

# THE BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF MYSTERY, THRILLS AND SURPRISE

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# His Thirteenth Wife

By Herbert Raymond Carter

I

WITH Jonas Bruckner, marriage had become a habit—and a highly profitable one. Under various aliases, he had led a dozen different wives to the altar—and later followed them to the grave. In each instance he had survived to find himself a wiser and richer man.

Naturally, the statutes concerning bigamy had never troubled him. In every venture he had been legally free of his previous bride before contracting the responsibilities resulting from another wedding. And by uncanny good fortune, the laws against murder had left him unscathed and unsuspected.

Since the days of his youth, Bruckner had worshipped Bluebeard as his hero. In his teens he had devoured newspaper accounts of the doings of such modern maniacs. Invariably their unskilful slaying of successive spouses, in order to collect insurance, had ended in their intimate association with the scaffold, the electric chair or the guillotine. Bruckner would smile in his sleeve over their clumsiness, and in choosing his vocation, resolved that he at least, would never be so crude.

Insurance companies, he had learned, were customarily curious, and the profession which Bruckner proposed to enter made inquisitiveness on the part of others extremely undesirable. In the first place, he determined never to give his name to any maiden or widow who carried a policy on her life. Should his prospects be insured they must allow that protection to lapse upon

the assurance that the bridegroom possessed plenty for two. Thus he eliminated one source of suspicion as to his motives. If, however, those who ensnared his accordeon-like heart happened to be wealthy, Bruckner certainly could not be blamed. Besides, he always made it a rule to state to the license clerk that he was a bachelor, casually adding that he was well-to-do and retired.

This knowledge was also the bait he persistently dangled in order to catch his intended victims. The plan had been remarkably successful, to which Bruckner's worldly possessions bore mute testimony. Frequently money talks—but Bruckner's was as silent as the graves from which it had been obtained. Under each new alias, he maintained a modest bank account for current expenses. None of them had been large enough to cause him any regret if he suddenly found it inconvenient to cash another check or present himself in person to claim his balance. The bulk of his fortune he kept in cash in several widely separated safe deposit vaults. To the banks where these sums were stored, he was known under various names, and was understood to be an eccentric man who traveled extensively.

The names he assumed for this purpose were never employed for any other form of his activities. His long absences and semi-occasional appearances caused no comment, and had never resulted in any undue curiosity. In fact, the officials of these "reserve" institutions, as he termed them, were not

aware of the contents of the boxes Bruckner rented. Probably they imagined that he used them for storing papers.

One, however, did contain something vastly different. In it were the tools of his trade—poisons of varying natures which he picked up at intervals in infinitesimal quantities in various parts of the world. Being versatile, he liked to vary his method of operation and took a genuine pride in his work. Mad he undoubtedly was—but the man was an artist, and no manufacturer or financier or creator of beautiful things ever took more satisfaction in his accomplishments than did Bruckner.

The one fly in the ointment was the fact that he could never confide to anyone just how clever he really was. To atone for this, and by way of diversion, he occasionally indulged in criminalities of a totally different nature, in fields where he might share his triumphs with others. He had a smattering of medicine and knew much chemistry, both of which he studied with sinister intent. He had played at being an amateur cracksman and had been complimented upon his skill in opening safes. Likewise, he had participated in several notorious Black-hand outrages and was well and favorably known in those circles. That is, the personality he assumed for this purpose, was known to such associates. Thus Bruckner had broadened his knowledge of ways and means of producing death in secret, and had familiarized himself with other branches of the trade, upon which he might fall back in case wife murder ever became an unhealthy occupation.

Bruckner flattered himself that during the whole of his career he had never made a single mistake. Not once had he been regarded as anything but a sincere mourner at the biers of his dear departed. Never had he run afoul of coroner or police. At times he chuckled

over his remarkable capabilities and congratulated himself upon his caution and truly exceptional foresight. Perhaps his success was due to the fact that he concentrated upon crime in its more subtle branches, and had never been addicted to any vice, either petty or great.

