

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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THE SECRET FEAR

A "Creepy" Detective Story

By KENNETH DUANE WHIPPLE

THE NIGHT was hot and breathless, as had been the day, and the humid *tang* of the salt air smote my nostrils as, envying Martin his vacation respite from the grind of police reporting, I turned off the broad, paved thoroughfare of Washington Avenue and started down Wharf Street, narrow and dimly lighted, toward my lodgings beyond the bridge.

As I passed the second dirty-globed street light I halted suddenly, with the staccato sound of hurrying footsteps in my ears. Homeward bound from the Journal office, where Martin's work had kept me until after midnight, I had yielded to the temptation offered by the short cut. Now, with the peculiar emphatic insistence of the footfalls behind me, I began to wonder if I had chosen wisely.

Brass buttons, glinting dully under the corner arc, reassured me. The next instant I was roughly ordered to halt. I recognized the hoarse, panting voice of Patrolman Tom Kenton of the fourth precinct, whose beat, as I knew, lay along the wharves.

"It's me, Kenton—Jack Bowers, of the *Journal*," I said. "What's doing?"

Kenton peered at me keenly in the bad light. Then his face relaxed.

"Man killed in Kellogg's warehouse, just around the corner there," he replied.

"Killed? How?"

"The sergeant didn't say. I got it from him just now when I reported. Someone 'phoned in a minute ago. Come along and see, if you want. It's right in your line, and you're a good friend of the captain's."

I fell into step with him, finding some difficulty in keeping pace.

"Do you know who 'phoned?" I asked.

"No. May be a joke. May be a frame-up. May be anything."

His deep voice rumbled through the gloom of the dingy street, deserted save for our hurrying figures. We crossed to the opposite side, passing beneath a blue arc which flamed and sputtered naked through a jagged gash in its dirty, frosted globe.

Just around the corner loomed the ramshackle bulk of Kellogg's warehouse, a four-story, wooden structure squatting above the river piers. On the ground floor a broad entrance gaped blackly. At the left of the doorway, about three feet above street level, the end of a loading platform jutted out of the darkness.

Beyond the warehouse a narrow pier ran out toward midstream. I caught a glimpse of the riding lights of some small vessel, dimly outlined against the gray-black of the oily water.

Kenton stopped at the corner of the
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The Secret Fear

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warehouse to draw his revolver, motioning me to remain where I was.

"Stay here," he said under his breath. "I'll take a look. If it's a frame-up there's no need to get anyone else into it. Besides, you'd be more help here."

He squared his broad shoulders and was swallowed up by the oblong of black. It did not require much urging to persuade me to stay outside. Timidly I peeped through a crack in the warped boarding. The dim ray of light which Kenton cast before him seemed only to accentuate the obscurity.

The light became stationary. I could distinguish Kenton bending over something on the dirt floor not fifteen feet inside the entrance. He looked up and spoke softly.

"Come ahead, Mr. Bowers," he said. "No joke about this."

There was a grim edge to his tone. With a shiver, I stepped through the doorway and crossed to where he crouched above a motionless shape huddled against the side of the long loading platform.

The body was that of a man of large stature—more than six feet in height, as nearly as I could judge from the cramped position in which he lay. There were no visible marks of violence, except for a frayed linen collar pulled awry, which dangled by a single buttonhole from the shirt about the powerful, corded neck. But as I bent closer to look at the features, I drew back with a gasp.

The face of the dead man was distorted by an expression of the utmost horror and loathing. Around the dilated pupils of his large, bluish-gray eyes, the ghastly whites showed in a pallid rim of fear. His irregular, reddish features, even in death, seemed fairly to writhe with terror. One long, sinewy arm was thrown up across the lower part of his face, as if to ward off some unseen and terrible menace.

Shuddering, I stared across the body at Kenton's homely, impassive face.

"In heaven's name, what happened to him?" I asked.

Kenton's hands had been moving swiftly over the body. Now he spread them apart in a little puzzled gesture.

"There doesn't seem to be any wound," he said. "See if there isn't a switch around somewhere, Mr. Bowers. There ought to be a way of lighting up here."

I fumbled along the wall until my fingers encountered the round porcelain knob. A single grimy bulb, pendant from a cobwebbed rafter, threw a dim circle of grewsome yellow light upon the floor of the warehouse.

