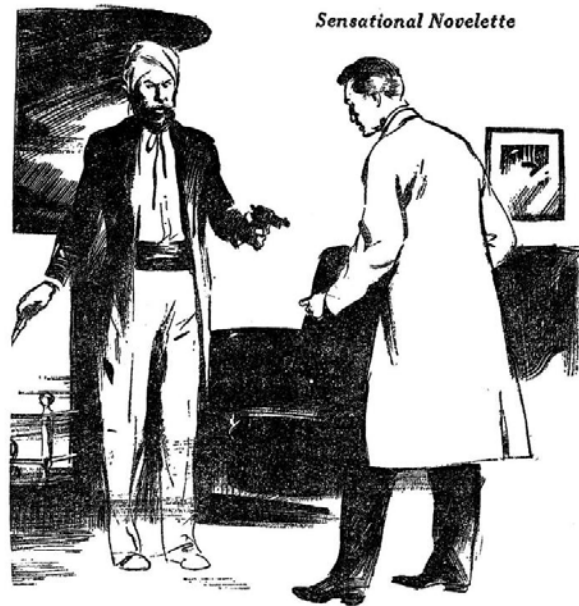


Satan Holds a Seance

By Norman A. Daniels

Although Detective Jim Thayer had never been an actor, he was the only one on the force to play the role of the murderous mystic. But Thayer had plenty to learn about homicide hokum. For when he called a seance for a crime cult, he was spirited behind the crystal eight ball.



Sensational Novelette

CHAPTER I

UNDERCOVER YOGI

THE Dorchester Arms was a ritzy place, equipped with swanky doormen and attendants. The doorman, at the moment, was gaping at an undertaker's utility truck which pulled up in front of the entrance. A man, somber in dress and appearance, climbed out. So did two assistants. They walked sedately around to the back of the truck, opened the doors and pulled out a wicker basket.

"Hey! Hey—there," the doorman protested shrilly. "You gotta make deliveries at the rear entrance. I ain't allowed to—"

The undertaker had a prominent Adam's apple that moved his wing collar and black bow tie up and down like a piston. He held

up one hand and bowed slightly.

"This, my man, is not a delivery. We are—er—collecting at the moment. There is a man named Peter Travers living in apartment 4D—that is he was living. Our days are short, my friend. We never know when the sunset will come."

The undertaker's somber expression changed abruptly. "You—" he called out to his assistants. "Be a little more careful with that basket. They don't grow on trees, you know, and the Mortensen Funeral Service prides itself on using the very best of equipment."

The three men passed into the foyer of the building and the doorman removed his hat. There was nobody living in 4D named Travers. Of all the apartments in the building, this one couldn't house such a man because the Yogi lived there. The black-

bearded, long-haired guy who wore a turban, called himself Ram Omar and made ghosts materialize, lived there.

In apartment 4D the man with long black hair, heavy beard and turban, watched the arrival of the hearse from behind slightly parted curtains. The room itself was a weird place. A long table occupied one side. There were chairs enough to accommodate an audience of about thirty people. An altarlike structure set off one corner and there was a small organ beside it. The entire room was hung with deep purple drapes that gave it the perpetual appearance of a room in mourning.

THE man with the black beard turned away from the window, walked over to the table and sat down to finish his game of solitaire. This man wasn't the real Ram Omar. The mystic, at the moment, was occupying a cell in a police precinct on the outskirts of the city where nobody could get at him. A special court order held the man incommunicado.

His double was Detective Jim Thayer of the larceny squad. He had been selected for his present undercover job because he looked something like Ram Omar and if he raised a beard and let his hair grow very long, he'd be a spitting image of the mystic. Three weeks had passed and Jim Thayer moped around Omar's swanky suite and wondered if there was anything more boring than a policeman's life.

He picked up a pencil and added a few figures to a stupendous column, indicating that he owed the game of solitaire something like seven hundred and seventy-two thousand dollars.

A knock on the door startled him. He hastily swept cards and tally sheet into a drawer, glanced in the mirror to see if his turban looked halfway presentable, and then he donned a frock coat. The door was provided with a pair of burglar chains. He slid these back, opened the door and stared at

the undertaker, flanked by his two assistants who carried the wicker basket between them.

The undertaker bowed gallantly, pushed by Jim Thayer and with a wide motion of his hand indicated that the assistants were to follow. Then he took out a black-bordered card, a black pencil and poised them while he looked at Thayer with an open question in his eyes.

"In times such as these—distressing but necessary moments of one's life," he said sonorously, "all sympathy is extended to you by the Mortensen Funeral Service Incorporated. The name of the deceased is Peter Travers. I would like all the other details, if you please."

Jim Thayer glanced at the wicker basket, now resting on the rug. Then he took the undertaker's arm and piloted him into a small anteroom.

"Look, my friend," he said, "there is some mistake. Nobody named Peter Travers lives here. There is nobody dead in this apartment. You've been kidded—spoofed. Now will you and your two ghouls take that basket out of my place?"

The undertaker flushed slightly and consulted that black-edged card again. "There cannot be a mistake. People do not joke about such sacred things, my dear fellow. You are distraught, but we shall take care of all details and—"

"Look," Thayer snapped, "you can either take that damned basket out of here or travel out inside of it yourself. I don't like this kind of joke. They keep me from sleeping nights. Scram—beat it. And stop rubbing your hands as if you were already looking at the corpse."

The undertaker drew himself very erect. "I think," he said hotly, "I can take a hint. I also assure you that if I find out who has perpetrated this unfunny joke he will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Good day, sir."

THEY went back to the reception hall. The undertaker motioned his two stolid looking aides. They picked up the basket and trotted out behind him. Jim Thayer replaced the burglar chains, walked back to the room which the real Ram Omar used for his seances, and sat down rather heavily.