Nor had a pretty face ever tempted him. During the whole of his marital adventures, Bruckner had never once been in love—not even the victim of a passing infatuation. Business before pleasure was his motto and he adhered to it strictly. Because he found the courtship stage of his engagements a trying ordeal, marriage usually followed his proposals swiftly. With grim humor, he often boasted to himself that he had no heart, and in view of this fact, he was reluctant to indulge needlessly in silly lovemaking.

The women of his choice were invariably rather mature and usually unromantic. The more homely they might be the better satisfied he was. A young and attractive wife might have admirers who would interfere with his plans. She would also be more likely to have relatives who might have too much to say and to whom her death would be a real bereavement. Widows with children were banned. He had an aversion to stepsons and daughters about the house. Instead, this pseudo lonely bachelor always sought a matron similarly situated—each with a tidy sum to support them, and both desiring a quiet comfortable home.

There was method in his rule. Not only was he assured of privacy in the domicile about to be established, but he could not be accused of the unpardonable crime of marrying for money. Bruckner was both sensitive and proud. He valued the good opinion of the community—because it was an asset in his curious business. To pick out a bride of great wealth would mean

additional difficulty in collecting his inheritance after the obsequies. Such details would be bound to be annoying and Bruckner loved simplicity in this respect.

A few thousand dollars—always less than his own little nest egg—and perhaps a small property upon which no other heirs had any claim—were to be readily gathered in without the formality of court proceedings or the advice of counsel. After each deal, he cashed in his gains, opened a new bank account under a new name, and stored his net profits in one of his safety deposit boxes. This had been going on for years.

It was true that such gradual means of accumulating wealth necessitated many marriages. None of his wives had lived more than three years after the wedding, but in no case did he cause a death under twelve months. He remained prudent rather than avaricious or hasty. He never sought a rapid denouement at the risk of personal safety. Moreover, his wives all died seemingly natural deaths and were fittingly interred. Bruckner would not countenance anything so crude as to savor of murder. Also, Bruckner had a certain sentiment about proper burials. As a result each simple ceremony was marked with unostentatious respect, while the countryside was dotted here and there with nicely cared for graves and tastefully adequate tombstones. Everything he did was done very well.

## II

WHEN analyzed, Bruckner's plan was as simple as it was practical and resultful. He would go to a small town and take a comfortable room at a cheap hotel or boarding house, frequented only by men. Without undue heraldry, he would announce that he was seeking a suitable place to end his days. After he had attained the age of fifty, this

sounded reasonable, so he discarded the various fantastic stories so successfully circulated during his youth. These had been ingenious, but rather more risky. In fact, he now looked back with concern upon the chances he had taken in connection with his first alliance—contracted when he was twenty. His initial venture had culminated admirably, however, and his four successive ones—covering a scant ten years—also paid him neat profits.

Now, when he was installed in a new and temporary residence, Bruckner would make it a point to scrape up a speaking acquaintance with a few substantial but humble souls in the neighborhood. He never associated with those who were prominent or overly endowed with worldly goods. He could not afford to make a permanent name for himself. He was always fading out of or into a picture. He was but a passing incident in the life of each community. To his chosen cronies, he would casually state that he was a plain man without frills. He regretted that he had not settled down and taken unto himself a life companion before he had grown too old to think of matrimony.

Frequently this observation would bring forth good-natured chuckles and sly winks. Male matchmakers would pass on the word to their romance-hatching wives, and soon several no longer young hopefuls would begin to preen themselves and press Mr. Bruckner to drop in for tea. Reluctantly, he would accept, and begin to judiciously sound out the situation. If all seemed well, he would guardedly hint of his state of mind and eventually suggest a married partnership on the basis of mutual contribution to costs and common connubial convenience. If the proposition met with a favorable reception, and the recipient of his attentions appeared pliable, the marriage would be solemnized at no distant date.

When this portion of the program was over, Bruckner would bide his time before springing the climax of his little drama. There were several phases of the stage setting to be considered. If his newly acquired wife was not possessed of real property, and there seemed no reason for their remaining where they were, he would find some good incentive for moving to another city. The death of a middle-aged matron causes less comment in a neighborhood where she is a stranger. Such a move made, he could proceed at his leisure, without engendering gossip or unwelcome sympathy.

