

Dec. 19 - Now in Its Fiftieth Year

ARGOSY

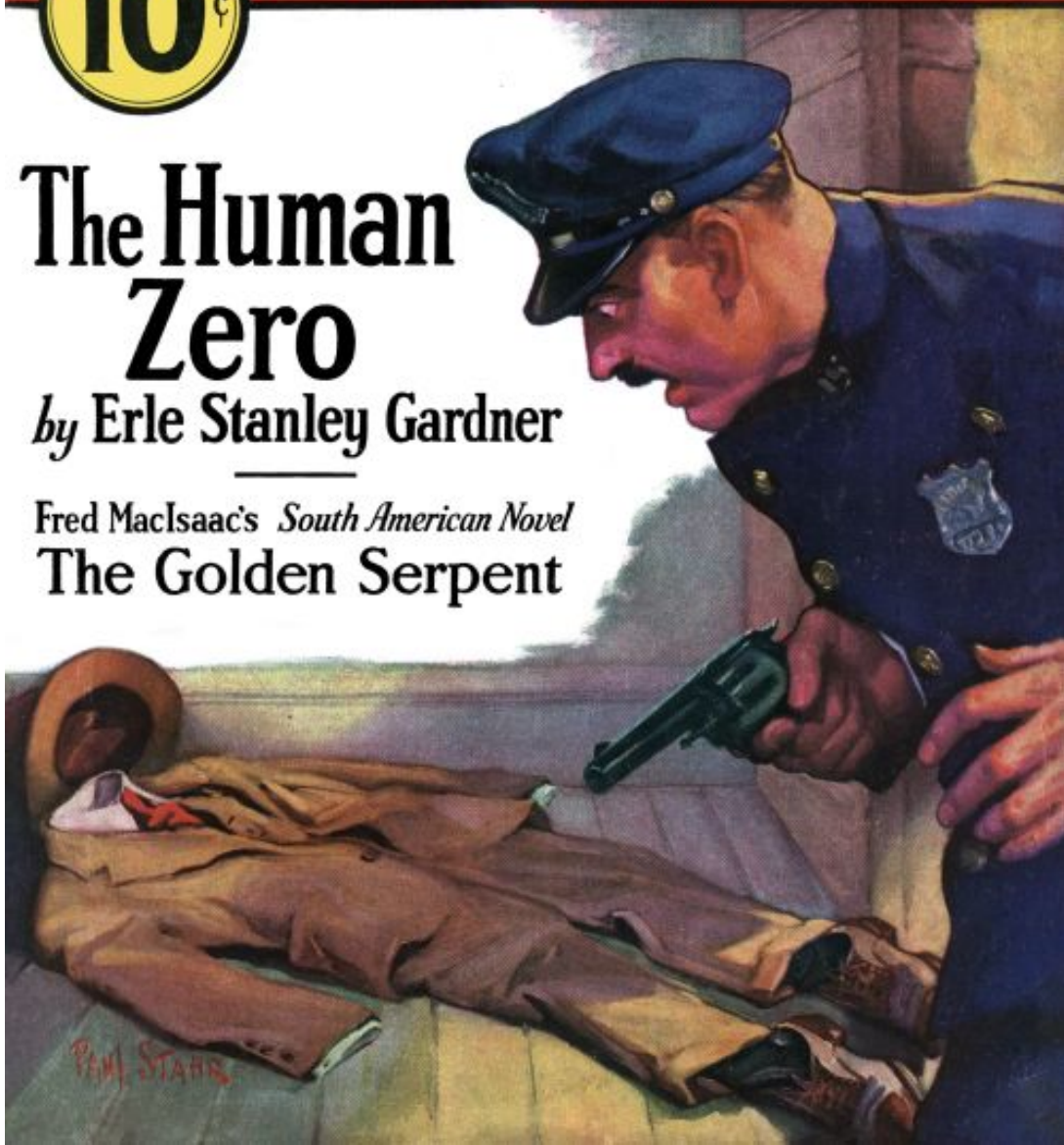
ISSUED WEEKLY

10¢

The Human Zero

by Erle Stanley Gardner

Fred MacIsaac's *South American Novel*
The Golden Serpent



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Human Zero

Date of first publication: 1931

Author: Erle Stanley Gardner (1889-1970)

Date first posted: Mar. 27, 2023

Date last updated: Mar. 27, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230345

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Luminist.



A face peered malevolently at them

The Human Zero

By

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Author of "Singing Sand," "Stamp of the Desert," etc.

First published *Argosy*, December 19, 1931.

The man who had kidnaped millionaire Dangerfield possessed a strange scientific secret—and only Special Operative Sid Rodney guessed its criminal possibilities

CHAPTER I. A MYSTERIOUS KIDNAPING.

Bob Sands took the letter from the hands of the captain of police, read it, and pursed his lips in a whistle.

Four pairs of eyes studied the secretary of the kidnaped man as he read. Two pencils scribbled notes on pads of scratch paper, of the type used by newspaper reporters.

Bob Sands showed that he had been aroused from sleep, and had rushed to headquarters. His collar was soiled. His tie was awry. The eyes were still red from rubbing, and his chin was covered with the bristling stubble which awaited a razor.

“Good Heavens,” he said, “the Old Man was sure given a scare when he wrote that!”

Captain Harder noted the sleep-reddened eyes of the secretary.

“Then it’s his writing?”

“Undoubtedly.”

Ruby Orman, “sob-sister” writer of the *Clarion*, added to her penciled notes. “Tears streamed down the cheeks of the loyal secretary as he identified the writing as being that of the man by whom he was employed.”

Charles Ealy, reporter for the more conservative *Star*, scribbled sketchy notes. “Sands summoned—Identifies writing as being that of P. H. Dangerfield—Dramatic scene enacted in office of Captain Harder at an early hour this morning—Letter, written by kidnaped millionaire, urges police to drop case and bank to pay the half million demanded in cash as ransom—Letter hints at a scientist as being the captor and mentions fate ‘so horrible I shudder to contemplate it.’ ”

Sid Rodney, the other occupant of the room, wrote nothing. He didn’t believe in making notes. And, since he was the star detective of a nationally known agency, he was free to do pretty much as he pleased.

Rodney didn’t make detailed reports. He got results. He had seen them come and seen them go. Ordinary circumstances found him cool and unexcited. It took something in the nature of a calamity to arouse him.

Now he teetered back on the two legs of his chair and his eyes scanned the faces of the other four people.

It was three o’clock in the morning. It was the second day following the mysterious abduction of P. H. Dangerfield, a millionaire member of the stock exchange. Demands had been made for a cool half million as ransom. The demands had been okayed by the millionaire, himself, but the bank refused to honor the request. Dangerfield had not over two hundred thousand in his account. The bank was willing to loan the balance, but only when it should be absolutely satisfied that it was the wish of the millionaire, and that the police were powerless.

Rodney was employed by the bank as a special investigator. In addition, the bank had called in the police. The investigation had gone through all routine steps and arrived nowhere. Dangerfield had been at his house. He had vanished. There was no trace of him other than the demands of the kidnapers, and the penciled notations upon the bottom of those letters, purporting to be in the writing of the missing millionaire.

Then had come this last letter, completely written in pen and ink by Dangerfield, himself. It was a letter addressed directly to Captain Harder, who was assuming charge of the case, and implored him to let the bank pay over the money.

Captain Harder turned to Rodney.

"How will the bank take this?" he asked.

Rodney took a deep drag at his cigarette. He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, and, as he spoke, the smoke seeped out of the corners of his mouth, clothing the words in a smoky halo.

"Far as the newspapers are concerned," he said, "I have nothing to say. As a private tip, I have an idea the bank will regard this as sufficient authorization, and pay the money."

Captain Harder opened a drawer, took out photostatic copies of the other demands which had been received.

"They want five hundred thousand dollars in gold certificates, put in a suitcase, sent by the secretary of the kidnaped man, to the alley back of Quong Mow's place in Chinatown. It's to be deposited in an ash can that sits just in front of the back door of Quong Mow's place. Then Sands is to drive away.

"The condition is that the police must not try to shadow Sands or watch the barrel, that Sands must go alone, and that there must be no effort to trace the numbers of the bills. When that has been done, Dangerfield will go free. Otherwise he'll be murdered. The notes point out that, even if the money is deposited in the ash can, but the other conditions are violated, Dangerfield will die."

There was silence in the room when the captain finished speaking. All of those present knew the purport of those messages. The newspaper reporters had even gone so far as to photograph the ash can.

There was a knock at the door.

Captain Harder jerked it open.

The man who stood on the threshold of the room, surveying the occupants through clear, gray, emotionless eyes, was Arthur L. Soloman, the president of the bank.

He was freshly shaved, well dressed, cool, collected.

"I obeyed your summons, captain," he said in a dry, husky voice that was as devoid of moisture as a dead leaf scuttling across a cement sidewalk on the wings of a March wind.

Captain Harder grunted.

"I came without waiting to shave or change," said Sands, his voice showing a trace of contempt. "They said it was life or death."

The banker's fish-like eyes rested upon the flushed face of Bob Sands.

"I shaved," said Soloman. "I never go out in the morning without shaving. What is the trouble, captain?"

Harder handed over the letter.

The banker took a vacant chair, took spectacles from his pocket, rubbed the lenses with a handkerchief, held them to the light, breathed upon the lenses and polished them again, then finally adjusted the spectacles and read the letter.

His face remained absolutely void of expression.

"Indeed," he said, when he had finished, but the tone showed no surprise.

"What we want to know," said Captain Harder, "is whether the bank feels it should honor that request, make a loan upon the strength of it and pay that ransom."

The banker put the tips of his fingers together and spoke coldly.

“One-half a million dollars is a very great deal of money. It is altogether too much to ask by way of ransom. It would, indeed, be a dangerous precedent for the more prominent business men of this community, were any such ransom to be paid.”

Captain Harder sighed.

“We’ve been all over that before, Mr. Soloman. What I want to know is what do you want the police to do? If we’re to try and find this man, we’d better keep busy. If we’re going to sit back and let you ransom him, and then try and catch the kidnapers afterward, we don’t want to get our wires crossed.”

The banker’s tone dripped sarcasm.

“Your efforts so far have seemed to be futile enough. The police system seems inadequate to cope with these criminals.”

Captain Harder flushed. “We do the best we can with what we’ve got. Our salary allowances don’t enable us to employ guys that have got the brains of bank presidents to pound our pavements.”

Ruby Orman snickered.

The banker’s face remained gray and impassive.

“Precisely,” he said coldly.

