

# Cyanide and Old Lace

By Emil Petaja



*Spooky was the word for the ancient mansion Roger Kent's aunt lived in. And deadly became the description when that mystery relative was poisoned. Because it certainly looked as if the next ghost to haunt that house would be that of Roger Kent himself!*

**S**TAR STREET swirled with fog and creeping shadows. The wind tossed autumn leaves around. This ancient neighborhood of Los Angeles, with its fantastic turret-topped mansions, was beginning to throw a first-class mope over my young mind.

I trudged up the hill. A high iron gate loomed ahead. The number above the mailbox was 613. *Grange Mansion* said the sign.

"This is it," I said, setting the gate shrieking as I pushed it open dubiously. It opened on a gloomy garden.

Abigail Grange is my aunt. Of course I'd never met the old dame, or even seen a picture of her. But I figured she'd be

tickled to see her sailor nephew, fresh from overseas. I didn't have much time, since I was taking the early train back to Wyoming, but we would have opportunity to shoot the breeze a while before I left.

I tapped on the big oak door. No answer.

I saw a vague light glowing somewhere inside—a deathly purple light. I knew somebody must be home, so I grabbed hold of the ring in the gargoyle knocker's nose and banged it down.

No answer.

Whistling impatiently, I tried the doorknob. It gave. The door creaked open. A tomblike hallway with a glowing purple light at the other end yawned ahead.

I stepped in.

“Anybody home?”

Echoes bounced back at me from up the gloomy stairway. Humming, I walked down the hall toward the purplish light.

“Yeow!”

I jumped two feet. But it was only a black Maltese cat. I’d crunched down on his tail, and he didn’t like it. He spit at me, and made a tangent for a dark corner.

“Sorry,” I said, and walked up to the purple light. It came from a strange ball resting on black velvet.

I made the U-turn in the long hall, then found myself in a cluttered-up sitting room with Victorian furniture and green wallpaper. Blue gas flame flickered in the fireplace. A small lamp glowed on a fancy table near an antimacassared chair.

Something sprawled in front of that chair. That something was a corpse!

She was dressed in a long, heavy silk dress. Her iron-grey hair was mussed. Her lips were twisted, and her eyes bulged in horror.

I gulped. “G-guess I’m a little late to talk to Aunt Abby!” I muttered.

**I** STOOD there, petrified, until the swish of skirts behind me told me someone had entered from the hall.

“What are you doing here?” a sandpapery voice asked.

I turned and saw a gaunt, angular woman with bushy eyebrows and a crow’s beak scowling at me. She had grey hair, too. For a second I thought she was Aunt Abby’s ghost.

“I’m Roger Kent,” I said. “I came to see my aunt.”

Her gimlet eyes searched my face carefully. “Morgan Kent’s boy from Wyoming?”

“Yes.”

“How did you get in?”

“Walked in.” My ears burned. “Hey,

don’t just stand there like a zombie! My aunt’s been murdered! Show me where the phone is so I can call the—”

“Already called the police,” she leered. “But how did you know she was murdered?”

I winced under her baleful, suspicious stare.

“I—I don’t know. Guess it’s that look in her eyes. . . .” I glanced at the corpse, then back at the tall spook in the doorway.

“Who are *you*, anyway?”

Her eyes softened a little.

“Matilda. Your Aunt Abigail’s housekeeper and companion. Thirty years I’ve been with her, and now—now—” A rough sob caught in her throat, then her face was a mass of quivering fury. “If it was you who poisoned her, you’ll come to justice, I swear it!”

I blinked. “*Me?* Why—”

“You don’t know it, but she was leaving you most of her money, all but—”

There was a loud clatter at the front door. “That must be the cops,” I said. “I’ll let ‘em in.”

I shook my head briskly as I moved down the hall. My mind was doing power dives. Here I had come to pay my aunt a friendly visit, just to be sociable. Now it looked like I was going to get mixed up in her murder!

The big-shouldered homicide dick who barged in said his name was Mallory. He was followed by two blue-clad cops. They went right to work.

They spent some time making their examination. I watched, owl-eyed. Matilda stood by, looking like grim death.

“Poisoned, all right,” Mallory grunted at last. He set down the fragile teacup carefully, and put his handkerchief back in his pocket. His rough-chiseled features turned toward the old housekeeper.

“Did you make this tea and serve it?”

Matilda’s thin lips twitched. She

nodded.

“What time?”

“Just after nine o’clock, Abby always had a cup of tea before she went up to bed.”

