

The Nudist Gym Death Riddle

By JACK GRAY



"You killed this dame!" the Lieutenant snapped through clenched teeth.

Ace Lansing, private investigator, goes nudist to solve this thrilling mystery of a double death!

THE telephone in the Lansing Detective Agency shrilled commandingly, shattering the late afternoon silence of the little office with its strident clatter. Stifling a yawn, Ace Lansing put down the Chronicle pink sheet, lifted the French phone from its cradle and answered with a lazy, "Yeah?"

"That you, Ace?" came a voice over the wire. Greeted with another languid, "Yeah," the voice went on in curt, clipped accents.

"This is Sam Andrews at the Chronicle. I gotta job for you!"

Lansing swung upright in his swivel chair, dropped his feet from the cigarette-scarred oak desk and glanced toward the luscious redhead who was displaying a generous expanse of silk-sheathed leg at the other desk. As Ace gave her an exaggerated wink she lifted the extension phone, placed the receiver to her ear.

"I want the dope on a nudist racket that's been playing high, wide and naked in this man's town," Andrews went on. "A lug named Lestro—he's some kind of Spik—is running a gyp nudist gym on the South Side, on Eighty-ninth just off the Avenue. Makes a play for business and

professional men. Has plenty dames in the house, day and night. There's talk of blackmail. Can you hit it?"

"I'm your monkey, Sam," Ace Lansing grinned. "What's the play?"

"You join the club, or whatever it is. Get the inside. This rag is going after the administration—but that's on the QT. I want evidence on this Lestro mug—stuff that will stand in court. Find who's backing him, how the racket works. The sky's the limit. Get going, kid, and report as soon as you have anything. Okay?"

"Okay, Sam. I'm practically undressed."

Ace was grinning as he turned from the phone.

"Well, sweetheart," he addressed Mary Gaynes, "that guy has ideas. Sam Andrews wants I should join a nudist club. Like to come along?"

"Nix, mug," the red-haired assistant grimaced. "I'm not above doing a strip act for the sake of a wealthy client who wants divorce evidence, but when it comes to displaying my feminine charms to a bunch of potbellied pappies who are nudists for what they can see, I draw the G-string. I'll stick and answer the phone."

"Okay, kid, but you'll be missing something. It

isn't every young gal who gets an invitation to lamp the famous Ace Lansing in the altogether."

And Ace, as a parting gesture, walked across the room, took the redhead in his arms and pulled her close. The nearness of her intoxicated him, as it always did. He could feel the round firmness of her pert young breasts as they crushed against him, could sense the quickened beat of her heart as she raised her lips to his. Eagerly he pressed those ripe, moist lips, crushing her closer, ever closer, to him.

Little shivers of delight, of ecstasy, ran up and down his spine. His hands strayed down her straight young back, caressed her smooth, rounded thighs.

Suddenly she pushed him away, drew beyond the reach of those exploring hands.

"That's all for you, mug," she smiled, straightening her hair and patting her dress back in shape. "Now it's you that's getting ideas. If I'm not mistaken, you're supposed to be on your way right now to a nudist joint on the South Side to do a job for Sam Andrews. Playtime's over, and if you expect us to eat in the next few days I'd suggest you get going."

"Okay, sweetheart. I'll phone you at nine tonight."

Ace grabbed his hat and topcoat, made a face at his luscious assistant and swung out the door.

At the corner he hesitated at a newsstand as he caught a glimpse of a flaming headline in the late edition of the Gazette, chief rival and sworn enemy of the paper on which Andrews cracked the whip as city editor. He grabbed the green sheet with its vivid red streamer:

MORTON ORDERS VICE CLEANUP!

Stuffing the paper in his pocket, Ace Lansing rounded the corner to a parking lot. Seated in his trim coupe, he pulled out the Gazette and gave page one a quick once-over. The lead story, trailing under lurid headlines beneath the screaming banner, declared that Police Commissioner Morton was on the warpath!

