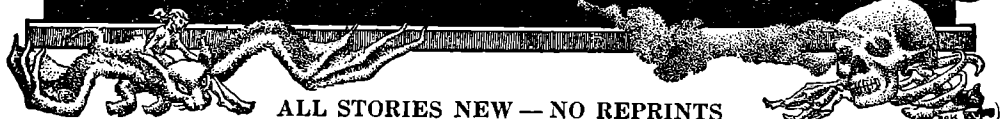


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

Cover by Matt. Fox

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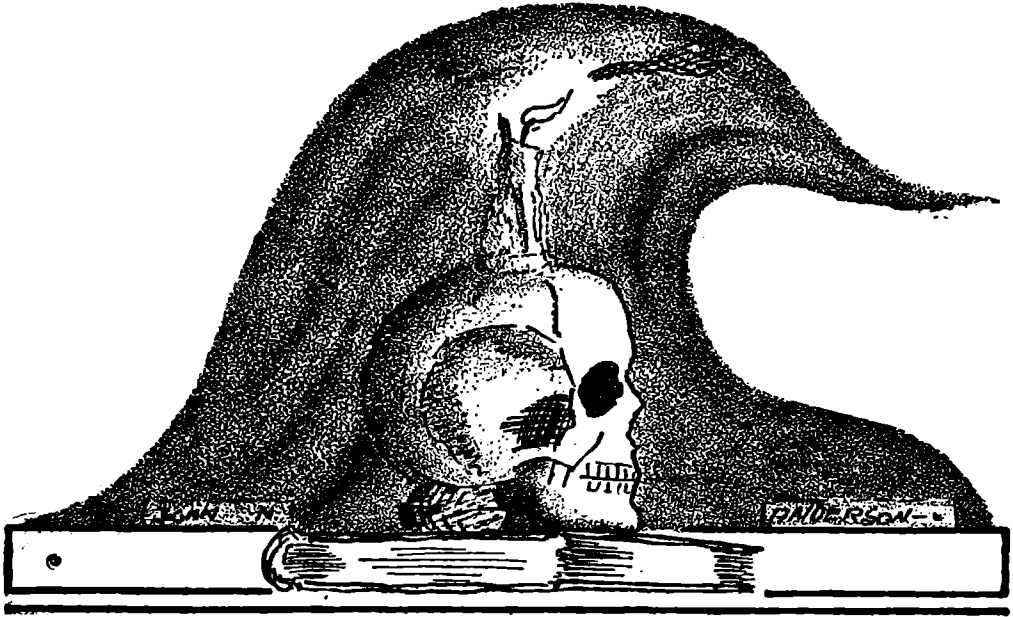
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It would be a push-over . . . everybody has something to hide.



Gordona's Skull

By Mary Elizabeth Counselman

JOE "FRESNO" TALLEY dropped his cigarette butt on the sidewalk and ground it out with his foot, careful not to step on it where the hole had worn through his shoesole. Absently he felt in the pocket of his shabby trousers, before remembering. No more cigarettes; that last one had been picked up out of the gutter, in front of a theatre whose twinkling marquee had once spelled out his name in lights a foot high. . . .

Fresno snarled deep in his throat. So what if he had taken a couple too many that night in Pittsburgh, when he was playing at the Roxy? So he had muffed a

card sleight, dropping the whole pack all over the stage, then fallen flat on his face trying to pick them up. Was that a crime? Was that any reason for his booking agent to be dodging him now, after telling him that seven cancellations in a row meant a magician was washed up? He'd show that crumb!

Digging a half-empty flask of cheap whiskey from his hip pocket, Fresno finished it at a gulp and shied the empty bottle at a scrawny gray cat, hunting for scraps in a nearby trashcan. The cat yowled and scampered out of range, limping. Fresno laughed nasally. Nothing wrong

with him; his hands didn't shake too much, or he couldn't have hit that mangey old. . . .

Shivering suddenly as the chill night wind cut through his loud striped shirt, he paused before a rickety old tenement where his aimlessly wandering feet had taken him. A sign beside the door read:

PROF. CORDONA
SPIRITUALIST
FREE SEANCE NIGHTLY
PRIVATE CONSULTATION,
\$2.00 (plus tax)

Fresno grinned at that last. Cripes! Were they even taxing the ghosts these days? His close-set hard little eyes, like two chips of onyx, slid over the sign thoughtfully, in a face that might have belonged to a race track tout or a smalltime racketeer. But he was no vag! Fresno drew himself up angrily, cursing under his breath as a passerby shoved a dime into his hand—but keeping the money. Crumbs, all of 'em! He'd show 'em! In the meantime, though, he was "at liberty", it was getting on toward three years since he had done a show and cashed a fat check, and a guy had to eat, didn't he? He couldn't sleep on a park bench, not in this weather.