Of course, where a wife possessed valuable lots and houses, or perhaps a little business, he must gradually make excuses to dispose of these, or else remain on the spot and wait until he could do so as sole executor. Practice had made him perfect, no matter which course he was forced to take.

In any event, no sooner would the funeral be forgotten, than Bruckner would move on. Invariably those who had known him expressed their regret and felt genuinely sorry for the lonely, broken-hearted man. Once or twice a second candidate had coyly sought his attention, but such women had no chance whatever. Under no conditions would Bruckner marry twice in the same town, or even under the same name. His various ventures were widely separated as to scene.

He would shake his name together with the dust of the deserted community, and assume a new and equally commonplace one upon his arrival in the section selected for his next proceeding. That little matter of choice of names indicated his extreme cleverness. Never was he known by a distinctive cognomen. His surname was likely to be the most numerous mentioned in the local directory.

Fortune favored Bruckner in that he

was a man whose appearance made his age seem uncertain. As he pleased, he was readily able to subtract or add ten to twenty years from the truth. Then, too, he made a careful study of personal appearance, and without resorting to artificial means of disguise, had in his box of tricks several methods of altering his looks. Little niceties of dress—a different manner of brushing the hair—and the time-worn cultivation or destruction of moustaches, beards, side-whiskers and imperials all served his purpose upon occasion.

Possessed of an excellent memory, a perfect capacity for forgetting the past, and a penchant for looking into the future, Bruckner was well equipped. He was devoid of conscience—insensible to sentiment—and looked forward to the day when he might safely write his memoirs—to be published posthumously.

### III

SUCH was the man who found himself a widower for the twelfth time last Fall.

Upon casting up his accounts after the final ceremonies of that funeral, Bruckner (as he then elected to style himself) discovered that his total fortune amounted to some two hundred thousand dollars. It was safely stowed away in his safe deposit strongholds. He had remaining—under the new name of Bruckner—sufficient capital to see him through his next adventure. The surplus he did not mean to touch—as usual.

Yet in the weeks that followed the death and the settlement of the estate of his most recent wife, Bruckner seriously considered the idea of remaining single. Like many another prosperous man—after years of striving—he longed for a life of indolence—broken of its monotony by such pursuits as might please him. He hated the very thought

of a home. He had no wish to settle down. He had possessed a surfeit of wives that he did not want in a personal way. Bruckner had married them in the casual course of business.

And this gave him a thought—in the nature of a vacation. Suppose he should seek a spouse who actually pleased him. Thus far he had not experienced such a genuine pleasure. For a man married as much as he, the situation was silly. Yet Bruckner had his doubts. If he paid court to a young and beautiful girl—one whom he really admired—he might, even after the passage of all these years, fall in love with her. That would prove fatal. He had heard of idiots, drunk with love, who told their wives everything.

That would never do. In the first place, the lady might not prove sympathetic. Also, he was certain that sooner or later he would desire to kill her—from sheer force of habit or perhaps from ennui—since he no longer needed money. Such a situation would be awkward if he became devoted to her—for then he would break the heart which had been proof against Cupid's darts through all these years of many marriages.

So he relinquished the thought and went to New York to rest up a bit and think the situation over. As usual, he went to a modest hotel. Yet the days he spent alone were tedious, and like a fish out of water, he longed to plunge once more into the matrimonial sea. For a time he had whiled away some of his hours in the company of a Russian, who claimed to have been a watchmaker to the late Czar. This gentleman still made timepieces—but he made them to put in bombs, and made them very well. His genius appealed to Bruckner and the two became quite friendly, although Bruckner was slightly nervous lest the police should visit the bombmaker's place while he was present.

However, he had no other company. His safe-cracking friends were all in jail—and the others were safe beyond the reach of the law—or else *had* been reached by it and removed from this vale of tears. So he found himself craving for action and the further exercise of his remarkable talents. Then he met Mrs. Mary Corcoran, a healthy husky lady who was doomed to become his wife from the first moment he saw her.

