

Man Without a Tongue—A. H. Norton

DETECTIVE

FICTION

WEEKLY

FORMERLY FLYNN'S



MURDER SET-UP

By George
Harmon Coxe

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*Thrilling
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Crimes of the Year 2000

Ray Cummings

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Tracking down crime in the super-mechanized world of the future

The night of June 20th, 2000, when the power failed and we so unexpectedly trapped 2XZ4—America’s most famous murderer-at-large—will be a red star always in New York’s criminal records.

You remember, of course, the main newscasted facts of the night when the power failed. But by chance it was my lot to be intimately concerned with that brief and sensational series of events; and I set them down here exactly as they occurred, with the hope that the details (hitherto untold) may be of interest.

I am a New York S. S. Man—plain-clothesman of the Shadow Squad of New York’s Bureau of Criminal Investigations. I was twenty-five years old last year, when this affair transpired. I am government-educated; a New Yorker by birth, of American-born stock through six generations, though originally my father’s family came from Italy. My name is Jac Lombard.

On the evening of June 20th, 2000, at about 11 P.M. I reported for work-assignment to my immediate superior, Captain Macfarlan, Chief of City Night Desk 4. I found him there with George Trant, a fellow of about my own age. Trant was, and still is, my partner. We S. S. men work in pairs, sticking together under all circumstances.

Mac’s office was dim. He was bending over the multiplicity of instruments on his big, flat-top desk. A fat little fellow, with a shining bald head and a ruddy, cherubic moon-face. But he didn’t look cherubic now. Every line of him was tense.

Behind him, big blond Trant stood motionless. As I entered, advancing noiselessly on the padded floor, Trant gave me barely a nod. I sat down. Then I stood up beside him.

“What’s in the air?” I whispered tensely.

“He’s worried over Kenna. Sent him out alone a while ago. His partner’s sick,” Trant whispered.

There wasn’t a single instrument alive on the desk. Mac just sat staring, waiting. The place was so silent that Mac’s little electric clock thudded with a racing, excited, beat. It is anything but easy, if you’re a conscientious man like Mac, to run one of these City Night Desks. You have a maximum of ten operators—five partners. You send them out, and at the desk you sit through the night, responsible for their lives, for almost their every action. The desk is the nerve-center—the brain.

I gathered that Kenna was overdue in reporting.

Then suddenly one of the little loud speakers buzzed. The tiny, wirelessly voice

of Kenna whispered, “Sorry, Mac. Couldn’t get a minute before now. . . .”

The words blurred; Mac bent down lower to the speaker-disc. Then I heard Kenna say:

“It’s tonight—Latitude 40° 15’ 10” N., Longitude 73° 44’ 50” W. I’ll call you again shortly. If I can only get closer to them! My Eavesdropper lost them just now.”

He clicked off. Mac sat back, relaxed and relieved. And he told us now what it was all about, so far as he knew, which wasn’t much. Kenna hadn’t come to the desk tonight. On his way in he had radiphoned that he’d stumbled onto something. That was Kenna’s style—by nature he was a browser. Something that concerned the present whereabouts of 2XZ4.

That was startling, of course. 2XZ4—the man wanted for a score of crimes, from murder up to treasonable plotting. 2XZ4 had never been arrested, never been typed. But we had his olfactory classification; the Bloodhound Machine, as the newscasters luridly call it, had contacted his trail several times, so that the scent of him was mathematically known.

Much good that did us! No one knew where he was now; nor what was his name, his nationality, nor what he looked like. Indeed we knew nothing about him at all, except his scent, which gave him the index-symbol 2XZ4. And now, when Kenna announced that he had by chance tuned his electric Eavesdropper upon two men—overheard a snatch that seemed to indicate that they were in contact with 2XZ4—well, Mac told him to go right ahead and tail them.

“Where is Kenna now?” I demanded.

Mac glanced at one of the dials on his desk, which had swung when Kenna’s incoming call was received.

