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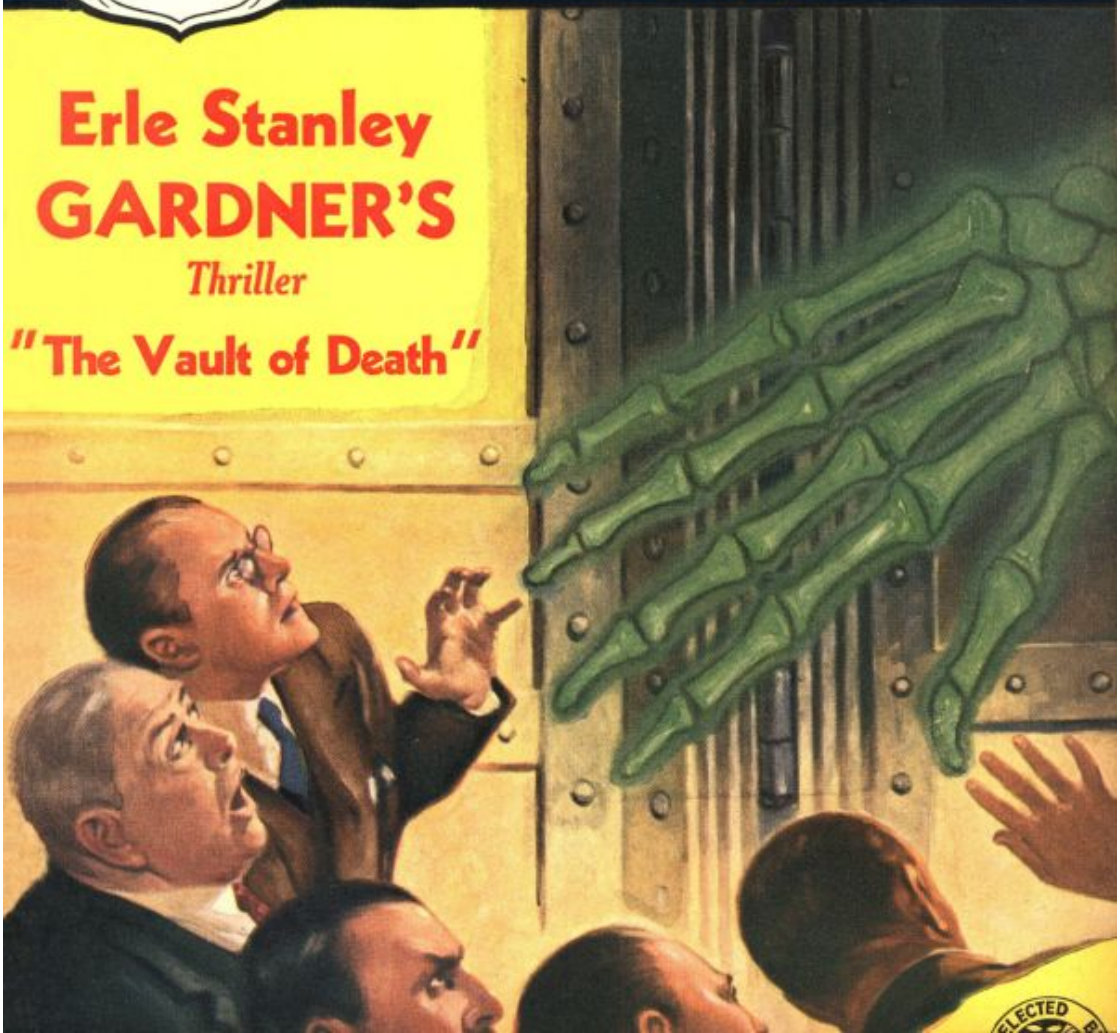


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*Thriller*

**"The Vault of Death"**



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# The Note on the Dead Man

By  
Ray Cummings

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*Others in That Crowded Hotel Room Gazed at a Sprawled Corpse, but Tolly Saw  
Three Blunders Avoided and a Perfect Crime Achieved*



**Blake had seen the naked blade of the knife**

Delivered into his hands! Tolly Martin sat contemplating the trick of fate which, after all these years, had brought him and Allen Blake to be guests at this same Bermuda hotel. Blake had arrived on the boat from New York just this morning. He hadn't seen Tolly yet; he'd probably even forgotten all about Tolly years ago.

