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SCHOOL FOR CORPSES

By
WAYNE
ROGERS

Benedisto's satanical face seemed to leer up at me. . . .



It was only the ordinary group picture of a boys' prep school, but snapped by the lethal camera of Gregory Benedisto, refugee from a fiery grave, it became a ghastly, black and white prophecy—of mass-murder!

GREGORY BENEDISTO looked like the devil—literally. That was my first impression of him. His long face was high cheekboned and came to a pointed chin. His large nose was beaked, beneath a widow's

peak of black hair that dipped down deep into his forehead. But his dark eyes contributed most to the satanic cast of his pallid face. They seemed to be imperceptibly tilted; strangely mesmeric eyes of dark brown that

at times appeared black, and again glowed with an almost red flame.

Something about that face sent a faint shiver trickling down my spine the first time I shook hands with him; an instinctive shrinking from him that later association did little to overcome. I asked myself time and again what manner of man—what manner of creature—Benedisto could be.

Meadesville was one of the most exclusive prep schools in America. Its registration of some three hundred boys listed sons of the wealthiest families in the country—youngsters now eagerly preparing to qualify for the Air Corps. Its faculty was equally hand-picked. And not the least illustrious among them was Gregory Benedisto, refugee scientist from the University of Warsaw, who would be my immediate superior. So I had joined Meadesville's staff with high hopes.

And then I met Benedisto—and felt my first misgiving. Something about the man sounded a vague alarm in my brain. . . .

Not that Benedisto wasn't a first-rate scientist. He was all of that. He was a wizard with chemicals. And he wanted to be regular. He tried to fraternize with the faculty and mix with the student body. But his colleagues avoided him, and the boys called him "Professor Mephisto" behind his back.

Aside from chemistry, photography was his one hobby; so when we began making preparations for the publication of our year book, he made all the individual photographs of the students and developed them in a little dark-room he had rigged up in a closet-like ante-room of the chem lab. I helped him with that; worked beside him night after night.

And that was when the first significant incident occurred. Not significant at first. Just an accident—but later—

Benedisto had just prepared a new batch of developer. He put the first film into it, and almost instantly an unintelligible foreign oath ripped from his lips. Frantically he tried to retrieve the film, but it was too late. Something had gone wrong; the negative was ruined, the gelatin almost eaten off the film.

"That fool clerk! That infernal fool!" Benedisto flew into a raging temper. "What did he give me? Some sort of corrosive acid. The film is ruined!"

"Too bad," I sympathized, "but no great harm has been done. We still have the second pose—or you can make another photograph. Herbert Thompson," I read the student's name from a slip pasted on the side of the film-holder. "I can make an appointment with him when he comes to class tomorrow morning."

"Yes—do that, Pollard," he nodded his head; but his voice was strangely detached, abstracted—as if he had not heard a word I

said. And the savage fury that blazed in his eyes was slow in subsiding.

I dismissed it from my mind and we went on with our work, but twenty minutes later we were interrupted by a sudden ominous clanging. The fire bell! The most dreaded sound on any campus! I dashed into the laboratory and raced out into the night.

THE fire was in Borden Hall, one of the dormitories. It wasn't much of a blaze—couldn't be in that fireproof building. It was confined to one room, but there it had done a thorough job. Out through the smoke-belching doorway the fire-fighters carried a charred figure that could hardly be recognized as anything human.

"That's young Thompson," old Chalmers, the history professor, whispered beside me. "I feared something like this. The boy was an inveterate smoker. He was caught several times smoking in bed—and this time he wasn't caught in time. He set the bed afire."

Young Thompson—Herbert Thompson. . . . For a moment I didn't get anything beyond the horror of his tragic death. Then I remembered, and clammy perspiration soaked the palms of my hands. Herbert Thompson—it was almost as if our accident in the dark-room had been a presaging of the death that hung over the lad. . . .

