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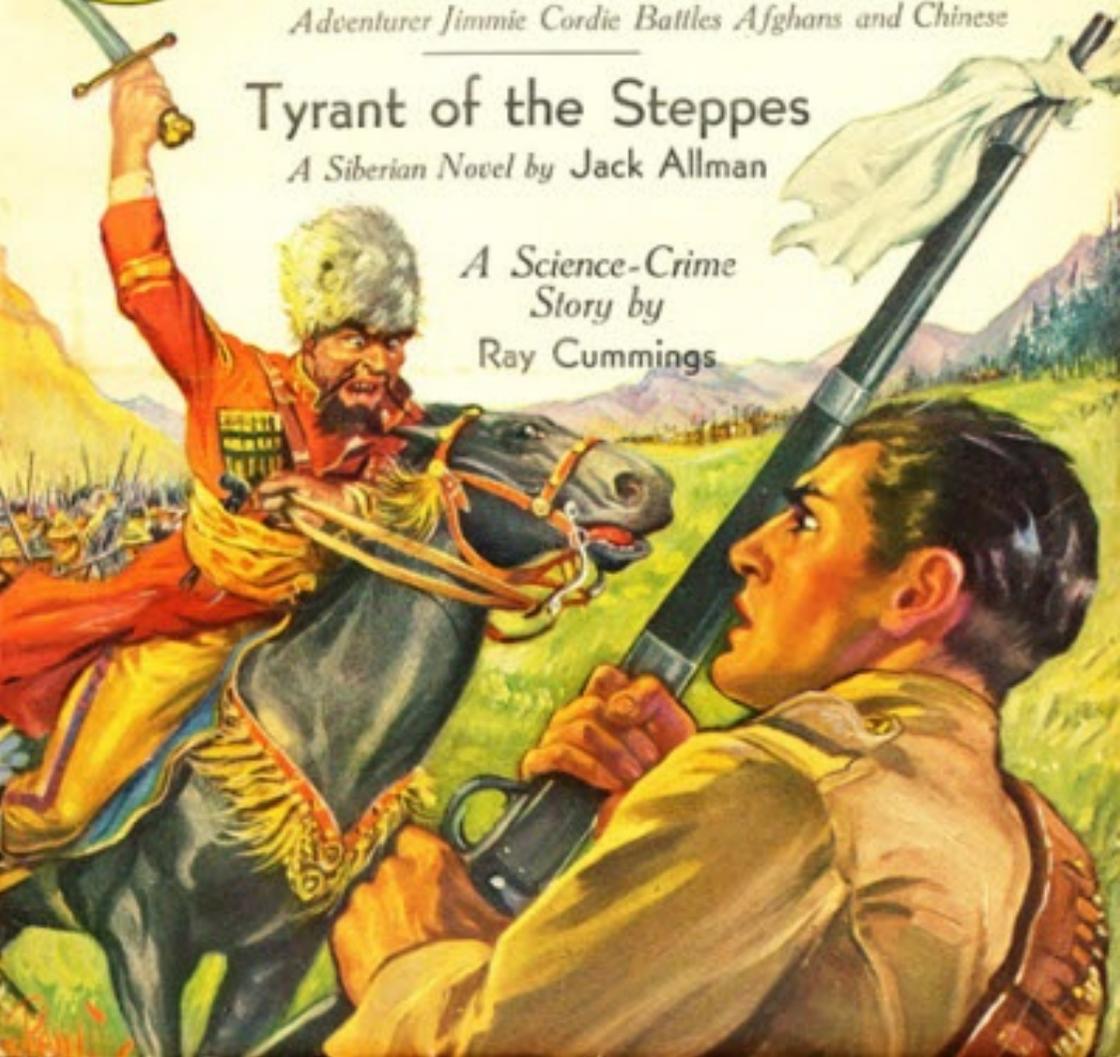
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Death by the Clock

Ray Cummings

First published *Argosy Weekly*, August 6, 1932.

"You're my friend, not my servant," said the aged millionaire; but he was unaware that Franz Karlin had planned his death for ten o'clock sharp, that night



His head went down under Karlin's brawny arm

It was 9:45 P.M. when Franz Karlin heard the flop of the old man's slippers as he went into the bath room. Karlin should have been attending to his household tasks; but instead, he was standing like a statue in a shadow of the upper hall, waiting and listening. A tall, powerful figure. His rolled shirt sleeves disclosed thick, hairy arms. His throat was a round column of muscle, supporting a bullet head of closely clipped black hair.