Of course the arrival of that undertaker had been a joke—probably some of the boys at headquarters. Thayer damned the idea that there shouldn't even be a phone in the apartment. Being cut off from the world like this wasn't much fun.

Peter Travers, the undertaker had said. Thayer frowned and wondered if he could have meant the Peter Travers who operated one of the biggest gambling houses in the state. He shrugged, hauled out his cards and started to play again, but his soul wasn't in it now. The time was almost ripe for him to go into his main act—that of taking Ram Omar's place, conducting his seances, interviewing clients and sending Omar's particular brand of hokum around.

Behind all this was a strange situation. Ram Omar really was a native of India and had once belonged to the notorious band of killers known as Thuggee. Omar had started his ghost rousing business and done rather well for himself. However, he'd extended it a bit too far in that he not only caused ghosts to appear, but he actually was alleged to have manufactured a few spirits by murdering their earthly bodies.

Not that there was any proof. Omar was too clever for that, but four men had been found murdered—each one with a garotte made of a red silken band twisted around his throat. Each man had possessed a mortal enemy and these enemies were known to frequent Omar's apartment. Thayer's superiors had a theory that Omar did the actual murdering for pay and that his four clients were guilty of compounding murder. Jim Thayer was supposed to gather evidence enough to convict them by posing as Ram

Omar.

He shivered at the memory of that undertaker and his wicker basket. Not that it was out of place in this suite because all the trappings of the seance room had to do with death. Jim Thayer flung down the cards again, got up and began to pace the floor.

The more he thought of that grisly joke, the more he worried. Who would have played a trick like that on Omar? Especially when the mystic was supposed to be out of town. Thayer glanced down the hallway. The last door—leading to a small study—was closed. He'd been pretty sure that door had been open an hour before.

Thayer walked briskly down the corridor, reached for the knob, and then began to grin. He was a fool! It must be the monotony of four weeks in one apartment that was getting him. He opened the door and stepped in, to freeze in his tracks.

A high, solid-backed chair stood facing the fireplace. Thayer couldn't see who occupied it, but a thin column of cigarette smoke drifted toward the ceiling. Thayer reached under his frock coat, fastened fingers around the butt of a shoulder holstered gun and snapped a question. The occupant of the chair didn't answer, didn't move.

Thayer edged around to the front of the chair. His hand fell from the gun butt, his jaw dropped a notch and his eyes bugged out a little.

The man who sat in the chair was dead. There was a red silk band drawn so tightly around his throat that it was barely visible. A cigarette burned right up to his fingers and the flesh was beginning to smell a bit. All this was horrible enough, but Jim Thayer realized the full measure of horror when he looked at the dead man's face. It was Peter Travers—the gambler whom that undertaker had come to claim.

CHAPTER II

EMPTY COFFIN

THAYER approached the corpse and managed to free the cigarette from its hand. He touched the wrist and found it cold, the flesh soft. He frowned. Rigor mortis must have already left the body. Then how come that lighted cigarette? Was it somebody's idea of a big joke? And how had that corpse got into the apartment when Thayer kept the door locked so securely?

He remembered that the real Ram Omar was suspected of killing his victims with a red silk garotte. The same method that had choked the breath out of Travers. Had Ram Omar escaped from his cell then? Or obtained his freedom by some legal twist?

Thayer closed the study door quietly, as though he didn't wish to disturb the corpse. Then he turned and sprinted for the closet in the reception hall. He grabbed his own hat, jammed it on and then grimaced. A guy with a turban wasn't supposed to wear a hat. He threw the hat on the shelf again. Remembering that Ram Omar always carried a cane, Thayer selected one from the dozen or more stuck in a homemade rack. He hurried to the elevators, went down, crossed the lobby and bowed somewhat ceremoniously to the salutes of attendants.

The doorman touched the peak of his cap. "Funny thing about them undertakers, wasn't it, Mr. Omar?" he chuckled. "Somebody must have played a joke on you. That little guy in the wing collar and frock coat was plenty mad."

"Yes—yes, of course," Thayer answered. "In a few moments some friends of mine will arrive. Please allow them to go at once to my apartment."

Thayer turned east and walked briskly for two blocks before he located a drug store with phone booths. He dialed headquarters and asked for Captain Dwyer.

"Thayer," he said crisply. "Sure I left the apartment. Yes, I know it is against orders, but listen, Skipper, there's a dead man in that apartment. A guy named Peter Travers and he was strangled to death with a piece of red silk. Are you sure Omar is still in the clink?"

"I know he is," Dwyer barked. "Talked to him three hours ago. I'll be right over."

"Make it fast," Thayer begged. "And Skipper, just bring a fingerprint guy with you. Don't use a police car—come in a cab."

Thayer half walked, half ran back to the apartment although to him it was the one place in the world he'd rather not be. All those ghost materializing implements of Omar, all his books on oriental magic and science had got under Thayer's skin. He'd learned plenty from them, but they gave him the creeps. Now, with a corpse that just materialized like a ghost, the thing was out of hand.

He let himself in, lit a cigarette and paced the floor with several side glances down the corridor at the study. Captain Dwyer—big, ruddy and efficient—arrived with a member of the identification division. Thayer led the way to the study, opened the door and pointed at the chair.

Dwyer walked around it, looked and then glanced up at Thayer with a strange light in his eyes.

"You feel okay?" he queried. "Nothing buzzing around inside your skull, Thayer? There is no corpse here. What's the gag?"

"No corpse?" Thayer sped to Dwyer's side. The chair was empty. Even the cigarette ashes and the butt itself were missing. Thayer sat down weakly on the corner of a table and mopped his forehead.

"THERE was a corpse," Thayer insisted. "I'm not bats although living in this joint for a month might make anybody go a little wacky. Listen, Skipper—about an hour ago an undertaker showed up and said he'd been told to pick up the body

of Peter Travers. I told the guy off and sent him away. Then I found Peter Travers, dead—right in that chair.”