“Nothin’ personal,” said Harder.

The banker turned to Sid Rodney.

“Has your firm anything to report, Mr. Rodney?”

Rodney continued to sit back in his chair, his thumbs hooked into the arm holes of his vest, his cigarette hanging at a drooping angle.

“Nothin’ that I know of,” he said, smoke seeping from his lips with the words.

“Well?” asked Charles Ealy.

Captain Harder looked at the banker meaningly.

“Well?” he said.

Ruby Orman held her pencil poised over her paper.

“The *Clarion* readers will be so much interested in your answer, Mr. Soloman.”

The banker’s mouth tightened.

“The answer,” he said, still speaking in the same husky voice, “is *no!*”

The reporters scribbled.

Bob Sands, secretary of the missing man, got to his feet. His manner was belligerent. He seemed to be controlling himself with an effort.

“You admit Mr. Dangerfield could sell enough securities within half an hour of the time he got back on the job to liquidate the entire amount!” he said accusingly.

The banker’s nod was casual.

“I believe he could.”

“And this letter is in his handwriting?”

“Yes. I would say it was.”

“And he authorizes you to do anything that needs to be done, gives you his power of attorney and all that, doesn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Then why not trust his judgment in the matter and do what he says?”

The banker smiled, and the smile was cold, tight-lipped.

“Because the bank is under no obligations to do so. Mr. Dangerfield has a checking account of about two hundred thousand dollars. The bank would honor his check in that amount, provided our attorney could advise us that the information we have received through the press and the police would not be tantamount to knowledge that such check was obtained by duress and menace.

“But as far as loaning any such additional sum to be paid as ransom, the bank does not care to encourage kidnappings by establishing any such precedent. The demand, gentlemen, is unreasonable.”

“What,” yelled Sands, “has the bank got to say about how much kidnapers demand?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all, Mr. Sands. Mr. Rodney, I trust your firm will uncover some clew which will be of value. The bank values Mr. Dangerfield’s account very much. We are leaving no stone unturned to assist the police. But we cannot subscribe to the payment of such an unheard-of ransom.”

“A human life is at stake!” yelled Sands.

The banker paused, his hand on the door.

“The safety of the business world is also at stake, gentlemen. Good morning!”

CHAPTER II. WHO IS ALBERT CROME?

The door slammed shut.

Captain Harder sighed.

Sid Rodney tossed away the stub of his cigarette, groped for a fresh one.

"Such is life," mused Charles Ealy.

"The dirty pirate!" snapped Sands. "He's made thousands off of the Dangerfield account. He doesn't care a fig what happens to Dangerfield. He's just afraid of establishing a precedent that will inspire other criminals."

Sid Rodney lit his fresh cigarette.

Ruby Orman's pencil scribbled across the paper.

"Scene one of greatest consternation," she wrote. "Men glanced at each other in an ecstasy of futility. Sands gave the impression of fighting back tears. Even strong men may weep when the life of a friend is at stake. Police promise renewed activity . . ."

Bob Sands reached for his hat.

"I'll go crazy if I hang around here. Is there anything I can do?"

Captain Harder shook his head.

"We'll have this letter gone over by the handwriting department," he said.

Sands walked from the room.

"Good morning," he said wearily.

Charles Ealy turned to the captain.

"Nothing new, Harry?"

"Not a thing, other than that letter," said Captain Harder. "This is one case where we can't get a toe-hold to work on."

Charles Ealy nodded sympathetically.

"Anything for publication?" he asked.

"Yes," snapped Captain Harder. "You can state that I am working on a brand new lead, and that within the next twenty-four hours we feel certain we will have the criminals in custody. You may state that we already have a cordon of police guarding against an escape from the city, and that, momentarily, the dragnet is tightening . . . Oh, you folks know, say the usual thing that may put the fear of God into the kidnapers and make the public think we aren't sitting here with our arms folded."

Charles Ealy scraped back his chair.

"Wait a minute," said Rodney, the cigarette in his mouth wabbling in a smoky zigzag as he talked. "I may have a hunch that's worth while. Will you give me a break on it, captain, if it's a lead?"

The police captain nodded wearily.

"Shoot," he said.

Rodney grinned at the two reporters.

"This stuff is off the record," he admonished. "You two can scoop it if anything comes of it. Right now it's on the q.t."

The reporters nodded.

They were there, in the first place, because the two papers were “in right” with the administration. And they kept in right with the police department by printing what the police were willing they should print, and by keeping that confidential which was given to them in confidence.

Sid Rodney went to the trouble of removing his cigarette from the corner of his mouth, sure sign of earnestness.

“I’ve got a funny angle on this thing. I didn’t say anything before, because I think it’s a whole lot more grave than many people think. I have a hunch we’re doing business with a man who has a lot more sense than the average kidnaper. I have a hunch he’s dangerous. And if there was any chance of the bank coming to the front, then letting us try to recover the money afterward, I wanted to play it that way.

“But the bank’s out, so it’s everything to gain and nothing to lose. Now here’s the situation. I ran down every one I could find who might have a motive. One of the things the agency did, which the police also did, was to run down every one who might profit by the disappearance or death of P. H. Dangerfield.

“But one thing our agency did that the police didn’t do, was to try and find out whether or not any person had been trying to interest Dangerfield in a business deal and been turned down.

“We found a dozen leads and ran ’em down. It happened I was to run down a list of three or four, and the fourth person on the list was a chap named Albert Crome. Ever hear of him?”

He paused.

Captain Harder shook his head.

Ruby Orman looked blank. Charles Ealy puckered his brows.

“You mean the scientist that claimed he had some sort of a radium method of disrupting ether waves and forming an etheric screen?”

Rodney nodded. “That’s the chap.”

“Sort of cuckoo, isn’t he? He tried to peddle his invention to the government, but they never took any particular notice of him. Sent a man, I believe, and Crome claimed the man they sent didn’t even know elemental physics.”

Sid Rodney nodded again.

There was a rap at the door.

Captain Harder frowned, reached back a huge arm, twisted the knob, and opened the door a crack.

“I left orders . . .” He paused in mid-sentence as he saw the face of Bob Sands.

“Oh, come in, Sands. I left orders only five people could come in here, and then I didn’t want to be disturbed . . . Lord, man, what’s the matter? You look as though you’d seen a ghost!”

Sands nodded.

“Look what happened. I started for home. My roadster was parked out in front of headquarters. I got in and drove it out Claremont Street, and was just turning into Washington when another car came forging alongside of me.

“I thought it would go on past, but it kept crowding me over. Then I thought of all the talk I’d heard of gangsters, and I wondered if there was any chance I was going to be abducted, too.

"I slammed on the brakes. The other car pushed right in beside me. There was a man sitting next to the driver, sort of a foreign looking fellow, and he tossed something.

"I thought it was a bomb, and I yelled and put my hand over my eyes. The thing thudded right into the seat beside me. When I grabbed it to throw it out, I saw it was a leather sack, weighted, and that there was crumpled paper on the inside. I opened the sack and found—this!"

Dramatically he handed over the piece of typewritten paper.

"Read it aloud," begged Ealy.

"Take a look," invited Captain Harder, spreading the sheet of paper on the desk.

They clustered about in a compact group, read the contents of that single spaced sheet of typewriting.

SANDS:

You are a damned fool. The banker would have given in if you hadn't been so hostile. And the police bungled the affair, as they nearly always do. I've got a method of hearing and seeing what goes on in Captain Harder's office. I'm going to tell you folks right now that you didn't do Dangerfield any good. When I showed him on the screen what was taking place, and he heard your words, he was beside himself with rage.

You've got one more chance to reach that banker. If he doesn't pay the sum within twelve hours there won't be any more Dangerfield.

And the next time I kidnap a man and hold him for ransom I don't want so much powwow about it. Just to show you my power, I am going to abduct you, Sands, after I kill Dangerfield, and then I'm going to get Arthur Soloman, the banker. Both of you will be held for a fair ransom. Soloman's ransom will be seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. So he'd better get ready to pay.

This is the final and last warning.

X.

Captain Harder's eyes were wide.

"Good Lord, has that man got a dictograph running into this office?"

Sands made a helpless gesture with the palms of his hands. He was white, his teeth were chattering, and his knees seemed utterly devoid of strength.

"I don't know. He's a devil. He's always seemed to know just what was going on. And he surely must have known Dangerfield's habits from A to Z. I'm frightened."

Captain Harder walked to the door.

"Send in a couple of men to search this place for a dictograph," he said. Then he turned on his heel, gave a swing of his arm. "Come on in another room, you folks. We'll go into this thing."

The little group trooped into one of the other offices.

"All right, Rodney. You were mentioning a scientist. What of him?"

"I went to his office," said Rodney, "and tried to engage him in conversation. He wouldn't talk. I asked him what he knew about Dangerfield, and he all but frothed at the mouth. He said Dangerfield was a crook, a pirate, a robber. Then he slammed the door.

“But, here’s the point. I got a peep at the inside of his office. There was a Royal portable in there, and these letters that were received demanding ransom were written on a Royal portable.

“It’s not much of a lead, and it’s one that the police will have to run down—now. If it’s a matter of life and death, and working against time, then it’s too big for our agency to handle. But my opinion is that Albert Crome was violently insane, at least upon the subject of Dangerfield.”

The police captain whirled to Sands.

“What sort of a car were these men using?”

“You mean the men who tossed the letter?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t tell you. I know it’s stupid of me, but I just got too rattled to notice. It was a big car, and it looked as though it might have been a Cadillac, or a Buick, or a Packard. It might even have been some other make. I was rattled.”

The captain snorted.

“What do you know about Crome?”

Sands blinked.

“I know Mr. Dangerfield was negotiating for the purchase of some patent rights, or the financing of some formula or something, but that’s about all. The deal fell through.”

“Ever meet Crome?”

The secretary hesitated, knitted his brows.

“You’ll have to let me think . . . Yes, yes, of course I did. I met him several times. Some of the negotiations were carried on through me.”

“Impress you as being a little off?” asked Sid Rodney, drawing the question, his inevitable cigarette dangling loosely from the corner of his mouth as he talked.

“No. He impressed me as being a pretty wide awake sort of a chap, very much of a gentleman, with a high sense of honor.”

Captain Harder pressed a button.

“Take these letters. Have ’em photographed,” he told the man who answered the buzzer. “Check the typewriting with the others. Then get me everything you can get on Albert Crome. I want to know what he’s been doing with his time the last few days, who he associates with, who’s seen him lately, where he lives, what he’s doing with his work, everything about him.