There was about Karlin an appearance of tremendous muscular strength; a suggestion of the professional wrestler in the heaviness of his shoulders. Karlin himself often thought of it, with sardonic inward amusement at the chain of circumstances which so incongruously, here in America, had made him valet and general servant to this half sick, frail old millionaire. It occurred to him now as with fingers clenching into the palms of his hands, he stood listening to old man Reese,

who had begun running the water for his bed-time bath.

9:45—right to the minute. The methodical Reese did everything right to the minute. Karlin grinned into the shadows of the portière beside him. This death, too, would take place right to the minute. Half an hour now, and Reese would be dead. And Karlin's witnesses would come in three-quarters of an hour . . .

Karlin was tense, but not nervous. He had no nerves. It would be easy to pull off this job of killing Reese; his last criminal act, for out of this one would come riches enough to last a lifetime.

He moved noiselessly from the shadows, and met the old man at the bathroom door.

"Mr. Reese?"

"Eh? Oh, you, Karlin. You startled me. What you want?"

"I thought you would like I arrange your bath, sir."

The bathroom light fell upon the old man's frail figure. His wispy gray hair was awry; the dressing gown, half open, showed his chest and ribs, hairless and white. He was smiling up into Karlin's swart face gazing down at him.

"Oh, no, thank you, Karlin; I can do it myself. Besides, you know, I'm fussy about the temperature of the water."

He was always good-natured about his fussiness; he had to be, or Karlin could never have lasted with him these five years.

"Yes, sir." Karlin turned quietly away. Then he came back. "Some friends of mine, they are coming soon for a game of cards. You will not mind?"

"No, of course not, Karlin. You are my friend—not my servant. You know that. Always glad to have you.—Where are you going to play?"

"In the library, sir? Like the last night? Or if maybe it was that our noise would keep you awake—?"

"Like to have it, Karlin. I'm not an invalid. Three men coming?"

"Yes, sir. They live near here—two of them. The other is Cafferty—"

The old man grinned. "Officer Cafferty? Nice fellow. Don't take too much of his money away from him."

Reese went back into the bathroom. He seemed in a particularly good mood tonight. Karlin heard his chuckle.

Karlin moved away down the hall. It was a daring thing, inviting this policeman here the night he was killing Reese. A stroke of genius. Who would think that a murderer would dare have a policeman on the scene of the crime?

Karlin padded down the upper hall, his lithe tread noiseless on the Oriental rugs.

At Reese's bedroom door he glanced at his watch. 9:50 o'clock. Plenty of time before Cafferty and the others would arrive. He had told them emphatically not to come before 10:30, when Mr. Reese would be in bed.

Nothing to do now but wait a few minutes while Reese shaved and got into the tub. The house was silent; no one in it save Karlin and the old man. It was not a big house; just these two stories. It was handsomely furnished, but the old-fashioned building hardly seemed like the residence of a retired millionaire with no family and few friends. It was set in rather a lonely neighborhood here in this suburban town. No close neighbors; thick trees outside the windows.

The minutes dragged. From down the hall, Karlin could hear the old man puttering about his shaving.

The bedroom here was hot as hell. The old man always insisted upon keeping the house very hot. Karlin wiped the sweat from his forehead. There was only a dim light here. It showed the big, luxurious bed, Oriental rugs on the polished floor. He would have to move some of those rugs when he used the old man's slippers . . . He saw now on the dresser the opened package of new leather slippers which Reese had bought to-day. They would be all right to make the necessary sounds . . .

Karlin knew he could contrive the sounds up here convincingly. In his boyhood he had once had a job making off-stage sounds. And he had never lost his skill at ventriloquism.

Franz Karlin was forty years old now. His had been a wide and varied career. Of mid-European birth, he had become a vaudeville tumbler—youngest of the athletes who, no relation to each other, had been famous as the "Six Brothers Jensen." Later, Karlin had been a professional wrestler. Then he had developed a vaudeville act of his own. "Vento, the Ventriloquist," had been known throughout the amusement places of Europe.