“Twenty-two thousand feet N. N. E. of here,” Mac said. “These damned direction-finders are only approximate at best. He said he was in a sub-level corridor, getting pretty close to the river.”

We knew the general locality. Mac’s office was on top of the eighty-level Police Building, central in Lower Manhattan. Kenna was some four miles north-north-east of us. . . . I think about ten or fifteen minutes went by. Mac was discussing a tame routine job on which he was planning to dispatch Trant and me.

Then suddenly Kenna’s little red danger bulb on Mac’s desk was illumined. For an instant Trant and Mac and I stared at it, stricken breathless. Very seldom had I ever seen one of the red bulbs glowing. It was an ugly, frightening sight. It meant that the hidden chest-band which held the tiny microphone under Kenna’s shirt, was being ripped away. Kenna was being attacked!

And suddenly Kenna’s voice sounded: “Got me! Don’t give a general alarm—

that would ruin everything. Send two partners quietly. Try to get more information. It's something big. It concerns Palisades Aerial Power. Warn Paul Green—it's tonight—2XZ4 is—I'm located at—”

His labored, incoherent whisper broke; and then the whole apparatus went dead. Mac swung around. His red face had gone pale; his usually mild blue eyes were blazing. He had lost a man.

“You heard him,” he said. “They've killed him, I guess. But I'll respect his words. No general alarm. Go after him, you two. If you find him—if he's alive—drop everything. Get medical help first.”

Trant and I sprang to fling on our instrument equipment, and to record what few details were available. 2XZ4 in some plot. Something about to happen tonight. A mysterious latitude and longitude which we knew was in the Atlantic Ocean somewhere off the Jersey coast. And the thing also concerned the Palisades Aerial Power House.

We were only a few minutes getting ready. Mac had called General Air Police; warned them of something unknown impending off the Jersey coast, so that an aerial patrol would be there. . . . Then he called Palisades Power House. It was a routine air-call with visual connection. On the mirror-grid we saw the florid face of Paul Green, for years chief of the power house. All the broadcasted aerial power, from which aircraft traversing this district were operated, was under the night supervision of this Paul Green.

“What's in the air?” Green demanded. “You look harassed, Mac.”

Mac told him only that we had a vague tip. Some criminal activity, directed possibly against the power house. Green was a phlegmatic sort of fellow. The little image of him on the grid showed that he was smiling skeptically. Behind him we could see the outlines of the main power broadcasting room, lurid with blue electric flashes.

Mac said, “I'll be sending you two or four routine guards presently.”

“Right,” said Green.

They disconnected. Trant and I took a look at the mute and motionless dial indicator which recorded poor Kenna's last position.

Mac said, “Well, good luck, boys. Keep connecting me.”

He flung himself back in his chair. We hurried out, closing the door; and I recall how grimly he stared after us. There is a thrill in prowling abroad. I wouldn't want to be the man who has to sit and wait.

II

We took the moving sidewalk of the Hudson River ramp; and on the top level slid northward at thirty miles an hour. It was a warm, starry night. There were quite a few pedestrians strolling here. We leaned unobtrusively against the rail, in appearance just a couple of nondescript young men in dark clothes who might have their minds on selecting a pair of girls from the strollers. The gleaming, moonlit river was dotted with pleasure planes landing and taking off, and the sky overhead, especially in the lower lanes, was fairly crowded with air traffic.

Within a few minutes we switched to the Eighty-sixth Street crosstown ramp, sped eastward between the rows of towering apartment buildings, over the Central Playground, and into the midtown East District by the other river.

Trant already had connected Mac. The chief had been trying to calculate on a city Street Level Map just where Kenna had been. That dial-reading of direction and distance embraced a considerable territory.

“He said he was in a sub-level corridor,” Mac reminded us.