Ten days later we had our second accident in the dark-room. Benedisto was taking one of the individual film plates from the holder when it caught. He tugged at it impatiently, yanked—and the film suddenly ripped. Half of it came out, crumpled and jagged-edged where it had torn right across the face of the subject.

This time Benedisto did not rage. He caught his breath sharply and stared at the ruined film with the stricken eyes of a miser who sees his greatest treasure being snatched from him.

"Raymond Gulick," he read the student's name in a voice that was hardly audible, and something about his agonized expression sent a chill through me.

In the morning I saw the battered wreckage of the flivver in which young Gulick had met his death. His head had gone through the windshield when the car crashed, and the jagged shards had mutilated his face horribly!

The backs of my hands were gloved with perspiration as I recalled that accident the night before in Benedisto's dark-room—the jaggedly torn film. Herbert Thompson and now Raymond Gulick. . . . Surely this was more than coincidence. Surely there was some other connection between those accidents I had witnessed and their ghastly sequels.

My brain shied away from the supernatural

implications of the only answers I could find. I had witnessed two inconsequential accidents, and two of our students had met tragic deaths—that was all there was to it, I told myself firmly.

BUT after that I watched Gregory Benedisto as a detective must watch a murder suspect. Yet I could find nothing whatsoever to connect him with the two students' deaths—until the day when I opened a shipment of chemicals that came to us from a firm in New England. The bottles were packed in newspapers, and as I smoothed them out one of the printed pages gripped my attention—held it spell-bound. An obituary page. Up from between the columns of type stared a Mephistophelian face I was certain I recognized! The face of—

Professor Benedisto, was beside me before I could take a second glance. He reached in front of me and picked up several of the bottles.

their photographs had met with at his hands.

A dead man presiding over the destinies of the living—juggling the lives of our boys in his undead fingers?

That was barbaric superstition, abysmal ignorance—and yet, as I struggled to reject it, an undeniable fear closed around my heart.

I stepped into a side room off the main office to glance over my mail, and, lost in thought, I didn't hear footsteps approaching, nor the soft tap on the open door. I was aware of nothing until the last person in the world whom I wanted to see that item was almost at my side. Barely in time, I folded the paper and crammed it into my pocket before Marcia Kirby had a chance to recognize Benedisto's picture.

Marcia was the Meadesville registrar—and just about the neatest and most desirable bit of femininity I had ever met. Now her wide blue eyes were even rounder than usual, her brows half-arched in unvoiced surprise.

"Mr. Latham would like to see you, Dan,"

SURE, WE'RE ON THE OFFENSIVE! But now, more than ever before, is the time to realize that it's always more costly to attack—in material and human lives—than it is to defend. And now more than ever our boys need the planes, the guns, and the bombs that your purchase of War Bonds helps to give them! Buy a War-Bond Every Pay-Day! Give More Than 10%!

"All right, Pollard—these I will take care of," he said matter-of-factly, and when the bottles were removed, the newspaper went with them.

I searched the laboratory for it that day and the next, but it was gone. Benedisto had disposed of it before I could read the amazing article beside that photograph—but not before my subconscious mind had registered the name of that newspaper and the date it was published. And now the copy I had sent for was there before me, and Benedisto's satanic features were staring up at me.

"Professor Gregory Benedisto, renowned scientist from the University of Warsaw," I read, "died here yesterday at the close of a lecture he delivered before the Haverhill Women's Club. The speaker was seized with a heart attack as he left the Town Hall rostrum and succumbed in a back-stage room a few minutes later."

Gregory Benedisto had died in Haverhill, Massachusetts, three days before he arrived to take up his duties in Meadesville!

The explanation was simple. This Benedisto was a fake, an impostor—nothing more. But there was nothing fake about the way those boys had died after the "accidents"

she told me, and then the momentary doubt faded from her face, banished by the smile that always made my heart start pogo-stick leaping. "Good luck—but I *know* you'll have it."