The body had lain on its left side, facing the doorway. Kenton methodically turned the corpse upon its face, his searching fingers exploring the back. To me, at least, it was a relief that the staring, terrified eyes were hidden from view, rather than gazing fearfully through the arch of the doorway into the narrow, empty street beyond.

"There's something queer about this," said Kenton. "No wound at all, Mr. Bowers, that I can find. No blood—not even a bruise, only this mark at the throat."

I had not seen the mark before, and even now I had to look closely to find it. It was scarcely more than a discoloration of the skin in a broad band beneath the chin. But there was no abrasion, much less a wound sufficient to cause the death of a powerful man like the one who lay before us.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Kenton rolled the body back to its original position. At once the ghastly eyes renewed their unwinking stare at the empty street.

A SOUND from the doorway caused us both to turn. Only Kenton himself can say what his imagination pictured there. For my part, I owned a feeling of distinct relief at sight of nothing more startling than a pair of ragged-looking men peering in at the open door.

As we looked, a third derelict of the wharves joined them, pressing inquisitively forward toward the body on the floor.

"Whassa trouble here?" asked one, curiously. "Somebody croak a guy?"

"Yes," said Kenton tersely. "Know him, any of you?"

His companion, who had been staring at the body, suddenly spoke in a startled tone:

"By gorry, it's Terence McFadden! I'd never have known the boy with that look on his face, except for the scar over his right eye. Look, Jim! Sure, and he looks as if the devil was after him!"

A confirmatory murmur came from the others. The grind of a street car's wheels on the curve of Washington Ave-

nue cut clearly across the low lapping of the waves against the rotting piles outside the warehouse. The humid air, impregnated with the foul odors of the waterfront, was stifling.

The three men huddled closer, with fearful glances over their shoulders, as if striving to glimpse that which the eyes of the dead man watched. Kenton alone seemed unaffected by the tension.

"Know where he lives?"

"Over on Twenty-fourth Street," volunteered the third man. "But he'd been on the Tiger yonder this evening. I saw him go aboard. Why not call Captain Dolan? Him and Terry was pals."

"What's his name?"

"Dolan—Captain Ira Dolan."

"Go and get him," ordered Kenton, removing his cap and mopping his forehead.

The man, not unwillingly, passed out of the circle of light. We heard his footsteps on the planking of the pier, and his hail to the ship anchored there.

Kenton turned to me, a worried look on his face.

"Would you mind going down to Patton's place on the corner and 'phoning in, Mr. Bowers?" he asked. "I wouldn't ask it, but the captain knows you well. Tell him I'm staying with the body. And ask him to have Doctor Potts come, if he's there. I'd like to get to the bottom of this."

I was only too glad to get out of the warehouse, for the eerie atmosphere was beginning to get on my nerves. When I returned, two of the somnolent loafers from Patton's greasy lunch room, roused by my telephone message to Captain Watters of the fourth precinct, followed in my wake, muttering and rubbing their bleared eyes.

Less than ten minutes had passed since we had found the dead man in Kellogg's old warehouse. Yet now a dozen frowsy wharf-rats fringed the doorway, brought thither by some mysterious telepathic message borne on the murky night air.

"Be here in ten minutes," I said, nodding to Kenton.

Suddenly a man made his way through the crowd and hastened toward us. His rugged, weather-beaten face took deeper lines from the dim light overhead, its high lights gleaming in the ghastly radiance like pieces of yellowed parchment. Yet there was power in the piercing blue eye, and strength in every line of the tall, gaunt figure, now stooping suddenly over the body of the dead man.

"Terence!" he cried, his voice harsh with grief. "Terence, lad!"

Kenton bent over and touched him on the shoulder.

"Are you Captain Dolan?" he asked.

The old man looked up, one hand still resting upon the motionless body beside which he knelt.

"I am," he said simply.

"I understand this man—Terence McFadden, his name is?"

Captain Dolan nodded.

"I understand he was on board your ship tonight?"

"Yes," said Captain Dolan, rising to his feet.

"What time did he leave?"

"'Twas not more than half an hour ago, officer. Shortly after midnight, I would say. He was just aboard for a little farewell banquet, y'understand—just a friendly visit, eating and drinking and the like, before I leave at day-break for another trip. I'm going down the coast."

Kenton shook his head.

"Never mind that. Have you any idea how he met his death? Had he any enemies that you know?"

Captain Dolan ran his bony fingers through his grizzled locks, his eyes still on the body of his friend.