“Who was the undertaker?” Dwyer asked. “We’ll settle this business right now.”

“Mort—Mortensen,” Thayer said. “That was the name. Mortensen’s Funeral Service. I didn’t want to start things rolling because of the job I’ve got in hand. The less publicity Ram Omar gets right now, the better.”

Captain Dwyer scanned a phone book in Omar’s library. Then he sent the fingerprint man out to a phone.

“No such name in the book,” Dwyer sat down. “We’ll wait and see if O’Brien can dig ‘em up. Say—you look pretty good, Thayer. I knew I’d picked the right man for this job. We’ll get busy at once because every day it gets harder and harder to keep the real Ram Omar under wraps. Know what you’re to do?”

“I should,” Thayer retorted. “That’s all I’ve had to think about for weeks. I pretend to reopen my seance business. Then I ask my old clients to show up and to each one of them I put a question that will get an answer if we’re right. You think Omar hired himself out as a killer; that for dough he garotted four or five men who stood in the way of his clients.”

“Right,” Dwyer nodded. “There’s Wythe Borell, George Payne, Roswell Kirk and Beany Scanlon. A fine quartet of gamblers, confidence men and wastrels. There may be others, too. Omar could have hidden the bodies of certain victims. I think that among his clients, Omar numbers these four men. Their enemies all died, via the garotte.”

“We suspected the four instantly because they profited by the murders, but each one had a cast iron alibi so damned solid we know it was prepared. That’s all, Thayer. The rest is up to you—if you don’t go around seeing a lot of dead people that don’t exist.”

O’Brien, the fingerprint man, returned in

a few minutes. There was no such undertaking firm as Mortensen’s.

“I checked with a couple of embalmers, with the medical examiner who knows ‘em all, and with an undertaker’s association. Want me to go over that room anyhow, cap’n?”

“For what?” Dwyer exclaimed. “Fingerprints of ghosts? Come on, O’Brien, and good luck to you, Thayer. We’ll start the machinery moving tomorrow. Meanwhile stay put. Learn all you can about Omar from his books and records and stop worrying about bodies that just appear and vanish like spooks. You’ve been reading too many of these books, that’s what’s wrong.”

Dwyer waved an all inclusive hand to take in the three walls loaded with thick volumes. After they left, Thayer sat down slowly and tried to figure it out. He didn’t blame Dwyer much for his skepticism, but Thayer knew what his own eyes had seen. There had *been* a corpse—an undertaker *did* show up with all his trappings, too. Peter Travers *was* dead!

Thayer snapped his fingers. There was one way to find out—to be certain he wasn’t going wacky. Why not take a chance, dust out of here and go to Travers’ house? If he was missing— Captain Dwyer would have to eat his doubts before this was over.

Thayer grabbed the cane, looked for a hat once more until he recalled the turban and mentally cursed the cockeyed thing. Why men would want to wear a towel wrapped around their heads. . . .

He hailed a cab and gave Travers’ address, but stopped the taxi a block from the gambler’s home, paid off the driver and proceeded the rest of the way on foot.

TRAVERS didn’t run his games for peanuts, which the mansionlike home indicated. There were tall trees and thick hedges masking most of the front of the place and beyond the gate was room enough

to park a dozen cars. There were four parked there now—big, luxurious sedans. Thayer walked past them, started to climb the steps and stopped dead, halfway up to the porch.

There was a black funeral wreath tacked to the wall beside the door!

Thayer drew a sharp breath and wondered what Captain Dwyer would have to say about this. He tiptoed across the porch, moved softly over to a big window and peered through it. What he saw didn't remove the goose pimples that were popping out all over him.

Straddling one corner was a bronze casket, banked with flowers and ferns. Candles burned at the foot and head of the casket. The lid was down. Four men sat side by side before the bier, each one looking as though he wished he weren't there. In the faint, flickering candlelight, Thayer glanced at their faces and gasped with surprise.

Looking from left to right he recognized Wythe Borell, slim, gray-haired and narrow-eyed. A shrewd gambler if there ever was one. Then George Payne who looked like a small town parson with a benign expression that would fool anyone—for Payne was one of the slickest confidence men in the game. Third down the row sat Roswell Kirk, younger than the others and dissipated looking. A boy with too much money and too little character.

The last man was Beany Scanlon, an out-and-out crook without flourishes. He looked something like an ape as he sat hunched in his chair. His arms were too long for his stubby body and he had a forehead that protruded out above his eyes. He could shave ten times a day and never get rid of that black outline of his whiskers. Scanlon was a bad egg with a thick, impervious shell.

"The four guys Dwyer thinks conspired with Omar to knock off their enemies," Thayer muttered to himself. "What a setup this is!"

He debated the idea of walking boldly

into the place as Ram Omar, but rejected it quickly. The time wasn't quite ripe. Yet Thayer wanted to see who was in the coffin. He had a hollow feeling that he'd find the same corpse there that had occupied a chair in Omar's study.

The four mourners arose finally and slowly filed out of the room. Thayer vaulted the porch railing and crouched behind a bush until all four of them entered their cars and drove away. He was close enough to hear any incidental conversation, but to his disgust not one man uttered so much as a word. They seemed frightened, startled and raging mad at the same time.

When they were gone, Thayer returned to the porch. He tried the door, found it unlocked and stepped in. The sickening odor of funeral flowers assailed his nostrils and made them quiver. Nobody came forward to greet him. The house seemed filled with the complete silence of death.

He tiptoed closer to the coffin, tried to make out the engraving on the name plate and finally tilted a candle so that its light would shower down on the glittering gold plate. The words he read sent a chill running through his body. The plate stated that under the lid of that coffin reposed Peter Albert Travers. The date of his death was given as that of the day before.