“Umm. I don’t suppose”—He whirled on her abruptly—“that you know how the cyanide got there!”

Matilda mangled a lace handkerchief with nervous blue-veined fingers.

“Certainly not! But I set the teapot on the kitchen table while I fetched cream up from the cellar. They must have poisoned it then. I brought it in here, then left. When I came back in here half an hour later I found—” She choked off.

Detective Mallory paced the heavy carpet, tugging his ear lobe.

“Let’s see. Correct me if I’m wrong. Abigail Grange was a crackpot.” He glanced at Matilda and coughed. “I mean, she was an eccentric recluse. She hadn’t left this house in twenty years, nor allowed any visitors, either. Even her legal business was conducted by mail. Oh, yes, she did belong to some screwy spiritualistic cult. She had one nephew, who’ll probably come in for plenty of dough when the estate is settled.”

His keen eyes made me their target this time. I managed a sickly grin, “Yup. I’m him.”

“I thought so.” His eyes narrowed on me. “Do you happen to know anything about poison, Mr. Kent?”

I licked my lips.

“Why, sure! I’ve been a pharmacist’s mate on a Navy boat for the last three years, but—”

“And you knew you were Abigail’s only living relative?”

“Sure, but—”

“Just where have you been since, say, to eight o’clock tonight, sailor?”

I was beginning to wish I’d never heard of Star Street. “Just hiking around.

Seeing the sights.”

“Alone?”

I nodded unhappily.

“Plan to be in L.A. long?”

“Nope. My hitch is over, and my discharge is all in order, so I figure to take the early train back to Wyoming and—”

He smiled grimly. “Better stick around, sailor! In fact, you’d better hang your hammock upstairs. You’re not going anywhere, unless it’s down to our nice cozy jail!”

SLEEPING didn’t come easily in that big four-poster bed upstairs. I kept mulling over everything in my mind, and getting less sleepy by the minute. Every time the flatfoot Mallory posted in the upstairs hall walked by I heard him. It didn’t help.

So I gave up and slipped back into my civvies which I wasn’t used to yet. My watch said 3:05 A.M. I tiptoed to the door, and listened for the clumping footsteps to recede and turn the el. Then I ducked out quietly, and scooted down the big staircase into the purple-lit front hall.

“Roger, my boy,” I told myself, “there’s a murder rap just itching to send you to the hot seat—unless you can trade places with the real killer!”

As I edged toward the death room, I froze. A wan candle’s light sprouted out of the nest of shadows leading to the kitchen. I backed into an alcove and held my breath.

I stuck my nose out and saw who it was. No mistaking that female Frankenstein. It was Matilda, the housekeeper. Holding a candle in front of her, she moved like she was on roller skates toward the death room, her black robes trailing.

I followed after, and glued myself against the wall by the door where I could see.

Loud snores came from the wing chair. The cop that Mallory had stuck there was dead to the world.

Matilda hung over him, then moved to the high old-fashioned desk in one corner. A key flashed. She unlocked it and began rummaging through a mess of papers. Her shadow splashed on the ceiling, like a monstrous bat's.

Her crow's beak dove into the papers. Finally she came up with one that looked long and legal.

She shot another look at the sleeping cop, then oozed down the hall again. I shrank back into the smelly black drapes when she passed by, then stalked her back to the kitchen.

I watched her set the candle down on the table, and poke her nose into that paper she had copped. Then I popped out on her.

"You!" she hissed.

"Not a reasonable facsimile," I grinned. "Mind if I take a look, too?"

She clutched the purloined paper to her bosom, but I managed to get hold of it. I opened it and whistled under my breath.

"Aunt Abby's will! What were you going to do with it? Burn it?"

"No!" she said fiercely. "To hide it, until—" She pressed her lips together tightly.

I cocked an eye at her, then began to read.

"I, Abigail Grange, being so-and-so-and-so—and—wow! Twenty thousand dollars to my lawyer, Henry Polk! Another twenty thousand to Matilda, my faithful housekeeper! Hmm. . . ."

Matilda's lip quivered, but she said nothing. I read some more:

"The balance of the estate, valued at approximately \$500,000, I will to my nephew, Roger Kent. However, should he die before I do, or within one month after my death, then—"

A yelping yawn and heavy clumping told me Mallory's bulldog had come to life. He was on the prowl.

Matilda's bony hand gripped my arm. "Quick!" she cried. "You must get away!"

I stared down at her hand on my arm. The ring on her finger glowed like a cat's eye.

"W-where?"

"It doesn't matter! Anywhere, except in this house!"