In the middle of the sheet was a box containing the Commissioner's own statement:

"Organized vice must go!" the statement thundered. "There can be no compromise with the lecherous vultures of the underworld who, by

preying on our girls and young women, are blackening the name of our fair city. The Vice Squad, under Lieutenant Swanson, is charged with the duty of cleaning out the brothels, the houses of assignation, and every other den of vice in the metropolis. I demand action!"

"Whoops!" Ace chuckled to himself. "That puts my old pal, Swanson, on the spot. That dumb dick's clock would stop if he ran into anything more vicious than a two-bit streetwalker. I got a hunch the old town's due to see some fun!"

BACKING his car from its stall, he swung into the Avenue. He turned the picture over in his mind as he wheeled toward the South Side.

"A thin dime gets you a sawbuck that Sam Andrews smells a mouse in this cleanup order," Ace Lansing told himself. "The Gazette spreads the Commissioner's stuff all over the page in studhorse type. The Gazette helped appoint Morton, of course. But Sam's rag doesn't give this cleanup thing more than a few paragraphs. Something's up, Ace, old sock, and you're gonna have a front row seat. I've got one of my hunches . . . I wonder where in hell a nudist carries his gun?"

Threading his way through the heavy afternoon traffic, the detective parked his car on the Avenue, near Eighty-ninth.

As he sauntered down the street he caught a glimpse of a trim figure just ahead in the gathering gloom. The girl, a striking blonde, hesitated before a lingerie shop, inspecting the display of filmy underthings in the window.

Ace stopped beside her, glanced sharply at the full-bosomed loveliness revealed by the stylish coat which fell away from her throat. Touching his hat, he spoke.

"Pardon me, Miss, but can you tell me where Lestro's gymnasium is located?"

The blonde faced him, smiling.

"I can," she said. "Why?"

"Well, it's like this. I'm one of these nudists. My home's in Indiana. I belong to a summer colony out there. I just came to town and heard that Lestro runs a nice indoor spot during the winter season. I thought I'd like to join."

"That's fine," the blonde vision replied with breathtaking swiftness. "I'm a member myself. I'll take you in and introduce you. I'm June Marson."

"My name's John Butler," Ace said, bowing.

Together they walked down the street. Arriving at a doorway, June guided her companion into a long, dark entrance-way. Shortly they were before a door over which a single light glowed dimly. The girl produced a key.



Lansing's trained senses caught a tiny click from the direction of the door.

As they entered, Ace Lansing took in the small, plainly furnished anteroom. Beyond, he caught a glimpse of a typical gymnasium where the flash of nude bodies greeted him.

June Marson removed her hat and coat, loosened the front of her dress to reveal the fullness of her breasts and the inviting promise of the warm valley between them. She sat down at a desk.

"You'd better fill out this application," she told Ace, pushing a card toward him. Then, as he raised questioning eyebrows, she added: "You see, I'm Lestro's secretary."

Ace signed the card, giving the borrowed name a final flourish, and paid the entrance fee. As she took the card, June Marson flashed him a smile. He was convinced he was going to enjoy this strange assignment.

June led him swiftly to the interior of the place. She showed him a tiny dressing room, fitted with locker, chair and day-bed, which he was to use. She gave him a key to the locker and told him the evening class would start in thirty minutes.

"Get out of your clothes," she directed. "Here's a mask you can wear in class—all the boys use them. I'll be back in no time to show you the ropes." She smiled again, a friendly smile of

promise.

Ace was new at the nudist racket, but he lost no time removing his clothing. He patted his .38 with a feeling of regret as he stored it away in the locker. Then, deciding to make the plunge, he slipped on the black domino and stepped out of the dressing room into the corridor.

The magnificent muscles of his legs and torso rippled smoothly as he walked out to meet the blonde June. He was hardly prepared for the breathtaking sight that greeted him as she approached.

Gracefully, her every movement a picture of motion's poetry, she strode down the hall. She had slipped out of her clothes, had thrown a lovely jade green shawl—hardly more than a scarf—about her shoulders. It revealed much more than it concealed.

And June, too, accustomed as she was to seeing masculinity unadorned, was not oblivious to the manly physique of the new club member.

"How do you like it?" she asked simply.

Ace gave her another quick once-over with his eyes, grinned. "Lady, I think it's swell!"