But Tolly hadn't forgotten. Tolly had searched vainly for Blake, with the desire to kill him like a rat. And now at last the opportunity had come. Blake's look at the beautiful islands of Bermuda would be his last. He had seen the sun set this evening for the last time. Tonight he would die. Confronted by Tolly, he would beg for mercy; then Tolly would kill him like a rat.

Tolly had himself been here in St. George only three days. He was an "American tourist" like Blake. How simple this would be! Blake the American visitor would be found murdered. By no chance could it be connected with Tolly. In all Bermuda no one knew either of them. Or knew that they were acquainted with each other. Blake wasn't even traveling under his own name. Tolly had seen the hotel register. Arthur J. Sampson. Blake would die with that name and his past history would never be discovered. So simple for Tolly. He would be nothing but an interested spectator—one of the crowd of hotel guests, horrified at a murder.

All day Tolly had been planning how he would do it. He sat now at a window of his bedroom in the hotel. It was 9 P.M. The window was open. The soft air of the winter's night was redolent with the perfume of flowers and the aromatic smell of the little stunted cedar trees. Tolly's window was one flight above the ground. The brilliant moonlight shafted down through the trees of the hotel gardens. In the distance, far down from this eminence upon which the hotel was set, the whitewashed walls and roofs of the town were visible; and beyond them Tolly could see the blue waters of the harbor where the moonlight was a great glistening silver path.

A paradise here. Tolly chuckled grimly. Blake had had his glimpse of Paradise today; tonight he was going to Hell!

The New York newspaper lay on the table behind Tolly. He got up and glanced again at a small news item which had attracted his attention this afternoon. The famous American crook known as the "Pencil-note Burglar" was thought by police to have left the country.

This mysterious criminal had always interested Tolly—an ironical sort of fellow, he must be, who had committed a very clever series of burglaries and each time had left a penciled note jibing at the police. So he was out of the United States, they thought now? Good enough! Tolly had conceived the idea of leaving a similar note on Blake's body. It would give these Bermuda police something to theorize about. They'd think this pencil-note fellow was here in Bermuda. He'd get the blame for the murder of "Arthur J. Sampson." And it would certainly be a mystery which could never be solved.

There came a knock on Tolly's bedroom door. He laid the newspaper aside. At the door stood one of the hotel bellboys.

"Your package from Gosling's, sir."

He proffered a paper-wrapped parcel. Tolly had phoned half an hour ago for a bottle of gin.

"Oh, sure," he said. "Thanks. How much is it?"

“The desk paid for it, sir.” The bellboy stood lingering. “Would you mind signing the delivery receipt?”

“Sure,” said Tolly. “How much did the hotel pay?”

“Six and six, sir.”

“Huh?”

“Six shillings, sixpence, sir.”

“Oh,” said Tolly. “In reg’lar money how much would that be?”

“About one dollar and seventy-five cents, sir.”

“Cheap at half the price,” said Tolly. He was in a jovially expansive mood. Why not, with Blake delivered into his hands after all these years? He drew an American dollar bill from his pocket for a tip. “You take American money?”

The bellboy grinned. “We live on it, sir. Much obliged, sir.”

He handed Tolly a flimsy oblong of paper. Tolly tossed it to his bedroom desk, drew a lead pencil from his jacket pocket and signed the receipt with a flourish. And stripped the wrappings from the bottle.

“Have a drink, young fellow?”

The bellboy was used to American tourists. He grinned. “Thank you very much, sir.”

They drank together. The bellboy might have been drinking the silent toast to his girl friend; but Tolly was drinking to Blake, who would rot in Hell.

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“Right you are, young fellow. Good stuff you have here. Come back tomorrow night. We’ll have another.”