By her manner I gathered that Stephen Latham wanted to talk to me about my next year's appointment and in the urgency of that vital moment I forgot about Benedisto. My reappointment meant more than a job to me now; it meant Marcia Kirby as well.

Latham turned his usual unsmiling face to me as I entered. Tall and thin, bald-headed, small-featured, he looked more like a mortician than a preparatory school president.

"Pollard," he came straight to the point, "your work has been very satisfactory. We want you to stay here at Meadesville next year. Not just as an instructor. You will be in charge of the Science Department, succeeding Professor Benedisto."

He must have read the question in my eyes.

"Professor Benedisto is an excellent man, no question about that," he leaned forward and spoke more confidentially. "No doubt he will find an opportunity more suited to his talents elsewhere, but here we look for a

warmer personality, a more human approach—"

There was more, but it did not register on me. All that mattered to me was that I had secured the appointment. I was to be Benedisto's successor. And in that moment I realized that I must drop my half-formed intention of showing that startling obituary to Latham. It was sufficient that I was to succeed Benedisto; no need to cast suspicion upon him. He would go away, and Meadesville would see no more of him.

Marcia was at her desk when I came out into the front office with my good news. That was the way I wanted it to be; she would be the first to hear it. I told her jubilantly, and when I finished she was in my arms. Just for a brief moment—and then we both were aware that someone was standing and watching us.

Gregory Benedisto!

WE HAD not heard his footsteps, had not seen him enter the office. We had no idea how long he had been there, or how much he had overheard, but he did not keep us long in doubt on that score.

"Accept my congratulations, Pollard," his dry-sounding voice broke the silence. "The news of your appointment comes very opportunely. I am anxious to get away from Meadesville. It is important that I attend to my affairs. Now that you are to succeed me, there is no more difficulty. I shall turn the department over to you immediately. I fear—" the slightly tilted eyes narrowed in the ghost of a grin—"you must inherit my extra-curricular duties as well. Tonight I shall help you with the group picture film. The rest of the work I must leave to you."

He was gone before I could do more than mumble agreement, and then Marcia's cold little hands were gripping mine tightly.

"I don't like him, Dan," she shuddered. "I'm glad he is going; I wish he were gone now!"

I knew how she felt, but Benedisto's abrupt departure would saddle a fine load of work on my shoulders. Only that noon he had made a group photograph of the entire student body and faculty with his rotary Leica, and before commencement night some three hundred prints of that negative must be ready for distribution. Now that job would be up to me.

The group picture film was nearly four feet long. Developing it was a two-man proposition, especially for one with as little dark-room experience as I had.

Benedisto made no reference to our changed status when we went to work that evening. He prepared the developer and fed the long film into the tank. At his direction I drew it out when the process was completed; held

it suspended between my outstretched arms while he got the clips to hang it up for drying.

"Just a minute. Hold it that way," his low voice came to me out of the semi-darkness. "Hold it that way—hold it—"

He was standing directly in front of me, and suddenly I was aware of his eyes blazing at me. The rays of the safety light reached his face just sufficiently to highlight it. It swam in the darkness like a detached mask with radiant eyes of living fire. Those eyes seemed to bulge, to grow wider and wider, until they filled the whole mask, the whole room.

"Hold it that way—hold it—" Benedisto's low voice came to me in a cadence that was like the muted throbbing of a drum.

Of course, I would hold it. I must hold it.

A curious transformation seemed to have come over the dark-room. Where there had been the single light of the safety lamp there were now two points of light. Two flames that burned over there near the wall where Benedisto had gone. His eyes? No, they were candles; strange black candles that were burning on either end of what seemed to be a small black altar. An altar with a vessel of some sort standing on it. A round, greyish sort of vessel that was the inverted top of a human skull!

I recognized it in the same instant that I saw a cross hanging on the wall behind it. A cross of ebon black that gleamed dully in the candlelight. An *inverted* cross, its long end spearing up into the blackness overhead!

