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THE NEW MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SHOCK



Volume 1

March, 1948

Number 1

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Published bi-monthly by New Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Entry as Second-class matter pending at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1948, by New Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under the International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 15c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.00; other countries 25c additional. Send subscriptions to 210 East 43rd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 210 East 43rd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character, appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U.S.A.

Strangler's Moon

*Garroted women, all
strangers to him, were
his stepping stones to
heights of homicide.*

By
Curt
Hamlin

MR. WEMME found the fourth body. There were five in all. The circumstances surrounding each murder were similar. In each instance, a woman was murdered. Never was there an apparent motive. The murderer always used a piece of common cord as his weapon, looping it around the neck of the victim and quickly drawing tight. He always struck on the night of a full moon.

The police quite logically deduced that all of the murders were the work of one man. The police were wrong.

Mr. Wemme found the fourth body because he happened to glance up the narrow alley which ran between High Street and Wilmington Avenue. It was choked with refuse cans, overflowing garbage, and it cast off the sickly sweet smell of decaying food and damp paper. Mr. Wemme invariably crossed its entrance quickly, nose buried in his handkerchief. What made him look up on that particular morning, he never knew.

The woman lay on her right side, with



The cord looped in his hands like a live thing . . .



her left arm thrown up so that it covered her face. A length of cord was still wound tight around her neck.

This was an eventful day for Mr. Wemme—for on this same day he met John Denton. He met him partly because he found the fourth body, and partly because Denton looked very much like Mr. Wemme. It was a little after seven in the morning when Mr. Wemme found the body. It was nearly nine that night when Denton rang his front door bell.

Mr. Wemme, a widower, answered the door himself. It was a wild night. The wind shrieked along the eaves and hammered at the windows, setting the panes to a noisy rattling.

A small man with a large mustache stood, hat in hand, on the doorstep. "Mr. Wemme?"

"Yes."

"If I might come in, please." It was a mild, soft voice.

Mr. Wemme stood to one side. He shut the door. "It's warmer in the parlor. I've a fire going." He led the way.

The man with the mustache went directly to the fireplace. He stood before it, arms outstretched, turning his hands this way, and that, to catch the heat. "Nasty night out. Windy."

"Yes."

"Nice place you have here. Can't stand modern stuff." The stranger moved a little from the fire, staring at a display of wax flowers under a dusty glass hood. "My mother had one like that."

"My wife bought it," said Mr. Wemme.

"You're married?" The question was unexpectedly sharp.

Mr. Wemme shook his head. "I was. She's dead, you know."

"Ah."

"Yes."

"I see. I see."

"Well—?" said Mr. Wemme.

The visitor suddenly wiggled out of his overcoat, laid it with his hat on the tufted

sofa. "My name's Denton. John C. Denton."

Mr. Wemme murmured that he was Charles R. Wemme.

"Fine." Denton rubbed his hands together briskly. He sat down, drawing a chair close to the fire. "Now we'll talk."

Mr. Wemme also sat down. He was quite puzzled. "Talk?"

"About the body you found." Denton leaned closer, tapped Mr. Wemme impressively on the knee. "That's why I came, you know. About the body."

Mr. Wemme's mouth hung open. "You're from the police?"

Denton chuckled. "My dear Wemme, do I look like a policeman?" He giggled a little. "The fact is—I'm a hobbyist."

"Hobbyist?"

"You know. Stamps. Model planes. Rare books. Pastime. Avocation." He looked up. "You understand, don't you?"

Mr. Wemme shook his head.

Denton's mustache jerked with exasperation. "Here," he said sharply. "It's simple enough. My hobby is murder."

MR. WEMME tried to speak, but his tongue was dry and his lips were stiff and awkward.

Denton was again staring dreamily into the fire. "That's why I came to see you."

"But I don't see—"

"Eh? Found the body, didn't you?" he went on before Mr. Wemme could answer. "I have a theory about the murder. So we'll work together. Catch the murderer, I mean. Quite a feather."

The feeling of fantasy grew. Mr. Wemme felt helpless, trapped. "But the police—"

"The police," said Denton coldly, "are fools." His hand darted inside his coat, burrowed about, came up clutching a ragtag assortment of newspaper clippings. "Now then. The facts." He balanced a pince-niz on the tip of his nose and read rapidly. "Salient points. Four murders.

Always women. No motive. Night of the full moon. Uses cord." He reached into another pocket. "Like this."