But the money always got away. Karlin, too, had had several experiences with the law, and that had been expensive. In Berlin he had been in jail for over a year. Then, shaking it all loose, he had come to America, where no one knew him. Even Reese had never heard him mention his vaudeville experiences, or ventriloquism. He had a sheaf of old newspaper clippings, from those days when the London Music Halls applauded "Vento—Master of the Trickery of Sound." The clippings were locked in a bureau drawer of his bedroom. Neither Reese nor any one else here had ever seen them.

Karlin's old skill would stand him in good stead to-night. And he knew that he could face police questions without quivering over it. No policeman could ever bully him. None ever had—and several had tried it!

Karlin came out of his roving thoughts with a start. Ten o'clock! But what of it? There was half an hour yet. Plenty of things could be done in half an hour by a calm, determined man.

A stroke of good luck had made the murder worth while. The estate of Elmer T. Reese was estimated at well over three million dollars, and practically all of it was destined for charity. Karlin knew that he was listed for a miserably few thousands. That was a year ago—up to a month ago. Then Reese had quarreled with the directors of one of his pet charities, and had come home in a towering rage.

“Imagine them talking to me that way, Karlin. Me, who have stood back of them like the rock of Gibraltar for years. Nearly half a million I've given them—one time or another. The ingrates! And they know there's eight hundred thousand more coming when I die. Lot o' money, Karlin . . .”

Lot of money, indeed.—It seemed then as though some premonition came to Karlin. It coursed through him like the tingle of an electric shock, so that he stood tense. The fuming, irate old man had then and there declared that they would never get the promised eight hundred thousand. His roving eyes seemed seeking for a place to put the money. His gaze rested upon Karlin.

“I'll give it to you, Karlin. Gad, that's what I'll do! Some one who'll appreciate it—has some deference for my opinion on things. That's what I'll do to them. I'll show them—!”

And he had changed his will. With his angry mood still persisting, he had summoned his lawyer and executed the new document. But Karlin knew him well enough to know that his temper wouldn't last, and now, while the spite document was in force, Karlin had to take advantage of his opportunity . . .

In Reese's bedroom, Karlin abruptly awoke to the fact that his moment was at hand. It was 10:05. He padded from the room, moving noiselessly along the hall. His bullet head was lowered a little; his thick, wide shoulders were hunched; at the half-opened bathroom door he paused, instinctively with opened hands outstretched, like a wrestler alert to every move of his antagonist. And then he spoke:

“Mr. Reese, there is a thing very strange—”

He shifted himself through the door and into the bathroom. The scene before him was like a tableau, and he saw that everything was as it should be. Small, old-fashioned bathroom; shade drawn over the single window; an electric wall clock near the light, plugged into a wall socket near the tub—and the clock said 10:06. A shower curtain was drawn back on the further side; and the frail figure of Reese sitting there in the tub, with a cake of soap in his hand and the water up to his bony

chest.—Clear, in that second, as a photographic image—and everything was correct.

“Eh, Karlin? What you say?”

Without a word of answer, Karlin’s head and shoulders came down in a wrestler’s crouch; his hands, with groping fingers, stretched out. He was conscious of a scowl that swept his face as he leaped.

Reese no more than tensed, stiffened where he sat, and over his upturned face came a vague expression of surprise. Then his head and shoulders went down under Karlin’s hand. There were bubbles—little silent things that might have represented an effort to scream under water. The thin legs came churning up, but Karlin’s brawny arm held them. So absurdly easy to hold this squirming, twisting, heaving little thing—to shove down the shoulders against the bottom of the tub! Why, it was like pinning them to a mat, with the grinning, ghoulish spectre of death standing invisibly here, stooping like a referee to see that it was done correctly . . .

A few seconds. No, not long enough. A leg got loose, lashed. But the crouching Karlin quickly pinned it. Amazing death-strength to this frail, pink-white thing. The hips heaved until Karlin had to lean well down to hold them. Must not bruise the body! Strange rules to this affair. No tell-tale marks of violence. Careful not to press a hand upon the tub and leave finger prints!—Would the accursed thing never give up struggling?—Karlin caught a glimpse of the contorted, agonized face with eyes staring up through the water. What a horrible look! Bubbles had stopped coming from the gaping mouth. The lips were moving, jerking—trying to gasp at air and getting only water.