Mrs. Corcoran was a widow of just the proper age—not too wealthy, Bruckner thought, although she was possessed of a trifle more than her predecessors. She owned a place by the seashore and was extremely fond of bathing. She had a little motorboat, and at the time when Bruckner entered her life, was about to open her bungalow for the season.

The situation appealed to Bruckner. He needed a rest and a change of climate, and a stay by the sea would be welcome. It would do him good and build up his health while he planned how to break down hers. So he mentioned to the widow as much of his plan as was fitting for the lady to know. She proved entirely agreeable—even eager, Bruckner thought. In fact, he was rather afraid that she was in love with him. That might prove awkward, but it could not be helped. So he married her and took a solemn oath that when this adventure was over, he would never again tempt fate.

The bungalow was on a little sandy point, some miles from the nearest town and the railroad station. Mrs. Bruckner, née Corcoran, taxied back and forth from the village in her motorboat when her fancy suggested such journeys or purchases required them. Bruckner spent much of his time sitting on the beach with his pipe and his thoughts, and practically lived the life of a married hermit. They got on

together beautifully, and Bruckner thanked his stars that the woman did not desire him to be eternally complimenting and petting her. Her sole aim was his comfort, and never in all of his thirteen marital ventures had he lived so pleasantly and contentedly. It almost seemed a shame to terminate such an ideal arrangement. In fact, it would be little short of a crime.

## IV

BUT just as he knew he would, Bruckner reverted to type. He simply could not resist the temptation to kill the woman. She did not annoy him. He had nothing against her, and he did not wish her money. Just the same he wanted to kill her, and he wanted to do it in some new and original way.

For days he thought it over, and grew more perplexed with the passage of the time. He could not sleep at night, and he found himself nervous and restless. His appetite began to fail—a condition unheard of before—and even his pipe and tobacco failed to solace him. Once or twice he wondered whether it would not be wise if he went out and got drunk. He vetoed that idea, however, for he had always made it a rule to keep his head clear and his brain unflustered. Drunken men and women, Bruckner always said, are inclined to talk too much—and he was a man of silence. Besides, the hooch lately available, had, in cases, proved fatal.

During all of his meditation and perplexity, Mrs. Bruckner remained in blissful ignorance of the thing which was troubling him. It was true that she seemed to suspect that something was wrong, but when she pressed for an explanation, he naturally put her off. She appeared to be alarmed about his health, and was constantly urging him to go and consult a physician. He flatly refused, and told her he had never

been sick in his life. Of course *he* knew what was the matter, and also knew very well that no physician's prescription would cure his ailment.

His wife made more frequent trips to the little village, and even went to New York to bring back dainty viands to tempt his appetite. Apparently her sole ambition in life was to prepare a dish that would tickle his palate, and Bruckner was not without some appreciation of her kindness and concern. At times, he almost resolved to put away his idea and let the woman live. But impatience to have it over with, and to be at peace with the world, mastered him at last.

His intentions crystallized into action on the morning when she announced her intention of going over to Calder's Point to attend a pinochle party. Bruckner never played cards and said that he would not go. However, he even urged that she indulge in this pleasant diversion.

"You stay around me too much," he pressed her tenderly. "You're wearing yourself out looking after my health. Stop worrying, and have a good time while you may—I mean while you're still young and have your health," he added, realizing that he had almost made an unfortunate slip.

"All right, I will—if you really don't mind," she agreed, and explained that the party would occur on the following Monday night. She proposed to take the motorboat over, leaving at seven o'clock; remain for the night, and chug-chug back again the following morning.

Bruckner was delighted. A sudden inspiration had plunged him into an ecstasy of joy. At last—like a bolt from the blue—he had hit upon a plan to do away with the woman. It was entirely possible that the thing had been done before, but it was new with Bruckner. It could not possibly savor of design and it would happen while she was

away. He would be presumed to know nothing of the accident until the heart-rending news should be brought to him. Then he would be stunned. Bruckner was a past master at registering grief—surprise—anguish.