“And if you can get a man into his offices and laboratory, I want a specimen of the typewriting that comes from the portable machine he’s got—a Royal.”

The man nodded, withdrew.

Captain Harder grinned at the little group.

“Well, we might go down to T-Bone Frank’s and have a cup of coffee and some eats. Maybe we’ll have something new when we get back.”

Sands fidgeted.

“I don’t want anything to eat.”

“Well, you’d better wait a little while, Sands. You know that threat may mean nothing. Then again, it may mean a lot.”

Sands nodded.

“Are you going to tell Soloman?”

“Yes. I’ll give him a ring, I guess. Maybe I’d better do it before he gets home and to bed. Let’s see, I’ve got his number here. I’ll give him a buzz and break the glad tidings and then put a couple of the boys on guard in front of the place. It’ll make him think a little. Didn’t like his attitude, myself . . . Oh, well!”

He gave the exchange operator the number, replaced the receiver, fished a cigar from his pocket and scraped a noisy match along the sole of his shoe.

Ruby Orman scribbled on her pad of paper: “In tense silence, these men waited grimly for the dawn.”

Charles Ealy put a matter-of-fact question.

“Can we get these letters for the noon editions, Harry?”

“What’s deadline?” asked the captain.

“We’d have to have them by eight o’clock in order to get the plates ready.”

“I guess so. It ain’t eight o’clock yet.”

Ealy perked up his ears.

“You speak as though you had something up your sleeve,” he said.

The officer nodded grimly.

“I have,” he said.

The telephone rang. Captain Harder cupped his ear to the receiver.

“Funny,” he said, “Soloman’s residence says he’s not home yet.” Then: “Keep calling. Tell him I want to speak to him. It’s important.”

They went to the all-night restaurant, lingered over coffee and sandwiches. They were all nervous, with the exception of Sid Rodney. That individual seemed to be utterly relaxed, but it was the inactivity of a cat who is sprawled in the sun, keeping a lazy eye upon a fluttering bird, trying to locate the nest.

Charles Ealy watched Sid Rodney narrowly. Once he nodded, slowly.

They finished their meal, returned to headquarters.

“Heard from Soloman?” asked Captain Harder.

Sergeant Green, at the desk, shook his head.

“They keep saying he hasn’t returned. But we’ve unearthed some stuff about Crome from our department files. He wanted a permit to establish an experimenting station in a loft building down town. Had the lease on the place and was all ready to go ahead when he found out he had to have a permit to operate the sort of a place he wanted.

“He was turned down on the permit after it appeared that his experiments were likely to increase the fire hazard, and he was bitter about it.”

Captain Harder grunted.

“That doesn’t help much.”

“Did he send in any typewritten letters?” asked Sid Rodney.

“Maybe. I’ll look in the files. Most of those things would be in another file.”

“Got the address of the loft building?”

“Yes—632 Grant Street. That’s down near the wholesale district, a little side street.”

Sid nodded.

“Yeah. I know. What say we take a run down there, captain?”

“Why? He was turned down on his permit. There’s nothing there for us.”

Rodney lit a fresh cigarette and resumed.

“The man’s a scientist. He hates Dangerfield. He impresses me as being very much unbalanced. He’s got a loft that isn’t being used. Now *if* he should happen to be mixed up in the kidnaping, where would be a better place to keep a prisoner than in an unused loft building, that had been taken over and fitted up as an experimental laboratory?”

Captain Harder grinned.

“You win,” he said. “Get me half a dozen of the boys out, sergeant. I’m going down there myself and give it a once over. Better take along a bunch of keys.”

“Do we go along?” asked Ealy, his eyes twinkling.

Captain Harder grinned.

“Certainly not,” he said.

Sands took him seriously.

“I’m glad of that. I’m simply all in. I want to go and get some sleep, a bath and a shave.”

Captain Harder looked sympathetic.

“I know, Sands. Ealy and I were kidding. But if you feel all in, go on home and get some sleep. We’ve got your number. We’ll call you if there’s anything there.”

“How about an escort?” asked Rodney. “Those threats, you know . . .”

Sands vehemently shook his head.

“No. I don’t want to advertise to the neighborhood that I’m afraid. I’ll go on home and sleep. I’m safe for twelve hours yet, anyway. If you think there’s any danger at the end of that time, I’ll move into a hotel and you can give me a guard.”

Captain Harder nodded.

“Okay.”

CHAPTER III. INTO THIN AIR.

The two police cars slid smoothly to the curb before the loft building.

The first streaks of dawn were tingeing the buildings in the concrete cañon of loft buildings, wholesale houses and nondescript apartments.

Captain Harder jerked his thumb.

“This is the place. No use standin’ on formality. Let’s go up. He had the whole building leased. Looks vacant now.”

The men moved across the echoing sidewalk in a compact group. There was the jingle of keys against the brass lock plate, and then the click of a bolt. The door opened. A flight of stairs, an automatic elevator, a small lobby, showed in the reddish light of early morning. There was a musty smell about the place.

“Take the elevator,” said Captain Harder. “Then we won’t have so much trouble . . . funny he leased the whole building in advance of a permit. This lease cost him money.”

No one said anything. They opened the door of the elevator. Then they drew back with an exclamation.

“Look there!” said one of the men.

There was a stool in the elevator. Upon that stool was a tray, and upon the tray was some food, remnants of sandwiches, a cup of coffee, the sides stained where trickles of the liquid had slopped over the side of the cup.

Captain Harder smelled the cup, jabbed a finger into the crust of the sandwiches.

“Looks like it’s less than twenty-four hours old,” he said.

The men examined the tray.

Captain Harder snapped into swift activity. It was plainly apparent that the curiosity which had sent him down to the loft building for a “look around” merely because there were no other clues to run down, had given place to well-defined suspicion.

“Here, Bill. You take one of the boys with you and watch the steps. Frank, get out your gun and watch the fire escape. Go around the back way, through the alley. We’ll keep quiet and give you three minutes to get stationed. Then we’re going up.

“If you see any one, order him to stop. If he doesn’t obey, shoot to kill. George, you go with Frank. The rest of us are going up in the elevator.”

He took out his watch.

“Three minutes,” he said.

The men snapped into action.

Captain Harder held a thumb nail upon the dial of his big watch, marking the time.

“Okay,” he said, at length. “Let’s go. You two birds on the stairs, make sure you don’t get above the first floor without covering every inch of ground you pass. We don’t want any one to duck out on us. If you hear any commotion, don’t come unless I blow my whistle. Watch those stairs!”

He closed the door of the elevator, jabbed the button marked by the figure “1.”

The elevator creaked and swayed upward at a snail’s pace, came to the first floor and stopped. Captain Harder propped the door open, emerged into a hallway, found himself facing

two doors.

Both were unlocked. He opened first one, and then the other.

There were disclosed two empty lofts, littered with papers and rubbish. They were bare of furniture, untenanted. Even the closet doors were open, and they could see into the interiors of them.

“Nothing doing,” said the officer. “Guess it’s a false alarm, but we’ll go on up.”

They returned to the elevator, pressed the next button.

There were three floors, narrow, but deep.

The second floor was like the first as far as the doors were concerned. But as soon as Captain Harder opened the first door, it was at once apparent that the party was on a warm trail.

The place was fitted up with benches, with a few glass jars, test tubes, some rather complicated apparatus inclosed in a glass case. There were a few jars of chemicals, and there were some more trays with food remnants upon them.

“Somebody,” said Captain Harder grimly, making sure his service revolver was loose in its holster, “is living here. Wonder what’s in that room on the corner. Door looks solid enough.”

He pushed his way forward through the litter on the floor, twisted the knob of the door.

“Locked,” he said, “and feels solid as stone.”

And, at that moment, sounding weak and faint, as though coming from a great distance, came a cry, seeping through the door from the room beyond, giving some inkling of the thickness of the door.

“Help, help, help! This is Paul Dangerfield. Help me! Help me!”

Captain Harder threw his weight against the door. As well have thrown his weight against the solid masonry of a wall.

“Hello,” he called. “Are you safe, Dangerfield? This is the police!”

The men could hear the sound of frantic blows on the opposite side of the door.

“Thank God! Quick, get me out of here. Smash in the door. It’s a foot thick. Get something to batter it down with!”

The words were faint, muffled. The blows which sounded upon the other side of the door gave evidence of the thickness and strength of the portal.

Captain Harder turned to one of the men.

“How about keys?”

“I’ve got ’em, captain, but where do we put ’em?”

The officer stepped back to look at the door.

There was not a sign of a lock or keyhole in it. There was a massive knob, but nothing else to show that the door differed from the side of the wall, save the hairline which marked its borders.

“Smash it in! All together!”

They flung themselves against the door.

Their efforts were utterly unavailing.

“Hurry, hurry!” yelled the voice on the other side of the door. “He’s going to . . . No, no! Don’t. Oh! Go away! Don’t touch that door. Oh . . . Oh . . . Not that!”

The voice rose to a piercing wail of terror, and then was silent. The squad pounded on the door, received no answer.

Captain Harder whirled to examine the loft.

“There’s a bar over there. Let’s get this door down.”

He raised the whistle to his lips, blew a shrill blast. The two men who had been guarding the stairs came up on the run.

“Get this door down!” snapped the police captain, “and let’s make it snappy.”

They held a block of wood so that it formed a fulcrum for the bar, inserted the curved end, started to pry. The door was as solid as though it had been an integral part of the wall. Slowly, however, the men managed to get the bar inserted to a point where the leverage started to spring the bolts.

Yet it was a matter of minutes, during which time there was no sound whatever from that mysterious inner room.

At length the door swayed, creaked, pried unevenly, sprung closed as the men shifted their grips on the bar to get a fresh purchase.

“Now, then, boys!” said Captain Harder, perspiration streaming down from his forehead and into his eyes. “Let’s go!”

They flung themselves into the work. The door tottered, creaked, slowly pried loose and then banged open.

The squad stared at a room built without windows. There was ventilation which came through a grating in the roof. This grating was barred with inch-thick iron bars. The air sucked out through one section, came blowing through another. The air seemed fresh enough, yet there was an odor in that room which was a stale stench of death. It was the peculiar, sickeningly sweet odor which hangs about a house which has been touched by death.

There was a table, a reclining chair, a carpet, a tray of food, a bed. The room gave evidences of having been lived in.

But it was vacant, so far as any living thing was concerned.

On the floor, near the door which had been forced, was a pile of clothing. The clothing was sprawled out as though it had covered the form of a man who had toppled backward to the door, stretched his full length upon the floor, and then been withdrawn from his garments.