The struggles were lessening now. Not much strength left. Karlin saw in the thin, stringy throat, the protruding Adam’s apple bobbing rhythmically up and down. The sucking, gaping lips were drinking in the water. A long, soothing last drink . . .

One of the arms twitched free of Karlin’s grip. It came up, flailed down again. It seemed to Karlin that an incredible time went by, but at last the thing lay still. It was not even drinking now. Karlin released his hold. It lay sodden in the water.

Karlin came as though from a dream into triumphant reality. He stood up. He was breathing hard. Excitement? He banished the idea. He was not excited in the least. He stood calmly surveying the scene, gauging exactly what had occurred and what must be done.

Surprise swept him. The drowning of Reese had needed more violence than he had realized. Karlin’s rolled shirt sleeves were wet from elbow to shoulder; his chest was wet, through shirt and undershirt; though from the waist down he was absolutely

dry. It would be easy to fix his own appearance, however.

The bathroom floor and the wall were splashed a little with water; the small towel rug on the floor was wet and crumpled. Karlin picked it up; laid it carefully outside the bathroom door. Then he stripped to the waist; put his wet shirt and undershirt with the wet bathroom rug.

The pink-white dead thing still lay in the tub with staring, open eyes. Karlin saw now that in the struggle either he or Reese had pulled at the dangling shower curtain; it was torn loose from the sliding rings of the overhead bracket. It had fallen, and hung on the side of the tub, half down between the tub and wall, and half in the water. Reasonable enough! The death struggle of Reese, supposedly fainting in his bath, would account for that . . .

Then Karlin saw something else, and it struck him with a rush of horror. The electric clock had stopped! It still marked 10:06, and a few seconds; the big second hand was not revolving! In the struggle, Karlin's hand had struck the cord, pulled the plug from the wall socket. He saw now where it dangled to the floor.

The thing gave Karlin a shock. Not because it was difficult to rectify. He plugged it back, and the clock started again. But suppose he had not noticed it? What a give-away! Detectives coming in here, and seeing a clock plainly marking the time of death! Especially since that wall socket was too far from the tub to have been reached by the supposedly fainting Reese. It would have been plain evidence of murder.

Then Karlin had another shock. He had not yet re-set the clock to the correct time! His watch now marked 10:18. Twelve more minutes and his friends would arrive for the card game. He would have to hurry. But he was wary of too much haste now.

He set the clock carefully to agree with his watch, which he was sure was correct. Then he saw something else. The little red signal on the clock face showed its warning that the current had been cut off. Karlin fixed that.

He spent two or three minutes more in the bathroom. The body was easily propped up into a position that looked plausible—a frail old man feeling faintness come over him, struggling a little to get out of the tub, slumping down as unconsciousness came, and lying twisted sidewise with face under the water. The limp thing was horrible to touch; Karlin was glad when he had finished with it.

His movements were quick and deft now. From the upper hall linen closet he brought two clean bath towels and a clean white rug for the bathroom floor. With the towels he wiped the floor and the walls until all evidence of the splashing was gone.

Then he spread the rug neatly by the tub, and tossed out to the hall floor the now wet and soiled towels, with his shirts and the other rug, to be burned.

Everything ready. At the hand basin he turned on the hot water faucet. The small jet of water ran out the drain as fast as it came in. He made sure of that for a moment, so that there could be no overflow. He left the water running. Soon it was very hot. A white cloud of steam came from it. The steam would fill the small bathroom, and give a reason for Reese's fainting.

The bathroom door had a spring lock on the inside. The catch was off now. Karlin clicked it on; and with a last glance at the tragic tableau of the room, he stepped carefully out and closed the door after him. The door clicked; he tried the knob. The door was locked on the inside.

Karlin stood a moment, listening to the sound of the running jet of water in the hand basin. In the silence of the house it was plainly audible, even through this closed door. That was what he had expected; he would need that sound to go with the others he would create.

Ten-twenty-five. In the next five minutes Karlin had burned his shirts, the rug and towels in the furnace. He washed himself thoroughly, so that even the smell of the bathroom soap would not cling to him; put on clean shirts; and at 10:30 he was in the library on the lower floor, calmly smoking, waiting for the arrival of his guests.

How easy it had all been! Karlin was as calm as though for an hour he had been sitting here doing nothing.

He rose at the brief ring of the front door-bell. He stood quietly in the midst of the low-voiced confusion as his three guests crowded in.