For a moment I thought my eyes must be playing me tricks. Surely that altar, the candles and the cross were no more than shadows, varying shades in the dark-room's blackness. Even the low, droning voice that was the only sound in the room must be a figment of my imagination.

"Sathanus Imperator," the strange sounding syllables intoned, but the words that came after them did not make sense. They seemed a meaningless gibberish. "—glory the and power the and kingdom—evil from us deliver but temptation into not us lead—us against trespass who those forgive we as trespasses—" Until, against the darkness, I could see Benedisto's lips moving, hear him mumbling the Lord's Prayer in reverse!

And now I could distinguish a darker shape in front of the black altar, could make out Benedisto's blazing-eyed face uplifted.

"Lord of the Coven, accept this supplicant and delegate unto him a modicum of thy power so that he may be properly equipped to serve thee," his voice rose to a climax, and he stepped toward me with that skull chalice in his cupped hands!

His burning eyes held me as he came closer, as he raised the skull to my lips and then I

felt its contents pouring into my mouth, searing my throat, as the liquid fire spread with lightning speed to every part of my body. The blood in my veins seemed to boil; my brain seemed to be baking.

Benedisto was kneeling beside me when I opened my eyes. He was laving cold water onto my face from half of a round gourd. The lights were on and the door was open.

"I did not realize—it must have been too close for you in here," he apologized. "You fainted. You will be all right in a few minutes, but you must not try to do anything more to-night."

The raging fire that had threatened to consume me was gone, but my whole body was covered with perspiration. There was a brackish taste in my mouth, and my throat was dry. Groggily I got to my feet and looked around me, but the dark-room was just as it always had been. Where I was certain I had seen an altar, there was only a table with some of Benedisto's photographic apparatus on it. And above it, on the wall, hung a T-square he used for cutting paper.

The whole weird performance had been nothing but a hallucination, a fantastic nightmare that had mushroomed in my brain as my senses faded in the ill-ventilated room!

PROFOUND relief surged through me when Benedisto had gone, and the last of the nightmares his very presence conjured up had gone with him!

I turned to the task at hand. With the aid of student volunteers, I soon had the group-printing organized and under way so satisfactorily that I had time to develop a film of snapshots Marcia had taken. Most of them were photographs of Patsy, her wire-haired terrier. Mighty good shots, too. So good that I gathered them up and took them to the office to show them to her.

Marcia was delighted with them. She spread them out on her desk and was comparing them when a sudden gust of wind swept them helter-skelter to the floor. Quickly I sprang after them and managed to retrieve seven, but the eighth skittered under my foot. When I picked it up it was ruined; my heel had ground down on it so hard that Patsy was almost obliterated.

"Oh—too bad!" Marcia lamented. "This was the best of the lot, too. You'll have to make me another, Dan."

Yes, of course, I would make another print—but something about that inconsequential little accident sent fear tentacles worming into my brain. My nerves tensed, my ears strained—so that I was fully prepared for the agonized yowl that came a few minutes later. A dog's shrill, yelping howl and the scream of brakes!

Marcia looked at me, and her face blanched. "Patsy!" she half-whispered.

But I was already on my feet, started for the door. I knew with awful certainty what had happened. It was a few minutes past five o'clock; the time when Patsy made her daily trip to the Administration Building to meet her mistress. But this time she would never reach the front door—she was crushed horribly beneath the wheels of a truck. When I reached the scene of the accident the mangled body was crushed to a ghastly pulp.

I knew, then, that the truck driver had not killed Marcia's pet. I had doomed the little animal when I ground its photograph under my heel—had slaughtered it as effectively as if I had driven the heavy truck wheels over its body!