Captain Harder bent to an examination of the garments. There was a watch in the pocket which had stopped. The stopping of the watch was exactly five minutes before, at about the time the officers had begun pounding at the door.

There was a suit of silk underwear inside of the outer garments. The tie was neatly knotted about the empty collar. The sleeves of the shirt were down inside the sleeves of the coat. There were socks which nested down inside the shoes, as though thrust there by some invisible foot.

There was no word spoken.

Those officers, reporters, detectives, hardened by years of experience, to behold the gruesome, stared speechlessly at that vacant bundle of clothing.

Charles Ealy was the one who broke the silence.

“Good Heavens! There’s been a man in these clothes and he’s been sucked out, like a bit of dirt being sucked up into a vacuum cleaner!”

Captain Harder regained control of himself with an effort. His skin was still damp with perspiration, but that perspiration had cooled until it presented an oily slime which accentuated the glistening pallor of his skin.

“It’s a trap, boys. It’s a damned clever trap, but it’s just a trap. There couldn’t have been . . .”

He didn’t finish, for Ruby Orman, speaking in a hushed voice, pointed to one of the shoes.

“Try,” she said, “just try fitting a sock into the toe of that shoe the way this one is fitted, and try doing it while the shoe’s laced, or do it, and then lace the shoe afterward, and see where you get.”

“Humph,” said Ealy, “as far as that’s concerned, try getting a necktie around the collar of a shirt and then fitting a coat and vest around the shirt.”

Captain Harder cleared his throat and addressed them all.

“Now listen, you guys, you’re actin’ like a bunch of kids. Even supposing there was some one in this room, where could he have gone? There ain’t any opening. He couldn’t have slid through those bars in the ventilator.”

Some of the detectives nodded sagely, but it remained for Rodney to ask the question which left them baffled.

“How,” he asked, “was it possible to get the foot out of that laced shoe?”

Captain Harder turned away.

“Let’s not get stampeded,” he said.

He started to look around him.

“Cooked food’s been brought in here at regular intervals . . . the man that was here was Dangerfield, all right. Those are his clothes. There’s the mark of the tailor, and there’s his gold-scrolled fountain pen. His watch has his initials on, even his check book is in the pocket.

“I tell you, boys, we’re on the right track. This is the place Dangerfield’s been kept, and it’s that inventor who’s at the bottom of the whole thing. We’ll go knock his place over, and we’ll probably find where Dangerfield is right now. He was spirited away from here, somehow.

“Those clothes were left here for a blind. Don’t get stampeded. Here, feel the inside of the cloth. It’s plumb cold, awfully cold. If anybody’d been inside those clothes within five minutes, the clothes’d be warm.”

One of the officers nodded. His face gave an exhibition of sudden relief which was almost ludicrous. He grinned shamefacedly.

“By George, captain, that’s so! Do you know, for a minute, this thing had me goofy. But you can see how cool the clothes are, and this watch is like a chunk of ice. It’d be warm if anybody had been inside those clothes.”

“Who,” asked Sid Rodney, “was it that was calling to us through the door?”

Captain Harder stepped to the door, dragged in the bar.

“I don’t know. It may have been a trick of ventriloquism, or it may have been a sound that was projected through the ventilating system. But, anyhow, I’m going to find out. If there’s a secret entrance to this room, I’m going to find it if I have to rip off every board of the walls one at a time.”

He started with the bar, biting it into the tongue and groove which walled the sides of the room. Almost instantly the ripping bar disclosed the unique construction of that room.

It consisted of tongue and groove, back of which was a layer of thick insulation that looked like asbestos. Back of that was a layer of thick steel, and the steel seemed to be backed with concrete, so solid was it.

By examining the outside of the room, they were able to judge the depth of the walls. They seemed to be at least three feet thick. The room was a veritable sound-proof chamber.

Evidently the door was operated by some electro-magnetic control. There were thick bars which went from the interior of the door down into sockets built in the floor, steel faced,

bedded in concrete.

Captain Harder whistled.

“Looks like there was no secret exit there. It must have been some sort of ventriloquism.”

Sid Rodney grunted.

“Well, it wasn’t ventriloquism that made the jars on that door. It was some one pounding and kicking on the other side. And, if you’ll notice the toes of those shoes, you’ll see where there are fragments of wood splinters, little flakes of paint, adhering to the soles right where they point out into the uppers.

“Now, then, if you’ll take the trouble to look at the door, you’ll find little marks in the wood which correspond to the marks on the toes of the shoes. In other words, whether those shoes were occupied or not, they were hammering against that door a few minutes ago.”

Captain Harder shook his head impatiently.

“The trouble with all that reasoning is that it leads into impossibilities.”

Sid Rodney stooped to the vest pocket, looked once more at the gold embossed fountain pen.

“Has any one tried this to see if it writes?” he asked.

“What difference would that make?” asked the police captain.

“He might have left us a message,” said Sid.

He abstracted the pen, removed the cap, tried the end of the pen upon his thumb nail. Then he took a sheet of paper from his notebook, tried the pen again.

Captain Harder grunted.

“Listen, you guys, all this stuff isn’t getting us anywhere. The facts are that Dangerfield was here. He ain’t here now. Albert Crome has this place rented. He has a grudge against Dangerfield. It’s an odds-on bet that we’re going to get the whole fiendish scheme out of him—if we get there soon enough.”

There was a mutter of affirmation from the officers, ever men who were more accustomed to rely upon direct action and swift accusation than upon the slower method of deduction.

“Wait a minute,” said Sid Rodney. His eyes were flaming with the fire of an inner excitement. He unscrewed the portion of the pen which contained the tip, from the barrel, drew out the long rubber tube which held the ink.

Captain Harder regarded him with interest, but with impatience.

“Just like any ordinary self-filling pen the world over,” said the police captain.

Sid Rodney made no comment. He took a knife from his pocket, slit open the rubber sac. A few sluggish drops of black liquid trickled slowly down his thumb, then he pulled out a jet black rod of solid material.

He was breathing rapidly now, and the men, attracted by the fierce earnestness of his manner, crowded about him.

“What is it?” asked one.

Rodney did not answer the question directly. He broke the thing in half, peered at the ends.

These ends glistened like some polished, black jewel which had been broken open. The light reflected from little tiny points, giving an odd appearance of sheen and luster.

Slowly a black stain spread along the palm of the detective’s hand.

Sid Rodney set the long rod of black, broken into two pieces, down upon the tray of food.

“Is that ink?” demanded Harder.

“Yes.”

“What makes it look so funny?”

“It’s frozen.”

“Frozen!”

“Yes.”

“But how could ink be frozen in a room of this sort? The room isn’t cold.”

Sid Rodney shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m not advancing any theories—yet. I’m simply remarking that it’s frozen ink. You’ll notice that the rubber covering and the air which was in the barrel of the pen acted as something of a thermal insulation. Therefore, it was slower to thaw out than some things.”

Captain Harder stared at Rodney with a puckered forehead and puzzled eyes.

“What things do you mean?”

“The watch, for instance. You notice that it’s started to run again.”

“By George, it has!” said Charles Ealy. “It’s started ticking right along just as though nothing had happened, but it’s about six and a half or seven minutes slow.”

Sid nodded silent affirmation.

Captain Harder snorted.

“You birds can run all the clews that you want to. I’m going to get a confession out of the bird that’s responsible for this.

“Two of you stay here and see that no one comes in or goes out. Guard this place. Shoot to kill any one who disobeys your orders. This thing is serious, and there’s murder at the bottom of it, or I miss my guess.”

He whirled and stamped from the room, walking with that aggressive swing of the shoulders, that forward thrust of his sturdy legs, which betokened no good for the crack-brained scientist.

CHAPTER IV. A MADMAN'S LABORATORY.

They hammered on the door.

After a matter of minutes there was an answer, a thin, cracked voice which echoed through the thick partitions of a door which seemed every bit as substantial as the door which Captain Harder had forced in order to enter that curious room where an empty suit of clothes had mocked him.

“Who is it?”

Captain Harder tried a subterfuge.

“Captain Harder, come to see about the purchase of an invention. I'm representing the War Department.”

The man on the other side of that door crackled into a cackling chuckle. “It's about time. Let's have a look at you.”

Captain Harder nodded to the squad of grim-visaged men who were grouped just back of him.

“All ready, boys,” he said.

They lowered their shoulders, ready to rush the door as soon as it should be opened.

But, to their surprise, there was a slight scraping noise, and a man's face peered malevolently at them from a rectangular slit in the door.

Captain Harder jerked back.

The face was only partially visible through the narrow peephole. But there was a section of wrinkled forehead, shaggy, unkempt eyebrows, the bridge of a bony nose, and two eyes.

The eyes compelled interest.

They were red rimmed. They seemed to be perpetually irritated, until the irritation had seeped into the brain itself. And they glittered with a feverish light of unwholesome cunning.

“Psh! The police!” said the voice, sounding startlingly clear through the opening of the door.

“Open in the name of the law!” snapped Captain Harder.

“Psh!” said the man again.

There was the faintest flicker of motion from behind the little peephole in the door, and a sudden coughing explosion. A little cloud of white smoke mushroomed slowly out from the corner of the opening.

The panel slid into place with the smooth efficiency of a well oiled piece of machinery.

Captain Harder jerked out his service revolver.

“All together, boys. Take that door down!”

He gathered himself, then coughed, flung up his hand to his eyes.

“Gas!” he yelled. “Look out!”

The warning came too late for most of the squad of officers who were grouped about that door. The tear gas, a new and deadly kind which seemed so volatile as to make it mix instantly with the atmosphere, spread through the corridor. Men were blinded, staggering about, groping their way, crashing into one another.

The panel in the door slid back again. The leering, malevolent features twisted into a hoarse laugh.

Captain Harder flung up his revolver and fired at the sound of that demoniac laughter.

The bullet thudded into the door.

The panel slid shut.

Sid Rodney had flung his arm about the waist of Ruby Orman at the first faint suggestion of mushrooming fumes.

“Back, back. It may be deadly!”

She fought against him.

“Let me go! I’ve got to cover this!”

But he swept her from her feet, flung her to his shoulder, sprinted down the hallways of the house. A servant gazed at them from a lower floor, scowling. Men were running, shouting questions at each other, stamping up and down stairs. The entire atmosphere of the house took on a peculiarly acrid odor.

Sid Rodney got the girl to an upper window on the windward side of the house. Fresh air was blowing in in a cooling stream.

“Did it get your eyes?”

“No. I’m going back.”

Sid held her.

“Don’t be foolish. There’s going to be something doing around here, and you and I have got to have our eyes where they can see something.”