Looking narrowly at the spiritualist's sign, he had an idea all at once how he could maybe latch onto a few bucks. These fake mediums were always on the dodge, even if they were operating with a fortune-teller's license. This "Prof. Cordona," whoever he was—it might be easy to shake

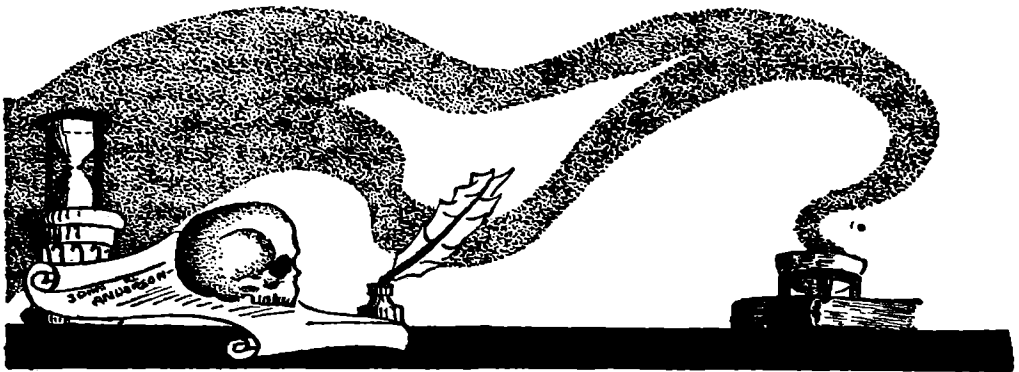
him down for a little cash by threatening to explain his gimmicks to some of his best customers. The usual tricks, of course. No spook show operated without them, and any professional magician knew how they worked; floating hands, spirit-voices speaking through a trumpet also floating in the air, ghostly raps and knocks all over the seance room, and now and then a misty face appearing in a smoky whirl of "ectoplasm." Anybody with a strong flashlight could banish the semi-darkness of such a seance and reveal the black threads tying these "materializations" to a moving boom that, with the lights on, became part of the picture molding. They always held hands at these little get-togethers, with the medium in the ring along with the "seekers"—so they thought.

Oh, yes . . . Fresno mounted the stone steps quickly. This was going to be a push-over!

The Professor's tiny flat turned out to be on the fifth floor. Panting from his climb up the spiraling staircase, Fresno paused for a moment before the door designated by another sign: PROF. CORDONA, SPIRITUALIST. Then he turned the knob and entered quietly, first through the doorway, then through a heavy worn-velvet drape that shut out the light from the hall.

Groping his way, Fresno waited to let his eyes become accustomed to the half-darkness, like that in a second-rate movie theatre, then slid into the nearest chair of three rows lined up facing a small dais.

The seance was in full swing. Spirits



were knocking obligingly on walls and floors. In a small curtained cabinet on the platform, they were also ringing bells and twirling a penny noise-maker such as revelers use at a New Year's celebration. A luminous hand drifted overhead, swooping abruptly to touch a squealing woman in the audience with icy-cold fingers chilled from Outer Space—or from the freezer compartment of the Professor's refrigerator, Fresno reminded himself. They'd keep these stuffed gloves there when not in use. He leaned back, smiling contemptuously at the small audience of perhaps eighteen people, who had come up here and would later make a "small donation" for the privilege of being rooked.

The medium, Fresno saw, was seated on the dais in a comfortable armchair, his head thrown back in the customary trance. Professor Cordona was an old man, he perceived, with the flowing white hair of an ex-thespian, probably an old Shakespearean actor who had, long since, fallen upon evil days. He was a good imitator, Fresno admitted grudgingly; good enough for bit-parts in radio, if he had sense enough to push it. The spirit-voices that issued from his throat were now those of a lisping child, now the heavily accented voice of an Italian emigrant, now the mellow throaty tones of a Southern Negro. The old codger was clever, too. He had dug up bits of personal fact about those in his audience, which, offered in the voice of some dear departed relative, often left one or another of them gasping.

