

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1949

Cover by Matt Fox

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D. McLWRAITH, Editor

# Murder Man

BY EWEN WHYTE



THE sun, like any April sun, made its way cautiously between showers, putting its early spring warmth here and there across the land in patchwork squares. In the country, greenness came out, the precious firstborn of a new season. In the city people came out, worn by the winter, used up and tired and stiffened by the chill blasts, out now blinking in the new, friendly light.

One of these people was Max Vollmer (Maximilian, his mother had named him in that strident burst of post-birth enthusiasm and hope that is as strong in a slum-district flat as a Florida estate).

Vollmer was a thinish man in his late forties, probably indistinguishable from so many of the others who scurried across streets, down subway kiosks, up el stairs, to work and home to some drear hovel at night to gather strength for the next meaningless day.

There are millions of Vollmers, living their lives out with hardly an awareness even of the passage of time so intent are they on the tiny task or duty or urge of the moment.

Each, of course, as with all of mankind, thinks himself quite different, endowed with superior qualities than those of his fellow creatures who, in turn, feel the same way about him. It is man's inbred sense of individuality that enables him to survive—for mostly he does—the cogwheel, assembly-line, loud and ill-mannered absurdity that is present-day life.

But this Max Vollmer was different from the other millions of Vollmers, whatever their names might be, because of one greatly distinguishing feature.

This Max Vollmer was planning a kill-

ing, a killing that he would surely carry through and one which the police would not solve.

There are many humans walking the dusty, unsatisfying paths of life who think of

Heading by  
Vincent Napoll

*The one perfect thing  
in an unbelievably  
imperfect life would  
be this perfect killing*

murder, who, when you see them smile, are smiling at the delicious thought of destroying another human being. All the people you'd never suspect and some you would. But these people, most of them, keep their murderous hates against life and other humans to themselves, for they know with primitive instinct that to action the impulse means not only the end of someone else's life, which is fine, but also their own—not so good—while a fumbled attempt means an even more restricted incarceration than the four walls of their grubby little homes.

With Max Vollmer it was different. He had thought this proposition over for too long to be turned away from it. He had pondered it on his way to work and as he came home at night, one among the hurrying thousands upon thousands, but accompanying him this dread secret.

Strangely, the one who was to be killed was not much thought of. Vollmer, exercising the godlike privilege of the killer-to-be, was concerned only with the time, the method, and the tantalizing proposition of completely fooling the authorities. For this then was to be the one perfect thing in a lifetime of imperfection; the too-large family he'd been born into, the lack of money, of food, of care . . . all so imperfect. The public school growing up, the struggle, always the struggle, and then the best job—not at all good—that could be gotten and the day, week, month, year monotony of that.

To understand the whole dreadful scheme that would end in death, you would have to understand the whole tragedy of being a Max Vollmer—a medium size, less than average in all qualities including luck, unprepossessing in every way. A child, a boy and a man not once smiled on by fortune either in the endowment of natural characteristics or the good breaks which would serve to minimize the lack of these. Many Vollmers go wrong very quickly and therefore do not join the throngs that crowd the streets and patios of this community and that. A car "job," a quick snatch at a corner store, starting with clubs and knives, graduating to guns and plots more elaborate . . . these Vollmers are weeded out fast. They fill the gray, faceless tiers of penitentiaries across the world, and they

themselves become faceless, with their identity whittled down to a number.

OTHERS, of less physical or mental vigor, see less of life and are saved from some of life's burdens by the burden of their very own illnesses and they too travel the inexorable way across the stage of life—which after all, is a very poor figure, for life is no stage and nobody watches. That is it. Nobody cares as we slip in and out. Vollmers have cars and buy houses, woo girls and marry them and have children. But all the time they are pre-doomed to indistinguishment, and saved by their universal anesthesia from the dreadful knowledge of that fact.

But here one of them, Max Vollmer by name, was distinguished enough to know some of these things, to have a glimmering of them which made him unlike the rest and worthy of a story. Knowing in him did precisely what knowing does to most people . . . for, of course, if there is one thing sure it is that ignorance is bliss. Knowing made him naggingly unhappy. Unhappy, that is, until the perfect solution came to him. Until the strong emotions could be channeled into a new direction . . . into burning, overwhelming hatred as the alpha and omega of all of life and of the universe which, after all, was no bigger than he was. And the perfect solution was, quite simply, the perfect crime. He would commit it; the killing would right all wrongs.

This was what drove Max Vollmer on. What brought him through the noise-stained, dirt-stained nights of the city; what sent him on his way in the gray, diffused light of early morning to his stand-up breakfast. That took his thoughts from the awful faces of the crowd, in the subway, at work, everywhere. Those faces bobbing and ducking through the streets, carried along at incredibly eccentric paces by the peripatetic bodies that propelled them; tired faces, thin and fat, drawn, over-madeup, sagging, jouncing with the impact of heel on the infernal sidewalk; and the eyes—made him think of "the ayes have it"—the eyes, fish eyes, mackerel and cod, cold eyes and calculating eyes; occasionally the brown hurt puppy dog eyes of someone who hadn't been here very long. And wouldn't be. For

you got like those others, or left, or perished.