Benedisto's satanical face seemed to leer up at me from the blood-spattered pavement. "—delegate unto him a modicum of thy power so that he may be properly equipped to serve thee," his ungodly prayer echoed in my reeling brain. And I knew that my worst fears were realized. That devil's mass in the dark-room had been no hallucination. In some incredible fashion Benedisto's plea had been answered. *He had delegated to me his unholy power over life and death; he had turned me into a potential killer in every move I made!*

I was on my guard constantly after that. I knew that my vigilance must never be allowed to relax, especially while I was in the dark-room. I handled the big group-picture film and the prints that came from it as little as possible, and as each newly finished print was added to the others I breathed a sigh of relief.

The work was almost completed on the afternoon of the last day, when a power breakdown tied us up. That delay disrupted my schedule so badly that the Commencement exercises, at which the photographs were to be distributed, were already started before the last prints had been made.

I handled those last few myself, and my brow was damp with perspiration when the final copy came out of the printing frame. Relief must have made me careless—that is the only explanation for what happened in the next few minutes. I left the film lying there in the opened frame and took the print to the fixing bath at the other end of the room. I was absorbed with the task that I didn't hear the dark-room door open.

A gust of wind must have unlatched it, lifting the long, half-curved film and rolling it across the table against a hot stand-pipe next to the wall. That is the way I have figured it out since—but when a sudden puff and the odor of burning nitrate whirled me around, one end of the film was in flames!

I fairly hurled myself across the little room and flung myself on the table, beating at the sizzling flames with my hands and smothering the blaze with my body. I managed to put it out—but my knees felt weak and I was bathed in cold sweat when I sank back into a chair and rubbed my blistered hands over my face.

FOR long moments I did not dare investigate the damage. When at last I forced myself to unroll the shortened film I saw that almost a fourth of it had been destroyed. Almost a fourth of the student body—!

I sat there, helpless, waiting. . . I must have known what was coming, but when the crash did break it shattered the last of my hope and left me stunned. Then, in the hushed stillness that followed, came wild cries of terror and agony.

Somehow I got out of the laboratory and reached the campus. With damning certainty I knew in which direction to turn, even before I saw the sharp flame-tongues that were beginning to poke through a pall of smoke and dust. The auditorium, where the Commencement exercises were in progress!

The next fifteen minutes I spent in a ghastly hell that I never will be able to drive out of my memory. The shattered, roof-caved building, the flames creeping up on trapped victims, the screams of the mangled and dying boys, the still, broken bodies dragged out of the ruins. Every terrible moment of those fifteen minutes is etched on my brain with the acid of self-accusation and self-condemnation.

I was the one responsible for that holocaust! I was the cause of that fearful tragedy! I was the murderer of 40 young boys! With the hell-distilled power Gregory Benedisto had delegated to me! I the devil's own deputy!

I must have been very close to madness. I worked frantically, feverishly—as if I could atone for what I had done by such futile efforts! But finally there was nothing more that I could do—nothing but face my horrible guilt. That must have been Benedisto's moment of hellish triumph.

He had bequeathed his diabolical power to me—but by that piece of devilry he had delivered himself into my hands! If I could get hold of a photograph of *him*—

He was not in the group picture; I had to dismiss that possibility. The rest of the faculty were there, but Benedisto had taken the photograph himself. But I knew where there was a picture of him! Marcia Kirby had taken a snapshot of the two of us—Benedisto and me—shortly after I joined the Meadesville staff. That snapshot was in her album in her desk in the office!

There seemed to be nobody near the Admin-

istration Building as I approached it from the rear. I would break a first-floor window and climb through, I planned swiftly, but subconsciously I tried the back door and it opened. That was strange!

Cautiously I picked my way up the short flight of steps to the first-floor level. Only darkness and silence greeted me, until I turned into the main hallway and could see the door of Marcia's office. Then I caught the rustle of papers and, unless I was mistaken, faint illumination came through that doorway!

Swiftly I catfooted the length of the hall and edged around the doorway. Marcia's green-shaded desk light was lit, bathing the desk top with illumination; and in her chair sat a man who was busily ransacking the drawers.

Benedisto!

