadow where I had saved Nancy Hedley's life. I had the complete solution to the case, but it didn't do me any good—not unless I could kill the kill-trained falcon. I reached under my armpit for my revolver.

The bird rose, flew toward me. I stood rigid, not even letting my eyes move. It's no easy thing to shoot a swooping bird, and if it proceeded slowly the better for me. It circled, started toward the other end.

My eyes picked out a shelf beside me. On it lay what must have been falcon food, I

thought.

Quickly I picked some up, hurled it high into the air as the huge falcon wheeled. The bird swooped, caught the food deftly in mid-air, flew to its perch to devour it. I breathed easier. That was the moment I needed to take aim.

I brought up my revolver, fired. I must have missed, because the falcon flapped its wings, rose from its perch and headed straight at me, peeking at my shoulders, my throat.

I emptied my gun, quickly pointing the weapon straight at the bird. I don't know which shot took effect, but the falcon shrilled horribly, circled up and around, coming to rest finally almost at my feet.

Now I had to get out, and the doors were locked. I kicked viciously at the wall boards beside me. It didn't take long to get one loose and squeeze through the narrow opening.

I WAS SMEARED with blood all over. I tore off my coat, found a linen duster hanging on a peg outside the building. I donned it, ran toward the house. Cars were stopping in front now. But I didn't go around.

I slipped into the basement and found what I wanted before going upstairs. I stopped in the dark hall where I could see into the living room.

Sheriff Haddon and three deputies were there. So was Nancy Hedley. Murdeau, smoking a pipe, stood with his back to the fireplace.

"I don't know where the detective is," he was telling Haddon. "The maid said Mr. Chant got mighty angry about a telephone call to Nancy and dashed out of the house. I haven't seen him since."

"The call was from Ben," Nancy said. "He wanted me to meet him at—"

"Where's Ben?" Haddon cut in. "We want to see him, too."

"I haven't seen him since he brought Chant here late this afternoon. He left to do an errand in Clyde."

"He hasn't been in Clyde," Haddon declared.

Murdeau shrugged his shoulders, went on smoking.

I walked into the room. Murdeau looked up. "Here's your detective now, Haddon." Murdeau knocked the ashes from his pipe and started across the room. "Maybe he can answer your questions."

"Wait a minute." I called to Murdeau, but he didn't stop. "Don't let him get away," I cried.

Murdeau turned quickly in the hall door, a revolver in his hand. "Don't move! I'll kill the first person who tries to stop me." He motioned with the gun. "Hands up and face the wall."

One of the deputies foolishly reached for his gun and Murdeau shot him. I had my hands in the air—my gun was empty, useless. But I was beside the wall where crossed daggers hung. I turned toward the wall in such a way that I could still see the room.

Murdeau disarmed Haddon and the other two deputies, throwing their guns out the open French doors. You could hear them land on the cliff a hundred feet down.

I twisted the dagger loose, hurled it at Murdeau. My aim wasn't so good. The hilt hit his elbow. He howled, dropped the gun. Haddon leaped for it. Murdeau kicked him in the face. Haddon rolled over, knocked out. A deputy now leaped for it. But Murdeau kicked the gun when he saw he couldn't get it. It flew out the French doors and disappeared.

Murdeau jerked a sword and dagger from the wall, faced us in fencing style. One of the deputies leaped in with a chair, but Murdeau sidestepped the rush, and slashed the deputy in the shoulder.

I jerked a sword and shield from the wall and advanced toward Murdeau. I didn't know anything about fencing, but I'd been in plenty of rough and tumbles. I hurled the shield at his legs when I got close.

He tried to leap back, got his feet tangled.

I threw the sword at him. A deputy hurled a chair. Haddon rolled into him, and Murdeau stumbled backwards. We had him pinioned in no time.

"So it's Murdeau," Haddon gasped.
"How'd he do it?"

"With a falcon," I said.

"Those little birds couldn't hurt anyone."

"It could," I said, "if it's equipped with razor-edged blades and is trained to slash at throats. The falcon he used has steel spikes on its beak and talons." I described the bird.

"Murdeau must have trained it to attack people—to go for the throat. He tried it first on a child, then on a large boy, and finally on a grown man, Bluedike. Bluedike also worked here, might have known more than was good for him about the whole thing."

"Where's Ben?" Nancy asked anxiously, but when I didn't answer quickly, guessed the

truth, that poor Ben had met his death the same as the other three. We found his body the next morning. . . . I put an arm around her shoulder.

"And it was me he tried to kill this afternoon?" she asked. I nodded. "But what about the phone call from Ben?"

"It wasn't Ben," I said. "Murdeau had the line tapped with a phone set in the basement. He called you, imitating Ben's voice, luring you to the trap." She sobbed on my shoulder.

"Why did he do it?" from Haddon.

"Money," I said. "He was about wiped out, had a large loan from Ben. He would inherit all the Hedley money with Ben and Nancy out of the way. There are no other heirs."

"He's more of a buzzard than a falcon," Haddon said and dragged Murdeau away.