

THE BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF MYSTERY, THRILLS AND SURPRISE

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The Explosive Gentleman

By J. J. Stagg

I

THE steak was ordered well done and the waiter served it rare. This incident gave the initial impetus to a most terrible catastrophe. That so small a matter could lead to such appalling results was due entirely to the character and temperament of Ralph Kremp.

That young man was of the hyper-neurotic, tempestuous type. That is, he was easily excitable and given to acting on impulse rather than on reason. Little provocation was needed to drive him into a rage. His temper once aroused, soon got beyond his control and frequently led him into deeds of passion and even violence. His anger at times was sustained through protracted periods, a feature which sometimes induced those with whom he came in contact on such occasions to doubt his sanity.

The affair in the restaurant was characteristic. Kremp made a caustic remark concerning the waiter's attentiveness. The waiter who was an extra, and indifferent to the prospect of losing his job, commented slurringly on the fastidiousness of diners who "couldn't tell a sirloin steak from an oyster fry anyway."

A less combative person would probably have reported the waiter to the management. Ralph Kremp began a spirited denunciation and in his excitement he rose from his chair. The waiter a bit frightened, put out a hand as in a calming gesture. His movement was a trifle too hurried and forceful. He had the ill-fortune to touch Kremp on the chest while he was slightly off balance.

The light push was sufficient to upset Kremp altogether and to topple him back into his chair. It was a ludicrous fall and caused several other diners to laugh.

That was the spark which ignited the consuming flame of Kremp's fury. He seized a heavy water tumbler and hurled it at the waiter. The aim was a trifle high. The glass tore a piece from the waiter's scalp. A few women screamed, several men jumped up and other waiters came running from different directions.

Kremp threw himself in a low tackle at the object of his wrath. They hit the floor together and rolled around. Fists, elbows, knees and feet were used as weapons. A table was overturned. The struggle continued beneath the debris.

The waiter eventually fought himself free. He staggered to his feet and retreated. Kremp attempted to renew the assault but was set upon by several diners and restaurant employees. With a madman's strength he tried to fight them off. Before he was finally subdued, two waiters and three diners bore unmistakable marks of severe maltreatment. In the confusion someone had telephoned to the police. Kremp and the waiter were placed under arrest.

At the police station Kremp affected great indignation and was insulting in his manner and language to the lieutenant. He claimed to be connected with one of the best families in the city. He demanded the privilege of calling up Mr. Walter Boyer on the phone. Walter Boyer, he bragged, was his cousin and he had pull enough to break any man on the force. None of the

officers appeared to worry any over the threat of being broken. Nevertheless the mention of Boyer's name did create something of a stir. The Boyers were shipbuilders, multi-millionaires and for several generations prominent in the social and political life of the city.

Owing to Kremp's extreme nervousness and agitation, he could not control his voice. He was finally compelled to request the lieutenant to speak for him.

The lieutenant spoke for some five minutes and then listened for some twenty seconds. Then turning to Kremp, he said:

"Mr. Boyer asked me to tell you that he thinks you are a lunatic and that he has tired of helping you out of your foolish scrapes."

Kremp was found guilty of disorderly conduct and sentenced to six months. Thus his exaggerated ego was humiliated beyond forgetting or forgiving. He suffered all the persecutory delusions of a madman. He imagined the Boyer family to be the central moving figure in the conspiracy against him. Every day he hated the Boyers more till at length he could think of nothing but revenge.

And in his anger and hate he accomplished that which in his saner moments had been beyond him. His entire character seemed to change. Formerly irritable and irascible, he now became patient and forbearing. This change was his first step in his yet indefinite plan for vengeance.

Kremp's mother had been the sister of the older Boyer. After she died Boyer's sons and Kremp were the only blood relatives.

Old Mr. Boyer accepted Kremp's postures of repentance as being sincere. After Kremp had behaved himself for three months after his release, Boyer offered him a clerical position. When Kremp made good at the work, the old gentleman again invited his nephew to

his home. It was then that Kremp's criminal plans began to assume a definite outline.

He plotted with a madman's cunning and patience. Scheme after scheme was discarded because it was not safe enough or not cruel enough. And several ideas were dismissed because they were not inclusive. It would have given him no satisfaction to hurt one of the boys. His feud was with the family.

It came to him at last—what he considered an inspiration. He realized that a set of circumstances could be utilized in a crime of a sweeping, all-destructive nature. With one stroke he could annihilate the entire Boyer family. Besides being emotionally gratifying, it would also be a profitable venture. If the Boyer family were destroyed, he, as the only blood relative, would inherit the family fortune of over twenty million.

This is the scene which had become impressed on Kremp's mind: The elder Boyer was an old-fashioned gentleman and had retained many of the customs and habits of his parents. Among his idiosyncrasies was the one of using candle lights. In the music room four silver candlesticks ornamented the mantelpiece. Red candles, about an inch in diameter, were used.