THE girl came closer, looking up into his face with something akin to admiration. It was too much for Lansing. It would have been too much for any man who wasn't paralyzed.

Reaching out quickly, he crushed her to him, their bare flesh merging, in an ecstasy of emotion. Avidly she gave him her lips, the full, promising lips of one who knows life's secrets and revels in that knowledge. Her active, exploring tongue darted out to contact his as both trembled with the excitement of their sudden contact.

Blindly, so great was the wave of passion that engulfed him, Ace Lansing led the girl back to the tiny cubicle which was his dressing room. She followed eagerly, clinging tight to him as though loathe to lose that thrilling contact. Together, they stared at each other with wide-open eyes. June's shawl slipped from her shoulders.

Lansing's hands, unable to leave this blonde vision alone, tore off the domino which masked him. He reached out to caress her breasts, to cup the lush mounds with their glowing coral buds. His hands slipped lingeringly down to her rounded thighs, stroked her legs, retraced their course.

As though fired by the warmth of those possessive palms, June sought his lips once more, massaged the rippling muscles of his back and

crushed herself closer to him. At that moment his trained senses, functioning subconsciously despite the stark passion that enveloped him, caught a tiny *click* from the direction of the door. There was a slight movement of the curtain. But, he thought, what the hell . . .

And then, the silence of the little dressing room, charged with the electric thrill of their mutual attraction, suddenly was broken by the muffled clanging of a gong.

“That’s class time,” she whispered, catching up her shawl. “Lestro will be looking for me. Come on.”

And Ace Lansing, the gymnasium’s newest convert to nudism, slipped on his mask. He followed the blonde vision out into the corridor, onto the gym floor. What a girl she was! His mind wandered back to that thrilling dressing room episode as he watched her stride across the room, every movement a picture of grace and loveliness. He watched her take her place beside a hairy, black-browed man. *Lestro!* The mug’s dark eyes glowed as he nodded to June.

Everywhere he looked Ace Lansing saw middle-aged men, and some who were past middle age. Most of them had paunches, all of them had the glitter of anticipation in the avid eyes that gleamed through the slits in their black masks. As he viewed the scene he realized that June Marson, now partially hiding her physical beauty under the green shawl, was the only woman in the room!

“Something screwy here,” he told himself. “These lugs aren’t just interested in working off surplus poundage.”

Then he noted that the men, some forty or fifty of them, were lining up on one side of the gymnasium. Following suit, he picked a spot at the extreme end of the line, near a door.

Again the muffled gong sounded, a curtain swept aside. A dazzling line of pretty girls, *utterly devoid of clothing*, ran into the room! Ace Lansing had seen plenty of hot musical shows—he was a hound for burlesque—but never had he witnessed such a breath-stopping display of feminine pulchritude as this.

There were golden-haired girls, vivid brunettes, flashing redheads. And every one seemed to be a real beauty contest winner. There wasn’t a bad looker in the lot. Their amazing loveliness, their abundance of youth and vitality, showed in every movement of their white, firmly molded bodies.

As Ace edged nearer the door, the girls, like a well-trained ensemble, fell into position facing the long line of eager men. Simple dance steps, started in cadence with the modulated strains of a concealed orchestra, gave way to a wild, dervish sort of routine as the music became hotter, more barbaric.

Throwing themselves into the intoxicating rhythm of the dance, the girls worked closer, ever closer, to the leering males. Expertly they writhed in their sensual evolutions until their darting arms touched the torsos of the men. The masked figures joined in, then, each clutching with frantic abandon at the dancer nearest him.

Ace Lansing, struck by the wild sensuality of the scene, shook himself as though to clear the astounding vision from his head. Then, as the oddly assorted couples pawed each other, he slipped through the door into the corridor. It ran, he found, entirely around the gym floor. On both sides of the passageway he noted curtained cubicles, identical with his own tiny dressing room.

Gliding swiftly to that room, he gained its privacy without being seen. As he entered he caught a glimpse of June Marson’s flashing white legs and vivid shawl as she whisked through a door at the end of the corridor.