For the newcomers he gave what is called a "cold reading"—incidents about their past and present that might have happened to anyone, but which they were quiveringly certain had happened to them alone. Then, with a sigh and a shudder, Cordona came out of his trance, and said in a mild pleasant voice that he hoped there were manifestations and that everyone was pleased.

As a *piece de resistance*, the old medium stepped over to a handsome buhl cabinet in one corner. From it, with an almost tender gesture, he lifted out a skull, a human skull.

Fresno's eyes narrowed. He had seen talking skulls before, usually made of plastic and mounted on a gimmicked tray. But this one, he saw with a tiny shiver of revulsion, seemed to be a real skull, yellowed with age and slightly cracked. As Cordona moved closer to his audience, stepping casually among them with the grisly thing held in his palms like a basketball, the magician noted that two teeth were missing from the articulated lower jaw. There was also a neat little hole, like a bullet hole, in the back of the polished cranium. Fresno grinned wolfishly at this chilling bit of realism, which the old man could have bored into the bone with a wood drill.

He leaned forward, listening intently to the Professor's spiel—something about this being the skull of a man who had died violently, from a shot in the back, and thus could not shuffle off this mortal coil with the ease of those fortunate human beings who had died peacefully in bed. The spirit of the man, the mind, the intelligence, call it what you will, (Cordona was saying in the rolling syllables of an old-time ham-actor) still haunted its earthly shell, returning to it like a homing pigeon seeking its nest. But, as a disembodied spirit, it now knew many things that, in life, it could not know. Having no vocal cords, it could not speak—but, by the strange psychic phenomenon known as *telekinesis*, it could move the skull's jaw and answer any question that might be asked. One click for *yes!* Two clicks—*no!* It could also spell or convey messages by means of the Morse Code.

Fresno crouched forward in his chair, watching the performance rather jealously. This old coot was good; better than he had ever been in his heyday, and it annoyed the ex-magician to see such talent and stage presence wasted on a spook show in a walk-up tenement apartment. There was, too, a kindly serenity about Cordona that irritated him. Why, twice already he had muffed a chance to con one of his customers into coming back for more. The spirit-answers he gave them—via the weirdly clicking jaw of the skull between his palms—were simple and friendly, almost

fatherly. Indeed, he seemed (Fresno's lip curled) more interested in helping these ignorant goggle-eyed jaspers than in skillfully extracting an extra dollar or two from their meagre bankrolls. Why, with a racket like this, the magician thought impatiently, he himself would be in the chips! Maybe, if the theatrical agents continued to dodge him, he might start one of these spook-shows himself, if he could talk some hard-faced, tight-fisted landlady out of her rent-in-advance.

THE Professor was strolling among the audience now, relaying question after question to the skull—which answered promptly by snapping its grinning teeth like a hungry crocodile. As he passed close to Fresno, the magician fidgetted uncomfortably, staring at the hollow cavernous eyes of the bony thing, which seemed to be staring back at him. A gimmick, just a gimmick, he reminded himself firmly. But—why did this amiable old fraud, Cordona, have to use a real skull? A skull—which had once been the living frame for a man's head!

"Does my sweetheart love me?" one giggling young girl whispered self-consciously as the medium bent over her.

The skull snapped its jaw, almost merrily. *Yes!* it clicked. *Yes! Yes!* The girl sighed happily, and Cordona passed on, leaning to catch another whispered question.

Then—Fresno sat up, stiffly. The white-haired medium, instead of holding the skull between his palms as before, was now gently handing it to a man who had asked a question. Grinning, gingerly, taking the gruesome thing in his hands the man repeated his query. He wanted to know what had become of a two-carat diamond, which had fallen out of his wife's engagement ring?

The skull was silent for a moment, an uncanny moment, as though it were thinking the matter over. Then the grinning jaw clicked several times, spelling out a word. D-R- *Drain*, the word was. The man gasped.

"Why, sure!" he burst out excitedly. "She

was washing dishes just before she noticed it was gone. I'll get a plumber to take those pipes apart tomorrow. It may still be in there, clogged up in some grease—"

A murmur of approval ran over the small crowd, and Fresno's lips twitched with ironic amusement at the old medium's clever guesswork. Housewives were forever losing rings and small bits of jewelry down the kitchen sink. But—the magician frowned. That skull was quite a gadget. The only ones he had ever seen, in magic shops over the country, worked with a silk thread, or some sort of mechanism in the tray on which it was mounted. His scalp prickled slightly as he watched the Professor hand the weird object to yet another person—for whom the toothy jaws clicked again obligingly, although Cordona was standing some feet away.