After dinner the Boyers generally spent half an hour in the music room. The electric lights were extinguished and the elder Mr. Boyer lighted the four candles. This act was something in the nature of a ceremony. A soft light was thrown on the room and a quiet, domestic atmosphere was created.

How Kremp intended to use this setting for his crime will be clear from the rehearsal of his actions.

II

MR. LEWIS BROPHY was a highly respected man—in some circles. He was

a man of many and variegated accomplishments all of which were conducive to inconvenience or ill-health, and sometimes even worse, to those on whom Mr. Brophy practiced. Mr. Brophy seldom sought acquaintances outside of his own set. Sometimes, however, he was sought. He could supply necessities of a certain kind and he was not particular whom he served so long as he was paid well for it.

A pickpocket whom he had met in jail had introduced Kremp to Brophy. On his third visit to the room of the thug the latter passed over a small glass bottle filled with yellowish liquid. Kremp was highly interested in the contents of the bottle and listened attentively to Mr. Brophy's recital of the peculiar properties and characteristics of the contents.

"I boiled it down from dynamite," explained Mr. Brophy. "And now you better be careful how you handle it. Nitroglycerine is a damn tricky stuff. And don't get the fool idea that it always explodes on concussion. That's what a lot of story writers think—that any jar is bound to set the stuff off. It might explode on concussion—and it might not. Now for instance, suppose you put a couple of drops on a stone and hit it a straight downward blow with a hammer. The chances are—mind you I say chances—that only that part which you hit will explode. But if you sock it a *glancing* blow the whole thing will go up. Then again, to judge by what happened to some of my friends, the stuff can be exploded by just looking at it kinda hard. It seems to have whims. Sometimes it will stand for a lot of monkeying and sometimes it'll get all het up and blow you into a psychic plasma without no reason at all. Sudden heat will explode it; that's one thing you can be pretty sure of."

A few hours later Mr. Brophy was remarking to one of his friends:

"That guy Kremp sure gimme the creeps. Stewed mackerel, but he was nervous! I wouldn't be surprised if he loses his head entirely and drinks the stuff. I got a feeling he's going to be an angel soon."

III

Two nights later Kremp dined with the Boyers. He purposely arrived a little early. While waiting for the Boyers to come down, he sauntered into the music room, switched on the electric light and played a popular tune on the piano. Thereupon he rose and stepped noiselessly to the door which opened on the hall. He could hear the Boyers moving about on the floor above. From the dining room to the rear came the sounds of the servants who were setting the table. He went quickly to the mantelpiece and drew a glass bottle from a coat pocket.

Candles generally burn to a saucer-like hollow at the top. This is because the tallow near the wick becomes hotter and consequently melts more rapidly than that around the edge. Into the cavity of each of the four candles Kremp poured about a spoonful of nitroglycerine. Then he turned off the electric light and went back into the library.

After dinner old Mr. Boyer invited him to the music room to listen to a few new records. Kremp pleaded a previous engagement—he had tickets for the theatre—and regretted that he had to leave at once. He was already a trifle late. He took his leave in a perfectly calm and natural manner.

But he had no sooner reached the street when the excitement which he had suppressed so long got the better of him and he began walking hurriedly with no attention to his direction. He kept going till the geography of the city impeded his further progress in a

straight line. That is he reached East River. Then he became conscious of his surroundings.

He retraced his steps a few blocks. Then he hailed a passing taxi and had himself driven to the theatre. During the performance his excitement subsided somewhat and he began reflecting on the results of his plan.

There was always a chance, of course, that the Boyers might change their minds and not go into the music room that night. That, however, did not affect his scheme. They would go some night and Mr. Boyer would light the candles. That is, he would light only one of them. There was no reason to believe that he would notice the liquid. The action of lighting a candle is a casual one and requires no concentration. In all probability the old man would be talking to one of his sons while engaged in the process.

Nitroglycerine, Mr. Brophy had told him, is almost certain to explode when sudden heat is applied to it. There were four candles, four chances. He did not see how his scheme could fail.

He expected that in the morning he would be notified that an unfortunate accident had occurred in the Boyer home.

IV

THE Boyers had not intended going into the music room that evening; they had offered to entertain Kremp as a social courtesy. After Kremp had gone the old man went to the library to read. The boys went up into their own rooms. Later all three of them went to a directors' meeting. None of the household went into the music room that night.

At about ten o'clock next morning—Boyer's sons had already gone to business—Mrs. Nolan began her house-cleaning duties. Mrs. Nolan, it must be said, was an energetic lady. Her

favorite polish was Elbow Grease: when she worked she raised a dust and a sweat. The windows of the room in which Mrs. Nolan was carrying on were always thrown wide open. And Mrs. Nolan was fastidious; she cleaned under as well as around the furniture.