"Sure, gentlemen, we play in the library. Come in."

Like the master of the house, he ushered them. *Master!* He was the master, now at last.

Officer Cafferty pulled back. It was the first time he had been here. "We don't want to be takin' advantage of him. Is he asleep? A nice, kindly old fellow he is—I'll be sayin' that for 'im. But our voices, Karlin—"

"He don't mind," said one of the other men. "Last week we was here—"

Karlin stood quietly smiling. "He is running the water for his bath—hear it?"

The faint sound of the water was audible down here—so faint that no one could have said that it was in the hand basin and not in the tub.

Karlin gestured to the ceiling of the library as he added, "You sit down. He is in his bedroom up there. I will ask him."

"Sure," agreed Cafferty. "Not for anything would we be after botherin'—" A

big, red-faced, sandy-haired fellow, this Cafferty. Just smart enough to make a good witness.

Karlin paused in the doorway. He drew out his watch, and gestured to the library clock. "Twenty-five minutes to eleven. We shall play until one? Here—or in the kitchen—?"

"Sure.—Any old place suits us."

The three men sat a little awkwardly in the big, leather chairs. Karlin smiled at them. "Then you stay just where you are, I will ask of him—"

With unhurried step Karlin mounted the stairs. He was still smiling. He had felt calmly confident like this when, as Vento, the Ventriloquist, he had faced his audiences. And it was so simple to imitate the voice of Reese, which he had studied so carefully.

At the head of the stairs he called gently:

"Oh, Mr. Reese—my friends they have come. We want ask you—"

Like a panther, Karlin swiftly and noiselessly padded to the open bedroom door. The dead thing locked back there in the bathroom could not answer—but how easy it was for Karlin's skill!

"Eh? What you want, Karlin?"

His head was in the doorway, with muffling hand over his mouth as he simulated Reese's voice. This off-stage, unseen drama hardly needed ventriloquism! Karlin noiselessly ran back from the doorway a few paces, scuffled his feet on the bare floor and again approached the door.

"My friends, Mr. Reese—they are 'fraid we bother you."

He was in the room now, with normal thumping tread. Then he turned silent, followed one of the heavy Oriental rugs, in a second he had gained the dresser, and snatched the slippers from the opened package.

Time for Reese to speak again!

"Playing cards, Karlin?"

"Yes, sir. A little poker, like last time. My friend Cafferty is here—"

Time now for Reese to come out of the bathroom and move across the room! Karlin noiselessly turned back the big rug, and shoved a small one aside. He thrust clenched fists into the toes of the limp leather slippers. His feet on the rug and his hands in the clacking slippers on the bare floor he bent double and flapped the slippers for the old man's shaking tread.

Time to talk again! "Eh, Karlin? You say Cafferty? Officer Cafferty? Nice fellow! Tell him to watch himself playing poker with you."

Karlin had flapped back to the dresser. A second or two, noiselessly replacing the rugs, putting the slippers back into their package.

“I tell him that, sir. Shall we play in the library?”

“Perhaps the kitchen, Karlin—don’t you think? You’ll feel freer—make all the noise you like back there. I’m going to take my bath and go to bed.”

At the doorway he called, “Thank you, sir,” and trod the hall with a noisy step. Plenty of noise now! The men in the library mustn’t notice the ensuing silence upstairs! Noisy tread!

He called down to them from the stairs. He herded them noisily from the library, back into the kitchen and closed its door.

“Now we can be free. Laugh all you want. Sure, I have the cards and chips here—move that table, will you, Cafferty?”

“Who banks?” asked one of the men. “Not me—I did it the last time.”

The game began. Down here, no sounds from upstairs could be heard. Reese was supposed to be taking his bath now.

Karlin was steadily losing. It was hard to keep his mind on the game. He was facing the kitchen’s electric clock. It was very similar to the one in the bathroom. What a fool he had been not to notice at once that he had stopped that clock! What a horrible error that would have been.

Karlin was annoyed at his thoughts—annoyed at his bad luck in the game—at the sarcasm the players were beginning to hurl at him. Annoyed by this necessary delay, too. Eleven o’clock. Late enough!

He suddenly cocked his head, listening. “What was that?”