The victim—Vollmer never thought of him by name—was a man of forty-seven. A good age for such an event as was about to befall him. A good age to write *Finis* to that life. The whole setup delighted Vollmer as though he had existed for this alone, for perhaps he had.

**T**HE monotony of life dropped away and began the supreme adventure of planning this creative effort of destruction. Max Vollmer became blessed with a peculiar sixth sense. A deep sensitivity developed, he thought, belied by his nondescript, one-like-millions face. It seemed now as though he were in league with forces beyond the ordinary ken. When he sat in a movie house, he thought he noticed the way people sitting near him would regard him with sudden but surreptitious interest; his next-door neighbor at the stand-up breakfast place; his co-worker at the office; the tired other sheep-people who lived in the old, creaking, smelling rooming house where he existed.

Max had the feeling that these people *knew, sensed* that he was different, different in ways they could not analyze. And that their knowing was a form of respect. But it pleased him to realize that they could not possibly guess his secret, as they said "Pass the mustard" to him and eyes held together for a flickering instant. He could root them to the spot by telling, cement them forever in that one place by revealing what he was going to do, but left it unsaid for each to go his own way into the maw of the city, to forget there in its throng and bustle all thoughts and dreams but the sheer, instinctive survival ones. But with Vollmer it was different. He never forgot.

The beauty was the way the police would be fooled. Those bumbling self-important idiots who were fit merely to stand on windswept street corners and misdirect traffic. The law, in a way, was symbolic of all the things that Max Vollmer detested. The police, in or out of uniform represented man's hypocritical conscience, man's inbred distrust of himself. If there was, for instance, a church where one spoke of the freedom of the human heart and spirit, there would surely be a policeman on the corner of the

street making sure there would be no freedom of heart of spirit.

For freedom was, after all, doing exactly what you wanted to do precisely when you wanted to do it, and isn't all of civilized life and its rules formulated against just that? So Max Vollmer was sure.

When a man kills, he is really free. And he is free in those quiet, whispering moments when the act belongs only to the killer and the victim—and is locked up forever as the last page of the snuffed-out life—and the silence of the night; before the deliciousness has been shared with the hungry hordes that live on the vicarious sensations of their tabloids, and with the minions of the law who are policemen because they lack the courage of the criminal yet still must be close to violence.

**T**HAT is the exquisite moment that makes all the dullards worth the pain and insufferability. Even the dead, the victims legion, must know a kind of strange victory in this triumph over the usual, the mundane and the man-ordered ways of their lives which prescribe gallstones or cancer or an errant bus or atom bomb as being Good and quite moral but this as being Bad. This, then, was the final victory and the very horror of society, the smackings of their satisfaction over the thing, the agencies set in motion to catch the wayward human who had dared, yes, dared to do other than wait for the gallstones, the cancer, the misguided auto, the atom bomb . . . dared, and in so daring, freed both himself and the victim.

Max Vollmer had chosen as murder weapon a razor. Not the much-advertised safety kind with fancy streamlining rhapsodized by the subway posters, poor fang-drawn impotent device. Instead, he would use a fine, old-fashioned—weren't old things always the best despite commercials—straight-edged one, the kind still found in barber shops. Vollmer had thought over the possibilities of all lethal weapons and this appealed to him the most. And a razor was better than a knife; it had more subtlety; it was a flute as against a tuba; a rapier instead of a broadsword.

The sweet, clean pain of a razor cutting was a pure virtue. A razor slicing, cutting deep had the cleansing quality of fire; and

Max had thought of fire for the victim, but that is improbable. How could a perfect crime be committed with the use of fire? Fire controlled was a beautiful thing, but it blossomed and mushroomed and soon lost its personalized intimacy.

No; it would be a razor. And the site was important. That too had been decided. A nighttime pier in the deserted dock district. A place left by the roustabouts and herky derricks and cursing after working hours, visited only by darkness, by fog and water-smell, and the eerie cries of river traffic moving their red and green and white lights up and down the great bosom of the ageless current out there beyond land's reach.

A razor could be dropped so easily into the deep water off the pier side, and nothing so small would ever be recovered. And the extra pair of shoes, they would go down too; heavy shoes they were and most important to the whole scheme.

Sundays daytime Max Vollmer had gone near the pier, by it, around it, not wanting to be seen or noticed by the Sabbath Day couples who love-strolled or the bums who lounged. The one chance in a million that if he walked boldly out on the rough wood planking, someone *might* say later, Yes, I remember this man. But there was not to be even the one chance in a million. So Vollmer noticed all the details he had to notice from the inconspicuousness of afar. And that was all that was necessary. It would be here that the final scene would be played; played in all its intensity with the dark and the sounds of the river as audience and the dark water as juror.

THE blackest night came finally on the heels of unimportant days and other meaningless nights. After work—and how did those other fools know the importance of today as they worked beside him, with their crude jokes and talk about stupid things like women and poker and the fights—Vollmer took himself home to prepare. The extra pair of shoes had to be cunningly weighted; the razor was newly sharpened and secured in his thin, gray overcoat.