At last, retrieving his talking skull, the old man bowed politely to his wide-eyed "seekers," announced that the seance was over, and invited them all to come back again tomorrow for further contact with the Beyond. Chattering, giggling, and squealing, the audience filed out, each dropping a small coin in a cigar box placed near the door for "donations."

UNNOTICED in the half-light, Fresno Talley sat where he was, smiling thinly as the old man shut the door, then counted out the money in the cigar box—\$4.45. He sighed, then gave a humorous little shrug, and plodded toward the closed door of what must have been his bedroom, starting slightly as he saw Fresno lounging in one of the chairs.

"Oh! I didn't see you, young man," the Professor said pleasantly. "Did you wish a private consultation? Ouija board, perhaps? I find that the most satisfactory method, if there is a question you do not wish even me to hear—"

Fresno's short laugh cut him off. He rose to his feet and stuck out his hand, turning on all the charm that eight years of successfully warming up a cold audience had taught him.

"Relax, Pop!" he drawled. "I'm Joe Talley—the Great Taliaferro. Maybe you've

caught my act at the Ritz? I—four years ago, I knocked 'em in the aisles with a new vanish called The Human Fishbowl. Say! That skull gimmick of yours is a honey! I can't figure how it works—except that it's *not* by telekinesis! Psychic force!" the magician snorted.

Professor Cordona peered at him keenly out of mild dreamy-blue eyes like a pair of moonstones. He smiled abruptly and seized the younger man's hand.

"Taliaferro!" he greeted warmly. "Of course! I did attend one of your performances—in Chicago, it was, at the Trianon. That Fishbowl vanish was indeed mystifying. But I particularly enjoyed your sleight-of-hand. . . ." He glanced down at the long pale fingers gripping his, and appeared not to notice their alcoholic tremor. "Ah, yes! Yes, indeed! I am greatly honored to have you attend my poor performance, here in my little cubbyhole under the roof!"

"Thanks. But—the skull?" Fresno prodded. "What's the gimmick? I noticed it even works when you're ten feet away. Built-in clockworks, maybe? You time the questions to fit the answers?"

The old medium glanced down at the grisly object, still held casually in his hand like a piece of bric-à-brac. He held it up, turning it this way and that so the other could peer into the hollow eyes, the gaping nose-hole. He chuckled, patting the skull almost fondly, and handing it to Fresno, who took it with no relish whatever.

"Oh—Yorick?" the old medium chuckled. "No, there's nothing supernatural about him, I assure you. He's an old friend! A prop that I have kept, out of sheer sentimentality, from my old days with the Sock and Buskin Players." His blue eyes softened in wistful reminiscence as he prattled on about the past, as always with the old and lonely. "My wife, Anna, was rather fond of him, too—she played Ophelia to my Hamlet, you understand, until—" The Professor sighed gently. "Drafty theatres. Late hours. Poor diet, you know. It was during the influenza epidemic of 1918 that I lost her. Our boy, too," he murmured, then eyed Fresno shyly. "We had a son,

aged twelve when he died. Quite a magic fan, that youngster! Would you believe it," the old man added proudly, "he could palm eight billiard balls, four to a hand! At the age of twelve, mind you!"

"No kidding?" Fresno exclaimed in the right tone of admiration, his black eyes sliding speculatively over the seance room. "That's sure unusual, for a kid! Hands too small—" His eyes came back to the skull in his own hand, examining it for hidden mechanisms. "Yorick, huh?" he laughed. "From the grave-digger scene—if I remember my Hamlet from high school. Where the guy picks up a skull and says: '*Alas, poor Yorick*' . . . ?"

"*'...I knew him, Horatio!'*" the old actor continued the quotation, beaming at his guest. "*'A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now—how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. . . .'*"

"You can say *that* again!" Fresno muttered, grimacing with distaste as he turned the skull to face him again. "This is no prop, is it? It's the real McCoy?"

"Oh yes. Yorick was once—someone's head," Cordona looked amused at the other's expression. "I often wonder how he got that bullet hole. He was bought from a medical supply company for me by a young dentist in the audience at one of my performances—when the papier-maché skull we had always used rather embarrassingly folded up in my hands during the grave scene! '*Here hung those lips that I have kissed—I know not how oft!*'" he quoted again, smiling at the skull as at some beloved dog or cat. "*'Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning. . . .'* Eh, Yorick?"