She fought against him.

“Oh, I *hate* you! You’re so domineering, so cocksure of yourself.”

Abruptly, he let her go.

“If you feel that way,” he said, “go ahead.”

She jerked back and away. She looked at him with eyes that were flaming with emotion. Sid Rodney turned back toward the window. Her eyes softened in expression, but there was a flaming spot in each cheek.

“Why *will* you persist in treating me like a child?”

He made no effort to answer the question.

She turned back toward the end of the hallway, where the scientist had maintained his secret laboratory with the door that held the sliding panel.

Men were struggling blindly about that door. Others were wrapping their eyes in wet towels. Here and there a figure groped its way about the corridor, clutching at the sides of the banister at the head of the stairs, feeling of the edges of the walls.

Suddenly, the entire vision swam before her eyes, grew blurred. She felt something warm trickling down her cheek. Abruptly her vision left her. Her eyes streamed moisture.

“Sid!” she called. “Oh, Sid!”

He was at her side in an instant. She felt the strong tendons of his arm, the supporting bulk of his shoulder, and then she was swung toward the window where the fresh air streamed into the house.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Now it’s got me.”

“It probably won’t bother you very long. You didn’t get much of a dose of it. Hold your eyes open if you can, and face the breeze. They’ll have the house cleared of the fumes in a few minutes.”

There was the sound of a siren from the outer street, the clang of a gong.

“Firemen to clear the house,” said Sid.

They stood there, shoulder to shoulder, cheek to cheek, letting the fresh morning breeze fan their faces. Out in the yard were hurrying shadows. Men came running to stations of vantage, carrying sawed-off shotguns. More cars sired their way to the curb. Spectators gathered.

Electric fans were used to clear the corridor of the gas. Men were brought up carrying bars and jimmys. They attacked the door. Captain Harder's eyes were still disabled, as were the eyes of the others who had stood before that door.

Sid Rodney touched the girl's shoulder.

"They're getting ready to smash in the door. Can you see now?"

She nodded.

"I think they've got the hallway pretty well cleared of gas. Let's go and see what happens."

She patted his arm.

"Sid, you're just like a big brother—some one to take care of me, some one to scold; but I like you a lot."

"Just as you would a brother?" he asked.

"Just exactly."

"Thanks," he said, and the disappointment of his voice was lost in the sound of splintering wood as the door swung back on its hinges.

They stared into a great laboratory and experimenting room. It was a scene of havoc. Wreckage of bottles, equipment and apparatus was strewn about the room. It looked as though some one had taken an ax and ruthlessly smashed things right and left.

Here, too, was another room without windows. Such light as there was in the room was artificial. The ventilation came through grilles which were barred with heavy iron. It was a room upon which it was impossible to spy.

There was no trace of Albert Crome, the man whose malevolent face had been thrust through the aperture in the doorway.

The police crowded into the room.

Bottles of various acids had been smashed, and the pools upon the floor seethed and bubbled, gave forth acrid, throat-stinging fumes. In a cage by the door there were three white rats. These rats were scampering about, shrilling squeaky protests.

There was no other sign of life left in that room, save the hulking shoulders of the policemen who moved about in a dazed manner.

Captain Harder's voice bellowed instructions. He was blinded, but he was receiving reports from a detective who stood at his side and giving a rapid summary of conditions in the room.

"He's escaped some way. There's a secret passage out of this room. Get the guards about the place to establish a dead-line. Let no man through unless he has a pass signed by me. Those instructions are not to be varied or changed under any circumstances . . ."

A man approached the officer.

"You're wanted on the telephone, captain. I can plug in an extension here in the laboratory."

A servant, surly-faced, resentful, impassively placed a telephone extension in the hand of Captain Harder, plugged in the wires.

The blinded officer raised the receiver to his ear.

“Yeah?” he said.

There came a rasping series of raucous notes, then the shrill cackle of metallic laughter and the click which announced the party at the other end of the line had hung up.

Captain Harder started fiddling with the hook of the receiver in a frantic effort to get central.

“Hello, hello. This is Captain Harder. There was a call just came through to me on this line. Trace it. Try and locate it . . . What’s that? No call? He said he was calling from a down town drug store . . . All right.”

The captain hung up the receiver.

“Well, boys, I guess he’s given us the slip. That was his voice, all right. He was calling from a down town drug store, he said. Told me to look in the northeast corner of the room and I’d find a secret passage leading down into his garage. Said he ran right out in his car without any trouble at all. He’s laughing at us.”

One of the men picked his way through the wreckage of the room to the northeast corner. The others shuffled forward. Broken glass crunched under the soles of their feet as they moved.

CHAPTER V. A FANTASTIC SECRET.

The man who was bending over the wainscoting emitted a triumphant shout.

“Here it is!”

He gave a pull, and a section of the wall slid back, disclosing an oblong opening.

Captain Harder was cursing as a detective led him toward this oblong.

“I’m blinded . . . the outer guard let him slip through! What sort of boobs are we, anyhow? I thought I had this place guarded. Who was watching the outside? Herman, wasn’t it? Get me that guy. I’ve got things to say to him!”

Men went down the steep flight of stairs which led from that secret exit, and came to the garage. Here were several cars, neatly lined up, ready for instant use, also several vacant spaces where additional cars could be kept.

“Big enough!” grunted one of the men.

Sid Rodney had an idea.

“Look here, captain, it took time to smash up that laboratory.”

Captain Harder was in no mood for theories.

“Not so much! What if it did?”

“Nothing. Only it took some little time. I don’t believe a man could have looked out of the door, recognized the police, turned loose the tear gas, and then smashed up this laboratory and still have time enough to make his escape by automobile from the garage.

“I happened to be looking out of a window after that tear gas was released, and I saw your additional guards start to arrive . . .”

Captain Harder interrupted. He was bellowing like a bull.

“What a bunch of boobs we are!” he yelled at the men who had clustered around him in a circle. “He didn’t get away at all. He stayed behind to smash up the laboratory! Then he sneaked out and telephoned me from some place in the house. No wonder central couldn’t trace the call.

“Look around, you guys, for another exit from this laboratory. And keep those electric fans going. I don’t trust this bird. He’s likely to flood a lot of poison gas through that ventilating system of his . . . I’m commencing to get so I can see a little bit. Be all right in a few minutes, I hope.”

The men scattered, examining the wainscoting.

“Here we are, captain!” called one of the men. “Take a look at this. Something here, right enough, but I can’t just figure how it works . . . Wait a minute. That’s it!”

Something clicked as the officer stepped back. A section of the wainscoting swung open, revealing a passage of about the height of a man crawling on all fours.

“Volunteers,” said Captain Harder. “Damn these eyes! I’m going myself.”

And he approached the passageway.

There was a stabbing burst of flame, the rattle of a machine gun, and a withering hail of bullets vomited from out of the passageway.

Captain Harder staggered backward, his right arm dangling at his side. The man who had been next to him dropped to the floor, and it needed no second glance to tell that the man was dead, even before he hit the floor.

The walls of the laboratory echoed to the crash of gunfire. Policemen, flinging themselves upon the floor, fired into the yawning darkness of that oblong hole in the wall. Here and there, riot guns belched their buckshot into the passageway.

There was the sound of the mocking laughter, another spurt of machine gun fire, then silence.

Captain Harder had his coat off, was groping with his left hand for the location of the two bullet holes in his right arm and shoulder.

“Reckon I’m going to be an ambulance case, boys. Don’t risk anything in there. Try gas.”

The captain turned, groped for the door, staggered, fell. Blood spurted from the upper wound, which had evidently severed an artery.

Men grabbed him, carried him to the head of the stairs where ambulance men met them with a stretcher. Officers continued to keep up a fire upon the passageway. A man brought in a basket containing hand grenades and tear gas bombs. The pin was pulled from a tear gas bomb. The hissing of the escaping gas sounded plainly while the men on the floor held their fire.

The man who carried the gas bomb ran along the side of the wainscoting, flung the bomb into the opening. It hit with a thud, rolled over and over.

There was no sound emanating from the passageway, save the faint hiss of the gas.

“Give him a dose of it and see how he likes it,” said one of the men.

As though to answer his question, from the very vicinity of the tear gas bomb, came a glittering succession of ruddy flashes, the rattle of a machine gun.

One of the men who was on the floor gave a convulsive leap, then quivered and was still. A hail of bullets splintered through the glass equipment which had been broken and scattered about. An officer tried to roll out of the way. The stream of bullets overtook him. He jumped, twitched, shivered, and the deadly stream passed on.

Sid Rodney grasped a hand grenade from the basket, pulled the pin, jumped to his feet.

The machine gun whirled in his direction.

“He’s got a gas mask!” yelled one of the men who was crouched behind the shelter of an overturned bench.

Sid Rodney threw the grenade with all of the hurtling force of a professional baseball pitcher.

The missile hit squarely in the center of the opening, thudded against something that emitted a yell of pain.

The machine gun became silent, then stuttered into another burst of firing.

A livid sheet of orange flame seared its way out into the room. The whole side of the place seemed to lift, then settle. A deafening report ripped out the glass of windows in one side of the house. Plaster dust sprayed the air.

The oblong hole from which the machine gun had been coughing its message of death vanished into a tumbled mass of wreckage.

Men coughed from the acrid powder fumes, the irritating plaster dust.

“Believe that got him,” said one of the men, rolling out from the shelter, holding a riot gun at ready as he rushed toward the tumbled mass of wreckage.

A human foot was protruding from between a couple of splintered two-by-fours. About it eddied wisps of smoke.

The officer was joined by others. Hands pulled the rafters and studs to one side. The body of a mangled man came sliding out.

From the blackness of that hole came the orange flicker of ruddy flame, the first faint cracklings of fire.

The mangled body had on what was left of a gas mask. The torso was torn by the force of the explosion. Parts of a machine gun were buried in the quivering flesh. But the features could be recognized.

Albert Crome, the crack-brained scientist, had gone to his doom.

Men rushed up with fire-fighting apparatus. The flames were swiftly extinguished. The wreckage was cleared away. Men crawled into that little cubicle where the scientist had prepared a place of refuge.

It was a little room, steel-lined, fitted with a desk, a table and a cot. Also there was a telephone extension in the room, and an electrical transformer, wires from which ran to a box-like affair, from the interior of which came a peculiar humming sound.

“Leave it alone until the bombing squad gets here. They’ll know if it’s some sort of an infernal machine. In the meantime let’s get out of here.”

The sergeant who gave the orders started pushing the men back.