With hands that shook slightly but were egged on by a determined brain, Thayer pushed the locking buttons of the lid. He sucked in a long breath that was so sweet and heavy with perfume that it almost gagged him and then he raised the lid.

The coffin was empty!

CHAPTER III

ROOM OF FALSE DEATH

THAYER'S hands grew paralyzed and the heavy casket lid dropped into place with a thud. Anybody in the house must have

heard it. Thayer slithered to the hall and listened. Someone was moving about upstairs. Thayer looked around for a place to hide, darted to the casket and ducked behind it. He pulled two of the big palms close together so they'd form a shield.

From here on Thayer was prepared to witness about anything from ghosts with clanking chains and flowing robes, to smirking, hand-rubbing embalmers. Yet he was hardly set to encounter what walked into that room of false death.

First of all Thayer was sure his eyes were seeing things that didn't exist, then he blamed the phenomenon on the flickering candlelight. For the man who stalked up to the casket was—Peter Albert Travers, who should have been inside the coffin—whom Thayer had last seen sitting in the chair of Ram Omar's study—whose body had been very cold in death!

This was no ghostly essence that paraded before Thayer's bulging eyes. If he had any such ideas, they were dispelled because the man gave breath to a string of sour curses. He scooped up a china vase, filled with flowers, stepped back and hurled the vase, flowers and all straight at the casket.

Some of the water splashed into Thayer's face, two of the flowers lighted on his shoulders. Then the living dead man turned on his heel and stalked away. Thayer felt like collapsing in a nice fainting blackout. Instead, he forced himself to think clearly, to weigh his next steps. So far he was utterly in the dark, his head as completely empty of facts as that coffin was of a corpse.

The obvious thing to do was question this living dead man named Travers, but Thayer was afraid that he might upset an applegart there. But he had four others he could talk to—Borell, Payne, Kirk or Scanlon. They might know what this was all about or, at least, have an inkling.

Yet circumstances made the job difficult. Thayer would much rather have gone to

them as himself, a detective, but he couldn't shave off the beard or cut those flowing locks of raven black hair he'd grown over a period of a whole month. He might put Captain Dwyer onto the case and let him handle it, but Thayer was just stubborn enough to want to see the thing through for himself. Dwyer's open skepticism still rankled.

MOVING carefully, Thayer made his way to the door and escaped into the night. The fresh, clean air smelled good after that effusion of heavy scents in the house. The air cleared his wits and made him more determined than ever to handle the job alone.

He walked boldly through the gate, looked for a taxi, but saw only a black sedan parked across the street and about thirty feet north of Travers' house. This car suddenly pulled away with a squeal of tires, as though the driver had mysteriously found himself very eager to leave the vicinity. Thayer shrugged off that episode and started walking.

He checked the address of the four men in a drug store phone booth, glared back at some simpering girls who were intrigued by his beard, long hair and turban and hurried to the street. Sorting those four men to pick a gullible one to question wasn't hard. Borell was too clever and cool, Payne too smooth and Beany Scanlon too tough. Kirk was the man—whatever character and courage he possessed was well hidden. Properly handled Kirk would talk fast and plenty.

Thayer felt almost cheerful as he settled back in a taxi and headed for Kirk's bachelor apartments. He gave up trying to align the angles of the case. It was like trying to make a circle out of a square without changing straight lines. But Kirk would talk—or have the truth belted out of him. Thayer wasn't going to be reasonable about this at all.

The cab stopped and he got out. His eyes flickered across the entrance of the

apartment house. There were two men standing just outside the door and they seemed to be almost too engrossed in deep conversation. Thayer felt an urge to get away from this place before something happened. Then he derided himself. After all, who knew he was coming here? How could any trap be set?

He took half a dozen steps toward the entrance and then stopped. His arms moved slowly away from his body. There was a gun pressed with suggestive firmness into the small of his back. The two men at the entrance approached him and with the one who had slipped up from behind, Thayer was uncomfortably forced to surrender.

A car pulled up and he groaned. It was the same car that had darted away from in front of Peter Travers' house. He knew now that a trap had been set—that he'd probably been trailed here and this trio of uncompromising looking mugs had figured out his destination just as Thayer himself had planned it. Kirk was the most vulnerable of the four men involved.

"Get in, Rajah," one of the men said out of the corner of his mouth. "We don't want no trouble with you, understand? We know all about the tricks you can pull, but we got a few tricks ourselves. They're made of lead, see? Just sit down, fold your arms and keep quiet."

Thayer was relieved about one thing—they didn't know he was a cop and they took him at face value as Ram Omar. The kidnaping had been performed so smoothly that nobody passing by saw anything out of the way. The car pulled from the curb, took the next corner and headed downtown.

Thayer started to say, "You have made a mistake," but the burliest of the trio slapped him across the mouth and warned him to keep quiet. These mugs meant business.

THE car shot across a sidewalk, down an alley. It stopped beside a long building

that contained a series of private garages. Thayer was forced to get out and march between two of the men. The third unlocked one of the garage doors and Thayer went inside.

He realized there was a second floor to the place which wasn't evident from the outside of the building. A narrow, ladderlike set of stairs led up and he went first. At the top he found a familiar face peering at him. Beany Scanlon reminded Thayer of that undertaker, the way he kept smirking.

"Well, if it ain't the Rajah himself, come to pay little Beany a visit," the crook gloated. "Brother, both of us is gonna remember this a long time. Maybe I'll remember it longer than you though because maybe you won't be here after tonight. Just walk over there and sit down. Yeah—that big wooden chair. I can tie you up nice and tight. Not that I don't trust you—oh, no—but I seen some of them tricks you pull and I ain't takin' chances. Squat, you double-crosser, or I'll smear you one right now."