That was not very definite, either. The river section here, particularly in the two or three sub-surface streets, had of recent years become a disreputable slum. We found ourselves presently walking north in the second sub-level corridor about a block from the river. It was exclusively a pedestrian street—not much more than a vaulted arcade. There were dingy shops here, and cubby dwellings of the cheapest sort. Most of them, at eleven-thirty at night, were dark. Occasionally there was a little restaurant, blue with cigarette smoke, its entertainers visible through the window as an allure to the street pedestrians.

The corridor was dim. Only an occasional ceiling tubelight cast its blue-white sheen over the intersection of the narrow cross corridors and the infrequent inclines leading to the surface street, or down to a lower level. The whole place was shabby, disgraceful to a modern city like ours. Yet perhaps there was sense to it—vice concentrating itself here, comparatively undisturbed by police supervision, on the theory that the more wholesome parts of the city might be free of contamination. A cesspool, necessary to sanitation. I am only an S. S. man; I cannot argue civic welfare.

The few pedestrians along here were shabby, furtively slouching and at many corners women lurked. We pulled our caps low and strode ahead. Somewhere in the general neighborhood Kenna had been operating. There was a way by which, dead or alive, he could lead us to him—if only we could get within the eight-hundred-foot magnetic range.

We were trying to do just that. Trant was using our tiny compass inductor now. That is one big advantage of partners—we each carried only half of the multiplicity of small instruments of our equipment. Except, of course, we both had a radio-telephone connecting us with Mac. It was, of course, on a secret split-wave. Both of us had the thumbnail-size disc fastened to the alarm-band around our chests. The alarm-band is accursedly sensitive with its trouble warning—altogether too sensitive, as a matter of fact, which we were soon to have demonstrated to us very forcibly.

Then we got within Kenna's magnetic range. Trant gave a low, triumphant chuckle. "Good boy! Dying or not, he kept his wits. I've got it, Jac! Coming in strong. Tell Mac."

Kenna, dying or not, had switched the current into his electro-magnet. The highly magnetized needle of Trant's compass inductor was feeling the magnet-pull, as the needle of an old-fashioned compass swings to magnetic north.

We stood in the dim street-corridor. We were in the middle of a block. The inductor indicator pointed diagonally at the dark show window of a small tobacconist shop, a shabby cellar wall with tenement dwellings overhead and all about us.

We tried not to look suspicious to anyone who might be watching us. I called Mac with chin down to my chest, as though I were peering at the display of tobaccos in the window. The tiny plug in one of my ears gave Mac's voice:

"You think Kenna might be in that house?"

"We don't know."

"How strong is the signal?" Mac demanded.

Trant calculated that Kenna might be five hundred feet away from us.

"Then he's not in that house," Mac decided. "I don't believe it's that big. I'll look it up on the large-scale map. And you try your Eavesdropper."

The electric Eavesdropper roared with a torrent of sound—the magnification of all the myriad blended city noises near us. But I couldn't isolate anything significant.

Then Mac came back to the connection. "An alley in the other street," his voice murmured. "Stay with me—I'll direct you. And watch yourselves—"

We shut off all instruments save my connection with Mac. Trant drew his Banning heat-gun; held it under his jacket. We went up to the next cross corridor; turned left; doubled back into another vaulted street. The block was seemingly deserted; dim and shadowed.

Mac's voice whispered, "Just ahead, on your left—a narrow alley between those two protruding walls. See it?"

His huge wall map showed it; but all we could see was a decrepit building wall

projecting a few feet into the street, with a black gash. The gash proved to be a six-foot wide canyon alley, which apparently ran into the next parallel street. It was wholly unlighted. We stood cautiously at the entrance, peering into the darkness. There was just a faint glow marking its other end. Was Kenna in here? Or in one of the adjacent buildings? Dead? Or captured?

To me the empty, silent darkness of that alley seemed full of a myriad menacing possibilities. The devices of modern detective science work both ways. It's ironic, but true, that although our scientific instruments are in many cases little known to the public, we could be sure that the criminals possessed them all.