Even as he spoke, there was a glow of ruddy red light from the interior of the box-like affair into which the electric wires ran.

“Better disconnect those wires,” called one of the men.

The sergeant nodded, stepped forward, located the point of contact, reached to jerk one of the wires loose.

“Look out, don’t short circuit ’em!”

Sid Rodney had crawled back out of the passage. The sergeant was tugging at the wires. They came loose, touched. There was a flash from the interior of the box-like machine, a humming, and then a burst of flame that died away and left a dense white smoke trailing out in sizzling clouds.

“You’ve short circuited the thing. That other wire must have been a ground and a button . . .”

But Sid Rodney was not listening.

His eyes happened to have been upon the cage of white rats as the voice called its warning. Those rats were scampering about the cage in the hysteria of panic.

Abruptly they ceased all motion, stood for a split fraction of a second as though they had been cast in porcelain. Then they shrank upon themselves.

Sid Rodney screamed a warning.

Men looked at him, followed the direction of his pointing forefinger, and saw an empty cage.

“What is it?” asked a detective.

Sid Rodney’s face was white, the eyes bulging.

“The rats!”

“They got away. Somebody turned ’em loose, or the explosion knocked the cage around or blew a door open,” said the officer. “Don’t worry about them.”

“No, no. I saw them melt and disappear. They just dissolved into the atmosphere.”

The officer snickered.

“Don’t bother yourself about rats,” he said. “We’ve got work to do. Gotta find out what’s going on here, and we’ve gotta locate Dangerfield.”

He turned away.

Sid Rodney went over to the cage. He grasped the metal wires. They were so cold to his touch that the slight moisture on the tips of his fingers stuck to them.

He jerked one hand, and a bit of skin from the tips of his fingers pulled away.

He noticed a little pan of water which had been in the cage. It was filmed with ice. He touched the wires of the cage again. They were not so cold this time.

The film of ice was dissolving from the pan of water in the cage.

But there were no more white rats. They had disappeared, gone, utterly vanished.

Sid Rodney examined the cage. The door was tightly closed, held in place with a catch. There was no possible loophole of escape for those white rats. They had been caged, and the cage held them until, suddenly, they had gone into thin air.

There was a touch on his shoulder.

“What is it, Sid?”

Sid Rodney had to lick his dry lips before he dared to trust his voice.

“Look here, Ruby, did you ever hear of absolute zero?”

She looked at him with a puzzled frown, eyes that were dark with concern.

“Sid, are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, yes! I’m talking about things scientific. Did you ever hear of absolute zero?”

She nodded.

“Yes, of course. I remember we had it in school. It’s the point at which there is absolutely no temperature. Negative two hundred and seventy-three degrees centigrade, isn’t it? Seems to me I had to remember a lot of stuff about it at one time. But what has it got to do with what’s been going on here?”

“A lot,” said Sid Rodney. “Listen to this:

“Dangerfield disappears. He’s located in a room. There’s no such thing as escape from that room. Yet, before our eyes—or, rather, before our ears—he vanishes. His watch is stopped. The ink in his fountain pen is frozen. His clothes remain behind.

“All right, that’s an item for us to remember.

“Then next come these white rats. I’m actually looking at them when they cease to move, dwindle in size and are gone, as though they’d been simply snuffed out of existence.

“Now you can see the ice film still on the water there. You can see what the wires of the cage did to my fingers. Of course, it happened so quickly that these things didn’t get so awfully cold . . . but I’ve an idea we’ve seen a demonstration of absolute zero. And if we have, thank heavens, that dastardly criminal is dead!”

The girl looked at him, blinked her eyes, looked away, then back at him.

“Sid,” she said, “you’re talking nonsense. There’s something wrong with you. You’re upset.”

“Nothing of the sort! Just because it’s never been done, you think it can’t be done. Suppose, twenty years ago, some one had led you into a room and showed you a modern radio. You’d have sworn it was a fake because the thing was simply impossible. As it was, your mind was prepared for the radio and what it would do. You accepted it gradually, until it became a part of your everyday life.

“Now, look at this thing scientifically.

“We know that heat is merely the result of internal molecular motion. The more heat, the more motion. Therefore, the more heat, the more volume. For instance, a piece of red-hot metal takes up more space than a piece of ice-cold metal. Heat expands. Cold contracts.

“Now, ever since these things began to be known, scientists have tried to determine what is known as *absolute* zero. It’s the place at which all molecular motion would cease. Then we begin to wonder what would happen to matter at that temperature.

“It’s certain that the molecules themselves are composed of atoms, the atoms of electrons, that the amount of actual solid in any given bit of matter is negligible if we could lump it all together. It’s the motion of the atoms, electrons and molecules that gives what we see as substance.

“Now, we have only to stop that motion and matter would utterly disappear, as we are accustomed to see it.”

The girl was interested, but failed to grasp the full import of what Rodney was telling her.

“But when the body started to shrink it would generate a heat of its own,” she objected. “Push a gas into a smaller space and it gets hotter than it was. That temperature runs up fast. I remember having a man explain artificial refrigeration. He said . . .”

“Of course,” interrupted Sid impatiently. “That’s elemental. And no one has ever reached an absolute zero as yet. But suppose one did? And remember this, all living matter is composed of cells.

“Now, this man hasn’t made inanimate matter disappear. But he seems to have worked out some method, perhaps by a radio wave or some etheric disturbance, by which certain specially prepared bodies vanish into thin air, leaving behind very low temperatures.

“Probably there is something in the very life force itself which combines with this ray to eliminate life, temperature, substance. Think of what that means!”

She sighed and shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Sid, but I just can’t follow you. They’ll find Dangerfield somewhere or other. Probably there was some secret passage in that room. The fact that there were two here indicates that there must be others in that room.

“You’ve been working on this thing until it’s got you groggy. Go home and roll in for a few hours’ sleep—please.”

He grimly shook his head.

“I know I’m working on a live lead.”

She moved away from him.

“Be good, Sid. I’ve got to telephone in a story to the rewrite, and I’ve got to write some sob-sister articles. They will be putting out extras. I think this is all that’s going to develop here.”

Sid Rodney watched her move away.

He shrugged his shoulders, turned his attention to the empty cage in which the white rats had been playing about.

His jaw was thrust forward, his lips clamped in a firm, straight line.

CHAPTER VI. STILL THEY VANISH.

Captain Harder lay on the hospital bed, his grizzled face drawn and gray. The skin seemed strangely milky and the eyes were tired. But the indomitable spirit of the man kept him driving forward.

Sid Rodney sat on the foot of the bed, smoking a cigarette.

Captain Harder had a telephone receiver strapped to his left ear. The line was connected directly with headquarters. Over it, he detailed such orders as he had to his men.

Between times he talked with the detective.

The receiver rattled with metallic noises. Captain Harder ceased talking to listen to the message, grunted.

He turned to Sid Rodney.

"They've literally torn the interior out of that room where we found the empty clothes," he said. "There isn't the faintest sign of a passageway. There isn't any exit, not a one. It's solid steel, lined with asbestos, backed with concrete. Evidently a room for experiments . . . Oh, Lord, that shoulder feels cold!

"Hello, here's something else."

The telephone receiver again rattled forth a message.

Captain Harder's eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets.

"What?" he yelled.

The receiver continued to rattle forth words.

"Well, don't touch a thing. Take photographs. Get the finger-print men to work on the case. Look at the watch and see if it stopped, and, if it did, find out what time it stopped."

He sighed, turned from the mouthpiece of the telephone to stare at Sid Rodney with eyes that held something akin to panic in them.

"They've found the clothes of Arthur Soloman, the banker!"

Sid Rodney frowned.

"The clothes?"

The officer sighed, nodded, weakly.

"Yes, the clothes."

"Where?"

"They were sitting at the steering wheel of Soloman's roadster. The car had skidded into the curb. The clothes are all filled out just as though there'd been a human occupant that had slipped out of them by melting into the thin air. The shoes are laced. One of the feet, or, rather, one of the empty shoes is on the brake pedal of the machine. The sleeves of the coat are hung over the wooden rim of the steering wheel. The collar's got a tie in it . . . Just the same as the way we found Dangerfield's clothes.

"One of the men found the roadster and reported. The squad that handled the Dangerfield case went out there on the jump . . ."

He broke off as the receiver started to rattle again.

He listened, frowned, grunted.

"Okay, go over everything with a fine-toothed comb," he said, and turned once more to Sid Rodney.

“The watch,” he said, “had stopped, and didn’t start running again until the officer took it out of the pocket and gave it just a little jar in so doing. The hands pointed to exactly thirteen minutes past ten o’clock.”

“That,” observed Rodney, “was more than two hours after Albert Crome had died, more than two hours after the disappearance of the white rats.”

Captain Harder rolled his head from side to side on the propped-up pile of pillows.

“Forget those white rats, Rodney. You’re just making a spectacular something that will frighten the public to death. God knows they’re going to be panicky enough as it is. I’d feel different about the thing if I thought there was anything to it.”

Rodney nodded, got up from the bed.

“Well, captain, when they told me you were keeping your finger on the job, I decided to run in and tell you, so you’d know as much about it as I do. But I tell you I *saw* those white rats vanish.”

The captain grinned.

“Seen ’em myself, Rodney, in a magician’s show. I’ve seen a woman vanish, seen another one sawed in two. I’ve even seen pink elephants walking along the foot of the bed—but that was in the old days.”

Sid Rodney matched his grin, patted the captain’s foot beneath the spotless white of the hospital bedspread.

“Take care of yourself, old timer, and don’t let this thing keep you from getting some sleep. You’ve lost some blood and you’ll need it. Where were the banker’s clothes found?”

“Out on Seventy-first and Boyle Streets.”

“They leaving them there?”

“For the time being. I’m going to have the car finger-printed from hood to gas tank. And I’m having the boys form a line and close off the street. We’re going to go all over the thing with a fine-toothed comb, looking for clews.

“If you want to run out there you’ll find Selby in charge. Tell him I said you were to have any of the news, and if you find out anything more, you’ll tell me, won’t you?”

“Sure, Cap. Sure.”

“Okay. So long.”

And Captain Harder heaved a tremulous sigh.

Sid Rodney walked rapidly down the corridor of the hospital, entered his car, drove at once to Seventy-first near where it intersected Boyle.

There was a curious crowd, being kept back by uniformed officers.

Sid showed his credentials, went through the lines, found Detective Sergeant Selby, and received all of the latest news.

“We kept trying to locate Soloman at his home. He came in, all right, and his wife told him we were trying to get him. He went to the telephone, presumably to call police headquarters, and the telephone rang just as he was reaching for the receiver.