Not hard to get them out of the kitchen and into the lower foyer. Karlin and all of them agreed that they had heard nothing; but it wasn’t difficult to get them to follow him silently halfway up the stairs while he went to Reese’s bedroom, to make sure that the old man hadn’t called out to him.

Not in the bedroom! The bed untouched! What was this? Still in the bathroom? Noise now. Plenty of noise. The alarm—

Of course they joined him at the bathroom door while he pounded.

“Mr. Reese! What is wrong? You sick? Let me in—”

Pounding on the locked door! Then all of them listening to that running water in the basin.

“Bust it in, you fellers—”

“Mr. Reese! Open up the door!”

“God, he’s—he’s—”

Dead! Of course he was dead. Karlin smiled quietly to himself as he shouted and pounded. But the door resisted their efforts, as Karlin had known it would.

It was Karlin who telephoned for the doctor, only a few blocks away—and at Cafferty's wild shouts, added a call for the near-by police.

He was still at the telephone when the men brought from the cellar the heavy iron bar used to shake the furnace grate. He followed them upstairs only in time to see them crash the door lock.

Clouds of white vapor swirled around the steam-filled room.

Officer Cafferty told his story with professional clearness. He had, of course, heard Karlin upstairs talking with Mr. Reese.

"You were familiar with Mr. Reese's voice?" the police captain demanded.

"Sure, that I was. The old gentleman was many times talkin' to me, down here by the corner. A nice old feller."

"Go on, Cafferty. At what time did you hear them talking?"

Cafferty remembered that it was about twenty-five minutes to eleven.

"Jus' that," said one of the other men who had been there. "Remember? Karlin pointed to the clock—"

It seemed to Karlin, as he sat among them now in the library, that this captain of the police was an unpleasantly suspicious fellow. Looking for trouble, where there wasn't any. He was a stalwart, gray-haired man of fifty-odd.

The doctor, who had speedily arrived, had tried his best, but old Reese was dead beyond any possibility of reviving.

It was now well after midnight. The police had come about 11:30. The house, for over half an hour now, had been in a turmoil. Several of Cafferty's fellow policemen were here; a fingerprint man; a photographer; and one or two plainclothesmen. All in charge of this Captain Gregg. The coroner was coming, but he had not yet arrived. And there was a man named Franklyn—a tall, thin fellow in plain clothes. He was not under Gregg, quite evidently. All the policemen seemed to have a great respect for this Franklyn, and Karlin learned that he was a private consulting detective—a fellow with a flair for science. He had solved several notorious crimes by finding some hidden, scientific clue. Karlin chuckled to himself. He could poke around here all he liked.

Gregg and Franklyn had been upstairs where most of the activity was going on. The body was now in Reese's bedroom; Reese's doctor was with it, waiting for the coroner.

Now Gregg came down, and had Cafferty tell it all over again. Cafferty had

heard—sure he could identify the voice—old Reese talking with Karlin. Heard plainly every word that was said. And heard the old man walking in his slippers across the bedroom floor. And all three of the men recalled hearing the sound of the running water.

Karlin chuckled. In all the world he could not have fallen upon a more perfect witness than Cafferty, who had been the first of them to rush into the bathroom and discover the body.

“The bathroom floor was dry?” Gregg was saying now. “No water splashed on the wall?”

“No, sir. I watched for that. An’ the little white rug on the floor was clean an’ dry. He got in the tub, cap’n—an’ he drowned there—never got out.”

The doctor had agreed with all of them how the accident had happened. Reese had closed and locked the bathroom door. He had turned on the hot water in the hand basin. Karlin told the reason for that.

“He sometimes fuss because it take several minutes for the water to get hot—”

Reese had evidently let it run to get it hot; had forgotten it; the room had filled with steam. The doctor said that Reese might easily have fainted, clutching at the shower curtain as he felt himself going. He might have screamed, but down in the kitchen, where a noisy card game was in progress, no one would have heard him. Perhaps he then lost consciousness before he was able to rise from the tub, slumped down with his face falling under the water and was drowned.

There was a little hitch here which had caused Karlin momentary annoyance.

“Why,” Gregg demanded, “did he run the hot water in the hand basin? What did he want it for?”

Karlin had not thought of that. “Why—why, I suppose to shave.”

Gregg smiled his unpleasant smile. “The body shows that he had shaved very recently. Franklyn thinks perhaps even this evening. His shaving brush was still wet.”