In Fresno's hands, the skull clicked its grim jaw once—*yes!*—in ironic answer. The magician almost dropped it and lost no time in setting it down on a nearby table, where the cavernous eyes stared up at him sardonically.

"That damn thing!" he laughed shakily. "How *does* it work, Pop?"

"By electro-magnetic power," the old medium confided, pleased at the magician's bewilderment. "There's a coil in my kitchenette back there. It sets up a magnetic field for about twenty-five feet. There are several keys under the floorboards in this room—a young electrician rigged it up for me. Grateful because I—well, persuaded his wife to come back to him. Speaking, of course, through the spirit of her mother, whose face I managed to materialize in a cloud of ectoplasm one night!"

The old man's eyes twinkled with naughtiness, like a child on Hallowe'en peering through the eyeholes of a dough-face. Fresno licked his thin lips.

"Say!" he drawled. "You've got a sweet little set-up here, Pop. You could take these suckers for plenty."

Instantly the Professor's eyes went cold. He looked at the younger man levelly, and spoke in a flat tone of finality.

"Yes—I am well aware of that, Mr. Talley. There are a great many fake mediums in this country who prey upon the grief and loneliness of ignorant people who have lost loved ones. I consider this the most vicious form of crime, worse than murder or kidnapping, and am always quick to expose such a person to the police whenever I happen upon his activities. My own little seances," the old man added quietly, "are—entertainment, at worst; friendly counsel, at best. I have never extorted money from those who—" he smiled slightly "—like to pretend with me that I am not merely an old humbug—like the Wizard of Oz. Those who come here to my seances are troubled people, reaching out for something, some small measure of comfort to cling to until they are able to face their problems with courage and common sense. Do I make myself clear?"

The mild blue eyes bored into Fresno's face, trying to read what lay behind his impassive expression. But the magician laughed quickly, on a note of reproach.

"Oh, sure, Pop! Why, anybody would be a *beel* to take advantage of dopes like come here, wanting to ask their dead grandma what to do with the egg money! Gee! You didn't think I meant—?"

Cordona relaxed, smiling warmly again. "No. No, of course I didn't. You know," he said shyly, "my—my son would have been just about your age, if he had lived. And probably a famous stage magician, like yourself. I don't suppose," he added diffidently, "that you would do me the honor of dining with me here? I was about to make some Italian spaghetti, by a very special recipe given me by the good landlady of this tenement. Would you?"

"Would I!" Fresno accepted heartily, thinking of the cold night outside and the prospect of no supper at all, though he disliked parmesan. "Say, this is swell of you, Pop! Tell you the truth, I'm not working just now," he confessed what was obvious to the old medium at a glance. "But I'm rigging a new act that'll wow 'em. Ghost-show. They sell better than straight magic, because every school kid knows how to saw a woman in half nowadays! Mind if I hang around here a few days to get some pointers?"

The old medium's face glowed with genuine pleasure. "I would be delighted, my boy!" he said, then added wistfully, "I—I have always been just a bit lonely, since Anna and our boy passed on. Then, too, mine is not a profession conducive to neighborly visiting!" he laughed. "Even the cleaning woman is mortally terrified of poor Yorick, and absolutely refuses to dust around his cabinet. She insists that he *watches* her!"

"Ye'ah—" Fresno glanced uncomfortably at the skull on the table, privately agreeing with that unknown lady; those hollow eyes *did* seem to follow one about the room. "Well," he said, turning on the charm and slapping Cordona on the back, "anyhow we can have ourselves some fun for a few days, Pop! Maybe," he let his voice fall an octave, "maybe I could kinda pinch-hit for that boy of yours, who wanted to grow up and be a magician? I—I never knew my own dad; he ran away and deserted Ma when I was born," the magician lied dramatically. "Think you could—sort of adopt me as a son for a few days?" he asked tremulously.

The white-haired medium, dreaming of

the past, nodded, pathetically, eager, his eyes misting sentimentally.

"Why—of course, my boy. Of course! Stay as long as you like!"

Fresno sighed, putting on his act for all it was worth. But as he moved toward the bedroom, the skull on the table clicked its jaw twice, emphatically, as—the magician reminded himself nervously—he must have stepped on one of the concealed switches under the floor.

