

C O N T E N T S

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The task of reading the thousands of manuscripts submitted in response to Liberty's \$10,000 First Serial Offer has been completed and the names of the successful authors will be announced in an early issue.

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DANSE MACABRE

A Short Short Story

By

HELEN O. LAMONT

(Reading time: 4 minutes 45 seconds.)

WHEN Fat McFadden retired at the age of forty the whole detective force knew that he couldn't leave go his profession any more than a fly can fly-paper.

So when we decided that Tuesday to call him in on the Ritzi Kitzi murder case, I wasn't much surprised when he said yes.

This here Ritzi Kitzi was a small-time vaudeville artist, a cute little number, real name Nora O'Connor, who'd been out of a job ever since she busted up with her dancing partner, Ramon da Silva. This bird had gone for her in a big way before he crashed the big-time shows.

There wasn't any motive for killing the poor kid, except you call it one of these here crimes passionelles. The murderer had climbed the porch roof, gone in a window, strangled the lady in bed, and departed by the front door.

We had da Silva traced up to the time he reached his rooms after the show that night, and no one happened to see him go out again.

We drove out to the two-family house in Flatbush where the O'Connor girl was murdered and piled out. It was four thirty and a dark December day, and you could see there wasn't anyone home. I had the key, and we all stumbled into the pitch-dark hall, Fat in the lead. I had a funny impression of Fat groping and fumbling in front of him with his hands, holding up the procession and muttering, "Come here, damn you!"

Just then Finnigan snapped on the light.

Fat blinked for a minute and then said: "Where'd I get the idea there was a string hanging from that ceiling light?"

He stood pointing like a dog toward the stairs.

Up in the room Fat began snooping around. Pretty soon he said:

"Hell, you fellows have done all this. Let's go. I want time to think."

Next morning he showed up at HQ early.

"Well, chief," says he, "I took my wife to Deuces Wild last night. Seen it?"

"No," I said. "That's the show da Silva's dancing in, isn't it?"

"Ye-e-es," drawled Fat. "Heard about that Palm Beach number? They turn all the lights out and this guy is wearing a Palm Beach dress suit and he dances in the dark. His white shoes, gloves, shirt, and hat are phosphorescent, and he gives them all the heeby-jeebies doing a what they call a danse macabre.

"Tell you what, chief," he goes on. "I'd sure enough like to have a look at him when he comes off after that Palm Beach number. There's a matinee today. Meet me at the theater, and bring along Finnigan and some bracelets just in case."

So there we sits, thanks to some synthetic enthusiasm and a little bribe to the doorman, in da Silva's dressing room, with Finnigan not far away, all of us waiting for the principals to come off after this danse macabre.

Da Silva was surprised.



"My name's McFadden, and this is Mr. Dugan," drawls Fat, getting up and holding out his pudgy hand. Da Silva takes it in his gloved one and they shake. Fat looks down at da Silva's hand, turning it over until it's palm up in both of his. Da Silva smirked and said:

"You like the show?"

"Yes," drawled Fat, "especially this number. These hands of yours, you know—they're kind of terrifying. I kept realizing how I'd feel if I suddenly saw those hands coming for me in the dark."

Fat still held the hand.

"Ah," cried da Silva, "perhaps you read palms? Let me take off my gloves."

"No," Fat said; "no, it won't be necessary. I can do it with the gloves on just as well. For instance, I read here, Mr. da Silva, that you are rather unobserving."

"How so?" said the fellow, kind of uneasy and puzzled.

"Well," drawled Fat, straightening up and fixing the dancer with those little blue eyes of his, "I see that you are wearing a pair of cotton gloves with cotton-covered buttons, but you have not observed that the cotton covering of one of the buttons is missing."

IT was true, as da Silva saw. He frowned a little. "Well," he said, "what then?"

"Why, this," said Fat. "You'll be glad to know that I've found the missing piece. I've come to return it." Fat took out of his pocket a scrap of white cotton. He looked at it a minute. Then he said:

"Why you should have taken those damn' gloves along to frighten the kid before you choked her to death I don't know. But you did," he added—and looked at the guy sudden. "I found this bit of cotton yesterday on the stairs of Nora O'Connor's house."

Da Silva turned the color of Roquefort cheese as Finnigan stepped in and snapped the bracelets on.

"Not so fast, gentlemen!" he gasped. "How do you know that little piece of cotton came from my glove?"

Fat stepped over to the switch and put out the light. Da Silva drew his breath in sharp, and I guess I did too, for I had forgotten that damn' phosphorus. That shirt front and those hands jumped out at me like they belonged to a fiend out of hell.

Over near where I knew Fat was standing I saw a little point of light at about the height of a man's shoulder, exactly like the little glass radium balls they hang on the end of an electric-light string. There was a thud, like someone had fallen.

"Turn on the light, sir," said Finnigan. "Your killer has folded up."

THE END