Nobody at the bedraggled rooming-house with its bedraggled people paid any mind to the comings and goings of the other inhabi-

ants. Vollmer slipped out of the door unseen sometime before eleven. He took a subway downtown; at that hour it was not crowded, and when he reached his stop, he rose to street level alone. He stood for a moment in the little puddle of light from the kiosk, got his bearings and then plunged into the dark, deserted streets. These thoroughfares were unused at night. They were poor and squalid, dividing more desirable sections from the waterfront. Movie houses and bowling alleys and new construction had moved away from here. This part seemed to sleep in the memory of a long ago when the crumbling brick and masonry fronts had been new.

Vollmer went on more by instinct than sight, for it was very dark, but his feet told him the cobblestones were rougher and the smell of dark swirling water came strong to his nostrils. A street light bisected the gloom ahead and threw feeble yellow rays across the desolate street. Ahead the light faded into the nothingness of space. The river was there, unseen but waiting. And the pier.

Max Vollmer went on until, from his many previous visits here, he could sense the exact directions he needed. The mouth of the pier opened out on a concrete foundation. But beyond that, stretching out over the tide, the wood planking was dirty with disuse; footprints would show clearly from the moment one left the concrete. Vollmer stopped on the cement part and listened, but there was nothing but the swirl of the water and the river sounds. He made sure of the pair of shoes and the razor.

There were a few things he had to do; he'd thought them out, oh so carefully. And now there was the final screwing up of courage, and it was like squeezing a tube of paste. For a while you squeezed and nothing happened, and then suddenly out would pop the substance of determination and resolve.

Max Vollmer did what he had to do with the weighted shoes; then, standing just above where the tide lipped and murmured at the under-pier wood, there was another sound. The final rendezvous would be complete now in a moment or so more. It was impossible to see anything in the impenetrable gloom. Sounds there were, but re-

mote, as of the darkness and the water and traffic borne along its surface, things belonging to the night and the river.

Soon now. Soon, so soon. Vollmer put his hand inside the pocket of the worn, gray overcoat and felt the reassuring handle of the murder weapon-to-be. His fingers on it tightened. He tensed at what could have been a sound of the wind—it would never do to have some blundering outsider stumble onto this scene now. His palm was sweat slick, and he forced his hand against the cloth side of the pocket to dry it.

**WHY** was he nervous? It irked him ever so slightly. For this was the goal, the incentive that had guided him all these weeks and months. After planning this way, after holding his secret, after knowing his superiority over all the other poor fools, poor driven sheep that passed him by through the little moments of their lives, would he hesitate now? Not now.

The breathing, living thing was at his side now. In the impenetrable darkness where only the imagination could see and know. The other human was here. Vollmer's hand, with the razor in it, straightened against the night and task, slipped so easily out of the gray overcoat pocket. He struck then, with the frenzy of a man born for just this minute.

The razor touched cloth and parted it, caressed flesh and slit it with thirst for the blood within. Vollmer himself felt every sweet, clean thrill of the slashing strokes.

He felt the solidity of an arm and struck at it; other solids came before the steel and were shredded, stroke by stroke, blow after blow until there remained in this weaving, drunken, monstrous hulk that had once been whole and human, only the supremely enticing and virginal area of the throat.

That too was fulfilled for ecstasy . . . a bubbling, gurgling ecstasy that slipped and slimed and then gaped so silently as the thing, once human, tottered and fell, no more than tree-like, to the kindred wood of the pier apron.

For Max Vollmer, this was the caress of a thousand beautiful women, the embrace of

sublime delight, and only now at the very last moment before the end did he, with a tiny flip of his hand, send the razor—so coated with bright fulfillment even though unseen—into the night at pier side where the river water plopped it down to the depths to wash and forget the shining red deeds stained there. This, the final act of complete accomplishment.

And the wind that had been here and seen, the water that had flowed by and heard, these were gone far away after a time; away, with the night.

**WITH** light and morning there was finally a person; then people and then the police. They came, sirens screaming with the impotence and noise of recriminators after-the-act. They swarmed to the pier and repaid the dear curious who had called them by pushing them back as though by denying them the pleasure of *looking*, the thing there at wharf's end would rise in all its grisly un-humanness and say hoarsely, "See, I'm all right again."

Patrolmen waved nightsticks, sergeants glowered and lieutenants-of-detectives thought. They noted the clear footprints, clear on the filth of the wood planking. The two pairs leading out to the end, the intermingling of prints, signs of scuffling there at the end, and the one set returning.

"Murder," the wise men of authority said positively and with distaste, for this was the kind of thing you don't solve.

"With a knife or razor," it was obvious.

And those in blue who had rolled him over and looked at the thing poorly hid by shredded clothes, the chest and arms and face and neck, they whistled and somebody who'd seen a lot of these said:

"Somebody sure must've hated this guy to do a carving job like this on him."

That was it, just a grudge, not robbery. Blind, terrible hatred.

For inside the worn, gray overcoat—what was left unshredded of it—was an equally worn wallet, two dollars in it and a card that said that this miserable, un-whole thing, to be bundled out of sight as soon as possible in the high, black morgue wagon, was once a human called Max Vollmer.