"But the cops will be sure I did it if I run out on them!"

"Shh! He's coming into the kitchen." She pulled me to a dark corner, and slid back a secret door in the paneling. Dark stairs dipped downward.

"What—"

"This passage leads to the summer house in the garden. Hurry, Roger! You're in deadly danger every minute!"

"Sure, I know. The cops—"

"No! *Something else!*"

She shoved the candle in my hand, pushed me in, and slammed the panel shut behind me.

I GROPED my way bewilderedly down the moldy, evil-smelling stairs, and across a long, wet tunnel. Then my shins bumped the first of an ascending flight of stone steps. I went up.

I found myself in a small slatted summer house set in the geometric center of the fog-ridden garden. The garden was rank with weeds and crawling vines. A row of bamboo trees formed a wall on three sides.

My mind percolated with uneasy thoughts. I smoked a cigarette and tried to piece things together in my mind.

Aunt Abby poisoned. Me knowing about poisons, having a \$500,000 motive, and no alibi. All that added up to make me No.1 boy on Mallory's parade of suspects.

The will mentioned the lawyer, Henry Polk. Could be he had a motive, besides the twenty grand. Lawyers sometimes took advantage of old women who left all their money in their keeping.

“Wonder what she meant, about me being in danger,” I mused. That sparkler on Matilda’s finger harassed my thoughts. It was like a winking eye.

Then there was the glimpse I got about just who came in for the dough in case I got conveniently framed to the hot seat, or, . . .

“I’ve got it! It’s that—”

Something winged past my ear, and it wasn’t a wasp. It was a death pellet from a silenced revolver!

I flattened against the vine-crazy summer house. I got a glimpse of a dark figure running through the fog, toward the iron sidegate.

I sped over the wet grass, then made a flying leap. He half fell under the impact of my tackle. Then he wrenched away, snarling. It was too dark to see his face, but I guessed he wasn’t here to admire the view.

I went at him again. His gun hand came out. That noiseless death spray gave my hair a crease. I dodged, moving to knock it out of his hand.

He hissed, leaping back alertly. I stumbled on a grass-overgrown rock. Then I was staring right into the muzzle of that revolver.

I waited, sweating. Just then I heard a yell from behind. The prowler’s hand wavered. With a wild leap, I shoved it away just as it blasted. The would-be killer snarled, and ran for the gate.

When I got there he had vanished in the curling fog. One of Mallory’s cops ran up, puffing.

“What’s going on here?” he growled. “Hey, what you doing out here?”

“Me? I always take a walk in the middle of the night!”

“Yeah? Tell that to the Marines, sailor. You’re going back to your little bed. This time I’m crawling right in with you!”

REGARDLESS of the copper’s musical snores, I slept until afternoon. Detective Mallory awakened me. I bounced up to find him searching my room.

“What gives?” I complained.

“Ever see this before?” He held up a small round box.

I stared at it and yawned. “No. And what’s the idea—”

“Let me polish up your memory, sailor,” he said acridly. “This little box has got *“For the U. S. Navy”* stamped on its little bottom. And do you know what’s in it?”

“Blonde bait?”

“No, smart guy! Cyanide capsules! Enough to kill a dozen rich aunts!” His words bit like rattlesnake fangs. “And I found it hidden in your room. So put your pants on, sleepy-head, you and I are going to take a little one-way ride—for you!”

Out of the window I could see his car waiting in front of the iron gate. He wouldn’t even let me have a cup of coffee.

“I won’t bother with the bracelets,” he told me grimly. “I guess I can handle a twerp like you.”

I pointed at that weird purple-lit globe on the velvet-covered table in the hall when we passed.

“What is it?” I asked Mallory.

“Oh, some phony gag used by that spiritualist bunch your aunt used to get letters from. They call themselves the Daughters of the Purple Sphere.”

“Yeah?”

I stopped to stare into it like it was a crystal ball. Mallory got impatient.

"I haven't got all day! The D. A. is waiting!"

"Okay, okay."

We went out to the car. My brain was hitting on all twelve cylinders. My hunch was so hot it sizzled.

"Tell me, copper, where does this 'Purple Spear' mob hang out?" I asked carelessly.

"*Sphere*, not spear!" he growled. He eased the car gently down the steep hill-grade. I was happy to see fog still blanketed the street. "Let's see. Out on Manfred Road, past Manzanita Park. What's it to you?"

"Oh, nothing," I grinned. "And who's the head cheese?"

"A guy named Laszlo. A sneaky-eyed rat. Looks like a Jap. He calls himself a Swami, but—say, what—" He turned his alert eyes my way.