So Franklyn was doing some thinking on this thing, was he? Karlin felt a little contemptuous; but in spite of that a wave of vague distrust swept him. Why was this Captain Gregg so unpleasant? And where was Franklyn now? Upstairs? What was he doing upstairs?

Gregg was repeating, “Reese quite evidently didn’t run the hot water in the hand basin in order to shave.”

Karlin gestured. “I am sorry I cannot read his mind why he turn on the hot water.”

Gregg let it pass. But his unpleasantness continued; and now, here in the library,

it suddenly burst forth.

“There are a number of strange angles to this affair, Karlin.”

That puzzled and startled Cafferty and the other two men, but Karlin did not move a muscle of his stolid face. In his opinion Gregg was bluffing. This policeman had probably heard from the doctor about Reese’s will.

“I do not know what is queer,” Karlin said carefully.

“Several things. Cafferty and these two friends of yours heard sounds upstairs, but they did not actually see anything.”

Karlin went so far as to permit himself to smile. The remark was not worth answering. He returned Gregg’s steady gaze with ironic amusement.

“We were wondering—” Gregg went on, and now his gaze shifted to Cafferty “—wondering if you might be mistaken in what you heard, because you couldn’t see anything.”

Cafferty shook his head, emphatically. But he looked uneasy. “Sure, Cap’n Gregg, if I wasn’t positive—an’ these other fellers—We all heard it.”

“I know you did.” Gregg stood up abruptly. “Come upstairs all of you. I’ll show you what looks queer to us.”

Silently they followed him up. Karlin too, was puzzled. What had gone wrong in the bedroom that looked queer? Or was this a bluff to frighten him? They had the wrong man, if they intended to try that.

The thing on the bed was covered by a sheet. Karlin cast a brief, calm gaze at it. Where was Franklyn? He wasn’t here. The men in the room all stood silent; it seemed that the eyes of every one of them were upon Karlin.

He said abruptly, “Do I think right that you accuse me of something, Captain Gregg? I am no liar.”

Gregg smiled for the first time; but it was an unpleasant smile. He turned to Cafferty.

“This is what’s queer. You heard the flap of Reese’s slippers as he crossed this room. You and both these other men have described it to me several times—and always the same. You heard him walk at least ten or fifteen feet on the bare floor. But there is no bare floor here, except very small spaces between these rugs!”

It was obvious. Karlin saw Cafferty staring stupidly. Gregg bent down and carefully lifted back the large rug.

“With this one placed this way, Cafferty, and perhaps this smaller one moved away, he’d have been able to walk that far on the bare floor. As a matter of fact, these rugs have been recently moved—the dust-line around them shows that.”

"I remember that the big rug was pushed away like that," Karlin said, relief sweeping over him.

"You didn't push it?"

"No."

"But why would Reese have done it?"

The policeman was like a child.

Karlin grinned. "I cannot tell his mind. Sorry. Is that all—?"

"No, it isn't. Where are the slippers he wore?"

That gave Karlin a little start. He recalled that Reese had made him throw away the only pair of old slippers he had. And Reese had gone to the bathroom in his bare feet. The new slippers Karlin himself had replaced in their package.

Karlin said, "He was with slippers. I do not know—"

"These, then?" said Gregg. He lifted the new slippers from the box on the bureau. "They look as though they had never been worn—"

"But he wore them," Karlin insisted stolidly. "I did not just notice, but—"

"They look," Gregg interrupted, "as though a fist instead of a foot had been thrust into them. See the bulges in that limp leather where the knuckles were?— Besides, why would he put them back into their package?"

Karlin was nonplussed. But he made an attempt to smile.

Gregg tossed away the slippers. He said abruptly:

"We searched your room, Karlin, and one bureau drawer we found locked. That seemed strange, so we opened it.—Brayley, give me those newspaper clippings."

The British newspaper accounts of Vento, the Ventriloquist! Gregg held out one which had a picture of Karlin, without make-up.

"That's you, isn't it? Looks like you, anyway."

For the first time in his life, Karlin felt that he had nerves. Something pulling at him inside, making him feel queer all over and dulling his thoughts. The room wavered. He heard his voice stammering:

"Yes—me! Why not? I once was a wrestler—"

He shouldn't have admitted that! Too late now! Still, what did it all prove? A man had a right to have been on the stage.