“He said ‘hello,’ and then said a doubtful ‘yes.’ His wife heard that much of the conversation. Then she went into another room. After that she heard Soloman hang up the receiver, and walk into the hall where he reached for his hat and coat.

“He didn’t tell her a word about where he was going. Just walked out, got in his car and drove away. She supposed he was coming to police headquarters.”

Sid lit a cigarette.

“Find out who he called?”

“Can’t seem to get a lead on it.”

“Was he excited?”

“His wife thought he was mad at something. He slammed the door as he went out.”

“These the clothes he was wearing?”

“Yes.”

Sid Rodney nodded.

“Looks just like another of those things. Thanks, Selby. I’ll be seeing you.”

“Keep sober,” said the police detective.

Sid Rodney drove to Arthur Soloman’s residence.

Newspaper reporters, photographers and detectives were there before him. Mrs. Soloman was staring in dazed confusion, answering questions mechanically, posing for photographs.

She was a dried-out wisp of a woman, tired-eyed, docile with that docility which comes to one whose spirit has been completely crushed by the constant inhibitions imposed by a domineering mate.

Sid Rodney asked routine questions and received routine answers. He went through the formula of investigation, but there was a gnawing uneasiness in his mind. Some message seemed to be hammering at the borderline of his consciousness, as elusive as a dream, as important as a forgotten appointment.

Sid Rodney walked slightly to one side, tried to get away from the rattle of voices, the sputter of flash lights as various photographs were made.

So far there were only a few who appreciated the full significance of those vacant clothes, propped up behind the steering wheel of the empty automobile.

The telephone rang, rang with the insistent repetition of mechanical disinterest. Some one finally answered. There was a swirl of motion, a beckoning finger.

“Rodney, it’s for you.”

Vaguely wondering, Rodney placed the receiver to his ear. There was something he wanted to think about, something he wanted to do, and do at once. Yet it was evading his mind. The telephone call was just another interruption which would prevent sufficient concentration to get the answer he sought.

“Hello!” he rasped, and his voice did not conceal his irritation.

It was Ruby Orman on the line, and at the first sound of her voice Sid snapped to attention. He knew, suddenly, what was bothering him.

Ruby should have been present at the Soloman house, getting sob-sister stuff on the fatherless children, the dazed widow who was trying to carry on, hoping against hope.

“What is it, Ruby?”

Her words rattled swiftly over the wire, sounded as a barrage of machine gunfire.

“Listen, Sid; get this straight, because I think it’s important. I’m not over there at Soloman’s because I’m running down something that I think is a hot lead. I want you to tell me something, and it may be frightfully important. What would a powder, rubbed in the hair, have to do with the disappearance, if it was the sort of disappearance you meant?”

Sid Rodney grunted and registered irritation.

“What are you doing, Ruby—kidding me?”

“No, no. Tell me. It’s a matter of life and death.”

“I don’t know, Ruby. Why?”

“Because I happen to know that Soloman had a little powder dusted on his hair. It was just a flick of the wrist that put it there. I didn’t think much of it at the time. It looked like a cigarette ash, but I noticed that it seemed to irritate him, and he kept scratching at his head. Did you notice?”

“No,” snapped Sid, interested. “What makes you think it had anything to do with what happened afterward?”

“Because I got to investigating about that powder, and wondering, and I casually mentioned the theory you had, and I felt a prickling in my scalp, and then I knew that some of that same powder had been put in my hair. I wonder if . . .”

Sid Rodney was at instant attention.

“Where are you now?”

“Over in my apartment. I’ve got an appointment. It’s important. You can’t come over. If it’s what I think it is, the mystery is going to be solved. You’re right. It’s absolute zero, and—My God, Sid, it’s getting cold . . .”

And there was nothing further, nothing save the faint sounds of something thump-thump-thumping—the receiver, dangling from the cord, thumping against the wall.

Rodney didn’t stop for his hat. He left the room on the run. A newspaper reporter saw him, called to him, ran to follow. Sid didn’t stop. He vaulted into his car, and his foot was pressing the starter before he had grabbed the wheel.

He floor-boarded the throttle, and skidded at the corner with the car lurching far over against the springs, the tires shrieking a protest.

He drove like a crazy man, getting to the apartment where Ruby Orman spent the time when she was not sob-sistering for her newspaper. He knew he could beat the elevator up the three flights of stairs, and took them two at a time.

The door of the apartment was closed. Sid banged his fist upon it in a peremptory knock and then rattled the knob.

“Oh, Ruby!” he called softly.

A canary was singing in the apartment. Aside from that, there was no faintest suggestion of sound.

Sid turned the knob, pushed his shoulder against the door. It was unlocked. He walked into the apartment. The canary perked its head upon one side, chirped a welcome, then fluttered nervously to the other side of the cage.

Sid strode through the little sitting room to the dining room and kitchenette. The telephone was fastened to the wall here.

But the receiver was not dangling. It had been neatly replaced on its hook. But there was a pile of garments just below the telephone which made Sid stagger against the wall for a brief second before he dared to examine them.

He knew that skirt, that businesslike jacket, knew the sash, the shoes . . . He stepped forward.

They were Ruby’s clothes, all right, lying there in a crumpled heap on the floor.

And at the sight Sid Rodney went berserk.

He flung himself from room to room, ripping open closet doors. For a wild moment he fought back his desire to smash things, tear clothes, rip doors from hinges.

Then he got a grip on himself, sank into a chair at the table, lit a cigarette with trembling hand. He must think.

Soloman had had something put in his hair, a powder which irritated . . . Ruby had seen that powder flicked there—a casual gesture, probably, like a cigarette ash. The powder had irritated . . . Ruby had told some one person something of Rodney’s theory. Powder had been applied to her hair. . . . She had known of it . . . She had telephoned . . . She had an appointment . . . And it had become cold . . . Then the clothes at the foot of the telephone . . .

And the chair in which Sid Rodney had been sitting was flung back upon its shivering legs as he leaped from the table—flung back by the violence of the motion with which he had gone into action.

He gained the door in three strides, took the stairs on the run, climbed into his automobile and drove like some mythical dust jinni scurrying forward on the crest of a March wind.

He whizzed through street intersections, disregarded alike traffic laws and arterial stops, swung down a wide street given over to exclusive residences, and came to a stop before a large house constructed along the conventional lines of English architecture.

He jumped from the machine, ran rapidly up the steps, held his finger against the doorbell.

A man in livery came to the door, regarded him with grave yet passive disapproval.

“This is the residence of P. H. Dangerfield?”

“Yes.”

“His secretary, Mr. Sands, is here?”

“Yes.”

“I want to see him,” said Sid, and started to walk into the door.

The servant’s impassive face changed expression by not so much as a flicker, but he moved his broad bulk in such a manner as to stand between the detective and the stairs.

“If you’ll pardon me, sir, the library to the left is the reception room. If you will give me your name and wait there I’ll tell Mr. Sands that you are here. Then, *if* he wishes to see you, you will be notified.”

There was a very perceptible emphasis upon the word “if.”

Sid Rodney glanced over the man’s shoulder at the stairs.

“He’s upstairs, I take it?”

“Yes, sir, in the office, sir.”

Sid Rodney started up.

The servant moved with swiftness, once more blocking the way.

“I beg your pardon, sir!”

His eyes were hard, his voice firm.

Sid Rodney shook his head impatiently, as a fighter shakes the perspiration out of his eyes, as a charging bull shakes aside some minor obstruction.

“To hell with that stuff! I haven’t got time!”

And Sid Rodney pushed the servant to one side.

The man made a futile grab at Sid’s coat.

“Not so fast . . .”

Sid didn’t even look back. “Faster, then!” he said, with a cold grin.

The arm flashed around and down. The liveried servant spun, clutched at the cloth, missed, and went backward down the few steps to the landing.

Rodney was halfway up the stairs by the time the servant had scrambled over to hands and knees.

“Oh, Sands!” called Rodney.

There was no answer.

Rodney grunted, tried a door—a bedroom; another door—a bath; another door—the office.

It seemed vacant. A desk, a swivel chair, a leather-covered couch, several sectional bookcases, some luxuriously comfortable chairs, a filing case or two . . . and Sid Rodney jumped back with a startled exclamation.

A suit of clothes was spread out on the couch.

He ran toward it.

It was the checkered suit Sands had been wearing at the time of the interview at police headquarters. It was quite empty, was arranged after the manner of a suit spread out upon the couch in the same position a man would have assumed had he been resting.

Rodney bent over it.

There was no necktie around the collar of the shirt. The sleeves of the shirt were in the coat. The vest was buttoned over the shirt. The shoes were on the floor by the side of the couch, arranged as though they had been taken off by some man about to lie down.

CHAPTER VII. A FIEND IS UNMASKED.

Sid Rodney went through the pockets with swift fingers. He found a typewritten note upon a bit of folded paper. It bore his name and he opened and read it with staring eyes.

Sid Rodney, Ruby Orman and Bob Sands, each one to be visited by the mysterious agency which has removed the others. This is no demand for money. This is a sentence of death.

Sid Rodney put the paper in his own pocket, took the watch from the suit, checked the time with the time of his own watch. They were identical as far as the position of the hands was concerned.

Sid Rodney replaced the watch, started through the rest of the pockets, found a cigarette case, an automatic lighter, a knife, fountain pen and pencil, a ring of keys, a wallet.

He opened the wallet.

It was crammed with bills, bills of large denomination. There were some papers as well, a letter in feminine handwriting, evidently written by an old friend, a railroad folder, a prospectus of an Oriental tour.

There was another object, an oblong of yellow paper, printed upon, with blanks left for data and signature. It was backed with carbon compound so as to enable a duplicate impression to be made, and written upon with pencil.

Sid studied it.

It was an express receipt for the shipment of a crate of machinery from George Huntley to Samuel Grove at 6372 Milpas Street. The address of the sender was given as 753 Washington Boulevard.

Sid puckered his forehead.

No. 753 Washington Boulevard was the address of Albert Crome.

Sid opened the cigarette case. Rather a peculiar odor struck his nostrils. There was a tobacco odor, also another odor, a peculiar, nostril-puckering odor.

He broke open one of the cigarettes.

So far as he could determine, the tobacco was of the ordinary variety, although there was a peculiar smell to it.

The lighter functioned perfectly. The fountain pen gave no hint of having been out of condition. Yet the clothes were as empty as an empty meal sack.

Sid Rodney walked to the door.

He found himself staring into the black muzzle of a huge revolver.