"Enemies he had aplenty, officer, like any two-fisted man with the disposition of Terence McFadden. 'Twas only last week he cleaned up two of the Jerry Kramer gang that tried to hold him up with a pistol down on this very street. But his worry tonight had nothing to do with them. A man like Terence could take care of himself against any man. Truth to tell, he was his own worst enemy."

Kenton broke in sharply.

"What's that? He was worried tonight, you say?"

There seemed to be a trace of evasion in Captain Dolan's manner.

"It was a piece he read in the paper. It fair spoiled his supper for him."

"What was it about?"

"It was an item from the Zoo," replied Captain Dolan.

Kenton fingered a button puzzledly, casting a mystified glance at me. It was evident that his inquiries were not getting him anywhere.

Before he could question Captain Dolan further, the group about the doorway behind us was thrust roughly aside, and Patrolman Corcoran, the new officer from the adjacent beat, shouldered his way in. His right hand was twisted in

the lapels of a short, squat foreigner with a swarthy face half hidden by a coarse, reddish-brown beard. The neck of his sweat-soaked undershirt was open, and his sleeves were rolled above hairy, muscular forearms.

Corcoran stared at the group about the lifeless body of Terence McFadden.

"So it's true, is it?" he curiously asked. "I thought 'Big Jim' here was trying to give me a wrong steer."

"Who?" asked Kenton.

"Dobrowski, or some such name—'Big Jim,' they call him. He's one of the Kramer gang, they say."

"Where'd you get him?"

"Caught him coming out of a basement over on Efton Street. He took one look at me and ran like hell. So I rounded him up and asked him what was the big idea of running. He just looked dumb, but I knew he'd been up to something. So I frisked him, and found—these!"

He pulled a watch and purse from the side pocket of his coat. Captain Dolan leaned forward eagerly.

"Terence's!" he cried. "See if his initials are not in the back!"

He fairly snatched the watch from Corcoran's hand. The younger patrolman turned to Kenton.

"Who's the old bird, anyway?" he asked in an undertone.

Kenton established the captain's connection with the affair in a few words. In the meantime the old man had pried open the gold case with his heavy thumbnail and was squinting inside.

"See!" he affirmed, pointing to the initials "T. J. M." engraved there.

Corcoran nodded carelessly.

"'Big Jim,' all right," he said decisively. "He's the man that killed McFadden here."

"Big Jim" stared at his captor, chewing vigorously.

"No kill!" he exclaimed. "No kill!"

Kenton had been frowning perplexedly. Now he turned to Corcoran.

"Say, Bill," he demanded, "how did you get over here, anyhow? Who told you there'd been a man killed?"

To our utter amazement, Corcoran jerked his thumb toward "Big Jim."

"He did," he said.

"He did?" repeated Kenton incredulously. "Then you were the one that 'phoned in to the sergeant?"

Corcoran nodded, taking a tighter grip on the captive's lapels.

"I was going to call the wagon and go straight in with 'Big Jim' here. Then

he told such a funny story that I thought maybe he was trying to string me, so I marched him over here to make sure."

Kenton shook his head.

"That was no way to do," he muttered under his breath. "Well, no matter. What does he say?"

"Says he took this stuff away from McFadden, but didn't kill him," sneered Corcoran. "Doesn't know who killed him, but he didn't. Fishy? Well, I'll tell the world!"

Captain Dolan again bent over the body of Terence McFadden. Then he looked up at "Big Jim."

"Tell us what happened," he commanded.

Words popped turbulently from "Big Jim." Either he was actually telling the truth, or he had committed his story to heart.

"No kill!" he vociferated, gesticulating. "No kill! Take watch, but no kill! Hide for man—pull him in—fight—no dead! Take money—run—hide—"

Fear shone in his shifting eyes and on his swarthy, perspiring face. As he glanced nervously about the building, the fantastic idea occurred to me that his fear was less of the police than of some unseen, intangible force beyond his comprehension. I caught myself looking apprehensively over my own shoulder.

Corcoran spat on the floor disgustedly.

"Part of that yarn's all right," he said. "That part about his stealing the watch and all, I mean. The rest is all bull. How would he get the stuff off a big guy like that without croaking him? How did he kill him, anyway?"

Captain Dolan leaned forward, his eyes gleaming.

"Yes, officer," he repeated. "How did he kill him? Tell us that if you can."

Corcoran thrust his captive toward Kenton and knelt beside the body. When he looked up, his face was blank. Rising he turned savagely on "Big Jim."