---

The bellboy departed. Tolly reached for the bottle, but checked himself. No more now. He had things to do. Blake’s bedroom was near the end of a long corridor on the ground floor. Tolly had the whole layout firmly fixed in his mind. This big whitewashed stone building was totally different from a hotel in the States. Tolly could get downstairs from his own bedroom and out of the building very easily without being seen. He could also get from the gardens into the ends of every one of the hotel ground-floor corridors. One of those garden doors was within a few feet of Blake’s bedroom. He wondered if Blake had come in yet . . .

Tolly had a long clasp-knife in his trunk. It could never be identified as belonging to him. He locked the bedroom door, got the knife out of the trunk and dropped it in the jacket pocket of his white linen suit. Then he sat at the wicker bedroom desk to write the “pencil-note” criminal’s message. He wanted everything ready, because after the killing he would be a sucker to stay in Blake’s bedroom an extra second.

On his desk lay a neat little pile of the hotel notepaper. All right to use a sheet of it—every bedroom, Blake’s included, would have the same notepaper. He must be careful not to get finger-prints on this sheet. A lead pencil lay on his desk. He picked it up, was ready to print the note, when suddenly he paused.

Good Lord! His heart was pounding. What a little thing could trap a fellow in a job like this! The lead pencil he held was the same one with which he had signed the hotel C. O. D. receipt just a few minutes ago! He had had it in his coat pocket; had signed the receipt here on the desk and tossed the pencil here. It was marked, he saw now, No. 3—Very Hard. An unusually hard lead. Easy to identify. These Bermuda policemen probably were dumb, but then again, maybe not. What an error that would have been!

He searched his pockets, found a little pencil stub. This one was marked No. 1—Very Soft. Good enough! He carefully printed the note. Just two words, and a dash:

*Killed by —*

The “pencil-note” fellow always printed something like this. Tolly surveyed it. Very nice! This would give quiet little Bermuda something to talk about for all the rest of the year.

Tolly put on his jacket. In his side pocket he had the note, the little stub of pencil and the clasp-knife. He opened his bedroom door. The corridor was empty. He locked the door after him, went down the back stairs, and in a moment was in the garden. A few tourists were strolling the garden paths, but nobody noticed him. He tossed the little stub of lead pencil into a clump of shrubs. On the terrace at the front of the hotel where colored lights were strung a small orchestra was playing American jazz, and twenty or more couples were dancing.

Blake was in his bedroom! Tolly saw the opened bedroom window. It was only a few feet above the ground. The shade was pulled all the way down, with a light behind it; and as Tolly stared he saw a brief moving silhouette of Blake’s thick, paunchy figure. It looked as though Blake were undressing.

Within a minute Tolly was into the lower corridor. No one was in sight. He rapped gently on Blake’s door.

Blake’s voice—how well Tolly remembered it!

“Wait a minute.”

The lock turned, the door opened an inch or two. Tolly shoved his foot into the crack. Tolly was a small, slim fellow. He had been a bantamweight fighter, and then a jockey, in the days when he knew Blake. A muscular fellow, lithe as a cat. He shoved the door which the suddenly startled Blake was trying to hold.

“Hullo, Blake. Tolliver Martin. Remember me, don’t you?”

Tolly wedged himself through the widening door-opening as he spoke. He turned, closed the door, and locked it.

“Why—hello, Tolly—”

Blake had stepped backward. He was partially undressed. He stood in an undershirt, white linen trousers and bare feet. His heavy-jowled, flabby face had gone white, but he tried to smile.

“Remember me, don’t you?” Tolly said grimly.

“Why—why of course I remember you, Tolly. How’ve you been? What you doin’ here?”

Delivered into his hands! It seemed to Tolly that the grim joy of this was far greater than he had thought it would be. The damned rat was frightened. He’d be worse than that in a minute. He always had been a coward. No fight in him.

“Thought you might have forgotten me,” Tolly said. “But you remember it all, don’t you? Remember how you sent me up so you could buy freedom for yourself? Me—who only took your orders when we fixed that horse an’ that race? Remember it?”