“Stand back, sir. I’m sorry, sir, but there have been strange goings on here, sir, and you’ll get your hands up, or, by the Lord, sir, I shall let you have it, right where you’re thickest, sir.”

It was the grim-faced servant, his eyes like steel, his mouth stretched across his face in a taut line of razor-thin determination.

Sid laughed.

“Forget it. I’m in a hurry, and . . .”

“When I count three, sir, I shall shoot . . .”

There was a leather cushion upon one of the chairs. Sid sat down upon that leather cushion, abruptly.

“Oh, come, let’s be reasonable.”

“Get your hands up.”

“Shucks, what harm can I do. I haven’t got a gun, and I only came here to see if I couldn’t . . .”

“One . . . two . . .”

Rodney raised his weight, flung himself to one side, reached around, grasped the leather cushion and flung it. He did it all in one sweeping, scrambling motion.

The gun roared for the first time as he flung himself to one side. It roared the second time as the spinning cushion hurtled through the air.

Sid was conscious of the mushrooming of the cushion, the scattering of hair, the blowing of bits of leather. The cushion smacked squarely upon the end of the gun, blocking the third shot. Before there could have been a fourth, Sid had gone forward, tackling low. The servant crashed to the floor.

It was no time for etiquette, the hunting of neutral corners, or any niceties of sportsmanship. The stomach of the servant showed for a moment, below the rim of the leather cushion, and Sid’s fist was planted with nice precision and a degree of force which was sufficiently adequate, right in the middle of that stomach.

The man doubled, gasped, strangled for air.

Sid Rodney took the gun from the nerveless fingers, scaled it down the hall where it could do no harm, and made for the front door. He went out on the run.

Once in his car, he started for the address which had been given on the receipt of the express company as the destination of the parcel of machinery, Samuel Grove at 6372 Milpas Street. It was a slender clew, yet it was the only one that Sid possessed.

He made the journey at the same breakneck speed that had characterized his other trips. The car skidded to the curb in front of a rather sedate looking house which was in a section of the city where exclusive residences had slowly given way to cleaning establishments, tailor shops, small industries, cheap boarding houses.

Sid ran up the steps, tried the bell.

There was no response. He turned the knob of the door. It was locked. He started to turn away when his ears caught the light flutter of running steps upon an upper floor.

The steps were as swiftly agile as those of a fleeing rabbit. There followed, after a brief interval, the sound of pounding feet, a smothered scream, then silence.

Sid rang the bell again.

Again there was no answer.

There was a window to one side of the door. Sid tried to raise it, and found that it was unlocked. The sash slid up, and Sid clambered over the sill, dropped to the floor of a cheaply furnished living room.

He could hear the drone of voices from the upper floor, and he walked to the door, jerked it open, started up the stairs. Some instinct made him proceed cautiously, yet the stairs creaked under the weight of his feet.

He was halfway up the stairs when the talking ceased.

Once more he heard the sounds of a brief struggle, a struggle that was terminated almost as soon as it had begun. Such a struggle might come from a cat that has caught a mouse, lets it

almost get away, then swoops down upon it with arched back and needle-pointed claws.

Then there was a man's voice, and he could hear the words:

"Just a little of the powder on your hair, my sweet, and it will be almost painless . . . You know too much, you and your friend. But it'll all be over now. I knew he would be suspecting me, so I left my clothes where they'd fool him. And I came and got you.

"You washed that first powder out of your hair, didn't you, sweet? But this time you won't do it. Yes, my sweet, I knew Crome was mad. But I played on his madness to make him do the things I wanted done. And then, when he had become quite mad, I stole one of his machines.

"He killed Dangerfield for me, and that death covered up my own short accounts. I killed the banker because he was such a cold-blooded fish . . . Cold-blooded, that's good."

There was a chuckle, rasping, mirthless, the sound of scraping objects upon the floor, as though some one tried to struggle ineffectively. Then the voice again.

"I left a note in my clothes, warning of the deaths of you, of myself, and of that paragon of virtue, Sid Rodney, who gave you the idea in the first place. Later on, I'll start shaking down the millionaires, but no one will suspect me. They'll think I'm dead.

"It's painless. Just the first chill, then death. Then the cells dissolve, shrink into a smaller and smaller space, and then disappear. I didn't get too much of it from Crome, just enough to know generally how it works. It's sort of an etheric wave, like radio and X-ray, and the living cells are the only ones that respond so far. When you've rubbed this powder into the hair . . ."

Sid Rodney had been slowly advancing. A slight shadow of his progress moved along the baseboard of the hall.

"What's that?" snapped the voice, losing its gloating monotone, crisply aggressive.

Sid Rodney stepped boldly up the last of the stairs, into the upper corridor.

A man was coming toward him. It was Sands.

"Hello, Sands," he said. "What's the trouble here?"

Sands was quick to take advantage of the lead offered. His right hand dropped to the concealment of his hip, but he smiled affably.

"Well, well, if it isn't my friend Sid Rodney, the detective! Tell me, Rodney, have you got anything new? If you haven't, I have. Look here. I want you to see something . . ."

And he jumped forward.

But Rodney was prepared. In place of being caught off guard and balance, he pivoted on the balls of his feet and snapped home a swift right.

The blow jarred Sands back. The revolver which he had been whipping from his pocket shot from his hand in a glittering arc and whirled to the floor.

Rodney sprang forward.

The staggering man flung up his hands, lashed out a vicious kick. Then, as he got his senses cleared from the effects of the blow, he whirled and ran down the hall, dashed into a room and closed the door.

Rodney heard the click of the bolt as the lock was turned.

"Ruby!" he called. "Ruby!"

She ran toward him, attired in flowing garments of colored silk, her hair streaming, eyes glistening.

"Quick!" she shouted. "Is there any of that powder in your hair? Do you feel an itching of the scalp?"

He shook his head.

“Tell me what’s happened.”

“Get him first,” she said.

Sid Rodney picked up the revolver which he had knocked from the hand of the man he hunted, advanced toward the door.

“Keep clear!” yelled Sands from behind that door.

Rodney stepped forward.

“Surrender, or I’ll start shooting through the door!” he threatened.

There was a mocking laugh, and something in that laugh warned Rodney; for he leaped back, just as the panels of the door splintered under a hail of lead which came crashing from the muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun.

“I’m calling the police!” shouted Ruby Orman.

Sid saw that she was at a telephone, placing a call.

Then he heard a humming noise from behind the door where Sands had barricaded himself. It was a high, buzzing note, such as is made by a high-frequency current meeting with resistance.

“Quick, Ruby! Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she said, and came to him. “I’ve called the police.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Just what you thought—absolute zero. Crome perfected the process by which any form of cell life could be made receptive to a certain peculiar etheric current. But there, had to be a certain chemical affinity first.

“He achieved this by putting a powder in the hair of his victims. The powder irritated the scalp, but it did something to the nerve ends which made them receptive to the current.

“I mentioned your theory to Sands. At the time I didn’t know about the powder. But I had noticed that when the banker was talking with Captain Harder, Sands had flipped some ashes from the end of his cigarette so that they had lit on the hair on the back of Soloman’s head, and that Soloman had started to rub at his head shortly afterward as though he had been irritated by an itching of the scalp.

“Then Sands made the same gesture while he was talking with me. He left. I felt an itching, and wondered. So I washed my head thoroughly. Then I thought I would leave my clothes where Sands could find them, make him think he’d eliminated me. I was not certain my suspicions were correct, but I was willing to take a chance. I called you to tell you, and then I felt a most awful chill. It started at the roots of my hair and seemed to drain the very warmth right out of my nerves.

“I guess the washing hadn’t removed all of that powder, just enough to keep me from being killed. I became unconscious. When I came to, I was in Sands’s car. I suppose he had dropped in to make certain his machine had done the work.

“You know the rest . . . But how did you know where to look for me?”

Rodney shook his head dubiously.

“I guess my brains must have been dead, or I’d have known long before. You see, the man who wrote the letters seemed to know everything that had taken place in Captain Harder’s office when we were called in to identify that last letter from Dangerfield.

“Yet there was no dictograph found there. It might have been something connected with television, or, more likely, it might have been because some one who was there was the one

who was writing those letters.

“If the story Sands had told had been true, the man who was writing the letters had listened in on what was going on in the captain’s office, had written the warning note, had known just where Sands was going to be in his automobile, and had tossed it in.

“That was pretty improbable. It was much more likely that Sands had slipped out long enough to have written the letter and then brought it in with that wild story about men crowding him to the curb.

“Then, again, Sands carefully managed to sneak away when Harder raided that loft building. He really did it to notify the crazy scientist that the hiding place had been discovered.

“Even before you telephoned, I should have known Sands was in with the scientist. Afterward, it was, of course, apparent. You had seen some powder placed in Soloman’s hair. That meant it must have been done when you were present. That narrowed the list of suspects to those who were also present.

“There were literally dozens of clues pointing to Sands. He was naturally sore at the banker for not coming through with the money. If they’d received it, they’d have killed Dangerfield anyhow. And Sands was to deliver that money. Simple enough for him to have pretended to drop the package into the receptacle, and simply gone on . . .”

A siren wailed.

There was a pound of surging feet on the stairs, blue-coated figures swarming over the place.

“He’s behind that door, boys,” said Rodney, “and he’s armed.”

“No use getting killed, men,” said the officer in charge. “Shoot the door down.”

Guns boomed into action. The lock twisted. The wood splintered and shattered. The door quivered, then slowly swung open as the wood was literally torn away from the lock.

Guns at ready, the men moved into the room.

They found a machine, very similar to the machine which had been found in the laboratory of the scientist. It had been riddled with gunfire.

They found an empty suit of clothes.

Rodney identified them as being the clothes Sands had worn when he last saw the man. The clothes were empty, and were cold to the touch. Around the collar, where there had been a little moisture, there was a rim of frost.

There was no outlet from the room, no chance for escape.

Ruby looked at Sid Rodney, nodded.

“He’s gone,” she said.

Rodney took her hand.

“Anyhow, sister, I got here in time.”

She smiled at him.

“Gee, Sid, let’s tie a can to that brother-and-sister stuff. I thought I had to fight love to make a career, but when I heard your steps on the stairs, just when I’d given up hope . . .”

“Can you make a report on what happened?” asked the sergeant, speaking over his shoulder, his head bent over the cold clothes on the floor.

There was no answer.

“I’m talkin’ to *you*,” called the sergeant.

Sid Rodney answered in muffled tones.

“Not right now,” he said. “I’m busy.”

THE END

[The end of *The Human Zero* by Erle Stanley Gardner]