DROPPING down on the day-bed, Ace made a quick checkup. Sam Andrews, he decided, certainly had the right tip when he figured Lestro’s place was a joint. What a swell layout for a blackmail racket! Any one of those forty or fifty paunchy chaps, providing he had more than the price of admission, would be a natural setup for a shakedown. A candid camera, brought into action from a concealed spot while Mr. John Q. Businessman was cavorting in the altogether with a luscious beauty, similarly attired, would bring plenty potatoes into the coffers of Signor Lestro. And how!

But who was behind the layout? Was Lestro the main squeeze or was he simply the tool for some higher-up? And what part did June Marson play? Was it possible that she was a willing stooge for the beetle-browed Spik? Or was she in his power, unable to break away from the dirty business?

Ace Lansing’s contemplation was broken by the thundering *crash* of a heavy gun!

As the shot echoed and re-echoed in the barn-like structure, Ace heard the unmistakable sound of

a falling body.

The shot and the toppling crash of human flesh came from almost directly overhead!

Ace held his breath, listening. He caught the faint but frantic sound of feet running above him toward the far end of the gym.

Another shot! Then other feet, heavier feet, also running.

Leaping to his locker, Ace Lansing hauled out his .38 and the shoulder holster which cradled it. Without stopping to consider what a ludicrous figure he made, he slipped into the leather harness, settled the heavy rod comfortably against his bare chest, beneath his left shoulder, and plunged into the corridor.

Ace plowed through the mob, oblivious now to the contact of his bare shoulders and thighs with other naked bodies. Like an avenging spirit he made his way to the far end of the passage. He flashed through the door where June Marson, in her green shawl, had passed but a few short minutes earlier.

Feeling his way in the semi-gloom he spotted a rude stairway, leading upward. The stairs gave into a shadowy passageway, little more than a catwalk, parallel to the corridor he had just left.

At first glance the tunnel-like alley seemed deserted. But, his eyes growing more accustomed to the dim light, Ace made out a dark figure huddled on the floor midway of the passage.

Cautiously, his nostrils filled with the acrid odor of burned powder, the detective advanced, gun in hand, toward that still form.

Ace knelt beside the figure of a man, dressed in evening clothes. A white domino, similar except in color to those worn by the men in the gymnasium, was across the staring eyes. A spreading dark stain marred the ghostly whiteness of the stiff shirt front.

Quickly Ace thrust his hand inside the victim's shirt, feeling for some sign of life. He found nothing but a bullet hole, sticky with still-warm blood, directly over the man's heart.

Whoever fired that shot had done it at close range, so close the leaden messenger of death could never miss.

Hurriedly wiping his bloodstained hand on the dead man's coat, Ace started as he caught a glimpse of vivid, jade green cloth beneath one outflung hand. He recognized that cloth.

It was the shawl June Marson wore!

Looking once more at the still features of the

heavy corpse, he could not shake off the feeling that he knew this man, or knew the man this hulk had been. He knew this guy beneath the spotless domino, but he couldn't hang a name on him.

There was one way to tell. He slipped the snowy mask off those staring, sightless eyes. Startled in spite of steel-like nerves, Ace Lansing swore, leaped to his feet.

The lifeless figure was Police Commissioner Morton!

"Jeez!" breathed Ace, half-aloud. "Here's a swell mess of spinach. What in hell was Morton doing in this joint?"



He was mad with jealous rage as he burst through the door, his gat barking.

He flashed a glance about him in the eerie passage. On the wall opposite the gymnasium proper he caught a tiny patch of light. That beam, he saw, came from the gym through a hole in the partition. Gluing his eye to the aperture, he had a perfect view of the gymnasium floor, deserted now except for half a dozen flabby old dodoes who were still running in circles, unable to decide where to go.

That peephole, which appeared so innocent, gave Ace ideas.

Quickly he retraced his steps, back through the passage, down the narrow steps. And on those steps he saw what he had overlooked in the dim light when he rushed toward the echoes of those crashing shots—dark spots, still damp.

Blood! A veritable trail of human blood!

