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THE DOOR OF HELL



by
Emma-Lindsay Squier

"The contorted face of the Butcher leered at him, then flung itself against the barrier of purple light."

IT WAS not often that Terry McGinnis and his chum, Bob Lazelle, quarreled with each other seriously. So it was a surprize to me to see them facing each other over "Lazy's" desk at the *Chronicle*; each young face wearing a curiously strained expression. They turned toward me simultaneously as I got out of the elevator on the editorial floor and walked over to them.

"You're as crazy as a bedbug," I heard Terry saying with determined emphasis; "I tell you the man's dead!"

"And I tell you——" Bob Lazelle was retorting when they saw me coming toward them.

"I'll leave it up to 'Nick the Dick' if you aren't crazy," Terry broke in upon him. "Listen, Nicholas, prince of police sleuths, my young comrade here is suffering from a diet of too many tamales at the 'Greasy Spoon'. Relieve his mind, will you, and tell him once for all that 'The Three-Finger Butcher' is dead; executed; hanged by the nape of his neck; in other words, totally extinct!"

I smiled slightly at Terry's vehemence. He is red-headed, and Irish, and can't bear to have an opinion or a belief contradicted. When he is grown up, he'll be the best feature

writer the *Chronicle* ever had, because of his quick imagination, his careless and colorful way of handling words, and his almost 'fey' intuitions—a gift of the Gaelic land which gave his parents birth.

"Terry's right for once," I grinned at them; "The Three-Fingered Butcher paid the penalty for his many crimes—let me see; when was it? I believe he was hanged on the twentieth of last February; what's the argument about, boys?"

Bob Lazelle did not smile. His brown eyes were puckered in that same strained way, and he looked at me with a mixture of appeal and defiance.

"But I saw him!" he said abruptly, and Terry shouted again.

"By golly, that's his story and he sticks to it," he cried, punching Lazy in the ribs.

Bob Lazelle shook him off angrily.

"I certainly do stick to it," he said sharply. "I'm not blind; and I'm not crazy. I didn't cover night police for six months without seeing something of that bird, in the cell, the courtroom, and the deathhouse at the prison. I know that he was *supposed* to be executed on the twentieth of last February. But I tell you that last night I saw him—or his ghost—at Sixteenth and Broadway—and furthermore, he saw me."

I looked at the boy for a moment without speaking. He did not possess the hair-trigger imagination of his chum, Terry. He was a good re-

porter, because he held to facts and facts alone. I could see that he had been badly shaken. That was why Terry's boisterous joviality had jarred his nerves.

"What makes you think you saw him?" I asked Lazy quietly.

"What makes me think that I see you?" he retorted. "Because you're standing there, looking at me, and I can describe the clothes you have on, the way you have your hands in your pockets, the expression on your face. Well, that's the way I saw him. Last night, coming back to the office from an assignment, I came face to face with him. It wasn't dark there on that corner, so I had a chance to notice everything about him.

"My God, Nick, I nearly bumped into him before I saw who it was. There he was, with his right hand—the one that had the two fingers shot off—fumbling with his coat lapel the way he always did when he was on the witness stand, and with that horrible smile on his face, his lips twisted up so I could see the hole in the upper jaw where his teeth were missing.

"I wasn't asleep, and I hadn't been hitting the pipe in Chinatown. Either the Butcher wasn't executed, or else I saw his ghost. *But I did see him!* I'll swear to that with my dying breath."

Terry's face had lost its bantering expression. It was strangely sober for him, and he met my eyes with a puzzled frown.

"By golly, Lazy sounds plausible," he said with a slight grin. "Maybe the prison records would bear looking into; what say, Nick? The Butcher had quite a following, such as they were. Could the body have been exhumed, do you think, or——"

"Good Lord, no!" I snorted at them. "You kids talk like a dime novel. Believe me, when the prison doctor pronounces a criminal dead, he's dead! The Butcher probably has a double, or——"

There came a shout from the office boy, who was leaning out of the telephone booth near by.

"Paging Nick the Dick! Detective Nicholas Brunna wanted on the *Chronicle's* high-powered telephone!"

"I told them I'd be over here in case of emergency," I explained to the boys, and stepped inside the booth. It was the chief at the other end of the wire. And the terse sentences that he flung at me made a queer tingling sensation noticeable at the roots of my hair.