“Why—why Tolly, you’re crazy! Sit down an’ let’s discuss this—”

Blake was backing toward the window. He mustn’t do that; the shadow of him might show on the shade. And they must talk softly; their voices might carry outside.

Tolly said, with lowered voice, “You sit down. We’ll discuss it.”

## II

He slid a wicker arm chair forward and shoved Blake into it. Blake's eyes roved the room as though he were trapped. Oh, he was frightened all right! He said:

"You're crazy, Tolly. I didn't—"

"Not so loud," Tolly warned. This was dangerous, toying with Blake like this. If somebody came, or heard them—

"Sure," Tolly added. "Crazy like a fox, that's me. I did my stretch. I waited. Then I got out, an' went after you like I warned you I would. But I couldn't find you. You've changed your name—"

"Oh, that." Blake still was trying to smile placatingly. His hands gripped the arms of his chair; his gaze roved Tolly, who stood in front of him. "That—that was necessary. A little jam I got into—"

"I thought maybe it was so I wouldn't find you."

"That's silly, Tolly. Especially after all these years. Why shouldn't I want you to find me? Why shouldn't I be glad to see you? I—I am. It gives me a chance to explain how wrong you were about me. Take off your coat—hot in here. Let's have a—"

"Sure," said Tolly. He stripped off his jacket; tossed it to a chair. His hand was behind him as he whirled back on Blake.

"Ain't afraid of me, Blake? Not a damn bit, are you?"

"Afraid? Why, Tolly—Oh! God, Tolly! Don't!"

He had seen the naked blade of the knife, as Tolly brought it from behind him. Damned rat, he was frightened now all right. He knew this was his end . . . But he might scream! Kill him now! Too dangerous to wait even a second . . .

A rush of instant thoughts, for certainly Tolly produced the knife and plunged it all in that second. Blake was half out of the chair. His scream seemed to die with a gurgle in his throat. He lurched upward and met the knife full in his chest. His arms went wildly up—and Tolly, nimble as a cat, sank the knife, stepped backward; pulling out the knife so that he was clear of Blake, who fell forward on his face.

Dead? No, he was twitching, with a ghastly rattle in his throat. Tolly stooped, more calmly now, and plunged the knife again; left it sticking up between the shoulder blades. Got him that time! A motionless dead thing sprawled there now.

For a moment Tolly stood panting, with the wild fear that someone might have heard the noise. But there was only the distant strains of the dance orchestra. No alarm. Was there any blood on him? He looked carefully. Then he stood there in front of the mirror and looked. No blood. Nothing wrong with his appearance. He had been clever not to get tangled up with Blake's body when it fell.

Everything was all right, but he must get out of here in a rush now. From his jacket pocket where it lay on the chair he took the penciled note. Still handling it gingerly, he laid it on the dead man. He saw that on the desk in Blake's room there was a pile of exactly the same hotel notepaper.

The handle of the knife might have his finger-prints. He wiped it off with his handkerchief . . . Hurry, get out of here. He went to the door. Unlocked it; opened it an inch or two. Voices! Footsteps! A man and a woman approaching!

Tolly closed the door very softly and stood waiting. The voices went past. He breathed again. What an escape! Beyond everything, he mustn't be seen getting out of here.

He tried again. The corridor was empty now . . . Good God, what he had almost done wrong! He was leaving his white linen jacket in Blake's bedroom!

Panic swept him with the realization that he was rattled. He seized his jacket. Put it swiftly on. It sagged. It felt queer. It was too big for him . . . Good Lord, this wasn't his coat! This was Blake's, which had been hanging on the same chair. He stripped it off; flung it to the floor. Took his own and put it on as he moved again for the door.

But he bumped something. He was close to the wall, walking and lifting an arm as he put on the coat. His arm bumped something. There was a click and a sharp thump.

Tolly stood frozen. Staring. The bedroom had a wall telephone. He had knocked the receiver off the hook. It hung swaying at the end of its cord, gently bumping the wall. The line was open! At the hotel switchboard, not more than a hundred feet away on this same floor, the girl would see the signal.

