

EERIE STORIES

*Startling Adventures
in Chilling Horror*

AUGUST, 1937

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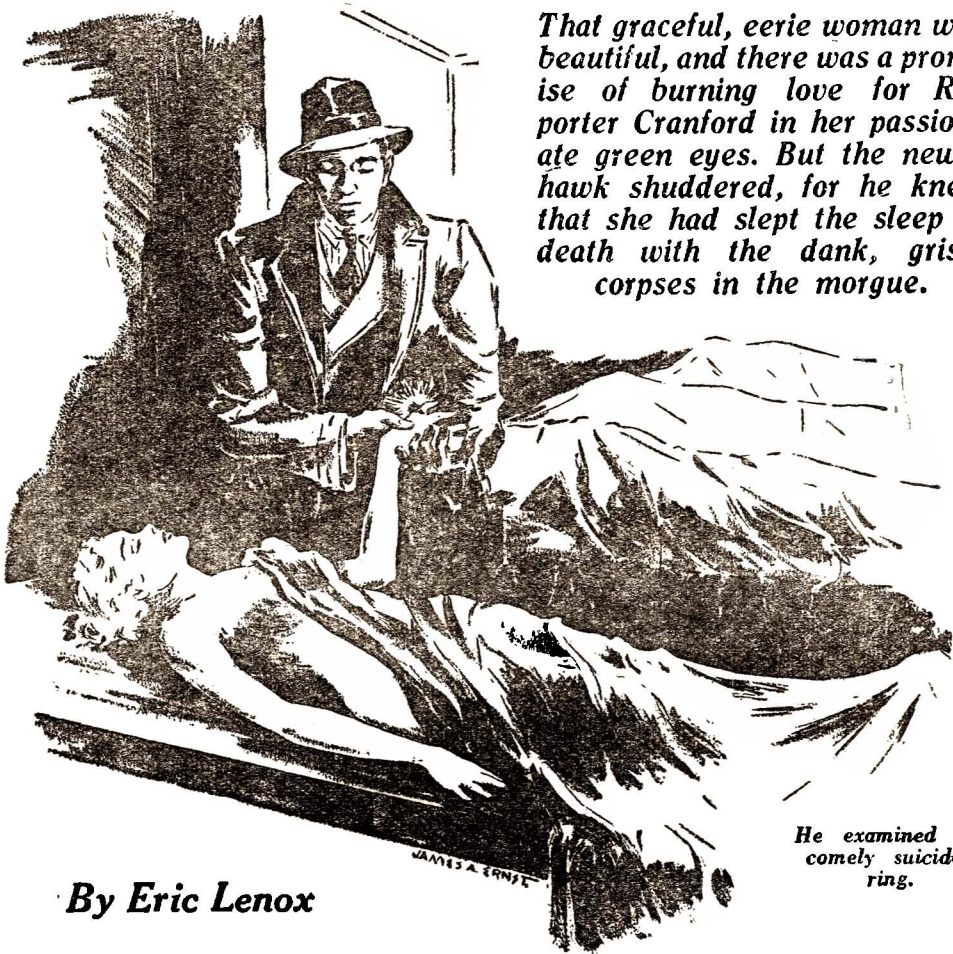
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Corpse Girl's Return

That graceful, eerie woman was beautiful, and there was a promise of burning love for Reporter Cranford in her passionate green eyes. But the news-hawk shuddered, for he knew that she had slept the sleep of death with the dank, grisly corpses in the morgue.



He examined the comely suicide's ring.

By Eric Lenox

LINES of disgust showed in Cranford's face. His hands were thrust deeply into the huge pockets of his topcoat as he strolled crosstown going eastward on Twenty-third.

A thin mist had begun to shoot in from the river, choking the glare of the street lights. Cranford felt the clammy air slapping against his skin, making it feel wet and cold. Effortless he noted that the street grew more deserted as he approached First Avenue.