"Get over here as soon as possible. Roscoe McKenna, millionaire oil operator, has been murdered. It looks like the work of the late Three-Finger Butcher. Probably one of his gang. Get busy on it right away, will you?"

And he hung up.

THERE is usually very little excitement at central headquarters about anything that happens. "A murder a day keeps the blues away," as Terry McGinnis phrased the situation. We don't get any more excited over a fancy crime than you do over the things that happen in the routine of your day's business. It's a steady grind for us, quite different from the melodramatic guff that's written about it in novels.

But on this particular day, I could see that there was a suppressed tension in the air. Two of the operators were arguing hotly as I passed through the main office, and their conversation reminded me strongly of the one I had overheard in the *Chronicle's* office.

"D'you mean to tell me I'm so blind that I can't tell who I'm looking at? I tell you I saw him, yes sir, right in front of me."

"Well, it was his double, then, because that guy was croaked at the pen last May."

I paused for an instant, alert to the peculiarity of the situation.

"Arguing about the Three-Finger

Butcher?" I asked them, innocently enough.

Paddy White, who looks like a minister, and who is the keenest go-getter on the force, shook his head.

"Naw, this poor simp here," with a jerk of his thumb toward Eddie Nugent, a typical 'flatfoot', "swears that he saw Dago Tito last night. And you know as well as I do that the Dago was hanged last May for his share in that Black Hand argument down in Little Italy."

I stared at them absolutely nonplussed. Was it possible that, as Terry had suggested, these criminals had not been executed after all? With my mind considerably upset, I went into the chief's office.

He looked up at me and nodded. He was a man of the fewest possible words, so I was not surprised when he merely pushed forward a starched shirt-front, evidently torn out of the garment, smeared in three places with ink. I saw readily that the smears were made purposely, by the thumb and first two fingers of the right hand. I had seen that sinister sign before. It was characteristic of the Three-Finger Butcher's audacious methods.

"Recognize it?" the chief asked tersely.

"Yes, it seems to be the Butcher's seal. Where did it come from?"

There was an instant of silence.

"That shirt was worn by Roscoe McKenna, who was killed last night."

I stared down at the inky fingerprints without speaking. The chief was evidently following the mental processes of my mind.

"It does one of two things," he said presently. "It either disproves the theory that no two fingerprints in the world are alike, or else the Three-Finger Butcher is alive. I've had the impressions experted and they are his prints."

He handed over the fingerprint cards for me to examine.

"The crime itself is sensational enough, because, as far as we know, McKenna had no active enemies. There was no robbery connected with it and no tangible clues except this one. Get busy on this thing from all angles, get hold of the prison board, have the body exhumed if necessary and identified. In the meantime, keep the reporters off this Butcher angle. It's going to be a ticklish affair to handle, and I'd rather they'd play it up as an ordinary murder mystery. Suggest old grudges to them, or something of that sort. Keep this other under your hat."

Just then the telephone bell tinkled, and the chief picked up the receiver. His face, usually as blank as a wall, took on a puzzled, almost angry expression.

"Hello—yes, chief speaking. Tito Moroni at large? Impossible; the man's dead; hanged last May—. It's his double then—"

He clicked the receiver down and turned in his swivel chair.

"Another mystery murder up," he observed. "Rufus Armstrong of the Armstrong chain of groceries, killed in bed this morning. No clues except a name, 'Tito,' traced in ink on the sheet, and a thumbprint."

He leaned forward to press a button.

"I'll put Paddy White on this," he said.

As I went out of the main office, I found Terry waiting at the door. His red hair was fairly standing up around his ears from excitement.

"The High Egg is going to let me cover the McKenna murder," he shouted joyously. "Are you going up there now? If so, I'm with."

The "High Egg," I might remark in passing, was the disrespectful title given to the managing editor of the *Chronicle* by the reporters.

I grunted, as noncommittally as I could. Orders are orders; but I had a hunch that Terry wouldn't be long

in nosing out the very angle that the chief had warned me about keeping under my hat.

And so it proved. Even in the police car, speeding out to the expensive suburb where Roscoe McKenna had lived, Terry unburdened himself of a variety of theories and guesses.

"Look here, Nick," he exploded, "I don't believe that Lazy was so bughouse after all. What I mean is, I'll bet he did see the Three-Finger Butcher. I think that bird's at large, and I think furthermore that this murder is one of his pieces of work."

"What makes you think so?" I asked with a slight smile.

Terry was silent for a moment, thinking deeply.

