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THE NEW MYSTERY MAGAZINE

# SHOCK



Volume 1

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# Skuldugger's Loot

*Human skulls grinned mockingly in the merchant's window—yet thick-skulled Dutch wanted in.*



After a while, a tall, shabby old gee stands in the doorway.

**T**HIS is about Dutch Schollmer and another guy. About knives and caterpillar hairs and some other things. And about why I don't like skulls.

When I got into Brophy's Bar that morning, Brophy says that Dutch Schollmer is looking for me. He says Dutch has been hanging around since opening time, waiting for me to show. Brophy asks,

◆ ◆  
**By H. C. Malcolm**

"What'll you have to drink, Doc?"

I say I will have beer. When it comes, I carry it into the back room. Dutch is there, battling a bottle of Brophy's bonded ant poisoning and grinning all over his face. That is quite a job. There is a rumour that Dutch's face got so flat by pushing it against jewelers' plate glass windows so he can case the rocks on the inside. That is not so. If Dutch pushes anything against a jeweler's window—it is a brick.

He waves me into a chair and grins even more so I can admire the three gold choppers set in the middle of his upper jaw. He says, "I got us a job."

I shake my head at that. "You got a line," I tell him. "I got a line. I am a merchant. I sell things. I do not go out at night and dip my pinkies into tills. That is illegal."

He makes an impolite sound with his mouth. "So shoving paste rocks for real ain't illegal? Since when? Besides, who says you got to lift anything? You listen while I tell you."

I listen while he tells me.

It seems that the day before Dutch is down looking over some warehouses and maybe a loft or two. "Just in case," he says. "Business ain't been so good." Anyway, he runs into this little shop on Cherry Street. Being interested, he goes in.

"A joint," says Dutch, taking another hefty swing at Brophy's Best Bonded. "Only I get to shooting the wind with the old gee that runs it. And what do you think?"

I do not know what to think. Dutch runs up his lip like a burleycue curtain, flashing those gold teeth again. "Jewels. Hundreds of 'em. Old stuff. Stickers with real rubies in the handles. All kinds of rings and things. He keeps them in a safe." Dutch makes that impolite noise again. "Safe! It's more like an iron cheese box."

I finish my beer and pour some of the bonded into my glass. "He tells you they're all the real mee-mookus."

"He does."

"He feeds you a line," I say. "He probably buys it from Woolworth."

"You find out," says Dutch. He sits back and grins at me.

"I find out?"

"You case the stuff. Rocks is your business. You know the phonies. If this gee has a load of the McCoy, you tip me and I'll knock off the joint. We split forty-sixty."

"Fifty-fifty."

We argue. We settle for fifty-fifty. He gives me the address and I go to take a look.

Cherry Street isn't much of a street. It's one block long, turning off Webster. It ends against the brick side of a warehouse. There are various things in the gutter.

The shop isn't much, either. I see a hole in a wall with only one show window. The window is dirty. Over the door is a sign that says: *M. Walker, Curios*. A lot of rain water has gone over it since it was hung. I look in the window.

Except for the skulls, there isn't anything to see. There are eight skulls, set in a line. They stare at me and I stare back.

AFTER a while, a tall, shabby old gee comes out of the shop and stands in the doorway. He bows and simpers in my direction, all the time dry-washing his hands.

"You are interested in my skulls?"

I shrug my shoulders. I say not particularly. I say a friend of mine tells me he sees some very nice things in this shop.

"A friend?" I catch something happening back of the old buzzard's eyes, something unpleasant. It is gone before I decide what it means. He waves a scaly claw

at the skulls. "These are purely for show. They attract attention. Won't you step inside?"

I step inside.

The shop smells of dust and other bad things. It is filled with all kinds of junk. There is junk on the tables and on the floor and on all the shelves. It is spread evenly with a layer of dust, like dirty butter on moldy bread. This character says, "My name is Walker. Now, if you'll tell me what it is you want?"

"Maybe," I say, "I got the wrong place." I wave at the stacks of stuff. "I don't see anything—"

This Walker chuckles. It is a dry sound, like loaded dice in a leather cup. "Of course not, my dear sir." He leans closer. His breath smells like Tuesday's milk on Friday. "Burglars," he whispers. "I must be careful, you know. This way, please."

He leads the way through a door. The second room is even smaller and stuffier than the first. But it is filled with different kinds of stuff. I see a lot of swords and knives and funny-looking rods. Walker takes a nasty, four-foot slicer from the wall and hands it to me. "A British naval cutlass. Is it not beautiful?"

I run a finger along the business edge. It is sharp. I say, "It is sharp."