"Come, now!" he ordered roughly, shaking the foreigner by the shoulder. "How did you kill him? Speak up!"

"No kill!" repeated "Big Jim" stubbornly. "No kill!"

Corcoran raised his club menacingly. Whether he would have struck "Big Jim," or merely wished to intimidate him, I do not know; he had not been long on the force, and he felt his authority keenly. But Captain Dolan stepped forward, holding out an imperative hand.

"One moment, officer!" he said sternly.

FOR A breathless instant the tableau held. Then Corcoran, closing his amazed mouth, thrust his flushed face close to Captain Dolan's.

"What business have you got butting in on this, anyway?" he shouted. "Who told you to give orders? You seem to have been a friend of this fellow's, by what Tom here says. But how do we know you didn't have a grudge against him and doped him tonight aboard your boat? How do we know you didn't give him wood alcohol or something to drink that put him down and out? You'd better just keep quiet and stick around here till the doc takes a look at him."

Captain Dolan's wrinkled, parchment-like face turned an angry red, and his bony hands clenched. Then, suddenly, he relaxed, uttering a short, mirthless laugh.

"In remaining here, as you request," he replied, "'tis my idea to see justice done. Little love as Terence had for Jerry Kramer and his gang, he would wish fair play, even for 'Big Jim' there. And for that reason I'll be asking your kind indulgence while I tell you a little of Terence McFadden."

Corcoran glared at the old man. Kenton shrugged his shoulders.

"Go ahead," he said. "We've got to wait for the car."

Captain Dolan stood erect beneath the grimy electric bulb, which cast a brassy gleam upon his grizzled locks. At his left stood Corcoran, scowling, one hand gripping his subdued prisoner. Beyond him Kenton leaned against the loading platform. I watched them from the shadows.

"Every man of us has his secret fear," began Captain Dolan abruptly, and a trifle oratorically. "With one it's the open sea. With another it's a horror of great heights. But we all have it. As for Terence McFadden, it took no more than a little, long-tailed, hand-organ monkey to set him a-shivering.

"And they seemed to know it, too, the grinning devils. No sooner would he pass a Dago organ-grinder on the corner than the little red-capped ape would let out a chatter and make a rush for Terence. And would you believe me, the man would actually turn pale.

"Come away, Ira," he'd say, clutching at me, 'come away, Ira. Sure, and he'll be looking for a bite from the leg of ye.'

"I mind me of a day when we went to the Zoo, Terence and I. 'Tis un-

derstood,' says he, when we reached the gates, 'that we make no visit to the monkey house.'

"But I give him the laugh, with hints about his courage, d'ye mind, till at last he sets his teeth determined-like.

"No man shall say Terence McFadden is a coward,' says he. 'Let us go in.'

"The minute we enter the room, the place is in an uproar. The little yellow-haired monkeys are hanging by their tails and chattering, and even the big apes down in the corner are roaring like devils let loose. 'Tis no use for me to point out to Terence that the hour for feeding is at hand. He will have none of it.

"The beasts know me,' he mutters between chattering teeth. 'Tis my blood they would be having.'

"For why would they be having your blood?' I asks.

"I know not the why of it,' says he, shaking in every limb, 'but 'tis so.'

"Rubbish!' says I, for I wished to rid him of this foolish fear of his. 'Walk with me to this cage, and look the big chap in the eye. There's no harm he can be doing to you, and him safe behind the bars!'

"Terence was fair sweating with fear, but he grits his teeth, and arm in arm we walk over to the cage. The big tawny fellow—the ugly-faced one by the far door—sits there humped up in his corner, glowering at us with eyes like coals.

"Look, man,' says I, 'and give over your foolishness. Why, even in the open ye'd be a match for him.'

"No sooner are the words out of my mouth than the beast makes one jump from his corner and lands half way up the bars at the front of the cage, with a roar that would blast the very soul of ye. I own I was startled, little as I fear monkeys and their likes.

"But poor Terence gives a sort of gasp and leans against me, actually paralyzed with fear. His eyes are set in a glassy stare, like a dead man's. And I swear to you that after I got him outside, it was half an hour before the color came back to his cheeks and his knees gave over their quivering.

"Did ye see the horrible face of him?' he gasps. 'And the long arms reachin' for me throat?'

"And then he'd fall to trembling again."