Thayer sat down. Beany gave some orders and ropes were quickly brought. Thayer stiffened every muscle in his body, making the sinews bulge as much as possible. It was a trick he'd read about in some of Omar's books. A good trick too—if it worked.

The ropes were fastened firmly. Even after they had been tied, Thayer had to sit just as erect and keep his muscles expanded lest Beany notice the slack in the ropes once he relaxed.

Beany dragged over a chair, straddled it, and regarded Thayer with a fishy eye. "Look, pal," he said, "you and me had a business deal. I didn't ask for it, but it happened anyhow, and I wasn't sorry. I paid off because it was worth the dough, but that ended the whole thing. Now you're trying to chisel some more outa me and it don't work—not with Beany Scanlon it don't. You shoulda known better."

Thayer closed his eyes and silently offered up a prayer that now he must adopt Ram Omar's identity, he'd do it without a hitch.

"So," he said blandly. "We made one deal, my friend. We could make another—eh?"

Beany licked his fat lips, but none of that cold-blooded murder light left his eyes.

"You talk big for a guy in a spot, pal. It's no dice. Y'see, I don't trust you much. Too many tricks up your sleeve for a dumb bozo like me. The way you polished off Mike Morgan, for instance. You made a little doll that looked just like him. Then you put a curse on the doll and stuck pins in it.

"Then you twisted a little piece of red silk around the doll's neck. You told me that when you did that, Mike Morgan was a goner. He was too—with a hunk of red silk chokin' him to death. Think I want to die like that? Not me!"

"Then what do you intend to do to me?" Thayer asked in a slightly accented voice, one he'd practiced for days from phonograph records made of the real Ram Omar's tones.

Beany waved his hand. "Sorry to say it, pal, but you're gonna go out—just like a light. Suppose the cops picked you up and you told 'em I paid you to knock off Mike Morgan? A guy with my rep wouldn't stand a chance. They'd send me to the chair, y'understand? That's why I gotta kill you to save my own neck."

"But I would never talk—because that would make me as amenable to the chair as yourself," Thayer objected.

Beany nodded. "Sure—that's how I figured it all the time until you started putting the screws down—askin' me for a hundred grand or you'll tip the cops. Who do you think I am—a big shot like Borell or something?"

THAYER was quietly testing the ropes. "Oh," he said softly, "so Borell and the

others are in on it too, eh? Before you do anything rash, Mr. Scanlon, may I remind you that I am not an ordinary man? My little trick with the dolls might work here—and now—even without the use of the symbolic figure of a doll. You wouldn't like a red silken scarf around your neck, would you?"

Beany gulped and arose hastily. "No—and you won't put one there. That's why I sent my gorillas out of the room while we talked. They don't know what's going on, except you're supposed to be some kind of a crackpot. They'll do the job while I get far away from here and build myself up a nice strong alibi."

"Just a moment," Thayer snapped. "You forgot one thing, Mr. Scanlon. Think what happened to Peter Travers. You were at his home this afternoon—you and the others. Travers also refused to bargain and he died. Yet I did not come into contact with him."

Beany turned white. "Yeah—yeah, I know, but I still take my chances. Ten minutes you got, Rajah. I can't afford to give you any more time than that."

Beany slipped through the door and Thayer heard him slide down the ladder stairway in his haste to get clear. But Beany was impressed by the man he thought was Ram Omar. His two or three hoodlums wouldn't be under any such delusions. They'd have orders to shoot—or use a knife—and they'd do it quite callously. Thayer was on a bad spot.

He relaxed all his muscles and felt the ropes grow limp. He got one arm free and then he heard the killers coming. With his legs and his left wrist still strapped to the chair he was just about as helpless as before. Working hastily, he slipped his wrist beneath the loop of rope again, swelled his muscles and tightened it.

The three men who came in were the trio who'd kidnaped him from in front of Kirk's apartment. Two of them stood near the door while the third strolled over toward Thayer.

He glanced at a wrist watch, sat down on the chair which Beany had vacated and calmly drew an automatic. He pulled back the magazine, pumping a slug into the firing chamber. Then he slowly moved down the safety and that gun was ready for action.

Nobody said a word. Speech was unnecessary, for everyone in that room knew what was to happen. Thayer began mentally checking off the seconds. With the three watching him he had no chance—none at all. He wished now that he'd conquered his vanity and called Captain Dwyer into the case.

Finally the killer arose, languidly, as if killing a man was one of the commonest things in his life. Thayer knew that three pairs of eyes were on him. Shrewd, calculating eyes watching for tricks.

CHAPTER IV

THE CORPSE RETURNS

THE killer deliberately turned his back on Thayer and for a moment or two blocked the vision of his two cohorts. Thayer's right hand slid from beneath the ropes. He tugged on his left and even started to use his free hand to work on the ropes, but the killer turned around again and Thayer hastily dropped his free hand to the chair.

"So you really are going to kill me," Thayer said slowly. "The ten minutes are up then. Beany gave you a thankless task, my friend. If the police rundown my killer, you are the only one who will die for the crime—not Beany."

"Yeah, we know that," the killer replied. "Because of it we get paid a lot of dough for the job. Here it comes, Mister. Personally I got no grudge against you, but orders are orders—when there's dough involved. Brace yourself."

"Very well," Thayer said. "I'm ready. All I ask is that you step close and do the job

well. Place the gun against my heart and then—shoot."

It was a risky business. The killer might not consider Thayer's plea or he might act so swiftly that there'd be no chance to resist. But the killer still maintained his languid pose and nodded as he walked forward. His gun came up and, so did Thayer's right hand. It grasped the weapon by the barrel, deflected the aim and when one slug came hurtling through the muzzle, it just banged against the further wall.