The skull said *No!*

FRESNO stayed for three days, his onyx eyes prizing out every secret in the tiny three-room apartment. At the end of three days, having discovered how everything worked, including the hinged jaw of "Yorick," the skull, he was about to shake the old medium down for the rent money he discovered hidden in a coffee can in the kitchenette.

But that night Professor Cordona had a stroke. When the neighborhood doctor had finished examining him, he took Fresno aside, pulling at his lower lip and regarding the young man keenly.

"You a relative?"

The magician shook his head, shrugging. "Business acquaintance." He yawned. "The old guy bad off?"

"Very bad," the physician nodded. "But he'll recover. What he needs is a month's rest in bed, and somebody to nurse him. Of course," he muttered as though thinking aloud, "I could move him to the hospital, charity ward. But he's a proud old rascal—might upset him."

As he spoke, Fresno Talley's quick weasel-mind was running over the situation, adding and subtracting. There were only about thirty-five dollars in that coffee can. Chicken feed! Buttons—compared to what he could get if he were allowed to run the Professor's seance for a few weeks, by his own methods! His blank face changed swiftly under the doctor's eyes, taking on a sad noble expression.

"Now, look!" Fresno snapped. "No charity ward for my pal! I'm just about as broke as he is, but I can sure stay here and look after him!"

The doctor relaxed. "Splendid, splendid!" he said, glancing at his watch impatiently. "Well—there's not much to do for the old fellow. Keep him off his feet, and don't let him get excited about anything. I'll send up a prescription—" He scribbled on a pad, glanced at his watch again, and hurried out, waving away the fee Fresno offered him. "Later. Back tomorrow."

Cordona was pleased and pitifully grateful. Lying in the big brass bed in the other room, he smiled to himself gently as he listened to his guest bustling about in the kitchenette, or in the living room, preparing for the night's seance. *Like a son! Just like Paul, if he had lived,* the old man thought fondly. He wished he could listen in on the seance that night, to see how Fresno handled it, but the doctor had advised against that. So, propped up on pillows, with a magazine in his hand, the old medium dozed and rested.

Beyond the door, seated on the dais, Fresno Talley, ex-magician, was hard at work. The Professor's audience, he observed with satisfaction, seemed to take to him at once, probably because they heard he was taking care of the old man in his illness. It was easy, absurdly easy—Fresno grinned scornfully—to con these suckers into coming back, night after night, leaving larger and larger donations in the cigar box by the door.

The landlady, he discovered—by the simple process of flattering her and buying her a ten-cent bunch of violets—knew everything about everyone in the community. She liked to gossip, and it was this gossip, skillfully concealed and paid out like fishing-line, that Fresno had his spirits reveal every night. The Professor's gimmicks were absurdly easy to work, especially Yorick, the skull. There were, Fresno learned, seven keys to the electro-magnet, placed in strategic positions all over the room. And it was the clicking jaw that mystified his audience most of all, since it answered questions while held in their own hands.

On the third night after the old medium became ill, the magician tried his

first trick. One of the materialized faces, floating above one trembling gentleman, suddenly mentioned a name—and the man's face, even in the semi-darkness, turned scarlet with embarrassment. Jumping up hastily, he almost ran out of the Professor's apartment.

And Fresno laughed nasally, jotting down the man's name and address in a little notebook he had begun to carry on his person. That gentleman, a smalltime grocer in the neighborhood, would be good for a couple of hundred bucks—to be used as hush-money for that spirit which had mentioned his paramour's name!

Oh, it was a push-over! Everybody, Fresno told himself cynically, had something to hide. A shady business deal. A secret love-affair. An injury to someone, either planned or already perpetrated. People were only human—but now and then they were willing to pay through the nose to keep it quiet! Blackmail—? Oh, sure. But the sweet part of it was, the old man, Cordona, would get all the kick-back. If any of these suckers in Fresno's carefully kept little notebook got mad and squawked to the cops, it was the Professor who would go to jail—not Fresno Talley, who, he would insist, was only doing what the old man told him in conducting the seances for his sick friend.

The Professor was sublimely ignorant of what was going on behind his bedroom door. He had even, Fresno noted with impatience, developed a deep fondness for his guest and "benefactor." In the afternoons, while he sat on the edge of the old medium's bed, playing two-handed Canasta, he often noticed how the mild blue eyes watched his face, seeing in it the contours of his dead son.