But after the funeral he could spend the entire summer at the bungalow in undisturbed peace. He was glad that he could accomplish his purpose so early in the spring, for unlike the average man, his thoughts did not lightly turn to love in that entrancing period.

The thought necessitated a visit to his friend, the clockmaker to the former Czar. He made it, and outlined his needs minutely. That is, he told the clockmaker precisely the sort of box he desired—how long and how wide it should be—and explained just how its timepiece was to be set. It was to be put up in a candy box and tied neatly with ribbon. It should weigh five pounds and bear the wrapping of a smart confectioner. On the day he meant to use it, Bruckner would call for the box. It must be ready, and everything must be fixed so that he would not need to unwrap it.

Mrs. Bruckner was going away in her little sea-taxi at seven o'clock. He would arrive from the city an hour before. He planned to reach the bungalow via a hired launch, timing himself to get there a little late for supper, but in time to bid her good-bye. When he did so he would thoughtfully put the candy box in his wife's motorboat, calling her attention to it, and laughingly instructing her not to nibble at its contents during the journey. He wished her to save it for the party and present it to her hostess.

He hoped she would obey. The trip would take her a little more than an hour. She did not mind that, since she loved the sea and could handle her craft as well as any man. But if everything went well, Mrs. Bruckner would never

land at the wharf at Calder's Point. Just about fifteen minutes before she was due to reach that settlement, the little clock would tick its final tick, and Mrs. Bruckner would proceed to eternity instead of the pinochle party.

The complete simplicity of the scheme appealed to him strongly. He would put the bomb near the gasoline tank. Its explosion would destroy that container and everyone would surmise that the blowing up of the fuel store had caused the tragedy. No one but the dead woman would know about the candy box—that is, no one but the clockmaker of the Czar. That gentleman would not be likely to speak. Secrecy was also essential to the success of his profession, and in such matters he was strictly honorable and thoroughly reliable. He need not know for whom the box was intended and for reasons of his own he would not inquire too deeply into the matter.

## V

EVERYTHING went as planned. On Monday morning Mr. Bruckner announced that it would be necessary for him to go to the city in connection with some business at his broker's. He promised to return as speedily as he could, but told his wife not to wait for him if he should not be home by the time she intended to leave. That was camouflage, carefully planned. He always thought of little details like that in order to turn away suspicion from the minds of his victims. Besides, he wanted to establish an alibi and have it known that he was away all day.

Moreover, he always disliked to be around his victims just before the climax of his cunning. Their very confidence and trust in him always tended to annoy him. But he knew very well that he would be back on time. Otherwise, of course, he could not place the candy box in the little launch.



The clockmaker was ready for him, and the box itself was a beauty—as creditable a piece of work as Bruckner had ever seen. It did not weigh too much nor too little, and while he was assured that the watch was perfect in its mechanism and timing, it did not give forth the slightest sound.

The clockmaker beamed when he saw the look of admiration in Bruckner's eyes and told him that he might trust the little bomb implicitly. "It is worthy to blow up a Prime Minister!" enthused its author. "Unfortunately, these days, kings are few and trade is far from good. The war seems to have caused an unreasoning dislike for explosives on the part of my very best customers."

Bruckner consoled with the man and took his departure. He had received the professional word of the watchmaker that the bomb would not go off if he were to drop it and that it would not explode until eight-fifteen precisely. That was as Bruckner wished. The detonation would be heard just as the motorboat was entering the waters about Calder's Point and would startle those on shore waiting for his wife. In all probability the bomb would tear her to pieces and wreck the boat completely. At least it would utterly destroy itself—and the gasoline tank. That was, of course, essential—for there must be no remaining evidence, even though no clue could possibly point to him.

But because the time schedule of the railroad had been changed without his knowledge, Bruckner did not arrive at the bungalow until almost seven o'clock. It had been a narrow escape from being too late, and the incident made him nervous; yet in a way, he thought, it was fortunate.

Mrs. Bruckner was down at the landing, dressed in her best bib and tucker, and she greeted him with a smile and an inquiry as to his health. "You look

tired, my dear," she sympathized in a motherly sort of fashion. "I really hate to go away and leave you."