With the same tugging motion, augmented by the element of surprise, Thayer ripped the weapon free. He only had one hand with which to act so he tossed the gun lightly into the air, caught it on the way down. He accomplished all this so fast that the two men near the door didn't have an opportunity to seize their own weapons.

The killer backed away, under the threat of his own gun in Thayer's hand. He raised his arms slightly and beads of sweat were already forming on his face.

"Stop — right there," Thayer snapped. "If you or your pals make a move, I'll drill the three of you. All right—you whose gun I have. What's your name?"

"Toomey, sir. Ed Toomey. You—you can't shoot. We were just foolin'. We—"

"All right, Toomey. Reach into your pocket very slowly and carefully. You carry a knife—all men of your breed do. Take it out of your pocket. Then get down on your knees and crawl over here. Stay down so your friends will still be in my line of fire. Cut my feet loose first and then my left arm. Do a good job, without tricks, unless you'd prefer to die."

Toomey gulped, got out the knife and sank to his knees. He waddled forward on them. Two strokes of the blade severed the bonds around Thayer's legs. Then Toomey slowly raised his head. Thayer was watching the other pair and Toomey took a long shot. He suddenly started the knife in a jab toward

Thayer's throat.

There was a single shot. Toomey was hurtled backward by the slug that crashed through his shoulder. He began howling for help. But his two friends didn't move, beyond a half-involuntary start, when Toomey went into his murder act.

"You're a fool," Thayer said. "Now pick up that knife again. I don't care if you are wounded. Cut my arm loose or I'll send a slug through your other shoulder."

A MINUTE later Thayer stood free. He herded the other two close to Toomey, backed toward a window, smashed it with his elbow and then fired three quick shots into the night. If the other shots hadn't been distinguished as such, those certainly would.

Two patrolmen responded and later on arrived in a radio car. Thayer led one of the officers aside and produced his badge. He gave orders that the prisoners were to be held without the privilege of seeing or talking to anyone, lawyers included. Then he descended the ladder, passed out of the garage and reached the street. He was still determined to see Kirk.

A cab driver, inspired by a five dollar bill, reached Kirk's apartment in eleven minutes flat. Thayer wondered if he'd rather face Toomey and his gun once more or take another of those rides. He handed over the five spot.

"Nice going, Mercury. Keep your winged sandals on, hang around and we'll take another express flight in a few minutes."

The driver fervently kissed the five dollar bill, stared at Thayer's retreating back and the loose end of his turban that hung down gracefully.

The cabby muttered: "Screwball—but if they're all like that, I'll get me a stand in front of the nut house."

Kirk's apartment was every bit as exclusive as the one where Ram Omar lived,

but Thayer's appearance commanded respect. It was funny what a beard, long hair, a turban and a frock coat could do. He went to Kirk's floor, walked down a corridor and pressed the doorbell above Kirk's name card.

There was no answer. Thayer felt the first pangs of apprehension creep up his spine. He banged on the door, listened again and then took keys from his pocket. In a minute and a half the door swung open. Thayer drew the gun he'd confiscated from Toomey and advanced with plenty of caution.

He turned into a large room and the gun sagged. Kirk wouldn't talk. Somebody else had recognized his inherent weakness and got to him first. Kirk had been shot through the back of the head, a particularly messy job of it, too.

Thayer went toward the phone, but hesitated. Hard heels were clicking along the marble corridor outside. He hastily stepped behind a portiere and waited.

The man who walked breezily into the apartment was Wythe Borell. He saw Kirk and let out a cry of horror. It was cut off when Thayer stepped from behind the portiere with his gun raised.

Borell said, "So you weren't content to murder Travers—now it's Kirk. You can't get away with it, Ram Omar. Not even if you do possess those powers you demonstrated to us. I'm going to call the police."

"But are you a complete fool?" Thayer asked softly. "The weapon in my hand is not magic, but pure science. What makes you think I killed Kirk?"

"What makes me think so?" Borell gasped. "Who else would do it? Kirk refused to come through. So did Travers. I paid up. Payne did, too. You first murdered Travers and then casually asked all of us to go to his house. We did and found—a coffin. That was to impress those of us who didn't pay your confounded blackmail.

"Kirk nearly went mad and you know it.

Probably you waited for his return here—and killed him. I don't care what happens to me. I'll expose you, Omar. I'll get on the witness stand and swear you into the electric chair."

Thayer shook his head. "You would hardly have paid up, my friend, if your intentions were in that direction. A mere murder would hardly have changed your mind. Now I am through fooling. Turn around. Turn—or I'll swivel you about with a bullet."

BORELL obeyed. Thayer stepped silently up to the man and slugged him on the head with the gun butt. Then he raced out of the apartment at top speed, calmed himself as he waited for the lift and walked sedately out of the place.

Mercury with his winged taxicab was still hopefully waiting. Thayer got in.

"Drive up Mason Boulevard until you see a house with a crepe on the door. Step on it."

"As if dead guys should make anybody hurry," the driver muttered, but he gave Thayer another of those nerve-splitting rides.

"Want I should wait?" he asked as he pulled to the curb in front of Travers' home.

"I want," Thayer grinned. "Or if you wish, take a little jaunt to Singapore or maybe Salonika. Just get back here in about ten minutes. You could do that easy."

Thayer hurried up the path and this time he walked deliberately to the door and found it partially open. He didn't relish stepping into this house of empty caskets and roving dead men again, but he did. The flowers still gave off their heavy scents, the candles still flickered and the house was still shrouded by eerie silence.

Thayer stepped up to the coffin once more, rubbed his beard for half a minute and then raised the casket lid. It fell back with a thud. The coffin was no longer empty. That same man whom Thayer had seen in Ram

Omar's suite and then again observed walking about this very house, lay inside the coffin. The dead had returned to its resting place!