CAPTAIN DOLAN paused as abruptly as he had begun. So vividly had he told his story that he had been for the moment transported bodily to the monkey house at the Zoo. Now, in the

sudden silence, we moved uneasily, glancing at one another.

Corcoran scratched his head in a puzzled manner.

"What's all this got to do with finding the murderer?" he burst out.

Captain Dolan shook his head.

"There is no murderer," he said.

We all looked startled, I imagine. Kenton would have spoken, but Captain Dolan motioned him to silence. Even Corcoran, for once, found himself without words.

"I spoke of an item in the paper tonight," continued Captain Dolan. "Doubtless 'twas seen by all of you. Did you not read that one of the gorillas at the Zoo had escaped from its cage and was at large in the city?"

In the breathless silence which ensued I felt a peculiar thrill of terror pass up my spine. Kenton was fingering the holster of his revolver with nervous, clumsy motions. In some uncanny manner the gaunt old sea-captain's grim words of doubtful import had woven about us all a web of superstitious fear in which we vainly struggled, unable to grasp the saving clew.

"'Twas that item which spoiled his supper for Terence, when he read it aboard the ship tonight. And no use I found it to reason with him. To his mind the grinning face of the big ape was peeping in at every porthole!"

Suddenly Corcoran whirled, peering into the blackness at the far end of the warehouse, where something stirred softly. Kenton drew his pistol. I felt the goose-flesh rising along my arms. Only the dead man, undisturbed, stared unwinkingly in the opposite direction.

The next moment a stray cat wandered leisurely into the circle of light and sat herself down to wash her dusty fur, blinking complacently up at our pallid faces. I wiped the cold drops from my forehead and breathed a deep sigh.

Corcoran turned almost pleadingly to Captain Dolan.

"The gorilla—" he said. "Was it the gorilla from the Zoo that killed Terence McFadden?"

Captain Dolan shook his head.

"I would not say that," he answered.

I stared at the parchment-like face in amazement. Like Corcoran, I had jumped to this conclusion. Kenton drew his hand across his forehead in perplexity.

"But you said there was no murder!" cried Corcoran. "Was it 'Big Jim' that killed him, after all?"

"I would not say that," repeated Captain Dolan.

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The Secret Fear

(Continued from page 46)

Corcoran looked at the old man dazedly. Then he spoke very softly and soothingly, as one might interrogate a backward child:

"Then tell me, Captain Dolan," he said. "How did Terence McFadden die?"

"He was murdered," replied Captain Dolan.

Corcoran stared.

"Murdered? But you said there was no murderer!"

"Nor was there," said the captain.

Corcoran dropped his hands helplessly. Kenton took up the interrogation.

"Did he kill himself?" he demanded. "Was it suicide?"

"I would not say that," repeated Captain Dolan for the third time.

But Kenton was not to be baffled.

"With what weapon was the man killed?" he asked doggedly.

Captain Dolan gazed at the contorted face of the man at his feet.

"With one of the oldest weapons in the world," he answered. "A weapon which has caused the death of many a brave man—aye, braver and more powerful than Terence here."

The waves lapped saltily against the rotting piles at the far end of the warehouse. In the darkness a rat squeaked, and the cat, interrupting its toilet, darted out of the circle of light and vanished. In the darkness was heard the sound of a speeding motor.

Captain Dolan raised his eyes from the corpse of his friend, and his voice was very soft and compassionate:

"Did I not say that Terence was his own worst enemy? Had it not been for that foolish bewitchment of his—"

He turned and pointed suddenly toward "Big Jim," standing stupidly there in the shadows. It seemed almost that the eyes of the dead man, following the direction of his extended arm, were staring at the bestial, repulsive features of the prisoner with sentient terror.

"Look at the hairy arms of him!" he cried. "Look at the long, shaggy beard! When he stood on the platform yonder by the door and crooked his elbow about the throat of Terence, do you think the poor lad knew of the pistol stuck in his back, or the words of warning jabbered in some haythin lingo? To the mind of Terence 'twas nothing less than the coming true of all his nightmares! Small wonder that his eyes are bursting from their sockets as he lies there with the grip of terror stopping the valves of his heart and curdling the very blood in his veins!"

"Then the name of the weapon—"

"It is called Fear," said Captain Dolan.

The throbbing motor sounded at the end of the street. With a *squeal* of brakes, the police car halted outside. Doctor Potts pushed through the crowd and bent briefly over the body.

"Heart failure," he said.