The old buildings loomed like ghostly hulks in the weaving spirals

of mist. Below he could faintly make out the black ribbon that was the East River; dirty river, murderous river. Like a slippery serpent it wound around the metropolis, sinister and silent, keeping many a secret on its filthy bottom.

As Cranford reached the avenue he turned north. Here the mixture of night and mist was a madman's concoction. To a person of Cranford's sensitivity, it connoted a fitting jest. His lips slid back to a smile, though he felt far from that act. Why should it not be so, he thought? Perhaps his hunch had been right—that is,

that something might break soon.

The thought sent a chilling thrill through him which in itself well repaid the miserable trot down this black section of the city. It seemed to put new life into him and in a moment he was swinging along, his gait a bit firmer, his face a little bit more hopeful.

Presently he entered the squat building that seemed to jut out to the river. He stopped in the dismal hallway long enough to have the silence of the place play on his nerves. He was smart. He knew he could whip himself up to a pitch of anxiety if he did this. His nostrils quivered and he let the pungent smell of chemicals assail him with their meaning of misery.

Before him there was a wooden stairway that rose steeply to the second floor. A dirty yellow light burned at the head of the passageway, throwing a meager bit of illumination on the worn wood. Beyond that loomed immovable shadows.

He moved forward and climbed the creaking stairs. At the left of the landing was a door leading to a small office. On the glazed glass in thick black letters were the words:

MORTUARY DEPARTMENT

The reflection of light on the glass told Cranford that inside there would be Detective Sergeant Harris.

Perfunctorily, Cranford knocked and entered the office of the man who had charge of the morgue of the great city.

Harris looked up from his desk.

"What the hell?" he mumbled.

"What the hell is right," smiled Cranford. "When in doubt come down to the morgue, that's what."

Harris swung around in his chair and faced the young man.

"Say, I thought only young cubs covered this place." He eyed Cranford closely. "Seems to me your cub days were over two years ago when you broke the Sherrelli murder case, eh?"

"And I've been looking for something ever since," Cranford muttered. "They made me a roving reporter and for a while I picked up plenty. It was a sweet life, Harris, and you can bet your bottom dollar I thrived on it. But it's six weeks now since I've had something worth while. Nothing but fires, conventions, a few anti-gang meetings that don't jell and a sensational divorce case that wasn't sensational."

Harris interrupted him. "Perhaps this world is reforming, ever stop to think of that, eh?"

"Nuts. I'm going stale, that's the trouble. I'm losing my nose for news. If I don't scare up something worth while in a hurry, two things are apt to happen: either they fire me, or I turn in my police card and go back to being a grocery clerk somewhere."

Harris wondered for a moment why this engaging young reporter who had broken the toughest murder case in the city had come here tonight. To confide his troubles? He had the answer with Cranford's next outbursts.

"How many stiffs you got here, Harris?"

The sergeant glanced at his desk and looked at the top serial number of a sheaf of green slips.

"One hundred and twenty-two."

"All unknowns, eh?" queried Cranford.

"Yep. Unless you got something up your sleeve."

Cranford's eyes brightened. "This is straight, sergeant. I'm not trying to pull a beat. I'm just ankling for a story that will sell papers, that's all. You've got a hundred-odd stiffs down in the morgue, all unknown and ready to make the next boat to Hart's Island for burial in Potter's Field. I want to mooch around downstairs among those stiffs. God knows there's a sob story behind every one of those poor bums and unknowns, but their lips are sealed.

"Most of them have died of age and misuse, but you've got the regular bunch of suicides. Those are the ones I want to see . . . I don't know

why, unless it's my nose for news that's smelling things way before my mind."

Harris' face was grave. "It's pretty hard to get a yarn out of a dead man or woman, son, but if you've got a hunch, go to it. You know where we keep them. The suicides are all on the left row."

Cranford got up and walked toward the door. "Thanks, old man, and here's hoping I get one of your stiffs to write me a six-column screamer."