Mr. Wemme took it. It was a length of stout butcher's cord, knotted at each end to keep it from ravelling. He looked numbly down at the cord. "I suppose the murderer is insane. He would be, wouldn't he?"

"You're wrong!"

Denton was so abrupt and vehement that Mr. Wemme started quite violently.

"Never trust the obvious, Wemme. Besides, it's perfectly clear that the murderer is a man of superior intelligence."

"Really?" A dazed expression was spreading over Mr. Wemme's small, pink features. "I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Think, man." Denton jumped from his chair, paced excitedly back and forth in front of the fireplace. "First, the lack of motive. Of course he has a motive. But he's kept it hidden." His voice dropped dramatically. "Clever, Wemme. Very clever. This man plans. When he goes out to murder—" Denton snatched up the cord—"he takes this. You know how he uses it?"

"Well, I—"

"Like this." Denton made a loop. He made it expertly, with a jerk of his wrists. He swooped suddenly forward. The loop dropped over Mr. Wemme's head, tightened with a snap at his throat. For one horrible moment he was gasping for breath. Then the pressure was gone, and Denton had dropped back exhaustedly in his chair.

"You see?"

"Terrible." Mr. Wemme swabbed his forehead.

"Exactly."

"But the business about a full moon? And the motive. If he's sane, he must have a motive."

"That," said Denton softly, "is the cleverest part of all. The police are looking for a man who kills without motive."

He turned his round, glowing eyes on Mr. Wemme. "Suppose that for *one* of these murders, there is a motive. Who would suspect, Wemme? Who would suspect? Think of it! To commit murder and walk away free."

He left, then. His going was as abrupt and unexpected as his coming. He stood up, put on his coat, picked up his hat. Mr. Wemme accompanied him into the hall. At the door, Denton paused and shook hands. "Think about it," he urged. "Keep it in mind. I'll be back."

He disappeared into the night.

Mr. Wemme returned to the parlor. The fire had died down. The room was cold, with shadows in the corners. He decided to go up to bed, switched off the light and climbed the narrow, dark stairway to the second floor. In his dresser mirror he saw that Denton's cord noose still hung about his neck. He snatched it off and flung it from him. The thing dropped in twisted layers, like some pale, revolting reptile coiled to spring. Mr. Wemme kicked at it gingerly, pushing it out of sight under the bed.

His dreams that night were hideous.

DURING the next four weeks Mr. Wemme was extraordinarily nervous. Dreams disturbed him. His brain bubbled with every manner of strange fantasy. He plotted dark plots, and thought weird, unholy thoughts.

Most of the time, of course, he was quite normal, and the fantastic vagaries of his mind seemed remote and unreal. Nevertheless, he felt a constant and mounting excitement that sucked like an undertow, pulling him into the depths that were both forbidden and fascinating.

For one reason or another, he expected Denton to come back on the night of the full moon. He didn't take off his shoes that evening, and he kept his coat on and his vest properly buttoned. He was in a restless mood. He glanced at his watch.

He piled wood on the fire. He drew back the window drapes to look out at the weather. It was fine and clear. The moon was huge—a great, round, yellow globe.

Denton came at nine.

He marched right in without ringing the bell, dropping his hat and coat on the sofa. He greeted Mr. Wemme with an airy wave of his hand. "Can't stay long. Meeting my wife. Lovely night, isn't it? Very." He plumped down into his chair, giggling. "For a murder. Lovely night for a murder."

Mr. Wemme watched anxiously. "Have you discovered anything?"

"Nothing. Not a thing. Not even one thing." Denton held up a finger. "Have to get him next time."

"Next time?"

"Keep trying, you know. That's the trick." The strange eyes turned on Mr. Wemme. "Been thinking?"

"Some. Quite a little." Mr. Wemme smiled shyly. "To tell you the truth, I could hardly get it out of my head. What you said about committing murder, I mean."

"Yes."

"I—it must have made quite an impression."

"Yes."

Mr. Wemme fidgeted nervously under the steady, unwinking gaze of the luminous eyes. "All nonsense, of course."

"Nonsense?" Denton's voice was quite sharp. "Not at all, Wemme. Not at all. On the contrary. Serious. Quite."

"But it isn't right," Mr. Wemme protested weakly. "Murder shouldn't be—"

"Fascinating? But it is. Isn't it? Admit it. Admit it, Wemme. Dammit, I don't mind. Strikes me the same way. Well?"

"Well—"

"Of course. Quite right." Denton's hand shot suddenly into a pocket. He thrust a package under Mr. Wemme's nose. "Cigarette?"

