

# MONSTER

PARADE

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**IRWIN STEIN**  
*Publisher*

**M. J. SHAPIRO**  
*Editor*

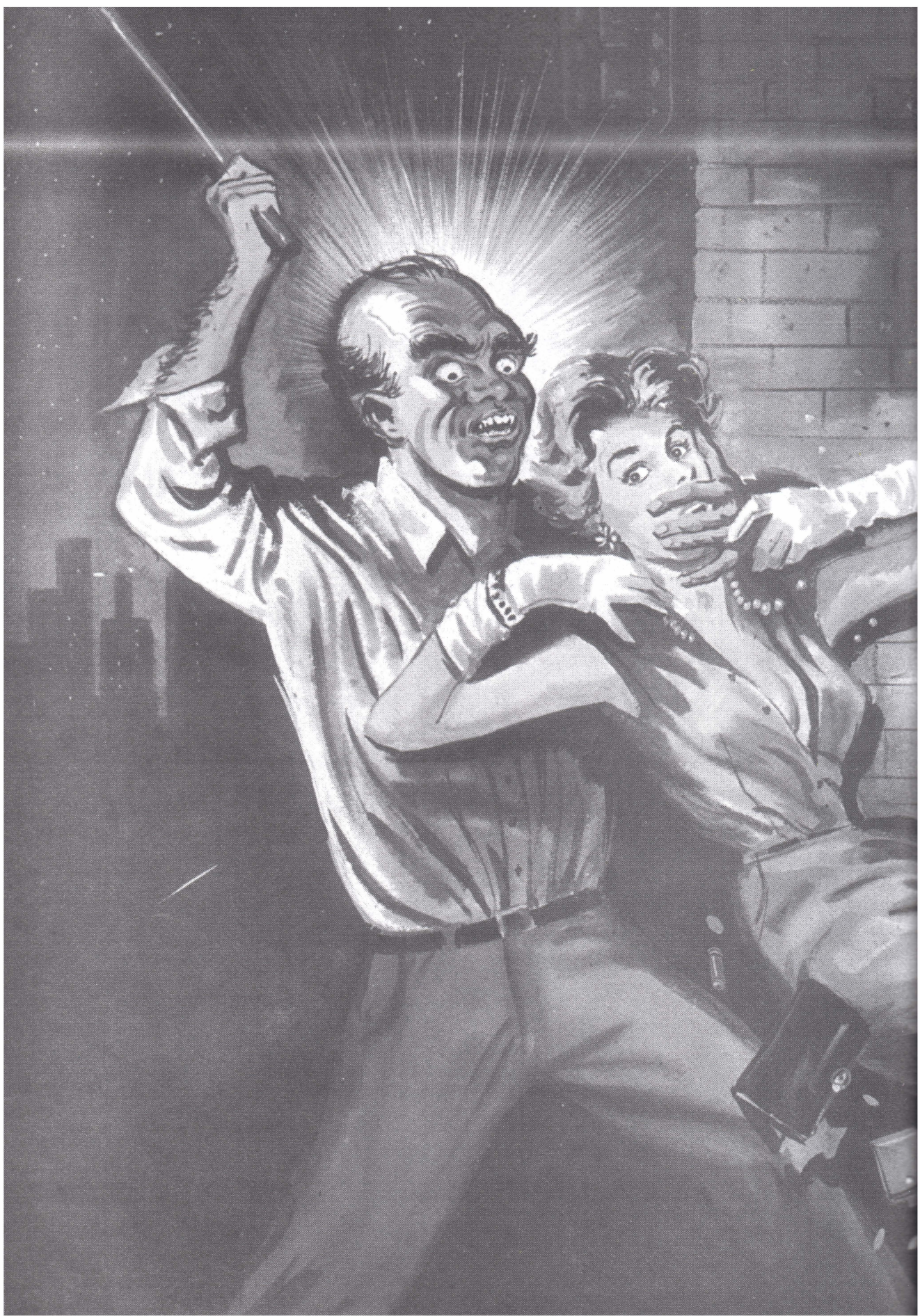
**L. T. SHAW**  
*Managing Editor*

**ALEX MARKOVICH**  
*Editorial Associate*

**HOWARD WINTERS**  
*Art Director*

**THE OLD GHOUL**  
*Your Host and Narrator*









*He roamed the streets of the city at night, striking terror into the hearts of young girls . . . from his body a strange blue light glowed . . . in his hand was an iron bar, strained and crusted with blood . . .*

# CURSE OF THE BLUE MAN

By **BARRY MILES**

**J**EROME BLACK lay in bed with his eyes closed. He tried to remember the dream he had just had. It had something to do with running, down a long corridor, or an alley, running away; there were others after him, and behind him the girl lay . . . she lay . . .