CRANFORD'S movements seemed to make a deafening sound as he walked across the cold concrete floor of the morgue. His skin felt tight and shivery in the dank atmosphere and he wished that he hadn't come on this wild goose chase. The morgue always affected him this way.

The weak yellow electric bulbs pierced the gloomy place like fiend's eyes. They threw ghastly reflections on the still bodies, row on row of them.

To one side, on the left, were the suicides. Six of them during this day who had quit the struggle for existence. Towards these he moved, his heart beating rapidly, and his face bathed in a cold clammy sweat.

On all sides of him lay the dead, their distorted features ogling hideously. Several of the stiffs lay with eyes wide open! staring, staring, and it was these that Cranford felt boring at him wherever he went in that chamber of unholy silence.

Suddenly he stopped in front of suicide row. Out of that grisly line of six, one stood out. For a moment Cranford seemed rooted to the spot as his glance took in the pale, round face of a blonde-haired woman. The beauty that he saw was accentuated by the pitiful surroundings, and Cranford was quick to realize this. Yet, she was comely. And she was young.

He came closer to the cold body and peered deeply at the immovable features. Sharp as his eyes were, there was nothing he could detect in that impassive countenance.

In the prime of womanhood, certainly she must have experienced the joys, sorrows disappointments of life. Her graceful, slender body must have pulsed to nature's age-old drive as its swelling bosom melted into the embrace of some man she loved. Yet the girl's inscrutable face was now a mask that betrayed nothing.

The hand of death had done its work without a flaw.

But his glance noted the thin gold band on the dead woman's left hand. At first glance it seemed like an old-fashioned wedding ring. But Cranford's keen gaze saw that the band tapered and narrowed at the center.

He stooped down and let his fingers touch the cold flesh. A rippling chill coursed up his spine. But he paid no heed. He was working with the coolness and skill of a newshound. In a flash he had seen something which had escaped the more phlegmatic keepers of the dead.

He twisted the girl's hand palm upward. As he had suspected, it was not a wedding band. Turned underneath was the part of the ring which normally would have been on the upper side of the hand.

As he saw its novel design, a short gasp came from his lips. The charm of the ring was a black onyx cameo, but only in half. The cameo showed distinctly one portion of a face, as if it had, at some time, been purposely cut.

Cranford let the stiff hand flop down, palm first. In his eyes burned that crazy light of intense excitement. His lips seemed to quiver emotionally. Quickly he rushed out of the place, his footsteps clattering hard over the dank concrete floor. A thousand things tried to cram through his mind at one time, but he stifled everything except the fact that he knew upon whose hand rested the other half of that black-onyx love cameo. Without being able to prove it conclusively, Cranford knew that Suicide Row held a murdered body!

TONY'S speakeasy wasn't crowded as Cranford sauntered in, whistling softly an innocuous popular tune concerning life and its similarity to a bowl of cherries, inwardly his blood ran swiftly and the pounding of emotion and excitement were hard surges to control.

With a great deal of effort, he gave a satisfactory appearance of the proverbial bored reporter, fed up not only with life but also the bowl of cherries.

It was near twelve when he draped himself over the bar.

Two hours later he was still there, fanning his courage and his hunch with an occasional shot of rye.

Within that time Tony had confided that the rain made business not so good, and that also his wife, at any moment now, would have another *bambino*.

For two nerve-racking hours Cranford listened to that chatter, the jangling of the cash register and the tinkle of ice in frosted glasses.

Then at five minutes past two the outside iron-grilled door opened and clanged shut. A moment later a buzzer squawked twice over the bar. Tony pushed a button and the door leading to the bar opened.

Cranford's head didn't move an inch. His glass came up to his lips. His eyes squinted at the mirror before the bar. There he caught the reflection of the man who had just entered.

The man he had been waiting for!

Even through the reflection of the mirror, Cranford could see the peculiar, pasty-hued skin, accentuated by the white, stiff-bosom dress shirt and the black tuxedo.