"I am tired," Bruckner confessed. "I guess I'm not as young as I used to be and I haven't been right pert for the last few weeks. I'll soon be better, however," he added cheerfully. "Just you go on and have a good time, and don't give a thought to me."

Then he produced the candy box and displayed it to her. The boatman who had brought him was gone by this time, and he had not seen the package which Bruckner had kept wrapped in a newspaper until this very moment. Now Mrs. Bruckner took it in her hands and plucked at the ribbon, but he shook his finger at her as he might do to a naughty child.

"Now don't be impatient or selfish!" he reproved. "Keep it until you get to the party. Then offer some to the others with my compliments."

"I suppose I should do that," she agreed with him. "And now I must be going. There's a light under the coffee on the stove, and your supper's on the table. You won't mind a cold snack, will you?"

"No," said Bruckner, and then the one flaw in his plan occurred to him. How could he make sure that she would put the candy box where it would certainly destroy the gasoline tank? He could not, if he left it in her possession. Of course it would kill her, but that was not enough. His plan must work out exactly as he had intended, and the only way to insure its perfect success was to go along in the boat.

That, in a way, was a risk, but Bruckner was equal to the situation. It required quick thinking, but he had a bright idea on the spot.

"Well!" he reproached himself, "if I didn't forget my tobacco! I guess I'd better go back as far as the station with you, and then get one of the public

launches to bring me home. It won't take more than half an hour, and I'll eat supper later."

So he took the candy box from his wife's hands, and helped her into the boat. She went directly to the little engine and started it as he stepped aboard. The bomb would not blow up for about an hour. In twenty minutes he would be at the station landing. When he got out, he would put the candy box by the gasoline tank and lay a tarpaulin over it, with the explanation that he did so to keep it from being wetted by the spray. Mrs. Bruckner would think nothing of his doing that, and would probably forget all about the candy until it reminded her of itself forcibly.

Speedily the little boat chugged away from the wharf and cut the waves like a knife as it shot off toward the station pier. It was twilight, growing gradually darker, and lights began to twinkle from the group of cottages ahead.

"Perhaps," Bruckner suggested to his wife, "I'll stay over at the post office for a while. Maybe I can get some of the men to play a game of pool, and go back home about ten o'clock. Supper being cold, it won't make any difference, and I can make some fresh—"

But he never made it. There was a terrific crash. The little motor launch was rent asunder. When the detonation died away, there was nothing left but a few pieces of floating wreckage, and, curiously, a red ribbon floating on the surface of the sea. Bruckner and his wife had been blown to atoms.

The clockmaker had worked well and the bomb had gone off precisely as he had planned—at the hour appointed by Bruckner himself. But the former creator of timepieces for the Czar was not a man who read the daily papers. In preparing the bomb and setting the clock, he had not known of the fact

that the daylight saving law for the season went into effect at the stroke of two that morning. Hence the explosion had occurred just one hour earlier than Bruckner had expected it would.

## VI

BUT simultaneously with the crash that ended the lives of the Bruckners, two strange men appeared before their little bungalow. The visitors on the beach looked out to sea, not knowing that the criminal they sought was now beyond their reach.

"Gosh!" one of them exclaimed. "That gasoline certainly made a thorough job of it! It won't even be worth while to send out a rescue boat."

The other detective shrugged. "I'm more interested in what we're likely to find inside the house," he said. "Since nobody seems to be home, suppose we go right in."

They did, and they made a thorough search, including a chemical analysis of the coffee on the stove and the cold snack on the table. It was a delicious looking little layout of tempting morsels, but the chemist who tested it whistled loudly in amazement when his task was finished.

"The old girl must have been in a hurry to finish *this* chap!" he announced. "She's put enough poison in all this stuff to kill an elephant. Funny, too—because she always worked slowly before—"

"Before?" questioned his companion. "Is she one of those fiends who marry a lot of men and murder them for their insurance?"

The chemist nodded. "She was tried twice and acquitted for lack of convicting proof—but we've been watching her ever since, and her mug's in the Rogues' Gallery under the alias of Arsenic Annie."