Mr. Wemme held up his pipe. "I usually—"

"Try one. Special blend. Made for me." He pressed a paper cylinder into Mr. Wemme's hand, produced a match, struck it noisily with his thumbnail. "Light up."

Mr. Wemme did. He thought the cigarette had an odd flavor. It made him cough.

"Draw it in," said Denton. "Draw it in. Turkish tobacco. Good for the lungs."

Mr. Wemme drew in. The smoke was heavy. It hung in a cloud around his head. He felt faintly dizzy.

Denton's voice seemed to be moving further and further away. "Keep drawing. Good, eh?"

Mr. Wemme said, "Good." He had an extraordinary sensation of floating, as though he was rising above the Morris chair on a comfortable air cushion.

DENTON seemed to be calling from infinite distance. "Draw it in. Draw it in." His voice was so faint that Mr. Wemme turned his head to make sure his visitor was not leaving. A pair of incredibly large, blindingly bright eyes were peering at him from a point just beyond his own nose. A voice, something like Denton's voice, said, "There'll be a murder tonight. Must meet my wife. She's waiting. Not safe for her."

"Headache," Mr. Wemme said simply.

"Of course. Take a walk with me. Clear your head." Denton's fingers closed firmly over his arm. "Coat. Chilly out. Where is it?"

"Hall."

The coat seemed heavy. Leaden. They went outside. To Mr. Wemme, the porch steps were ten feet high. He floated down them softly. Denton kept urging him on. "Walk fast. That'll clear your head."

They hurried along the sidewalk by tremendous bounds and leaps, sailing up without effort and coasting gently down.

At the alley between High Street and Wilmington Avenue, Denton stopped. "It happened here—last month."

Mr. Wemme looked up the dark ravine of the alley. It stretched endlessly. "Here."

"With one of these."

Denton dangled a piece of butcher's cord. Mr. Wemme took it from him. It was enormously long, but his arms were somehow longer. "Yes."

"And he got away."

Mr. Wemme said, "...he got away."

"Interesting, eh?"

"Yes."

"We'd better hurry. My wife will be waiting. Can't keep her waiting. Here. Give me your arm."

They went on. The cord still dangling from Mr. Wemme's fingers. Denton's voice murmured at his ear. "A clever man could get away with it. They'd blame the *other one*, of course. This is his night, you know."

They hurdled a curb. Mr. Wemme said, "Yes."

"Think of it. Think of it. Think of it—" The murmur undulated off into the distance, and was gone.

Mr. Wemme stepped over a very large match on the sidewalk.

Denton said, "An uncontrollable impulse. To kill, that is. It must be a woman, though. You understand, don't you? Not a young woman. Middle-aged. Ugly." Denton stopped suddenly, dragging Mr. Wemme to a halt beside him. "How's the headache?"

"Headache?" He thought for a moment. "I feel fine."

"Nothing like a walk. Clears your head. Got to leave you here. Better walk a little further. Look! Up there on the next corner. A woman, isn't it?" It was a woman. She stood under a street lamp, waiting. Denton's tone took on a feverish excitement. "Must be an old woman, Wemme.

Not young. Get away with it, of course. Fascinating, isn't it? Remember the cord."

"Why?"

"Go it, Wemme." Denton was easing away. "Go it. Don't forget."

Mr. Wemme looked up along the long block to where the woman stood. He turned his head, looked at Denton's retreating figure. He nodded. The cord looped in his hands like a live thing. He began to run silently. After a moment he said, almost thoughtfully, "Why?"

No one answered. Denton was quite beyond hearing.

* * *

They caught Wemme. He was dragging the body down High Street, toward the alley, when he was arrested. He cried bitterly, reproaching himself for having made a terrible mistake. He was too shaken to answer questions. They put him in a cell and he lay down on the straw mattress and fell immediately into the heavy sleep of innocent exhaustion. His pink face was relaxed and unlined. The Chief Inspector looked in at him through the bars. "Doped to the ears."

"What is it?" asked the district attorney.

"Marijuana."

"Wonder where he got it?"

"We'll ask him that when he wakes up. It isn't important, though. The important thing is that we finally caught him."

The district attorney lit a cigar, puffed it with comfortable pleasure. "Just the same, it took you a long time. He got five of them. Let's see. There was Combs, Howard, Tate, Prentiss. . . ."

"And Denton."

"Yes. Funny thing, the way the last one he picked was a man. And there was this Denton's wife just around the block from where it happened, waiting on the corner. Isn't that the damndest coincidence?"

The chief inspector said it was.