Cranford remembered him definitely now. On several occasions he had seen the man drinking alone at the bar, seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts. Once he had heard him mumble through his thin, cruel lips, "It must be amusing to watch some one die!"

The remark, so startling and yet, uttered with such complacency, had

etched itself deeply in Cranford's mind.

With even step the man came to the bar.

"Good eve, Mista Kretchel. The rain, he's no stop yet, eh?"

"Not yet, Tony. Let me have a rye high, will you."

Kretchel looked in the mirror, scrutinized his own features and made a slight motion to adjust his bat tie.

It was peculiar that Cranford's gaze met his at the same focal point in the garish mirror. For a brief moment the two lines of vision hung at the same point like the withering contact of two electric poles.

Kretchel was the first to withdraw his probing glance. Dreamily, Cranford kept gazing as if nothing had happened.

Tony placed the amber fluid before Kretchel. The man grasped the glass with his right hand. Cranford's head turned just as the man started to drink. Under the glare of the speak-easy lights nothing was left to a doubt.

What he had hoped to see, he now saw as he had seen several nights back in this same place, and as he had seen three hours ago in the dank pit of the morgue—the other half of the black onyx cameo.

The very essence of the thing made nonchalance a difficult rôle for Cranford to assume. Impetuosity, in this case, as in others, might not only spell defeat, but might turn back at him in the form of a bitter reprisal. After all, coincidence might be the joker in this deck.

As far as the girl was concerned, there seemed no indication of murder. The slip at the morgue offered this much information: that she was white and about twenty-five years old; that she had been found asphyxiated in a room at Eighty-fifth Street, that sixty cents had been found in her purse. Her clothes were good, but that there were no means or papers of identification. And that she had

taken that room less than six hours before death, giving no name but paying a week's rent in advance.

A thousand reasons might have motivated the girl into taking her life, Cranford admitted. This he did quickly; then shut his mind from further thought in this direction. Reasoning would surely overwhelm him were he to give in to it—

Yet he knew that the cool human being who takes to the art of killing plans invariably to produce such an effect.

Kretchel struck him as such a man.

And with such a person, circumlocution, or the other indirect methods of approach, would be useless. Naught but the height of nerve and the unexpected would challenge the fortitude of that type.

With that in mind, Cranford slid near to Kretchel. His voice was half-drunken as he addressed the alleged murderer.

"That ring," Cranford mumbled. "Couldn't help seein' it. Sort of odd, isn't it?"

A COLD smile cut the pasty face of Kretchel.

He glanced at the ring. "Lots of them around, I guess."

Cranford fiddled with his glass of rye. His voice droned as he continued:

"Now f'r instance where exactly would you say you might find a lot of them?"

Kretchel seemed amused.

"Jewelers, gift shops. All over town. They're very common."

A raised eyebrow and a sort of drunken squint came from Cranford. He hailed Tony and ordered him to fill up both glasses. In a moment the task was done.

Kretchel took his. Cranford lifted his glass also. They were ready to down the stuff when Cranford exclaimed softly:

"Hmm. I wonder if, well, that is, since there's lots of 'em around, would

I find one—well, let's say in the morgue!"

Kretchel didn't bat an eyelash. The hand that held the rye highball was as firm as a rod. Not one trace of emotion flickered across the man's countenance. As Cranford waited for his answer he felt the terrible coldness of the man.

Kretchel kept silent for a full minute.

Finally he clipped, "One might."

His elbow crooked and in one gulp he finished the drink.

Cranford thought then that he sensed the fractional wave of dubiousness in the man's mind, and hurriedly he plunged in with the rest of his facts. Outwardly his manner still remained unperturbed and drunkenly inquisitive.

"F'r instance—aw, let's say on the left hand of a pretty, baby-faced blonde—"

Kretchel's laughter was hard.

"What an imagination you have, or is it the rye?"

Cranford faced Kretchel squarely. The staged sleepiness had suddenly vanished from his features. The half-closed eyes snapped fully open and the glint of chilled steel showed within the blue.