Ace Lansing followed that path into the inner regions of the place. Listening, he heard the babble of excited feminine voices behind one heavy door—the girls' dressing room. He passed on, still

trailing the gore-marked route.

Suddenly, as he reached a second door, a woman's voice rose in a scream of terror, a wild, fear-crazed shriek that froze his blood.

GRABBING his gun, Ace Lansing crept toward the room from which that frightful cry had come.

As he closed in, the door swung open with surprising suddenness. A man, fully clothed, leaped through the open space. Ace tried to raise his gun, to pull the trigger. But the flying figure was upon him. The heavy, bull-necked form crashed into him. A knee caught him in the groin. A huge fist struck his chin. He fell unconscious . . .

When Ace came to he was lying on a couch and firm, cool hands were stroking his hot brow. Opening one eye he caught a glimpse of Mary Gaynes, smiling at him.

Recovering his senses, Ace Lansing got to his feet, clutching at the sheet which covered him. He looked about. The room was full of cops. He saw Lieutenant Swanson beside a rumpled bed across the room. Twisting the sheet about his waist, Ace moved toward that bed. He saw a huddled form beneath a bloodstained coverlet.

The Vice Squad copper eyed the private sleuth, then caught the coverlet, tore it off.

There on the bed, a long knife buried to the hilt in her left breast, lay June Marson!

The lovely body, that such a little while before had glowed and pulsed with life and passion, lay forever stilled. The breasts that Ace had known in all their white perfection were stained with crimson. No more would they thrill a man by their electric touch. Those lovely arms, whose warmth had cradled Lansing's head, were cold in death, on one an ugly wound.

The detective shuddered, shook his head to clear it.

"Well, Lansing," Lieutenant Swanson spoke, "you're in a spot. I've waited for a chance like this. You're the smart boy who's razzed me too damned often. *You killed this dame!* Look at the bloodstains on your hand! We found you lying right outside this room. I say you killed this dame. Laugh that one off!"

"Yeah, I will, you squarehead," Ace grinned and turned to Mary. "What's the lay, kid? Has anyone left this joint?"

"Nope, everybody's here. Some of Swanson's

men have them corralled in the gym—two of his brighter cops are on the door."

"Okay, sweetheart. Now, listen, Swanson—you think I killed this frail. We'll start from there.

"Knowing your limitations as a cop, I'm betting you haven't searched this dump. Right? Right! Then the party's just started for you, my fran'. You come with me. C'mon, Mary."

Ace Lansing piloted them through the door, out to the stairs which led to that grim overhead corridor where still another corpse lay in a sinister pool of its own blood.

Silently he took them to the spot. Then, turning to Swanson, he spoke quietly.

"You'd better use your flash, Lieutenant."

The cop's pocket light came out. He switched its revealing beam on that dark form with its gray hair, its gore-stained dress shirt.

Swanson stifled a curse as he recognized his chief.

"While you're about it, Swannie, you might as well make the murder rap stick. Two stiffs should be better than one."

As they stood looking down in silence, *a shot rang out!*

Snatching the cop's flashlight, Ace led the way back through the narrow passage. He leaped down the stairs, leaving Mary and the officer to follow.

Out into the gymnasium he ran. In one corner a group of jittery girls and men, dressed now, were crowded together in a human ring.

Ace Lansing shouldered through, into the very center of the mob. *There on the floor lay Lestro, a blood-rimmed hole marking the center of his dark forehead!*

Beside the huddled form a burly cop, gun in hand, looked down at what had been a man.

"Made a break for it, did he, Donovan?" Ace asked.

The copper nodded. "Yeah, and a pass at me with a rod, too. No Spik kin do that and git away with it. I let him have it."

"Nice shooting, Irish." Ace slapped the policeman's uniformed shoulder. "He had it coming."

Ace picked up Lestro's gun, broke it open, smiled.

Then, realizing for the first time that he was the only person in the room who wasn't fully dressed, he gathered his sheet about him. Beckoning to Swanson and to Mary, he led them back to his own

dressing room.

“SIT down, Swannie, I’ve got some talking to do while I get my pants on. Mary, you turn your back!”

The redhead grinned and made a face.