Even now in the silence Tolly could hear her voice coming from the instrument.

Should he slam up the receiver? He had the confused thought that he'd get his fingerprints on it. Get out of here! He'd be caught now like a rat in a trap. He jerked the door open, listened, peered cautiously with a fervent hope that the corridor would be empty. It was. He darted into it; ducked out the nearby outer door.

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In the garden, the panic suddenly left him. He was sure no one had seen him come out. He walked calmly on one of the garden paths—got into another door and back up to his bedroom. Still unseen. He was sure of it. He had just entered the bedroom, when from downstairs came the sounds of a commotion. The murder discovered already. That was it, of course.

Across the hall, a door opened. A man's voice said:

“What the devil's going on down there?”

Tolly went out and joined him. Then in a moment as the commotion grew louder, they rushed downstairs and were on the scene of the murder.

It seemed at first that there was only a complete confusion. When Tolly and his companion arrived at Blake's bedroom door there were hardly more than five or six other hotel guests, the hotel manager, and a few of his employees, one of whom Tolly made out to be the hotel detective. But more people were hurrying every moment so that presently the terrace orchestra abruptly stopped and the people outside began milling into the garden for a look at Blake's window.

The bedroom door was open now. Tolly and the man with him found themselves shoved forward into the room by the people arriving behind them. Tolly caught a glimpse of the dead thing sprawled face down on the straw matting of the floor, with the wicker armchair askew behind it and the knife sticking up . . . Gruesome thing. There was more blood on the undershirt now.

The room was a milling confusion—a babble of voices and shoving people all craning to get a look at the horror. At the window somebody outside raised the shade. It went up with a snap, disclosing the group of faces out there in the moonlit garden.

The hotel manager's voice was trying to be heard above the noise.

“I say, everyone, do not touch anything! Will you please leave this room? The proper authorities will be here presently. Go out—please—”



But nobody moved. Tolly's companion murmured, "We'd better keep back—we'll get put out of here."

"Right you are," Tolly responded.

They moved over to an unobtrusive corner and stood watching. The room was jammed with men now. At the corridor door a woman took a look, screamed hysterically and was shoved away by the men around her.

"The telephone receiver is off the hook," somebody said over the babble. It was the big stolid hotel detective.

"That's where the alarm came from. Somebody in here was at the telephone," somebody said.

More people were jamming into the room. Somebody called from outside:

"Here come the police."

The hotel detective sprang into action.

"If you please, everyone—outside, please. I must ask you to leave, gentlemen."

Amusing to Tolly. This British courtesy. Apologetically the guests were being herded from the room. The manager drew down the shade, with a murmur of protest from the garden. Tolly and his companion were moved into the corridor. The police shoved past them—four or five uniformed men. And the voices of others were audible maintaining order out in the garden.

Tolly lost his companion amid the press of people in the corridor. The bedroom door at first stayed ajar, with a policeman guarding it. Then the door was closed. Tolly stood nearby in the shadow of a staircase. Interesting, all this. No one noticed him, of course. He was just one of all these horrified guests. Nobody knew anything of what was going on now. Everybody was talking wild. Theorizing. Tolly chuckled to himself. If they only knew what he knew of this murder of "Arthur J. Sampson!"

The door occasionally opened. There was always a press of onlookers; and afterward a babble of new rumors. It was murder all right. How could a man stab himself in the middle of the back?

"He couldn't," somebody said. "Say, you know he was stabbed in the chest, too?"

"Still it's got to be murder. You can't stick yourself in the chest and then turn around and stick yourself in the back. I say now, can you?"

Tolly suddenly was aware that the query was addressed to him.

"Oh—why, sure not," he said. "Murder all right. Wonder where the fellow got to?"

Escaped by the window, somebody said . . . No, by this corridor door . . . Somebody had lifted or knocked the telephone receiver off the hook. Wonder if the telephone girl heard anything? Maybe it was the murdered man calling for help. But somebody else asserted that was idiotic. The doctor was inside now. A man had said that the doctor had said that Sampson died almost instantly. He couldn't go to the telephone and then go back and fall in the middle of the room. It must have been the murderer; he must have been right here only a few minutes ago.