Mac quite evidently didn't like the aspect of this alley. His voice murmured, "Wait! Let's try—"

But Trant, like the brash fool he always is, had already started forward. Don't misunderstand me; I like Trant. He's my partner—as fine a partner as anybody could want—except that he's too accursedly courageous. Big, lazy, and smiling—I guess, like Mercutio, he'd smile with a mortal wound, and smile as he died. I'm his exact opposite. I'm rather small and dark—bad-tempered, he says; grim and over-cautious.

He turned and murmured, "To the devil with your instruments. Shut Mac off. Come on."

He was already quite a bit ahead of me; and I disconnected Mac with a hurried explanation and went forward.

"Nothing here," Trant murmured.

"Maybe not," I whispered.

We stood midway of the alley length. There was plenty of dark doorways. I could imagine men might be lurking in any of them, watching us. Kenna had come along here, maybe, following somebody who was joining some secret rendezvous in one of these shabby cellars? I wanted to try the Eavesdropper again, or see what the magnetic reading of Kenna's location might be now.

But Trant whispered, "Devil with it—quicker to look for ourselves!"

We poked along, peering into the vestibule doorways. Trant even had the brashness to use his small actinic flash-torch.

And then we came upon Kenna—his crumpled body lying in the shadows up against the alley wall. We bent over him and saw at once that he was undoubtedly dead. His white shirt showed the little round burned hole, seared bloodless by the heat, when the Banning heat-flash had stabbed through him.

I stared at Trant. "They were here. They rifled him."

“Yes, I see it.”

“Took some of his weapons,” I whispered. “Ripped his shirt—see it? That’s when Mac got the red signal.”

They had evidently wanted to learn Kenna’s identity. A hurried search, and then they had fled.

“If only he could have told us who they were,” Trant murmured.

I was feeling up Kenna’s forearm, under his sleeve. A wild chance. . . .

“If they didn’t smash his phono-disc,” I said. “If only he stayed alive long enough —”

The tiny phonographic recorder on his forearm was intact. I switched his battery current into it. Trant and I crouched breathless. The wax disc revolved under the needle and diaphragm; Kenna’s laboring, dying voice murmured microscopically at us!

“Got me—they’ve gone—it concerns 2XZ4—and it’s at Palisades Power Station about midnight tonight. The—the incoming Great Circle Flyer—you had better—”

The microscopic gasp and rattle as he choked and died were gruesome, horrible. It was almost as though he were dying here now. . . . The little phono-disc ground and scratched emptily to its end.

Trant snatched at me. “Power station—midnight tonight? But it’s eleven-fifty now, Jac! I’ll tell Mac—the incoming Great Circle Flyer—”

I jumped erect. “Let’s get out of here first! If they—”

It must have been a premonition. Certainly we had no warning. The darkness of the alley was abruptly stabbed with a sizzling Banning heat-flash. It missed me by inches. I heard Trant rip out an oath, saw him rise up, stagger and go down. Dead? I think I have never had such a sickening sensation of horror as in those few seconds. I saw a distant running figure; I stabbed after it, but the hissing blue flash went far wide.

“Jac!”

Amazing relief! Trant was not dead. The flash had seared his shoulder, burned his jacket and shirt; stunned him so that he stumbled and fell over Kenna’s body. He rose up now, still dizzy, with his arms flailing wildly. It was a queer coincidence. Unfortunate mischance. I was aware that his flailing fist struck me smartly in the chest, but I thought nothing of it then.

I gripped him; steadied him. “You’re all right?” I asked.

“Hell, yes. Almost—got me.” The heat-bolt—so brief, but so utterly intense—had burned his shoulder only a little; but had shocked his whole nervous system. He

was trembling as though palsied; but I saw that he was grinning. He stammered:

“That fellow got away?”

“Yes. Only one. He ran—”

“Then you call Mac,” Trant insisted. “Tell him—”

“We’ve got to get out of here first,” I insisted.