"It's a mixture of three things," Cranford muttered firmly. "Imagination, the rye, and fact!"

Kretchel's answer was immediate.

"That's damned interesting." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a bill. "Here you are, Tony."

Then he turned to Cranford. "Good night, sir. You've been rather interesting. And, by the way, if I were you I wouldn't leave right now. It's raining quite hard out—"

VERY SOON after the iron-grilled door slammed shut, the reporter jumped into the phone booth and called his paper.

While he was waiting for the connection to be made, the face of Kretchel appeared in front of the glass of the booth. A quick twist of

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the folding door; Kretchel's chiselled voice low and controlled; his right hand in his coat pocket menacingly.

"Hang up. I've a cab waiting outside—just so you won't get wet."

Cranford forced a grin to his face. The receiver went back to the hook with a metallic jangle.

"Let's go," he said.

Half an hour later they both were sitting in the living room of Kretchel's isolated suburban bungalow. Calmly and coolly, Kretchel was playing the host. A silver decanter had poured forth drinks for two and Cranford watched curiously from the depths of a leather lounge chair.

Kretchel's hand still rested in his jacket pocket. The silent warning that at any suspicious move he would probably shoot.

"As you know," Kretchel began, "I could have taken you for a ride tonight. I believe that is the expression."

The reporter probed at him deeply. "That's an admission of guilt, isn't it?"

A sneer came over Kretchel's face and for the first time all the ugliness and hate of the man was portrayed in his features.

"I have little patience with dullards. Your acute brain power attracted me, why do you think you are here then? Guilt!" The man sneered again. "Of course I killed her. Killed her cleverly, and the man who even half-suspected a murder has my respect."

Cranford's blood ran cold. Kretchel continued:

"I hold brains at a premium in friend or foe. It took unusual insight to discover whatever you did to lead you on a trail such as this; a man of your type interests me beyond anything else. A man like you I can use to great advantage."

He paused for a moment.

"She had passed her point of usefulness. As a matter of fact she became a deterrent to my plans. For your own edification let me tell you

that I am a chemist. My ways are as mysterious as the action and reaction of chemical agents. During my processes of investigation, I discovered a rare perfume which had a narcotic effect. In its primary stages it was a poison. But through constant, maddening research and experimentation, I had finally succeeded in rendering it to the stage of a usable narcotic. Its effect is the same as morphine, heroin, or hashish. But the beauty of my discovery is its usefulness to women. As a perfume of course. Yet so delicate that the clinging odor finally dominates the user until she cannot live without it.

"I have a gigantic scheme to get this narcotic perfume on the market without government interference.

"You realize that inside of six months I would have every woman in the country eating out of my hand.

"She threatened to expose me, so I did away with her. And in a simple fashion. After she had engaged the room, I called on her and overpowered her with a dose of another powerful chemical of my own discovery which causes instant death similar to asphyxiation. It was a simple matter to turn on the gas in the room to give the sufficient setting and then to raise the alarm. In two minutes crowds had gathered and I lost myself in the masses.

"My only error was in leaving the ring. Yet it may mean my good fortune because it has sent me a person of the highest intelligence."

CRANFORD waited long enough to make sure that Kretchel had no more to say. Once or twice he blinked his eyes to make sure he really was awake. And once or twice he thought of the sensational story this would make if—

If he could get away not only from a murderer, but a madman as well.

"Am I to understand then that you are not going to kill me?" the reporter asked.

"I would regret such a move. But if it were necessary, please bear in mind that you too would be just a suicide."

Strange were the numerous emotions that Cranford was experiencing, but somehow he smiled.

"You don't care what you do with other people's lives, eh, professor?"

Kretchel smiled evilly. "Not a bit—my only love is in the drugs I may create which in turn will give me power over humanity."