"Of course. It would be quite useless, otherwise."

I give it back to him. For some reason, I have trouble swallowing. He does not notice. He has scuttled away and is hunching his frame over a big iron box. Over one shoulder he says, "I keep my real treasure in here. They are not for sale, you understand. I collect them."

"Collect them?"

If there is an answer to that, I miss it. He is coming back to me, carrying something in his fingers. It is a ring, a big gold ring with a lot of fancy work. "Watch," he says. He presses a spring or something. A little needle jumps out

from the center of the ring. Me, I jump too. Walker chuckles. "Clever, eh? You put poison inside. Very effective."

I say, "I think I got to go, now."

I do not get away from him, though, because he shoots out a long arm and gloms onto my elbow. "Not yet, my dear sir. I have more to show you."

He goes back to the safe, and this time he brings a leather bag. I dump it upside down over a table. The stuff that rolls out makes my eyes bulge. There are rings, pins, chokers. And the stones are as good as Uncle Sam's long green. I paw them like a kid pawing a sack of candy.

Walker isn't paying much attention. He leans over and breathes on my neck. "My friend," he says, "have you ever considered murder?"

I have a feeling under my shirt like ants crawling. I lick my lips, which are very dry. "Murder?"

"It is a hobby of mine."

"Murder?" I squeak.

He giggles very unpleasantly. "Shall we say, rather, the contemplation of murder."

I say he can if he wants. I say it is all the same to me. I look at my watch. I find it is late. I say I must go. I start to go.

**H**E GRABS me by the elbow again. His voice is husky and deep, like he is talking from down in a hole— A grave maybe. . . . "In ancient days," he tells me, "murder was a fine art. A knife—" he waves at the assorted pig-stickers on the walls—"a potion in a cup . . . a bit of powder, perhaps. Or caterpillar hairs."

"Caterpillar hairs?"

"The fuzzy kind. They are not used much anymore." He shakes his head sadly. "Murder isn't what it used to be. People use guns and things. No imagination."

I say, "I got a fine imagination. Too

good. And now I have to leave here."

He doesn't seem to hear me. "Very sad. Very sad." He points at the rings and stuff scattered on the table. "Did it ever occur to you what an excellent motive those things would make for murder?"

I say there are a lot of things occurring to me.

"You know, my friend, I like you. You have an interesting—" He studies my head, like a bug collector casing a prize bug. "—face. I am going to tell you something. Do you know the key to murder?"

I do not. I say the matter has never seemed very important. I say I do not really care. Walker has gone to the safe. He comes back with a big, flat, wooden box. He hisses, "This is for disposing of the body."

He opens the case. I look inside. It is filled with sawbones' tools, big ones and little ones, the kind they use to cut people open. I leave then.

When I get out into the street, I run.

Dutch is waiting for me at Brophy's. He has ruined the first bottle and is working on a second. He flashes the three gold posts when he sees me. "Well," he says, "is it the McCoy?"

I tell him it is the McCoy.

"Swell." He pours a drink and tips it down. I also pour a drink. I pour two drinks. After that, I pour two more. Dutch is rubbing his hands together. "So I crack it. Tonight I crack it wide open."

I say, when I can talk, "Leave me out."

He stares at me. "What gives, Doc? We split. You did your business. Now I do mine. We split."

I says, "I do not want any part of this deal. You don't either. I have talked to

this Walker. He is not right in the head. There is something missing when they put him together. He collect skulls—personally."

Dutch only laughs. "So what? He's nuts. You think I can't handle a dried-up old member like that?"

"Okay," I say. "You handle him. Only leave me out."

"But Doc—"

"Out," I say, very firm. "All the way out."

It is nearly a week before I am in Brophy's again. I ask around for Dutch. Brophy shakes his head. "Ain't seen him for six, seven days, Doc. Ain't seen him since that time he was looking for you."

"Got thrown in the pokey, maybe," I say—kind of hopeful.

"It ain't that. I would've heard if he was. It's just he ain't around. Nobody's seen him for maybe a week."

I order a rye. Something is running around inside my head, like rats in a cellar. I order another rye, a double one. After I drink it, I go for a walk. I go over to Cherry Street.

It has not changed. There are still things in the gutter. There is still a row of skulls. I count them. There are nine.

I think: *Before there were eight.* The one on the far end is shinier than the rest, like maybe it isn't quite dry. I am sick in the gutter. As I am straightening up, painful-like, I hear a tapping on the window. I turn to look. There is a little card stuck in front of the new skull. It says: *Under New Management.*

Above it, grinning and bobbing his head and showing his three gold teeth, is Dutch.