III

The fugitive had ducked like a rat out of the distant alley end. We ran that way. Trant staggered at first, but in a moment he had recovered. The corridor street beyond the alley showed no alarm. There were a few distant pedestrians, and a nearby cross corridor on which vehicular traffic was passing. No sign of the running fugitive.

We stopped to peer into a lighted window. I tried to call Mac, and then we discovered the unfortunate mischance. The portable wireless apparatus, as I said, is damnably sensitive to trouble. When Trant stumbled and fell over Kenna's body he had smashed his sender—and his flailing fist, a moment later, had smashed mine.

Mac had gotten the red alarm-signal from both of us! I can imagine how Mac felt. Three of his men killed on one job. And it had shocked Mac so that he threw caution to the winds. The whole tradition of the S. S. Division is secrecy; but Mac now turned in a general neighborhood alarm. Down at the corner, where the vehicles were passing, a street siren set up its sharp electrical whine. An actinic alarm light bathed the whole street in this vicinity with its dazzling white glare. The alley had no such equipment, but it would be lighted by the reflected glow. The nearest police and news lens-eye on their fixed street posts would all be transmitting the scene to headquarters.

The street sprang into a sudden turmoil; people peering and shouting from windows, pedestrians miraculously gathering, the vehicular traffic getting itself into a snarl. Within another minute a score of the roaming routine police and traffic officers would be here.

Trant clutched at me.

“Good Lord, Jac—we mustn't get caught in this! Ten minutes from now, in that Power Station—”

By S. S. training, by instinct and all common sense, the worst thing we could do was to get tangled in this police-routine turmoil. Those ten precious minutes would be gone.

Trant shoved me through the gathering crowd. “We can get to the Power Station in ten minutes and phone ahead to Green from the taxi. That's the quickest way—”

For once I agreed with him. We spotted a little pedestrian incline up to the surface street. Already it had a uniformed police guard. We showed our credentials and told him to report to Mac at once that we were unhurt. Then we ran up from the alarm-glare to the comparative darkness of the surface street, and hailed the first passing taxi.

“Westchester-Hudson Power Station,” Trant said as we leaped aboard. “An’ make it fast, fella. S. S. business—you get into the air the quickest you know how. We want the Power Station roof landing.”

The taxi-pilot nodded, with an awed look at us. With reckless abandon we outsped the rolling traffic up an ascending ramp onto a take-off incline. And within a minute were in the air, gliding swiftly up into the open starlight.

“Pilot, open this audiphone,” Trant ordered.

The taxi’s instrument opened for Trant; he called Aerial Central.

“Westchester-Hudson Power Station,” he told the Central Operator. “S. S. man calling, asking visual connection.”

Within a few seconds the taxi’s mirror-grid glowed with the image of the power house wireless operator. I knew him—a little hunchback fellow named Iturbi. A mid-European. He had been night operator in charge of the power house for several years. He said:

“What’s in the air?” He had an image of the interior of our taxi but he didn’t know Trant. “Who are you? S. S. man?” he said. Then he saw me leaning over Trant’s shoulder. He said, “Oh, Jac Lombard!”

Trant said, “Everything all right with you there?”

“Why, of course. We had some warning—”

“Macfarlan of City Night Desk 4 should have sent you an extra guard,” Trant said. “By now they ought to be there.”

“They’re here. Four of them. They’re upstairs with Green now. Only Green and one assistant up there—we’re running low-manned tonight. But it’s all right.”

Trant told him it wasn’t all right; that something might go wrong there any minute; to warn Mac’s men of that, and tell them we were on our way up—we’d be there in a few minutes, landing on the roof stage.

“Correct,” Iturbi said; and reached to disconnect. Just as his image faded, it seemed that I saw on his face a very queer look. It startled me. And certainly it startled Trant. Instantly he plugged back for the Central Operator.

“Give me Westchester Aerial Power again,” he demanded sharply.