Again Cranford's newspaper mind buzzed. The utter sensation of the thing would sell a million copies in half a day if he ever could break loose. Visions of this gigantic sweep made him positively dizzy and oblivious to his surroundings.

Kretchel's gaze was intent on him too, so that he also failed to see the hammered silver knob turning ever so slowly in the doorway.

"I am going to use as—" Kretchel was saying as the door swung open. In the same motion it swung shut.

Simultaneously both men came to their feet.

The reporter's eyes gazed unbelievably at the figure with its back against the door. He was going mad, he told himself. This could not be.

But the rapid motion of Kretchel's hand swinging out of its pocket with the revolver brought Cranford into action.

With a pantherish movement he lunged sideways at Kretchel. Both his arms propelled forward toward the gun in order to deflect the shot. The impact brought him across the intervening distance with such force that Kretchel sprawled across the center table.

The girl shrieked a warning.

The sharp burst of a revolver cracked through the room. One shot, filling the room with the acrid odor of gunpowder. Then silence. Kretchel had slumped to the floor, a clean hole drilled through his forehead. His gun had gone off in his upflung hand—killing himself.

Again the reporter felt agonizing chills as he heard the girl's voice.

Cranford came close to her and peered deeply at her face. There was no doubt—it was she! The black onyx ring was still on her hand.

As the reporter stared, the woman's long black, nondescript coat parted open, and the slender, graceful curves of her bare body showed. Besides a pair of shabby shoes, the coat was all she wore.

Her eyelids dropped a trifle over greenish eyes, but other than that she showed no embarrassment as she casually pulled the coat together.

"It—it was all I could find to put on in that awful, dark place," she explained.

THE REPORTER was silent, still staring dumfoundedly.

She broke in on his thoughts quickly. The slight tremor of emotion and fright still in her voice. "I heard it all," she said. "I was standing outside a long time. His drug did not work. Though it gave all the appearances of a suicidal death by gas and seemed to produce a condition similar to *rigor mortis*, it was in reality nothing but a condition of suspended animation."

The girl shuddered. "Then I woke up in that cold, dreadful place—with all the dead bodies!" It was moments before she tremulously went on: "I knew his drug wouldn't work, that's why I never feared him. He tried the drug on white rats. After some hours they came back to life—but I always withheld the fact from him."

Cranford didn't know what to say. He didn't believe this was so. He knew he'd wake up any minute. Here was a dead man at his feet. And here, directly in front of him, was a beautiful blonde he had seen earlier in the evening in the dank chamber of the city's dead, stretched out with one hundred-odd stiff.

Here she was alive—talking—breathing—animate—and lovely—

She saw bewilderment in his face. "Hadn't we better go?" she asked.

"Good Lord, yes. Tony's is still open. He's got the stuff that'll make me think. You come along."

"Yes, yes, I want to go with you," she said eagerly. Then, hesitantly, she stepped closer to him, and there was no mistaking the message for Cranford in the long, steady gaze of her green eyes.

"I don't want you to leave me," she said softly.

At Tony's they settled their nerves with some brandy before the girl began telling him again what had happened.

Cranford kept staring at her, his face a mask with a twisted slit of a mouth. He had started out to get a story. Now he had one. The greatest scoop in his life! . . . But he couldn't use it! To break this gigantic story would implicate this girl. And would put himself in a devil of a hole. A

man had been killed. But it was his hand that knocked up the gun, exploding the cartridge. Cranford's twisted slit of a mouth was grim. The biggest story of his life—

The reporter felt the girl's hand creep slyly into his, felt her press closely against him in the booth seat they were sharing. Cranford knew she was beautiful, but there was something too creepy about a woman who still bore the odor of the morgue in which she had slept with the dead. Well, he'd help her out, give her a stake. Maybe later, when the atmosphere of horror about her had worn off. . . .

He excused himself from the girl who had come back from the dead, and called his city desk at the paper. His message was brief:

"This is Cranford. Been legging all night . . . Naw. Nothing stirring. It's been a very quiet evening . . ."