"Well, I don't exactly know, only I've got a hunch about it. From the dope I got on this from the police blotter, there was no robbery. It was short and sweet and brutal. Revenge for some old business deal, perhaps. Well, the Butcher was once an oil-driller on the same farm in Oklahoma where McKenna struck it rich."

I turned sharply to the boy. I wondered if he knew about the fingerprints on the torn shirt-front. But he evidently did not.

"Now, look here, young fellow," I said gruffly, "don't go off half-cocked with any wild stories, or I'll have the High Egg can you from the police beat. Stick to facts, and leave the detective work to the fellows who make a business of it. If it will relieve your mind any, I'll tell you that I got the warden of the state penitentiary on long distance just now. He says that they destroy the bodies of the executed criminals with quicklime. The Butcher is as extinct as a dinosaur. And don't you go bringing him to life."

Terry eyed me gloomily and sank back into the seat.

"Just the same, it would make a whole of a story," he sighed dismally.

I do not intend to go into the details of the McKenna murder mystery. Astounding as it was, it became only one of a series of startling and untraceable crimes that very nearly wrecked the morale of both police and detective forces.

The Armstrong murder, which had occurred on the morning that I have just described, was another crime which threatened to go into the "Unsolved" pigeonhole at headquarters. There seemed to be a complete lack of motive, an entire absence of clues, and no logical way for the murderer to have gotten in and out of the house without being seen. In addition to these baffling elements, there was the defiant inky scrawl on the sheets: "*Tito*". The handwriting, as identified secretly at headquarters, was that of "*Dago*" Tito Moroni. The thumbprint was undeniably his. And Tito Moroni, the infamous Black Hand murderer, was dead!

In spite of all our precautions it was impossible to keep some of the facts from leaking out. Policemen and detectives are only human. They have wives, and wives have intimate friends. Soon it became known in a guarded, underground way, that a nameless terror was abroad. Queer things, baffling things, commenced to happen. People were assaulted viciously, murderously, at night, and could give no description of their assailants. Fires started mysteriously from untraced sources; there was an orgy of wanton destruction that the papers called, for want of a better term, a "crime wave."

I found it best to take the newspaper boys into my confidence, warning them against the effects of playing up these unsolved crimes. And they responded, as I have always found they will, when put upon their honor, by going as easy on the gruesomeness and mystery as they humanly could.

But even so, a vague panic had seized upon the public mind. In three

months, no less than six purposeless and traceless murders had been committed in the city. Three of the victims were men of prominence. Their families clamored hysterically for us to do something about it. Arrests were made by the score, and more than one innocent person spent a wretched night going through the third degree. We combed the underworld with a thoroughness that would have caught a vagabond flea. But we were met on all sides by unassailable alibis that refused to be broken down. Theories and clues all led into blank walls. We discovered absolutely nothing.

Then one day a wild-eyed little man with a mop of distraught hair came bursting into the police reporters' room and stood there looking about as if bewildered. The boys were playing black-jack at a long table, and I was arguing with Terry and Lazy about something or other, I've forgotten what.

The little man suddenly rushed over to me and demanded, "Are you a policeman?"

"Detective," I corrected him; "this is the police reporters' room. Police department next door."

He spread out his hands in a helpless sort of way.

"I want to give myself up," he said in a thin strangled voice; "I am responsible for the murders that have been committed recently."

Now, perhaps you will think that his announcement should have created a tremendous sensation among the assembled police reporters. It didn't. True, they stopped their game, and strolled over to us, with the bored, cynical disbelief of the typical newspaper man who is familiar with "crime". Any police reporter knows that for every murder that is committed, there are three or four unbalanced people ready to swear that they are guilty. A peculiar mental psychology is responsible

for it, sometimes induced by dope, sometimes by brooding over the details as printed in the papers. Once in a great while, a guilty man really does confess. But it is usually a man who has committed such an obvious, unpremeditated crime that his guilt would soon be fastened upon him anyway.

It took only one look at the undersized, pale-faced man to know that he was incapable of having committed any of the brutal murders of the past three months. Nevertheless, I questioned him as a matter of routine.

"Your name?"

"I am Dr. Francis Wedgerow," he said in a scarcely audible voice. His blue, near-sighted eyes began to stray about the room, apparently becoming conscious of the ring of curious, slightly smiling faces about him.

The name meant nothing to any of us, except to Terry, who had a phenomenal memory.