On one of these afternoons, with the rain drumming on the tenement roof just overhead, the old man smiled at Fresno, and reached out shyly to touch his hand.

"My boy," Cordona faltered. "I—I can't lie to you any longer. You have been much too kind to me, too thoughtful—staying here, running my seances for me, caring for me like—like my own son. When there is no need."

The magician peered at him sharply, his long fingers poised above a card he was about to palm. "No—no need? I don't get you."

"I mean," the old man said gently, "that I could have paid well for medical aid at some hospital. I—I have nearly ten thousand dollars in the bank, which I have saved up over a long period of years. It's—it's simply that I prefer to live among these less fortunate people, in this tiny flat. Now and then I—I have helped many of them, with money from an 'unknown source' as promised by one of my fake spirits. It is my kind of charity."

"*What!*" Fresno's eyes narrowed with shock, then softened under the old man's clear gaze. "Why, you old rascal!" he laughed heartily. "Playing ghost Santa Claus all year to a bunch of poor dopes who never dream it was you and not the spirits that helped them?"

Cordona chuckled complacently. "That," he said, "is most aptly put. But," he added, "I have a rather considerable balance. And if you will be so kind as to call a young lawyer in this neighborhood, a Mr. Peabody, I should like to draw up my will—and leave that balance to you."

The magician's mouth fell ajar. He had the grace to flush slightly. Then avarice and a naturally deceitful nature got the better of his momentary impulse, and he went into his act again. He protested. He hung his head, saying the old man was much too good to him. But, in the end, he accepted the legacy—and got hold of Lawyer Peabody as quickly as he could.

He had already decided what to do, a few days later.

THAT night, much to Fresno's annoyance, the doctor said Professor Cordona might sit up and observe the seance, if not conduct it. Wrapped in a blanket, the old man had to be carried into the seance room and settled in a comfortable Morris chair before the magician could begin his act. He was furious at this denouement, because there was a very juicy sucker attending tonight, whom he could probably have nicked for a cool thousand. But

with Cordona listening in, he was afraid to pull any fasties. The old man was simple and kindly, but he was by no means stupid.

Which was why Fresno had decided to murder him, by the simple process of exciting him unduly, the day after he himself had collected all the blackmail he could rake together from the suckers in his little notebook. Dead, the old man could not even defend himself. And dead, he was worth ten thousand bucks more to his adopted son!

At nine o'clock the little seance room had filled up. Due to Fresno's showmanship—and a few hints by telephone to several perspiring people who had attended other meetings—he had to put in another row of chairs, borrowed from the landlady. The audience was unusually quiet, a strained uneasy quiet that struck the Professor at once, bundled up in his morris chair beside a window overlooking the alley five stories below. He wondered at this change in his "seekers," and was about to ask Fresno concerning it, when the ex-magician mounted the dais and sat down in the chair, prepared to go into his customary trance.

Cordona watched and listened, smiling. Fresno Talley did not possess as many voices as he himself did, he realized modestly, nor did his quick, slightly harsh tones spellbind the audience as easily as his own rolling Shakespearean accents. But the seance was creditable enough, the old man thought proudly—wishing his lost son into the person of this guest who had been so kind to him.

The luminous hand floated out over the audience as usual, eliciting screams and gasps from those it touched. The bells and noise-makers in the spirit-cabinet set up a merry din, and there were raps and knocks in every corner of the room. Then two faces materialized in a wad of ectoplasmic cheesecloth, carefully dipped in phosphorous. Someone recognized their lost daughter—although the face was a clipped-out picture of Shirley Temple. Someone else professed to see the features of an uncle in the photograph of a wanted criminal Fresno had clipped from a true detective magazine. Then, aping the Professor, he came out

of his trance and turned on the blue light.

Striding over to the inlaid buhl cabinet, Fresno took out the skull, Yorick, eyeing it uncomfortably as always. He had never quite got used to the thing. Magic was magic, plastic horror gimmicks were one thing, a genuine human skull, obtained from a medical supply house, was something else again! Every time he got the thing out and looked at it, he began to wonder morbidly what the flesh features that covered this macabre framework had looked like. Some bum, no doubt. Some rumpot who had sold his body to science, in order to buy another quart. Then—well, maybe some other bum had put that bullet hole through his skull in order to steal the money. No one would ever know. There was, Fresno thought again, a sort of horrible anonymity about a skull—this one, Cordona's, his own, anybody's. Once there had been a thinking, feeling brain inside this hollow thing, but now—

Shuddering, Fresno got the object out of his hands as quickly as possible, handing it to a young veteran who wanted to know when he was going to get his G. I. insurance dividend. The skull, clacking its yellowed teeth hideously, spelled out: M-A-R-C-H. Fresno, of course, was tapping out the Morse Code letters where he stood near the dais, by stepping on one of the electro-magnet keys hidden under the floor. A second member of the audience took the skull between her hands, giggling nervously, and wanted to know whom she was going to marry. Yorick, obliging, spelled out the letters J.C.—a wide choice for the young lady, who suddenly whooped with mirth as she thought of someone with those initials.