"Oh, I just—*look out!*"

The old trick still worked. Mallory swerved blindly to avoid what I was staring at horrifiedly. And right then I opened the car door and scrambled.

Before he could stop, I was loping over the low hedge that surrounded a well-timbered park estate. I crouched in the bushes until I heard him crash back to the car, cussing.

I KEPT under cover in Aunt Abby's gloomy garden till it got dark. Then I sneaked into the summer house and down the dank tunnel to the kitchen.

Matilda wasn't around. But as I swung the door to the hall open cautiously, I heard her heavy voice talking on the phone.

"I understand, Mr. Laszlo," she was saying. "You want me to put on one of Miss Abigail's dresses, and to be at the Temple of the Purple Sphere at nine. I am to use the back door and take care that no one sees me. Is that right?"

My jaw tightened. This had all the earmarks of a seamy plot—a plot with half a million dollars buried in the middle!

When I heard the receiver click, I ducked back in a pantry. Matilda stalked my way. I saw her crow's puss light up strangely as she disappeared toward the back wing of the house.

I didn't wait. I slipped out and hired a cab.

"Manfred Road," I told the driver. "I'll tell you when to let me off."

Manfred Road was a lonely wind-swept stretch some miles east of town. It was flanked intermittently by the odd trees which gave Manzanita Park its name.

We approached a white stuccoed building with a purple ball shining on its tower. The neon sign said, "Temple of the Purple Sphere."

The cab driver pulled up a little beyond it, although I saw that there were a lot of cars clustered around the entrance. Ritzy hacks.

"Two-twenty," my driver said. I winced, peeling off the lettuce. Then I thought about that five hundred grand, and wondered gloomily, "Am I rich, or only worm-fodder?"

I pulled up my collar against the raw wind, and circled around the back of the temple. I sat on a little bench behind some bushes, waiting.

It wasn't long until a cab drove up and braked in front of the little back door. A woman got out. She wore a black veil, but there was no mistaking that tall, angular figure.

She paid the cabman, then tapped on the back door. It opened abruptly, and she vanished inside.

I waited five minutes. Then I tried the door. It was locked from inside.

I glanced up at the square, opaque glass window. It was part way open, but high up. I dragged the bench over by the

wall. By standing on its arm, I could pull myself up on the ledge.

I looked in. Nobody around. I tugged the window wide and dropped down in.

The small back room was equipped as an office. I could hear muffled voices toward the front, so I pushed open the door gently and found myself in a dark hall. I moved toward the voices, which came from beyond a wall of black velvet. Then, behind me, I heard a small noise.

I whirled.

A hand with a knife in it lunged toward me.

I moved plenty quickly. The knife grazed my left arm. My right went out, and seized that skinny wrist. I got a good look at the knifer, as he struggled silently to free himself. Apparently he didn't want to interrupt what was going on in front.

He was small, beady eyed, and had dark skin.

When I looked in those repulsive snake's eyes, I knew there was only one thing to do. I did it.

I grabbed him, so he wouldn't hit the floor when I hit him, then dragged him into the little office. I found some fancy silk rope and trussed him up good. I stuffed his own handkerchief halfway down his throat, then started down the hall again.

THE voices were audible now. They were chanting. It was like church, only the words were screwy:

*Oh Purple Sphere of divine cognizance!*

*O Realm of All-Knowing!*

*Show us the boundless love that awaits!*

*Show us our sister—taken to thy heart!*

The women's voices hushed. Then a deep, dramatic man's voice rang out:

"In order that we may believe that our life in the Soul of the Purple Sphere is everlasting, give us a sign! Show us, O Light of Unborn Eras, our beloved sister,

Abigail Grange, so that we can believe and serve!"

For a moment everything was quiet. Then eerie harp music floated through the building. It was very faint at first, then it swelled and grew until the walls seemed to vibrate.

I heard startled gasps. A woman cried out.

I reached the velvet curtain, and drew it aside where it was slitted, just enough to get a look beyond.

I saw a large circular room draped in velvet. It was filled with women. Even in the hazy purple light, which came from a big sphere on a semi-circular platform at the far side of the room, they looked like women who'd never worried about where their next fur coat was coming from!

Then I saw what was causing the astonishment.

At the back of the platform was a filmy white curtain. Standing in the middle was a ghostly figure. She was tall and spectral, and wore a weird purple halo.

"You call me from distant stars," she said, in a low, sighing voice. "I come."

The man's voice asked, "Who are you?"

The music swelled, then faded.