"That's right," another man said. "Sampson's only been dead five or ten minutes. There's the door opening again—let's hear—"

Amusing all this! So utterly simple for Tolly! Not even a question to answer. Not a single policeman even to look at him. He wondered what they were making out of the note on the dead man . . .

### III

The man who had just come out of the room was a hotel clerk. He seemed willing to talk, and the guests jammed around him. Amusing to Tolly. They were all talking of the note now. These Bermuda police—not so dumb! They had spotted the note for the work of the “lead pencil” criminal. Tolly was sorry that he couldn’t be inside to hear all the interesting details.

God, what was this! The bedroom door had opened again. A voice was saying:

“Tolliver Martin? A guest—”

And another voice:

“Over there by the staircase. Oh, Mr. Martin, sir!”

Tolliver Martin! Tolliver Martin! Tolliver Martin! What was this? The hot crowded corridor swam before Tolly’s gaze. It seemed that all the world suddenly was babbling and echoing “Tolliver Martin . . . Tolliver Martin!” But why? Who had ever thought of him?

“Mr. Martin, sir. If you please.”

This damnable British courtesy! Was this voice ironic? Tolly found one of the hotel employees plucking at the sleeve of his white linen jacket. “They want you inside there, Mr. Martin, sir.”

“Huh? Why—why sure.” He stumbled forward. This was all wrong. What could they want of him?

The bedroom door closed behind Tolly with a click—like the click of a cell-block grating. Before him Tolly found the towering bulk of a man.

“I am Captain Tucker. Are you Tolliver Martin?”

“Yes, sir,” Tolly said.

“Your room is No. 22?”

“Yes, sir. That’s right.”

But he needn’t say sir! No need to be humble—he was a guest here.

“Afraid I can’t help you much, Captain Tucker. But anything—”

“You were in your bedroom all the evening, Mr. Martin?”

“Well, just about all the time, I guess.” Clever, not to be too sure of past movements. An innocent man wouldn’t remember everything he did.

“At about 9 P.M. you were in your bedroom?”

“Sure I was.”

“You received a package in your bedroom this evening at about nine o’clock?” the Captain said.

“Sure I did.”

The Captain was saying: “This hotel receipt which you signed—”

In spite of himself it made Tolly’s heart start pounding. The Captain was holding the C. O. D. receipt for Tolly to see.

“Sure,” said Tolly. “I ordered a bottle of gin to come in from a store. A bellboy—”

“This bellboy?”

Tolly turned and grinned at the bellboy. “Hullo, young fellow. Sure—him.”

“This is your signature, then?” The Captain held the receipt closer.

“Yes, that’s my signature,” Tolly said. “What about it?”

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“No one ever signs his name quite the same on two occasions,” said the Captain. He handed the receipt to the policeman beside him. “The scroll of that flourish never would be duplicated—by you, or any forging murderer.”

“I don’t get you,” Tolly said.

The Captain said quietly, “Well, now, suppose you look at this.”

The murder note. He held it for Tolly. He drew Tolly aside so that the table electrolier would shine directly on the note. Tolly saw the two words he had printed,

*Killed by —*

God, what was this! The captain was holding the sheet of paper so that the light fell on it slantwise.

“The bellboy tells me you laid the receipt on your desk when you signed it. You happened to use a very hard lead pencil—”

Was that the captain’s voice? Tolly hardly heard it. Damnable mischance that he had tossed the receipt on top of the little pile of hotel stationery on his desk, signed the receipt, and then afterward used the top sheet for the murder note! A tracery of two words, hidden there on that top sheet! He had not noticed them. But now as the captain held the note slantwise under the bright light of the electrolier he saw them clearly. Two words, a dash, and two words more. Half in pencil, half marked deeply into the paper.

The murder note read:

Killed by—*Tolliver Martin*.

[The end of *The Note on the Dead Man* by Ray Cummings]