"Dr. Wedgerow who developed the Anthemum ray?" he asked briskly.

"Yes, yes," he said nervously, and looked about him again.

"Anything you say will be used against you," I said formally. "I'll take you in to the chief."

He peered up at me wildly, like a trapped animal.

"You don't understand," he jerked out; "I am not confessing to any of these murders—I never killed anyone in my life. I—I——"

I took him by the arm and steered him into the detective board room. The police reporters looked after us, shrugged their shoulders, and most of them went back to their game of black-jack. One or two of them questioned Terry, who was staring after us with what Lazy calls the "big idea look."

"He's an American doctor who has studied in England and Germany," Terry told them; "gone in strong for various rays. He's been trying to discover cold light, and he worked out a

ray called the Anthem, which is beneficial for smallpox patients. Don't you guys ever read *Who's Who*?"

Some of the reporters made a note of Terry's brief statement. Most of them only jotted down the name. There was an understanding between us that no suspects or "nuts" should be played up unless there was sufficient evidence to warrant it.

"Been hitting the pipe," was how they dismissed the incident.

I WAS steering the little doctor to the chief's desk, when he tugged back at my arm. I saw that the frightened, almost insane look was gone from his eyes, and it occurred to me that he just realized the seriousness of his overwrought actions.

"They won't arrest me, will they?" he said in a low, agitated voice.

"Not if you aren't guilty," I told him.

"No, no, no!" he cried with the same low-voiced vehemence; "I am not a murderer! My whole scientific knowledge has been devoted to the preservation of life, not its destruction; I came here for help today—I mean—oh, how can I explain? Only they won't arrest me! It would be fatal!"

"How do you mean, fatal?" I asked him quietly. I noticed that Bob Lazelle was trailing us. And I thought with an inner smile that Terry McGinnis had something on his mind besides his red hair. If he had come into the board room, every reporter would have been at his heels. For it was acknowledged that Terry had the hair-trigger mind of the whole crew. But he was noisily playing black-jack. He had commissioned his chum, Lazy, to follow us up.

"I mean"—he hesitated—"I have been working very hard—I am somewhat unstrung—these terrible things that have happened—they haunt me and make me feel afraid——"

That was all that we got out of him. He was questioned rather closely, principally as to why he made his "confession". But nothing of a suspicious nature developed from his answers. We had no record of him as having been connected with any crimes, we were satisfied that he had had no dealings with any of the murdered men, and that he was out of town when two of them were killed.

It seemed a plain case of that peculiar psychology I mentioned before. We released him after a couple of hours, and Lazy and I strolled back into the reporters' room, where the game was still going on.

"Anything doing?" they asked me.

"No," I said, "the doctor's a little woozy in the bean, that's all. I think he's been eating Anthem rays off the back of his hand."

I saw Terry's intent blue eyes fixed upon my face.

"Do you really believe that?" he asked me out of the side of his mouth. I shrugged my shoulders for answer. But a moment later I signaled him to follow me out of the reporters' room.

"I'd like to have you interview the Doc about his Anthem rays—or anything you like," I told him. "Get as much of an idea of him as you can, but don't print anything about him. Give me the dope as soon as possible."

Terry's face took on that ecstatic look of happiness which it always wears when there is an unusual story in the offing.

"Can I take Lazy with me?" he asked eagerly.

"This is lone-wolf stuff," I answered; "you'll work better alone."

His face fell a little. "Oh, very well," he said obediently, and pocketed the address which I gave him.

I WAS gone for about an hour working on a faint theory I had evolved covering the McKenna murder. I pulled a blank, and when I

got back to the station, it was to find the place seething with excitement. I collided with Paddy White, whose face was pasty and perspiring. There was a look of baffled rage in his usually sleepy blue eyes.

"Eddie Nugent's been brought into the receiving hospital," he jerked out. "Shot! I don't think he'll live."

"Shot!" I echoed, dismayed. "Who did it?"

Paddy White hesitated. Then he brushed past me and went into my office. He sank down on a chair and put his head between his hands.

"Nick, I guess this monkey business of the past three months is getting under my skin. I didn't think I had any 'nerves', but this thing that happened to Eddie"—he looked up at me with strained, perspiring face—"the guy that shot him was—Tito Moroni!"

I stared back at him, realizing that I, too, knew the feeling of "nerves".

"Can that stuff," I said at last; "you know he's dead."