Gregg said quickly, "This is you—a ventriloquist. You see, Cafferty, you might have been tricked. It's possible.—In fact, we think you were tricked."

Might have been! That was far from proof. You couldn't convict a man on what might have been.

From down the hall came the slow, quiet voice of Franklyn.

“I say, Captain Gregg, it figures the way I thought it would. Bring him in here.”

Franklyn was in the bathroom.—What figured the way he thought it would?

Karlin said slowly, “I have tell the truth. Why you want to accuse—?”

“Accuse you of murdering Reese?” Gregg finished. “We do accuse you! God knows you look pretty dumb, but I guess you’re smart enough . . . We’ve got you!”

“Because—I was on the stage?” Karlin managed sarcastically. “Because I might have imitate a voice which I did not—”

“Because—Come here and I’ll show you.”

Gregg was shoving him roughly from the room. All these men crowding upon him. His instinct was to knock them all aside. Weaklings! He could crunch two or three of them at once in his arms.

He gasped, “What you doing?”

“Got something else to show you.” Into the bathroom. They completely filled it.

“Big hunk o’ meat—too dumb to understand.”

Who said that? He could take the fellow in one of his arms and squeeze him until his ribs cracked . . . Was this Franklyn speaking now? No! It was still Gregg. But Franklyn was here, leaning up against the wall, watching. His coat was off, his shirt sleeves were rolled up. He had obviously been working, but he was finished now. Working at what? Finished with what? Things which did not belong here in the bathroom were standing on the hand basin. Karlin tried to see them, but somebody got in the way.

Somebody had said, “Dumb as an ox.” And Gregg was saying, “He’s not so dumb as you’d think. Want to tell him what you found, Franklyn?”

Franklyn took a step forward and held Karlin with his quiet gaze.

“See here, Karlin, you fixed this thing so that the time at which everything happened is clear enough. Your friends came at ten-thirty. They heard the sounds upstairs a few minutes later. What you want us to believe is that Reese went to take his bath about ten-forty-five.”

“I no care what you t’ink!” It seemed to Karlin that his English was deserting him. The bathroom was swaying; but in the blur he could see the face of the electric clock. Nearly midnight now. He heard himself stammering, “The clock—”

“Not the clock, Karlin. We’ve got a better time-piece than that.”

They had shoved Karlin to the bathtub. Franklyn was pointing to where the shower curtain still lay, half in the water and half down between the tub and wall.

“There’s the time-piece, Karlin! Maybe you never heard of capillary action, but water can run through the little tubes of the threads in fabric. Ever heard of that? Or

the principle of a siphon? If the outside end is lower than the surface of the water—then the water will run out. Siphon out!”

This strange thing! This unseen time-piece! Karlin stammered, against all his effort to check himself, “Why—but what—?”

Franklyn had turned and shoved one of the men aside, so that Karlin could see those things standing on the hand basin. A little rubber bulb syringe belonging to Mr. Reese; it had always been here in the bathroom medicine cabinet. And ranged along the edge of the basin, several small empty cream bottles which had been brought up from the kitchen. There was water in them now.

Franklyn was saying, “My emergency apparatus, Karlin. I gathered up and measured the water which has been siphoning out of the tub through that shower curtain. There wasn’t any water on the bathroom floor except behind the tub, where quite a pool of it had come down through the fabric of the curtain and collected on the floor. I sucked it up with the syringe and measured the quantity of it in those half-pint cream bottles. There were very nearly three half pints.”

He seemed to be speaking very slowly, to make sure that Karlin would understand. “I did this at eleven-forty-five. Three half-pints had already flowed out, so that all I needed to know was the rate of flow in order to be able to count back to when the flow started. I’ve been sitting here measuring the time it would take a half-pint to flow down. I found it took a trifle over thirty-three minutes. So those three half pints before I got here must have taken a hundred minutes. A hundred minutes before eleven-forty-five. A very nice time-piece, Karlin. Not exact to minutes and seconds, undoubtedly. But it tells us when he died—at about 10:05!”

Somebody said, “Better watch him! He’s a strong brute!”

Were these handcuffs they were clacking on his wrists? He was panting. He heard his guttural voice—his English almost gone—“An’ I t’ink you nefer catch me ___”

THE END.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Death by the Clock* by Ray Cummings]