And then we got another shock. An out-of-order signal from Iturbi. The main switchboard of Westchester Power was out of order! Audiphone emergency men would be rushed there to re-establish service. Then we tried Paul Green’s personal instrument. “No answer” signal. No answer—and Iturbi had just told us that Mac’s men were upstairs with Green and Green’s assistant! Six men up there by this instrument—and not one of them to answer it?

Trant and I gazed at one another. Very queer this. There was now no time to call Mac. Already our little taxiplane had sped over the terraced buildings of the Yonkers district. The gleaming Hudson lay to our left. And in half a minute the small, square building of the power house, on its isolated little hilltop with incongruous woods and gardens around it, lay beneath us.

The broadcasting mechanisms, for all their giant capacity, were small and easily manned. The quadrangular metal building was no more than fifty feet square and only two stories high. The power came by wire from the huge turbine stations of the Adirondacks. There was nothing here but the converters, the power tubes and the senders, flinging into the ether the wireless waves of energy to be tapped by every craft subscribing to this wave length.

We knew, by what Iturbi had said, that there would be in the power house now only Green and his assistant in the broadcasting room of the upper floor. Mac's four guards were supposed to be there with them; and Iturbi himself would be at the switchboard downstairs. And an attendant on the flat-roof landing stage. The little roof lay almost under us now as we spiraled down toward it. But no attendant with his welcoming light-signal was visible. The roof lay dim, seemingly deserted.

Our pilot gave us a look of startled inquiry.

"Drop down," Trent commanded grimly. "Charge the fare to City Night Desk 4. You land us—quietly—and you make away."

The taxi's helicopter propeller came out. We dropped silently, swiftly, almost vertically down to the empty roof top. The taxi rose again and sped away as we leaped from it. It had barely touched the roof surface.

I was familiar with the place and Trant was not. I went ahead of him, on a run for the stairs. The little building was shrouded with trees set close beside it on the hilltop. As we ran across the roof there was the sound of a departing surface vehicle on the road down the hill, and an instant later it seemed that we heard the intensified motor-thrum as it took to the air and increased its speed.

We dashed down the stairs to the upper story. There was only a dimly lighted corridor, and the main broadcasting room, where Green and his assistant and Mac's men should have been gathered. An amazing scene greeted us as we burst through the swinging doors. The big square room was luridly illuminated, mainly by the deep orange glow from the giant six-foot power vacuum tubes—a dozen of them ranged in series and occupying the space along one wall.

The broadcaster was in normal operation, hissing and spitting as it sent the transformed power up to the main aerial stretched above the roof. The transformers throbbed and whined; the huge emergency switch was closed, as it should have

been; its giant, naked electrodes, fenced in for safety by a low metal guardrail, glistened with a coppery gleam, giving no hint of the amazing voltage passing through them.

All were working normally, but momentarily unattended now. . . . No one here? We stood stricken for an instant in that doorway, gazing at the tragic scene. The dead bodies of many men lay strewn amid the overturned furniture of Paul Green's railed-in little office space, which occupied the center of the room. Five men, all dead, lying in attitudes which bore mute witness to the brief fight they had waged against a surprise attack. Mac's two partner-pairs, and Green's young assistant. All of them stabbed with the Banning flash. Not long ago, for the acrid smell of it still lingered here.

A room of death. Our gaze encompassed these details far quicker than I can record them. There was a sixth man—and he was alive. In the chair before his desk, inside the small railed enclosure, Paul Green was sitting. A crude cloth gag was tied around his face; a heavy wire lashed his ankles and bound his arms behind him. His face was as pale as the white cloth gag which hid most of it. At our sudden entrance his eyes swung to us mutely imploring, and he twisted and writhed against the wire that bound him immovably in his seat.

We leaped over the little rail and had him loose in a moment. He seemed uninjured. Trembling, confused by the shock, he fell against me. I saw that the tail of his loose office jacket was burned where a Banning stab had barely missed his body.