Thayer backed away slowly, breathing rather hard and chilled by the horror of that surprise. He was certain the casket would be empty. He reached the hallway, glanced up the steps and then drew his gun. With firm, silent steps he began to ascend the stairs. What he'd find at the top might be a distinct new problem or it might be the answer to the entire case.

He reached the landing. A man stood there, trembling and ashen-faced. It was the undertaker from Mortensen's—the fake firm of funeral directors.

"You—you wanted someone, sir?" he asked in a voice hardly audible.

"Yes," Thayer asserted. "You!"

WYTHE BORELL resented the firm grip on his wrist, resented the police car and the two detectives who rode with him. He promised civil action, disciplinary steps and even violence. All of which left the detectives totally unimpressed.

"Just take it easy, Mister," one of them said. "We don't know what this is about any more than you, except it has something to do with a couple of murders. The Skipper sent us to your house to pick you up and you're going along either straight up and down or stretched out end to end. Personally, I don't care which, because I'm sick of your jabber. Now shut up!"

Borell shut—instantly. When the police car stopped in front of the Dorchester Arms apartment, where Ram Omar's bronze professional sign glistened dully, Borell gasped. He gasped some more when he saw other cars pull up and disgorge George Payne and Beany Scanlon. The latter wore handcuffs and a belligerent expression that fooled nobody—not even himself.

CHAPTER V

SUICIDE SEANCE

ALL three of them were escorted to Ram Omar's suite. The bearded, turbaned man sat behind his big table, arms folded and impassive. A section of the purple drapes parted and Captain Dwyer stepped out. Ram Omar inclined his head respectfully, but the others in the room might not have been there for all the attention he gave them.

Captain Dwyer spoke briskly. "You three men probably wonder just why you were brought here. It's simple to explain. We police depend upon science to help solve crimes. Personally I do not believe in spirits—except the kind that comes in bottles. However, Ram Omar alleges that he has been made a victim of someone else's murders. Two men have been killed—Peter Travers and Roswell Kirk. In each instance it was murder, without question."

"But for heaven's sakes," George Payne cried out, "why drag us into the mess? I didn't kill anybody."

"That remains to be seen," Dwyer said. "First of all Ram Omar has fully confessed what has gone on before. He maintains that you men, with Travers and Kirk included, called upon him for professional advice. You wanted to know how you might harm certain men who were your enemies from whose deaths you would derive a great deal of profit. Kirk's uncle, for instance, left him a fortune. Payne, your business partner was strangled with a piece of red silk.

"You were insured, with one another as beneficiary, for a hundred thousand. When your partner died, you collected that sum. Beany Scanlon was in danger of being turned over to the police by a rival gangster who died—with a piece of red silk twisted around his throat. The same idea holds true for all of you."

Borell asked hotly, "Are you accusing us

of those murders?"

"Not yet," Dwyer answered. "Ram Omar maintains he merely satisfied your egos by furnishing a doll, made to resemble the men you hated or whose deaths you'd profit by. He stuck pins into them, tied red silk around their throats and told you they were as good as dead. Unfortunately, they were. Ram Omar swears that each of you went out and really did the job. You probably insist he did it."

"Which means we are quite stalemated," Payne argued. "And what are you going to do about it? I admit everything you say is true—except for the murder. Personally, I have a very good alibi which has already been investigated."

"Ram Omar says there really is something to this business of raising the dead," Dwyer countered. "He's willing to risk everything on bringing back those murdered men and learning from them the whole truth."

Payne jumped up. "Now wait a minute. This is no way to administer justice. Ram Omar is a damned swindler. He blackmailed me for almost all the money I received at my partner's death. He'd have bled me for everything I had. He blackmailed the rest of us, too—including Kirk who wouldn't pay up. Travers didn't pay either. Ram Omar told us if we didn't shell out he'd tip the police. Naturally we were involved in those deaths—in a left-handed way. We did want the men killed, but we didn't kill them. Omar did!"

"Sit down," Dwyer thundered. "We'll go through with this just the same. Omar—you're ready?"

Omar nodded courteously. Dwyer walked over to a row of electric light switches and gradually the room was darkened. A pale blue halo hung over everyone, like an unholy shroud. Beany Scanlon began to mumble, but Dwyer rapped him smartly on his bald pate. Beany lapsed

into shivering silence.

SUDDENLY the organ began to play—dismal hymns, dirges, offerings to the dead. The colored light changed slowly from blue to an odd reddish hue. All eyes were upon Ram Omar. He sat with bowed head, both hands outstretched on the table.

He began to murmur an incantation of some kind. This went on for several minutes. Then the vast table at which he sat began to jiggle. It moved and no human hand touched it other than Ram Omar who certainly couldn't have been doing the lifting. One end rose high up and banged on the floor. Beany gave a wild shriek and the others jumped nervously.

A trumpet, phosphorescent and gleaming, sailed through the air carried by invisible hands. It sounded a weird, flat note. A tambourine rattled like the dried bones of an ancient skeleton. It followed the trumpet through nothing but space and disappeared as mysteriously as it had come into being.

"It is a good omen," the Oriental said sonorously. "The spirits are very willing tonight. Peter Albert Travers was the first to die. Kirk is but recently departed and may not have learned how to come through yet. Travers died almost two days ago. I shall call on him first."

The deep, terrifying voice began calling Travers' name. The trumpet whizzed through the semi-darkness again. The table banged several times and then there was a period of intense silence broken only by Omar's incessant pleading with the dead.

Payne half arose. "I can't stand any more of this nonsense. It's sheer hokum, but I'm scared anyway. I want to get out of here."

"Park," Dwyer ordered. "I never believed in this stuff myself, but how do you explain those things passing through the air—or that big table rocking like that? Two men couldn't lift it—not living men anyhow."

"Silence," Omar said. "There must be no interference. I think he is coming through. Closer—louder Peter Travers—we are waiting. Peter Travers—you can make it. Come through! Come through!"