He, too, had remembered that snapshot! Marcia's album was lying on the desk, ready to take with him. Suddenly I saw red. I leaped to the desk and snatched the album just as Benedisto whirled to confront me.

My onslaught took him off-guard, but his surprise was only momentary. He flung himself around the end of the desk, crouched behind it, a snub-nosed automatic in his hand. Murder gleamed in his eyes. Deliberately he pulled the trigger.

Instinctively my arm went up, in a hopelessly futile attempt to ward off the bullet, and the album was sent spinning out of my hand. Desperation guided me as I dived forward, trying to grab him to seize his gun arm before he could fire again. I missed his wrist, but he staggered backward when I launched into him, and lost his footing to fall against a marble pedestal surmounted by a heavy bronze bust of Benjamin Franklin.

The pedestal rocked, the bust careened crazily—and then like a pile-driver, it smashed into his upturned face. . . .

“THIS fellow who called himself Benedisto was a crook—and a cold-blooded murderer,” Sheriff Newton stated emphatically a few days after news of the Meadesville tragedy had shocked the whole country. “Benedisto—the real Benedisto—died up in Haverhill; we checked that. This fellow looked a lot like him and figured out a way to cash in on it. Sometimes those ‘heart attacks’ are phoney; maybe he bumped Benedisto off. Anyway, he takes the professor's place and comes here pretending to be Benedisto. Comes here because he knows that most of the fathers of these youngsters are millionaires.

“He volunteers to do the photography work so that he can get pictures of all of them. Then he has to get hold of their fathers’

names and addresses, and he's all set to start a slick extortion scheme. That's why he went to the office where you nailed him—to get the kids' addresses. He had the records right out there on top of the desk, when you came in, didn't he?"

"Yes—" I had to admit that— "but the strange manner in which Herbert Thompson and Raymond Gulick died so soon after the so-called 'accidents' in the dark-room. How—"

"Simple," the sheriff cut me short. "This fake Benedisto killed them. He set the Thompson boy on fire, and he probably tampered with the Gulick lad's car so that a smash-up was sure to happen. He figured on you getting jittery about those accidents just the way you did. Then he blew up the auditorium and expected to get away with the addresses while everybody was busy fighting the raging fire."

Maybe so, I made mental reservation. Perhaps those dark-room accidents were intentional—to tie up with the scheduled murders—but I remembered Benedisto's savage rage when the Thompson lad's negative was ruined, remembered his stricken expression when young Gulick's film was ripped, and I wondered. . . .

"After that wholesale slaughter," Newton went on complacently, "it was your cue to crack wide open and tell the newspapers about the mysterious deaths and show them Benedisto's obituary notice. They'd play it up big—supernatural stuff—refugee professor comes back from the grave and kills youngsters by

hocus-pocus with their photographs. And they'd have a nation-wide audience because of the Meadesville tragedy—all those young boys burned to death.

"That would leave him sitting pretty. He had the negatives of all the boys' photographs. You can't find them anywhere, can you? He intended to put a fancy price on those negatives, with death threatened for each kid if his old man didn't come across. Most of the parents wouldn't have needed much threatening—after what happened here. A devilish extortion scheme, that's all there was to it, Pollard. I wouldn't worry any more about it if I were you."

Maybe so. . . I hope to Heaven the sheriff is right. . . . But I have not showed him what remains of the group-picture film. I checked that negative once—checked the lads who are missing from it entirely and those whose images are singed or partially destroyed with the explosion's list of dead and wounded; and what I found fairly dropped the bottom out of my stomach. . . .

The boys burnt out of the film are dead; the boys whose images were singed are horribly maimed today—the rest are healthy and whole! Coincidence? Not to my way of thinking!

And I have not showed him the snapshot album Benedisto's bullet knocked out of my hand. The photograph I wanted was there all right, but it is no use to me now. It already has served my purpose—horribly. Benedisto's bullet tore through it—and left only a gaping hole where his face had been!