"They got away—just a few minutes ago," he gasped. "A dozen masked men—leaped upon us—no warning. They must have killed Iturbi and the roof attendant. We had no chance—your men wounded one or two, but they all got away."

IV

It was a few minutes past midnight now. The first impulse Trant and I had was to call Mac. Trant said, "This audiphone here—"

The audiphone instrument on Green's desk seemed uninjured. It was the one we had called from the taxi, and got the "No answer" response.

"Your main-waves board downstairs is smashed," I told Green.

I remembered that queer look Iturbi had given us when we called him from the taxi. Had he been attacked just at that instant?

Green was lying back in his chair, still trembling and panting. "You can—call from here," he gasped. "I guess it's still working—it's been buzzing, but I couldn't answer it."

Trant reached for the instrument. I said:

"The incoming Great Circle Flyer!"

The huge mail flyer from Europe was due just about now. And I had a sudden flash of realization. That mysterious latitude and longitude which Kenna had given us; that point off the Jersey Coast would be just about where the incoming flyer was now.

"Incoming flyer?" Green stammered. "Why, what—"

He got no further. Trant was in the act of calling Mac when in the room with us there came a sudden flash. A hiss; a queerly muffled puff. It startled us so that Trant slammed down the instrument and we both leaped to our feet. The flash was over by the wall, fifteen or twenty feet from us, and within a second or two there came the tinkling of breaking glass—a dozen staccato reports.

The giant power tubes, one after the other smashed and went black, as the thin glass enclosing the six-foot vacuums burst inward.

A time-bomb! The escaping criminals had set it here, and now it had ignited, wrecking the power tubes. The ignition wires burned with a swift red flash.

The whole thing was over in a few seconds. And as the disorganized electrical power rushed for an outlet, automatically it threw the big safety switch. The handle visibly moved; the switch opened. For just an instant the berserk electrons streamed in a luminous flow across the two-foot space between the switch-terminals. Then the whole apparatus died—went dark and quiescent.

The aerial power for the entire metropolitan district was off!

"Why—why what is that?" Green gasped.

Trant jumped for the audiphone. Called Mac. Got him. I did not hear Trant's hurried explanation. I was busy trying to help Green, who seemed to have fallen into

a sudden panic. Then across the room I suddenly noticed two more dead bodies—the roof attendant and Iturbi. A yellow flame from the burning filaments of one of the broken power tubes showed them plainly.

Queer. The attendant must have been murdered on the roof, and Iturbi murdered downstairs. Yet the criminals had carried them in here so that the discovery of the bodies would not be made until someone entered this particular room.

But that was not the queer part. That Iturbi should be among the victims was queer. Vaguely I had thought him one of the murderers.

“Jac, look! Look here!”

Trant was vehemently beckoning me to the desk.

“Jac, look! I got Mac. Told him everything. The Great Circle Flyer is bringing platinum from the Bank of England tonight. There’s your motive for this damned thing. Four million platinum dollars—what a prize for these bandits! And Mac’s connected us with a police plane off the Jersey coast. Take a look!”

The mirror-grid on Green’s desk was glowing with the colored image of the scene from one of the planes of the aerial patrol, which had been lurking above a cloudbank in the sub-stratosphere off the Jersey coast. And the patrol was now swooping down.

Amazing, silent drama out there over the calm, fitfully moonlit ocean! Swift culmination of this brief affair. . . . The aerial power had failed. Local craft everywhere were seeking hasty forced landings. . . .

From a height of perhaps ten thousand feet we gazed down. Winging low out from the coast was a dark little taxiplane. It flew with incredible speed—evidently a modern racer disguised as a taxi. Doubtless it was the one which had taken off from the power house just before we arrived. The high-lurking patrol spotted it. A search-glare stabbed down—and a moment later a giant heat-bolt caught the taxiplane, so that it burst into flame, fell like a whirling torch, and was extinguished by the sea.