It was no use. The dream was already dissolving. And once it was gone, of course, it was usually gone for good. But there had been something unusual about this dream, something strange and important; he wanted very badly to remember it.

After a few more minutes he gave up and opened his eyes. "Probably wasn't important anyhow," he muttered, and sat up in bed.

He looked down at his right hand, flat against the blankets.

*The dream, he thought with something like terror.*

He was holding a long iron bar, clutching it tightly in his hand. He had no recollection of ever having seen the thing before. He knew that, in some way, it was connected with the disturbing dream he'd had, but he couldn't remember any more than that. There was only the fact that he had awakened clutching the bar.

That, and the fright that overtook him like an enemy.

The bar was slightly stained at one end. He examined it more closely but he couldn't tell what the stains were; they might have been several hours old, or several years. It was heavy; he hefted it and, as he did so, a flash of the dream returned, and the feeling that he was running down an alley, away from something or someone; but when he put the bar down on the blanket at last, he could recover nothing more.

Minutes ticked away while he lay in bed. He was going to be late for work, but that didn't matter. The bar was more important. How had he found it? What was it, anyhow? What was he doing with the bar in his hands? And what did it have to do with the dream he couldn't recall?

There weren't any answers. (Continued on page 55)

# CURSE OF THE BLUE MAN

(Continued from page 37)

He told himself, at last: "Sleepwalking, that's what. And I picked it up somewhere around the apartment. That's what it was. Plumber left it, or something like that."

He didn't believe that, but it was good enough. It allowed him to forget the bar, and get up, and dressed, and ready to go out to work.

But before he went, he muttered: "Fingerprints," to himself, and wiped the bar carefully all over with his handkerchief. Then he put the handkerchief in the incinerator to burn.

He wondered why he had done any of that, and couldn't find an answer. It frightened him again . . .

But he had work to do. Sooner or later he would find the answer.

THE NEWSPAPER frightened him again, and more seriously. There was a report on page three about the mysterious death of a young girl. Black read the story as if he were in a dream:

## 'BLUE MAN' RESPONSIBLE IN DEATH OF GIRL, 20?

Police investigation into the murder of Greta Collins, 20, found early this morning in an alley near 40 Decatur Street with her head bashed in by what medical evidence called "a blunt instrument," was complicated today by the evidence of an "eyewitness," Charles F. Drucker of 14-40 Frederick Lane.

Drucker's statement, made to police this morning, includes mention of a "blue man" seen leaving the scene at a late hour last night.

Police state that they are investigating Drucker's testimony, and . . .

Black put the newspaper down and stared around him. People passed him on the streets, hurrying to offices and shops. He thought about the blue man, and about the iron bar that had been stained. He thought about fingerprints.

He shivered and then, tossing the paper into a trash basket on the corner, he walked on. The thing was no concern of his. Whatever terrors he felt were only the result of that dream's hanging on (whatever it had been—and it didn't really matter: it was only a dream), and the assault was only a matter of coincidence. Of course he felt sorry for the poor girl . . .

And the dream recurred. He thought of himself running while she lay there, in the alley . . . while she lay there . . .

Nothing.

Only a dream.

Only coincidence.

But he walked on down the street and had to restrain himself from peering back to see who was following him.

To see if there was a police officer following him.

THAT NIGHT, Jerome Black turned his TV set on in time to catch the news broadcast. He told himself there wasn't any special reason for doing that, but, all the same, he knew better. He was beyond the stage, now, where he could hide so much from himself.

Foreign news was covered, and then news from Washington, and more foreign news. At last: "And locally," the announcer said, "police are investigating the statement made by a Mr. Charles F. Drucker, of 14-40 Frederick Lane, that a 'blue man' is responsible for the death of young Greta Collins in an alley late last night.