He shook his head dazedly.

"I don't know it," he said lifelessly; "I don't know anything except that I'm about ready to take a rest cure in a sanitarium. I'm not exactly a babe in arms, Nick, and I know the ropes of this crime game as well as the next fellow. But these cases I've been working on—why, it's been like beating my head on a stone wall. They have all looked like the work of two men—the Butcher, and Dago Tito. And those two men—we think—are dead. Eddie Nugent swore that he saw Tito—remember the argument we had here in the station that day? And I thought he was crazy. Even when the Armstrong murder pointed to only one person, I figured it as a pretty obvious imitation of Tito's methods by some crook who knew his stuff. Even the thumb-print might have been a copy. But now—I don't know. I've got wheels in my head instead of brains."

"What happened?" I asked as quietly as I could.

"Eddie and I met by accident on the corner of Thirty-eighth and Union," he said dully. "We stood and talked for a few minutes, and I was turning away, when I heard him gasp. I looked around, just in time to see his hand go back to his gat in his hip pocket, and just in time to see the flash of a gun from across the street. Then Eddie pitched forward, and I ran to him, getting out my own gat. I fired at the man who was standing over there, and Nick—for a minute he didn't run. He stood there, grinning at me. I'd swear on my oath that it was Tito Moroni. Or else it was his double. He stepped back into a doorway, and when I got there, not two seconds later, he was gone. Just utterly vanished. Of course, I combed the house, but there wasn't a trace of him. The woman swore that the door hadn't opened at all, that it couldn't have opened, because there was a spring lock on it."

"Did you arrest her?" I asked.

"Sure; but she doesn't know anything—I'm satisfied of that. And the worst of it is, Nick"—he hesitated again—"I took a look at the wall where my bullet struck. That bullet, as near as I can figure, *should have gone straight through the guy who was standing there!* But either my eyes have gone on the blink, or else I'm just plain crazy."

The telephone on my desk rang sharply. I jumped, and so did Paddy White. There was no disguising our "nerves". We both had a week-end supply of them. The voice that came to me through the instrument was Terry's voice, strained, breathless, as if he had been running, and almost incoherent.

"Nick, tell the chief to get out the reserves; police everything. Wire the governor to put the town under martial law; it's going to need it."

"What's up?" I shot into the

'phone. "Give me something definite. I can't hand the chief a lot of hysteria that might——"

I heard Terry make a sound that was almost a snarl.

"For God's sake, Nick, don't stand on formalities now! I tell you hell's going to be let loose—I don't think he can hold them—it's a losing fight——"

"Terry!" I shouted; "pull yourself together. What's going to happen——?"

There was a crash, and the sound as of a terrific explosion. I shook the telephone hook frantically. There came only a dull clicking that told me the line was dead.

I finally got to my feet. Paddy White was watching me with eyes that bulged. Briefly I told him what Terry had said.

"Report it to the chief," I said, trying to speak naturally. "I think the kid's in trouble. I'm going to run out there in the police car."

As I swung out of the office, Bob Lazelle seized my arm.

"Where's Terry?" he demanded. There was such a peculiar sympathy between them that it was not strange he had received a "trouble" wireless.

"The last I saw of him he was going out to interview Dr. Wedgerow," I told him, "and I have an idea that he's somewhere in that neighborhood now."

I went over to the police desk.

"Any report of an explosion?" I asked.

"Just in," answered the man at the switchboard, "explosion wrecked house at 3581 Allen Street. I haven't had time to find the name yet."

I consulted my memorandum book.

"Dr. Francis Wedgerow," I told him; "I'll go out with the ambulance. And it might be just as well for the 'Black Maria' to make the run, too."

WE MADE that run in record time, Lazy and I sitting with the driver, the siren shrieking its warning to motorists and pedestrians, and the patrol wagon, or "Black Maria," clanging its bell behind us.

We found Allen Street swarming with startled people. The wreck of a plain white house, set well back on a lawn, was attracting crowds that reminded me of ants circling about a wounded spider.

We pushed our way unceremoniously through the throng, in time to see two men lifting an inert body from underneath a pile of timbers.

"Terry!" I heard Lazy cry out. And running forward, he took the limp body in his own arms.

I helped him carry the boy to the stretcher, and we eased him carefully into the ambulance. The face was deathly white, except for a streak of red that smeared his cheek and forehead. With practised nonchalance, the intern bent over him and made a swift examination.