So many things happening almost simultaneously! The big Great Circle Liner had been brought down by the failure of the power. It was settling now quietly to the placid ocean, making ready to taxi ashore. But a sub-sea vessel was lurking here—a freighter engined for speed, an armed bandit craft manned by these criminals. It lurked at a few fathoms depth. Doubtless it had been unaware of the hovering patrol hiding so high—unaware of them until just now, when they began swooping down upon the criminals.

The bandit sub-sea vessel never had time to rise and attack its victim. The patrol search-glare, flinging vertically down from so great a height, disclosed its presence.

We saw now, on our mirror-grid, the huge white patch of glare on the ocean surface; and at a few fathoms depth, the oblong blob which was the lurking bandit submarine.

The patrol ship dropped a sub-surface bomb. It sent up a glistening silver geyser, but it missed. . . .

The bandit vessel tried to make off. It swung and sank lower, but in a moment another bomb caught it. The geyser of silvery water was dotted with fragments of metal. Air-bubbles came up in a torrent. The torn hulk sank too low for the light to reveal.

For a moment longer we gazed at the silent anticlimax of the drama—bodies coming up, whirling in the maelstrom of wreckage. Trant was absorbed. I turned away from the mirror. I don't know what instinct actuated me, but my mind suddenly left that moonlit scene off the Jersey coast.

It is a strange fact that the cleverest criminal, at a crisis of his career, will often do something extremely stupid. I thought of that now; and for no reason at all I was suddenly struck afresh with the queerness of this affair here at the power house. These marauding criminals had ruthlessly murdered so many men; they had set a time-bomb to shut off the power exactly at the moment when the Great Circle Flyer would be forced to descend near their lurking sub-sea ship.

How had they been able to calculate that exact instant? But more queer still, why had they gagged and bound Paul Green when they had so ruthlessly killed everyone else? Paul Green had official knowledge of the flyer's exact location; but why, after the bandits had forced the information from him—why hadn't they killed him?

It was an intuition, which I translated into action almost without waiting to reason it out. Trant was still engrossed with the mirror-grid—the triumphant ending to the affair. But as I saw it, it was not quite ended yet. Green was close to me, lying back in his chair. It seemed suddenly that his face bore a very strange expression as he became aware of the events out on that moonlit ocean. . . .

I turned swiftly and whipped out the little classifier—the Bloodhound Machine.

I thought that Green was not watching me, but at once he gasped:

“What—you doing?”

I did not answer, but jumped suddenly and pressed the vacuum cup of the classifier against his shoulder. The dial indicators swung wildly, and instantly settled.

2XZ4!

Green twisted; mumbled, “You—you—”

A clever criminal, perfectly stupid with every detail of this, his last crime. He staggered to his feet. There had been nothing physically wrong with him. It had all been pretense. But he was shaking now with horror. And he mumbled:

“Why—that’s a lie—that damned thing—”

I dropped it and snatched my Banning gun. “Don’t move! I’ll drill you! We’ve got him, George! He’s 2XZ4!”

But we didn’t have him. He ignored my weapon. He let out a wild, irrational laugh, turned abruptly, and vaulted the railing. I withheld my fire for that moment. He rushed, still with that eerie screaming, not for the door, but for the broken power tubes. A bound took him over the guardrail of the open power switch.

Trant shouted a warning—then we both stood transfixed. Green’s leap brought him staggering against the open terminals. But it was intentional, for he seized one of the terminals with each hand.

For a few seconds he hung, galvanized, with feet lifted from the floor. The high-voltage current surged through him, leaped from him like a crackling aura, burned and shriveled him. A few seconds, yet to us it seemed an eternity. Then his charred, twisted body broke at the wrist and fell away. The snapping terminals went dark. There was only the little smoking heap on the floor to mark the end of the criminal we had sought for so many years.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *Crimes of the Year 2000* by Ray Cummings]