The reddish light dimmed until the room was bathed in complete darkness. In a far-off corner appeared a wisp of what seemed to be fog. It floated forward very slowly, like something not sure of itself. Something from a strange world. It paused directly in front of Omar and it began to grow larger. Beany's hoarse breathing was the only sound to be heard.

"Yes—yes, Ram Omar," a voice said. It seemed to come from far away. "Yes, Ram Omar. You called me."

"There are unbelievers," Omar's voice said. "They must have absolute proof. You are not materialized completely. Show us your face. Prove that you have really come back. Peter Travers—prove to the unbelievers!"

That halo of white fog began to spin madly, like a miniature whirlpool. It seemed to take more definite shape. Gradually the spinning ceased and the outlines of a face could be seen. It assumed more definite proportions and it began to sway, like a man moving about, yet bereft of his body. It required a full three or four minutes before the features could be distinguished. Then the face of Peter Travers, who was dead, yet alive, stood out with a ghastly whiteness.

OMAR'S voice broke the silence. "Peter Travers. We can see you very well now. Very well indeed. You will name your murderer. Name the man who killed you."

A low moaning sound was the only answer. Omar spoke again.

"He cannot come all the way through yet, but he will. He has promised me to speak. He will speak. We must have patience."

More minutes crawled past. Then Omar suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Travers," he called in a loud voice. "Travers. Name the man! Who is he?"

A voice that thundered from every corner of the room, a voice magnified a hundredfold yelled one word.

"Borell!"

The accused man was on his feet too, shrieking at the ghostly white face that came closer and closer to him. He admitted his guilt. He screamed pleas to take the ghost away. Every word he uttered fastened him more and more securely in the electric chair.

Lights flashed on. Borell saw Omar sitting nonchalantly on the edge of his desk lighting a cigarette. Peter Travers, his features peculiarly colored, was smiling coldly. George Payne slumped in his chair, mouth hanging wide open, eyes like an owl's. Tough, gutter-raised Beany Scanlon was on the floor in a dead faint.

Borell looked around, uttered a piercing yelp of dismay and made a streaking dash for the door. Captain Dwyer jumped in front of him, and handcuffs closed around Borell's wrists. Dwyer flung him into a chair.

Ram Omar walked over to him. "Well, Borell, my amateur exhibit rather got under your skin, didn't it? Want to know how we worked the thing—how we were able to accuse you so flatly? Every moment you and the others sat here a movie camera was taking your pictures through infra red light. Sections of the film were developed and dried by a quick process. They were run off by detectives in a back room.

"This room was especially prepared by the real Ram Omar— Oh, no, I'm not Omar. I'm Detective Jim Thayer, the man you knew took Omar's place. Anyway, the men in the back room could hear everything that went on here. They were able to transmit this dope to me without your hearing it. When the seance started, you were wholly at ease. In the darkness you kept smiling confidently,

knowing it was just a trick. For even if the real Ram Omar could have produced spirits, you were safe, because the real Omar was locked up and you knew I must be an impostor.

"Then, when the face of Peter Travers appeared, you weren't so certain. When it actually materialized, you became frantic and, the films showed this. I called for a denunciation of you, and one of the men in the back room spoke into a microphone, which amplified his voice here."

"But—but it is Travers," Borell moaned. "He's dead. I know he's dead. Make/him go away! I can't stand this! I'll go mad!"

"THIS is the real Peter Travers," Thayer said. "The man you killed was a double. A man made up to resemble Travers, who was willing to risk his life for pay. You went to Travers and told him Ram Omar had blackmailed you and also demanded you collect from the others. They paid up—some of them—but Travers refused. You knew he might be an object lesson for the others so you killed his double, choosing the same means that the real Ram Omar used in the other murders.

"Travers really believed that Ram Omar did the job and he decided to throw a scare into him. He had his butler pretend he was an undertaker. A couple of crooks stole an undertaker's utility wagon and wicker basket. The body of the false Peter Travers was put inside. They took it to this apartment. I was here, posing as Omar. While the butler kept me busy, the two crooks put the corpse in the study. When I went out to phone they returned, probably having fixed the lock on their first visit and removed the body.

"Meanwhile you, Borell, called the others together. You pretended you were Ram Omar over the phone and told them to go to Travers' house. They did and found a coffin. They believed that Travers was inside

when the casket was really empty. Later Travers put the body of his double inside it. Travers is under arrest, but his helpfulness will assist him if there is a clear charge against him. Hiring a man to die for you seems to be quite legal so far as I know now."

Captain Dwyer said, "I get it. Borell was the mysterious man who tipped us off about Ram Omar. He knew we picked him up and that you took his place, Thayer. How he found out I'm not so sure."

Thayer walked over to a window, carrying a flashlight which he took from the desk drawer. He turned the ray of that light down an alley between the two buildings. An ordinary clothes line was strung from one window of the apartment next door, to the wall of the structure they were in now.

"That clothes line fascinated me," Thayer explained. "I couldn't see any reason for it. Now Ram Omar kept this room equipped with hidden microphones. They all

led into one speaker in another room. Borell merely tapped that line and heard everything that went on. The clothes line hides a wire to the building next door where Borell rented a couple of rooms. He was the real blackmailer, although Ram Omar certainly is a killer. Omar probably had blackmail up his sleeve."

"We've got Borell for the murder of John Doe, Travers' double, and for the killing of Roswell Kirk. There was no time to use a piece of red silk and throttle him, so Borell used a gun. While he was here, detectives searched his house and found the gun hidden in a drain pipe on the roof. You can take him away, captain. I'm going to be busy for a little while."

"Busy?" Dwyer asked. "I thought the case was closed."

"It is." Thayer was peeling off the turban. "I'm going out for a haircut and a shave. I haven't seen myself in weeks."