"Drucker's story of the 'blue man' is, of course, being treated with all the seriousness reserved for major testimony in a murder investigation—but a source who'd rather not be quoted at this time has told me that the police are speculating on whether or not Drucker was under the influence of drink last night."

Black turned the set off.

He felt relieved, but he couldn't have said why.

All the same, he didn't want to go to sleep—then, or later. At midnight, after a long struggle with himself, he turned out the lights and climbed into bed.

And lay there rigid for an hour.

At last he dropped off to sleep. His brain whirled into blackness, and . . . a long time passed, and . . . he awoke.

Morning.

He might just as well not have slept at all.

He felt exhausted, as if he'd spent the night in violent action, running somewhere. (*And maybe I have*, he thought, and forgot at once that he'd even considered that idea.)

There was nothing in his hand this morning. Was it because he had picked up no bar in the house while sleepwalking—or was it because he'd been more careful this time, and somehow managed to destroy the evidence?

The evidence . . .

He didn't want to buy a newspaper, but he bought one. There was a followup on what the headline-writers were calling the Blue Man Murder, and on page three a new headline appeared.

## GIRL FOUND SLAIN: BLUE MAN AGAIN?

The unconscious verse of the writer didn't make him laugh. The headline frightened him, instead, even when he told himself he had no reason to be frightened. He read the story, and found that the girl had been killed by another "blunt instrument."

Jerome Black tried to remember where he'd put the iron bar, the day before. That day, he drew several odd looks from the foreman; his work was slower and less sure than usual, and he knew it. He wasn't thinking about his work.



He was thinking about the iron bar.

THAT NIGHT he looked for it and found it at last at the top of a closet in his kitchen.

He was quite sure he hadn't put it in the kitchen.

And he spent the evening, after that, staring into space. What does it feel like when someone else, something else, begins to take over your body? What new kind of horror is this, to imagine that your own body might betray you, rising at night to stalk the empty streets, waiting with uplifted weapon to maim, to strike, to kill . . .

Two girls were dead. Black didn't want to think of the girls. He got up and went to his bathroom mirror, and peered there at his own face. It was normal, a little fleshy, the eyes perhaps a little small and a little bloodshot, as if he hadn't been getting enough rest. He combed his hair there, in front of the mirror, without thinking too clearly about what he was doing.

He saw the blue man. But that was ridiculous. There was no such thing as a blue man. The witness who'd reported it had obviously been drunk.

The only trouble was . . .

The only trouble was that the idea of a blue man frightened Jerome Black.

Two girls were dead, and he had had a dream. He could not remember the dream. He thought: *I won't sleep.*

That was one way to be safe, for a little while at least.

He didn't even consider what he meant by "safe." He didn't want to think about that.

He didn't want to think about any of it.

The next night he dropped off in spite of himself. There was no feeling of terror; only an incredible lassitude, as if sleep had been forced on him by a drug. And in the morning, when he awoke . . .

There was nothing.

The newspaper, at first sight, carried no headlines about death.

And then the enormous relief he felt was wiped out by a tiny story on page eleven:

#### WAITRESS, 20, DISAPPEARS

There was no need for guesswork. He *knew*.

They hadn't found her body yet. But they would. She was dead; he could not hide that from himself. And the blue man had killed her.

With a sigh as if something inside him had broken, Black admitted the truth to himself.

He was the blue man.

How had it happened? Black thought vaguely of chemical change, of hormones . . . he didn't have enough facts, and there was no way for him to get them. Obviously he could never consult a doctor; and the textbooks wouldn't make any sense to him.

All he knew was the fact, and not the reasons for it, never the reasons. During the night, while he slept, he . . . changed.

He began to shiver, in the street. But there was only one thing for him to do. He spent the day planning his next move.

Once the foreman came near him. It was Black knew, a warning. He might

be fired any day.

He didn't worry about it. He found himself unable to care about whether he kept his job or not. A job was only a little thing, while he—he was the blue man.

He had no need for jobs.

Then he caught himself in horror and turned back to his work. The blue man was something frightening, something abnormal, not to be countenanced or boasted about or even thought of, if he could avoid it.