"Alive—just," he announced succinctly. "He was probably caught under some falling posts that protected him from the full weight of the rest."

I signed to Lazy to remain with his chum. He would have stayed anyway. That was one time when a story had completely lost its value to him. I went over and looked down at the wreckage of the house. There were plenty of people to tell me about the explosion—it had rocked the entire neighborhood. But no one could tell me of its cause. The timbers suddenly flamed up into a stiff tongue of fire, and I telephoned for the fire department.

It was hours later that they pulled from the burned ruins the unrecognizable body of a man. But I knew from the size, that it was Dr. Wedgerow. He had died with his curious secret locked within him; unless Terry had fathomed it; and Terry recovered con-

sciousness only to go into a long and terrible fever, in which he cried out, "The Butcher! The Butcher!" and "Keep them out, doctor, for God's sake—shut the door!"

It was two days later that Terry opened his eyes from a drugged sleep, and stared wanly at Lazy and me.

"Hello, old kid," said Lazy with unsteady voice; "how's tricks?"

Then I saw Terry's face contract painfully, and he tried to sit up.

"Is — is — everything — all right?" he whispered.

"Right as a fox," I said soothingly, and we pressed him gently back against the pillows. "Town's running smoothly as could be expected with two crooks loose like Lazy and me."

He sighed sleepily, and his pale lips twisted into a smile.

"He got it shut in time, then," he murmured, and went back to a sleep that was natural, and prolonged.

"Got *what* shut in time?" said Lazy, in a puzzled tone, after he had assured himself that Terry was sleeping.

"I don't know," I said with a shrug of my shoulders. "Nobody knows except Terry. I gather that the little doctor knew, but he'll never tell anybody."

NEARLY a week passed before Terry was permitted to talk to us at length. And even then his eyes had a haunted look in them as if he had looked upon some horrible thing that would leave a lasting memory.

"Nick," he said to me as Lazy and I sat by his bed, "I'm trusting to you to square me with the chief of police if he tries to get me canned for turning in a false alarm. I know darned well he'd never believe this story, but I think you will. And Nick, I'm telling you straight, if the explosion hadn't come—well, the police reserves and the militia would have been as useless as guns without

bullets. Poor old Doc Wedgerow! He was a game guy. He paid the price, and paid it like a gentleman."

Naturally, this was all Greek to us, and we said so, as vehemently as one can to an invalid.

"I know, I know," the boy said, waving a weak hand at us, but it's hard to tell about it. It's the biggest story of my life—and I can't write it. No one would believe me, and the High Egg would give me the gate or send me to an insane asylum. But here it is, and you can take it or leave it:

"You remember, Nick, I left you that day to interview Dr. Wedgerow. Well, I found his house, and rang the bell—and waited. I rang again, and no one came. So, just to be sure that nobody was home, I turned the knob gently, and the door opened. Still silence. So I took a chance, and went down the hall past the telephone to where there was another closed door. As I stood there, just ready to knock, I heard a voice—the doctor's voice, pleading with someone. I couldn't help hearing what he said:

"No — no — don't come in—you must not—you must not——"

"Of course, I thought for the moment that he was talking to me. But I hadn't knocked, and I was fairly sure that he hadn't heard me at the outside door. As I stood there, wondering what to do, I heard—well, I hardly know how to describe it; a sort of whispering, a subdued noise that a big crowd of people might make pushing forward on a carpet.

"I don't know why I opened the door just then. I didn't mean to do it, but somehow my hand acted automatically. I saw——"

He twisted in the bed and put his hands up to his face uncertainly.

"Go on!" whispered Lazy tensely.

"You won't believe me," Terry said faintly, then he straightened up defiantly, "but this is the truth. The room was the doctor's laboratory.

The windows were curtained closely. But there was a light that came from a metal standard with racks of long light tubes. It was a queer, misty purple light. And silhouetted against it, the doctor was standing with his back toward me.

"At first I thought he was alone in the room. Then as I stood there, in a dazed, unthinking way, I saw that the patch of misty purple light looked like a great door. And I saw that within the light, something moved. It was like phosphorus in the water, moving ceaselessly, formlessly. I stared at it, fascinated. It was from there that the curious, whispering noise came. Then I began to distinguish forms—shadowy, dissolving, changing forms. And as the light seemed to grow brighter, I could catch a glimpse of faces that seemed to be pressed against a closed window.