The spirit said: "*I am Abigail Grange!*"

A WAVE of gasps and whispers swept over the crowd. I was getting used to that purple light now, and got a good look at the ringmaster of this circus as he stood poised halfway up the ring of wide steps leading to the platform.

He was slim, dapper in evening clothes. He wore a crimson silk band around his neck and a purple turban.

Like the knifer in the hall, his face was swarthy. But unlike his henchman, he had a sharp, aquiline nose and slant eyes.

"So that's Swami Laszlo!" I muttered.

He turned toward the ghost dramatically.

“Why have you come back?” he asked.

The tall ghost turned to him. She said nothing.

“Is it to assure the Daughters of the Purple Sphere that all I have told them is the truth—so that they will unhesitatingly give their money to the further advancement of—”

“No!”

Suddenly the ghost wasn't a ghost any more. With a sweep of her hand she swept off the cobwebby covering that made her look transparent, and knocked the neon halo to the floor.

Her furious eyes stabbed Laszlo.

“I have come back from the grave to denounce you, Swami Laszlo, as a fake and a murderer!” she screamed. “You deceived Abigail Grange with your smooth letters and records. You found out that if her nephew died you were to inherit! So you poisoned her!” She turned toward the milling mob of excited women.

I slipped into the room and started her way.

“Ladies!” she cried. “Don't let this charlatan fool you as he did Abigail Grange! Don't give him one penny—”

I saw Laszlo reach in his pocket and pull out a revolver. His face twisted in rage, as he pointed it at the “ghost” and fired.

I plowed through the shrieking mob of women, and up the steps. I hung one on his chin just as his gun blazed again.

The old woman crumpled.

Laszlo turned, snarling, and sent a bullet whining past my ear. My left hit his stomach. A wild haymaker sent the gun spinning across the stage.

His fists started slashing. I caught one on the ear. Bells rang. He lunged, and started wrapping an arm around my neck. He was trying to pull some Jap jiu-jitsu.

Just when he thought he had me, my

elbow went up, hard. It caught him right under the chin. His head snapped back. While he hung there, my right went out, all over that oily pan.

I STOOD there, panting and staring at the stretched-out weasel, when suddenly the room sprang to life. Somebody'd turned on the lights.

“What's all this, sailor?”

I turned to see big Detective Mallory plowing my way, followed by a crew of cops.

“Just giving this lady-killer a taste of Navy maneuvers,” I grinned.

He looked down at Laszlo speculatively.

“Not bad. But—”

“I'll explain later,” I told him, turning to the crumpled “ghost.”

I knelt down by her, while Mallory sized up the situation and sent one of his men for an ambulance.

“She's only grazed,” I told him. “Must have fainted from shock.”

While I touched up her seared arm, I explained all that had happened.

“Umm,” Mallory grunted. “I get it. The poison was planted in your room by the prowler you tangled with last night. Laszlo must have known about that secret passage, too, and used it when he poisoned the tea. But, why didn't you tell me—”

“You seemed plumb set on putting me in the clink. I didn't think you'd—”

“What'd you think brought me here tonight?” he complained. “It was the questions you asked about Laszlo. I called up Abigail's lawyer, and found out about his part in the will.”

He looked down at the old woman, who was slowly coming to. “But how did Matilda—”

The old woman's eyes opened. She saw me, and her hand clutched mine. I stared down at the ring on her finger and

smiled.

“Well, she knew it wasn’t the lawyer, because she knew what kind of a guy he was. That left me—and Laszlo. She wasn’t sure about me. After talking to me, she decided I wasn’t a killer. That left pinning it on Laszlo. She risked her life to do that.”

The grip on my hand tightened as the old woman nodded and smiled faintly.

“You’re a brave woman, Aunt Abby!” I told her.

“What!” Mallory snorted.

“Sure,” I grinned. “Didn’t you guess? It was Matilda, the housekeeper, who drank the poison. She probably sampled it in the kitchen before serving it. Aunt Abby

knew it was meant for her, and decided to let the killer think she was dead so she could track him down!”

“Well, I’ll be—” Mallory exclaimed. “I can see how she could do it all right. Abby Grange hadn’t seen anybody in twenty years. And when Laszlo called her up and wanted her to put on this ghost act, it was her perfect chance to—but, say, how’d you figure she was your aunt?”

I lifted my aunt’s hand.

“See that sparkler, Mallory? That diamond didn’t come from Woolworth’s! And a housekeeper who took care of a house the size of Grange Mansion wouldn’t have soft, well-kept hands!”