How had he begun to feel *proud* of it?

THAT NIGHT he worked at his trap. If he stepped out of bed, ropes would tangle him, an alarm bell wake him up, a clatter arouse him as precariously piled pots and pans tumbled to the floor. He crept into bed surrounded by his own machines, and went off to sleep smiling.

And, the next morning, every trap was disconnected. The alarm had not gone off; the ropes were neatly coiled and the pots and pans carefully stacked on the table near his bed.

He had foiled his own traps—*of course*, he thought.

Who had known them better than he had?

The newspaper report was no surprise.

#### GIRL, 20 . . .

He hardly looked at it. He had no need for the facts. He *knew* . . .

He could still see her, looking up, a little brunette with big eyes and a thin figure. He could still see her first gasp of fright, and then the pitiful attempts at screams as he held her tightly, dragging her back. He could feel her struggling against him as he raised the heavy iron bar, and then he felt her slump as the bar came down. He left her there, in the alley, and ran . . .

Black looked down at his hand, clenching on the paper, the knuckles white with tension. He could feel the grin of excitement on his face.

He could hardly wait for the night to come . . .

SLEEP was soft and easy, at last. He felt himself slip away . . . and rest, there in the blackness . . . and then he could feel his mind returning, and his eyes opened. He got up without hesitation. He had set no traps.

In the mirror he looked like a different person. The dull sheen of his skin was actually more grey than blue, but even his face had changed; it was solidier, less fleshy, more the face of a muscular man who was unafraid of anything at all in the world. He laughed very softly, staring at himself, and flexed his muscles to feel the satisfying pull of strength there.

Night had come. It was time.

He never thought: *time for what?* He swung out of his window to the fire escape without any thought at all; he had put on an old sweatshirt and trousers, and his body seemed to burn through them as if it were luminescent. He dropped quietly to the ground, feeling the delicate balance in all of his body, the working of his muscles; and then he loped off into the darkness.

Less of them were out alone, these nights. The stories in the newspapers and over the radio had frightened them away. Nobody made fun of the blue man any more (and Jerome Black chuckled softly). The blue man was something very real and threatening. But it made things difficult . . .

It made hunting difficult.

Then he heard the click of heels on the pavement, and he tensed for his leap.

Seconds went by while the sound came closer. Then . . . then . . .

She had no time to scream. His hand was over her mouth and she was struggling against him while he dragged her back into the darkness, against a building, and then into an alley. She was, he saw, quite young, eighteen or nineteen, a blonde, slim and—he supposed—pretty.

He hefted the iron bar. He felt the surge of power within him as the girl tried frantically to escape his embracing hand and arm. Then the bar came down with terrific force and the girl crumpled.

*Finished.*

He turned and ran. But there was a shout behind him.

Had she been a decoy? Had he been caught now? But there was no fear in him; instead, he laughed as he ran. The shouts were no closer.

Then he heard the crack of a gun and, at the same second, something burned in his arm. He felt blood trickle down, and keep flowing, slowly . . . but he never stopped. The long, loping stride ate up city blocks effortlessly, and he simply blocked off the pain in his arm until he was back . . . in his own apartment . . . in his own bed . . .

Asleep.

HE WOKE the next morning to pounding on his front door. Bleary-eyed, triumphant and remembering everything that had happened, he padded over and peered through the crack he'd opened.

"Police," said a voice.

He could see three men. Was there an escape?

He shrugged and opened the door.

Of course the trail of his own blood had led to him. He was in jail before he took the time to make plans and think things out. The police, he supposed, were as puzzled now as they had been before: they'd expected a blue man, and had caught ordinary Jerome Black.

And during the day, Jerome Black would languish in jail, the picture of a confused and innocent man. Perhaps they'd even think twice and release him, though he didn't really think so.

And it didn't make much difference. During the night the blue man would escape. Black grinned. The blue man was powerful, tricky, fearless . . . the blue man would make his escape without effort.

And then he'd be free . . .

Free to kill.

Black laughed. After all: what was there to be afraid of?

He was still laughing when they strapped him in the chair. And when they threw the switch and the electricity began to hum and course through his body, a faint luminescence seemed to outline Jerome Black's body. The luminescence was blue.