"The doctor threw out his hands, as if warding something off.

"No—no!" he cried out again; 'you must not come in! There is enough evil—too much has already been done—'

"Then he turned and saw me. He gave a queer, animal-like kind of a moan, and fell back against one of the long tables covered with test-tubes.

"Go away," he whispered, 'go away before it is too late.' I can't keep them out much longer—I can't turn off the rays—the stronger the light gets the easier it will be for them to enter—go—quickly—"

"But I didn't go. I just stood there, gaping at him, and at the swirl of that misty purple light that seemed to grow brighter and brighter. That sibilant, pushing noise seemed louder—closer—"

"What have you done?" I asked him at last. I don't know why I said that—perhaps to keep my own sanity. He covered his face with his hands.

"I have brought destruction into

the world!" he said in his queer, shaking voice. "I, who wanted to be mankind's benefactor, but I have done—this!" He flung out his hand at the door of purple light. "I have for long been trying to establish the connecting link between the world of the living and the dead. For years I have been experimenting on a light ray that would make a door, a pathway, between the world of material things and the astral world of unknown substance. And"—his voice was a tortured groan—"I succeeded. Look! *There is the door into the other world!* See how they crowd about it, peering in! But what I did not predict, what I could not foresee, was that my doorway would be of most use to the earthbound entities; the spirits who are held here by lust for revenge or desire for low and evil things. How could I know that they would be so strong? The others go on! But these entities, craving the things that made up their earthly lives—ah! they are overwhelming me! When the first disembodied spirit came through that doorway, I was overjoyed. The first—and the second!—How was I to know?"

"I felt my face grow hot with horror.

"The Butcher—and Tito?" I managed to ask him.

"Yes, yes, those two!" he gasped out. "Dead—yet alive! Keeping still their horrible traits, their unquenched desires for vengeance and wanton slaughter! Dealing out destruction in the world of living men! When I saw what I had done, I tried to quench the ray. But I failed. It is a link between the known and the unknown. It feeds upon the vibration of that outside substance. I succeeded only in reducing it as far as it was connected with the material world. I blocked the passage for a little while. But I have created something that I can not kill. I know nothing that will—"

"He suddenly stopped, and ran his hands through his hair.

"'Yes, yes,' I heard him mutter; 'that might do it—it is barely possible——'

"'But the Butcher, and Tito!' I said to him, half whispering; 'are they still at large—here?'

"He turned on me the face of a man suffering in hell.

"'In—in—there!' he said, pointing at that quivering, pulsing, whispering patch of light, 'they have to go back for renewed strength—it is like a swimmer who must come to land when he is exhausted—but they will come out again—they will all come out! Do you know what that means? It means that the world will be flooded with evil—with terror—with horrible destruction! I can not prevent them, unless——'

"I tried to speak, but failed. The swirling light was growing brighter. An eddying whirl of faces—evil, sinister faces—groping hands that flattened themselves against the light—horrible crooked fingers that tried to find a crack—bodies that pressed themselves closer—closer—— The light was like a transparent curtain of strong, tenuous material which was yielding, little by little, to the strong, insistent pressure from behind.

"In front of that horrible crowding swarm of evil figures I saw the contorted face of the Butcher—peering through—he leered at me—he flung himself against the barrier of purple light——

"Again I heard the doctor's voice, raised to a scream.

"'No—no—you must not come—you must not, I tell you——'

I saw him reach for a chemical bottle. Then I turned and sprang for the 'phone. I don't know what I said—I guess I was almost crazy. And when I was talking, I heard a crash. I tried to run, but the explosion came and something hit me. That's the last I knew."

WE STARED at each other without speaking. Terry sank back against the pillows, weak and exhausted. I could think of nothing to say. I couldn't scoff, and yet I could not bring myself to utter a word of belief. The thing was too outrageous, too preposterous.

But Lazy's faith in Terry was unshaken. His eyes were shining excitedly.

"Doggone!" he exploded at last; "what a bear-cat of a story!"

Terry turned on him a tired, grateful look.

"You've said it, boy," he remarked with some of his old-time jauntiness, "and like all the biggest and best stories of the world it will never see the light of print!"

But in that he was wrong. For I, Nicholas Brunna, took my pen—and my reputation—in hand, and have written it. There is no proof for it except Terry's word—and the fact of immeasurable relief that the Three-Finger Butcher and Tito Moroni were never seen again.