Fresno, who was somehow unwilling to handle the skull any more than was absolutely necessary, let the grisly thing pass from hand to hand, clicking its answers again and again. Then, as the last person gave it back to him, the bony relic seemed suddenly to *twitch* between his palms. Sweat sprang out on his forehead and upper lip, and he almost dropped Yorick as the yellowed broken teeth began to click out letters in rapid Morse Code. Most of the

audience, ex-Scouts in their childhood days, could make out the letters plainly.

B-L-A-C-K-M-A-I-L! the skull spelled. M-U-R-D-E-R!

Fresno set it down hurriedly on the table, swallowing on a dry throat. Then his eyes narrowed, glancing toward old Professor Cordona bundled up in his chair. But *he* couldn't be clicking out those sombre messages! He had not moved from his seat; was, in fact, leaning forward with a puzzled expression. The nearest electro-magnet key was two yards away from his slipped feet. Several members of the audience tittered, deciding that it was part of the act; a spirit-warning that actually meant nothing.

Perched on the table, and glowing weirdly in the blue light, Yorick was talking again. His grinning jaw clicked out the same message, spelling the words this time slowly by number in the alphabet, so that no one in the audience could miss their significance.

B-L-A-C-K-M-A-I-L! the skull said, emphatically. M-U-R-D-E-R!

Fresno Talley began to tremble all over. Casting his eyes all around the audience to single out someone, anyone, who might be working one of those hidden keys, he backed away from the skull. He mopped his forehead shakily, tugged at his collar.

And then he screamed, a high-pitched raucous yell, like a frightened horse. Because the skull, sitting there on its table, had *turned around*. It was staring straight at him with those holes of eyes, grinning at him sardonically with those bared teeth which suddenly began to click out that grim accusation again: B-L-A-C-K-M. . . .

Then, with a peculiar little hop, it rolled off the table. Rolled across the floor, with its teeth still snapping. Rolled straight toward Fresno Talley, who was screaming now hysterically and backing away in a mad scrambling rush—toward the window that looked down, five stories, upon a paved cluttered alley.

When the police arrived, and the ambulance picked up that broken body that

had crashed through the fifth story window, a little knot of silent wide-eyed people moved closer, staring at Fresno's bloody remains, and at Professor Cordona. He had been carried down the long spiraling steps in order to identify the dead man. And now, as one of the policemen in charge handed him a small notebook, the officer growled:

"What's-zis? List o' names and addresses. . . ."

The old medium took one look at the names, and at the cryptic notations beside them. He paled. He was a kindly simple man, but he was by no means stupid.

"Oh, just—a list of my seekers," he said gently. "I always like to keep a record of the people most interested in—spiritualism, you understand, officer. My—my guest was keeping the list for me in my illness. It's of no importance."

As though to prove his statement, the old man tore out each page carefully, wadded them up, and tossed them into an ashcan—where a scrawny gray cat with a limp nosed them curiously, then arched his back to rub against the Professor's hand.

At that moment a young man in the crowd sidled over to Cordona, and nudged him. He was a happy-looking redhead in coveralls, with an electrician's tools bristling from every pocket.

"Well, Prof," he whispered, "I fixed that coil for you. Musta shorted out yesterday when you slipped out of bed to take a look at that skull. Funny! Mrs. Steinbaum says Yorick was working okay tonight at the seance, answerin' questions and everything, just before this guy tripped and fell out the window. Tough, huh?" The boy clucked his tongue as the ambulance pulled away. "Good friend of yours, wasn't he?"

Professor Cordona smiled oddly, glancing up at the window of his flat five stories above, where a cracked yellowed skull lay forgotten on the floor of the seance room.

"Not such a friend as Yorick," the old man said softly, then added whimsically, "You know—I often wish I'd known him when he was alive!"