Outdoors, the temperature that morning was below freezing. Mrs. Nolan generated considerable heat when she worked. As long as she was busy she was more or less indifferent to temperature. Now Mr. Brophy in his elucidation of the properties of nitroglycerine, had failed to inform Kremp of one peculiarity. Nitroglycerine freezes at 34.04° F. and when it freezes it changes to long whitish crystals.

Mrs. Nolan kept the windows in the music room open for almost an hour so the nitroglycerine which Kremp had spilled into the hollows at the top of the candles, froze. And Mrs. Nolan, making her final inspection of the room, noticed the whitish crystals at the tops of the four candles.

With reference to what happened next, we call to your attention the following proverbs: "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." "Death may meet us everywhere." And, "Innocence is no protection." The first two of these wise cracks we admit. The last we intend to prove in the easiest way—by citing the exception.

The whitish crystals, each one of them potentially able to transform Mrs. Nolan into a sudden if rather clumsy angel, aroused that lady's curiosity. She picked up one of the candles and poked at the top of it with a hair pin, but the crystals clung rather tenaciously to the tallow, so she finally used her fingernails. Scratch, scratch, scrape!

What was it they used to say at the old motordrome down at Coney Island? Oh yes,—"Come in and see the motor cyclists race neck and neck with death!" These fellows had nothing on Mrs.

Nolan when it came to taking chances. As Mrs. Nolan dug the crystals off the third candle, a small piece broke off one of them and fell to the floor. And as she stepped to pick up the fourth candle she placed most of her two hundred and twenty pounds on the frozen nitroglycerine. My! That crystal could have played a nasty trick on her!

She found it a moment later, crushed to powder on the carpet, swept it up and spilled it with the rest of the crystals into a brass ash tray. . . . Well anyhow, in that respect, Mr. Brophy was right: concussion will explode it sometimes, sometimes it won't. This time it didn't.

We also know a proverb to cover the succeeding events: "With God nothing is accidental."

Mrs. Nolan decided to carry the stuff out into the kitchen and throw it in the waste pail. For no reason at all she changed her mind and carried the ash tray with her across the hall and into the reception room. She placed it on the center table and then threw all the windows open. She had just started cleaning when a cry and then the sound of a body falling, came from the floor above.

She rushed into the hall. The old Mr. Boyer lay on the stairway near the landing of the floor above. Mrs. Nolan saw him seize the bannister and try to pull himself up. But when he was half erect, he collapsed again. Now Mr. Boyer was ordinarily a mild-mannered gentleman, but under certain condition he was given to the use of colorful language. He got Mrs. Nolan and the butler and the chambermaid, all of whom had rushed to his assistance, rather excited.

It occurred to all three of them, at different times, that in case of accident it's a good idea to telephone to somebody. Three doctors, Mr. Boyer's office, a hospital and his lawyer were called up.

No one thought of an undertaker or the fire department. Verily, a sprain in the ankle maketh of man an unreasonable wretch.

Neither of Mr. Boyer's sons happened to be in the office when the three telephone calls brought the news of the old man's injury. They had gone to transact outside business without leaving word of their movements. A secretary finally became alarmed and went out to the clerical department to notify Boyer's nephew, Mr. Kremp.

"There's been a terrible accident up at the Boyer home," said the secretary. "The old man has been hurt. . . . Well no, I couldn't make out how. They're sure awful excited up at the home. Perhaps you'd better go there."

Accident . . . terrible . . . awful excitement—these were the words which kept ringing in Kremp's ears as he hurried up to the Boyer home. But why had only the old gentleman been hurt? Had he gone into the music room alone? . . .

Kremp was admitted by the chambermaid. That young lady was still in the grip of her excitement. She led him to the reception room door and then, stating somewhat abruptly, that she would inform Mr. Boyer that he had come, turned and ran upstairs.

Now, from the hall it was apparent that the music room was not a wreck. This was puzzling. Still, something was not in order. That was clear from the maid's actions.

Kremp went into the reception room. He was too preoccupied to notice that the windows were open and that the room was quite cold. He stood leaning against the center table. After a few moments he absently laid his lighted cigar into a brass ash tray.

Just how much nonsense do you expect nitroglycerine to stand for? It had been scratched, scraped, tossed

about carelessly and stepped on. Now the hot end of a cigar was being applied to it. Can you blame it for raising a splutter?

It was a terrible mess for Mrs. Nolan to clean up.

V

"It was a most peculiar case," Mr. Boyer will tell you. "The reception

room was blown right out of the house and yet the most careful investigation could not disclose the original cause. It seems cruel to say so, but it would appear that Mr. Kremp's torrid temperament, which was long suppressed, suddenly exploded from spontaneous combustion. He used to have a sulphurous disposition, that gentleman. He was, you might say, an explosive fellow."