“Don’t mind me, big boy. I’ve seen everything. You didn’t have that sheet when I found you back there.”

“And that reminds me, sweetheart—how’d you get in?”

“Just instinct, Ace. I stuck in the office, getting out that Middleton report, and when you hadn’t called by 9:15, I barged out here. I spotted the joint, used my pet key to crash the gate. There was plenty confusion, if you ask me!

“First thing, that hairy ape out there on the gym floor came through hell-bent looking for an exit. He was in too much of a hurry so I dropped my gun on him. I stood him up and used the phone to get Swanson and his mob out here. When they arrived I turned the Spik over to Donovan, prowled in with Swanson, and found you stretched out in your birthday suit. Some fun!”

Ace Lansing grinned.

“Nice going, kid! Now listen—you think I killed that moll, Lieutenant. And you figure I bumped the Commissioner.

“I’m laughing at you again, Swanson. Here’s what took place in this damned naked nuthouse. Listen and learn things.

“That stiff out there—Lestro—was cuckoo about June Marson, the blonde dame. But she wouldn’t play with him except in a business way. It drove him nuts. She was the big come-on in this racket, but he wanted her to himself.

“Tonight he missed her from the gym, went looking for her. He found her just as he expected—with Morton in that dark alleyway above the dressing rooms.

“Morton, the Police Commissioner, was the guy behind the works, the big shot. He had heavy dough in this joint, figuring to make heavier dough by the shakedown route. And while he was about it he wanted the thrill he could get by watching what went on down here in the gym—and there was plenty. That’s why he had that peephole spotted where he could see everything.

“This Lestro mug found them together. He went mad with jealous rage, bumped Morton with a single shot. June ran in fright, dropping her scarf.

Lestro let a slug fly at her. It caught her in the arm. She made the dressing room, leaving a trail of blood.

“The Spik followed, stuck a knife in her. I was outside her door and heard her scream. He fouled me when he crashed out of that dressing room, knocked me cold. He’d have lammed out of here if it hadn’t been for Mary.

“You’ll find, Swanson, that Lestro’s rod holds two empty shells. I’m glad the rat is dead. And I’m proud of you, Swanson—I didn’t know you had a cop who could shoot like Donovan, even if he was too dumb to search that Spik for weapons.”

Ace Lansing, finished dressing, lit a cigarette and turned to Mary. “Let’s scam, sweetheart. I’m hungry, and I gotta phone Sam Andrews. This ought to give him the yarn he wanted.” And Ace grinned, winking at his assistant.

“Swanson, I’m not telling you your business—although God knows someone should—but I’d turn those old birds loose out there. They’ve had their lesson. They’ll be shaking a month from now. The gals—well, use your own judgment about the gals. But watch ‘em, Swannie, they know their stuff. So long, copper.”

Stopping in the anteroom, Ace Lansing phoned Sam Andrews, gave him the yarn in short, crisp sentences. Then he and Mary hit a hash house, sought a booth and ordered steaks.

It seemed minutes only before they heard hoarse cries of newsboys. The Chronicle had scooped the town!

Sitting beside Mary, Ace slipped his arm about her shoulders, tried to draw her close. But the redhead pulled away.

“What’s the matter, baby? Can’t you be nice to papa? I need relaxation.”

“Listen, lug, judging from what I’ve seen tonight, you need anything else but. Here!”

She flipped open her handbag, fished out a scrap of paper and shoved it to him. Silently he turned it over.

He was looking at a perfect candid camera shot of himself, nude, all tangled up with the blonde and equally nude June Marson!

“I grabbed that thing when I first barged into the blonde dame’s room,” Mary told him coolly. “Swanson didn’t see it. Seems to me you take your detective work too seriously, big boy. Nudist rackets are out from now on. We stick to good clean murders or bank jobs.”

He grimaced, tore the photo into bits.

“That’s no good, mug,” Mary said quietly, a
twinkle creeping into her pretty eyes. “I got the
negative, too!”

Then she slid over, squirmed into his arms and
pulled his head down till she could reach his lips
with hers. After all, Ace Lansing wanted relaxation.