

[COMPLETE STORY.]

Tom Munro's Murder

By Herbert J. Allingham

"I confess," said Munro, "I have committed most crimes once. Did I ever tell you how I blackmailed a man, and got 5000 dollars out of him? Then there was my murder, quite an artistic affair."

"There were four of us loafing in the club reading room. It was a bright but cold October afternoon, and the first fire of the season blazed in the grate. We were all ranged about it, sprawling in saddle back chairs. There was Masters, the lawyer, who meant to do something some day; there was old Tufnell, the comedian, who had done all he meant to do twenty years ago; there was myself, the youngest of the group, an untraced playwright; and there was Munro.

No one knew quite what Munro did for a living. He was a wanderer, and would absent himself from our set for months at a time, but he always turned up at the club sooner or later. He was a man of 45 or so, hair grizzled about the temples, face strong, and hard eyes keen but kind.

"Let's have the murder," said Masters with a yawn.

"A really artistic murder should possess dramatic possibilities," remarked the comedian ponderously, "and may be of service to our young friend here."

The old man indicated me with a patronising gesture. Munro took his pipe from his mouth, and thoughtfully polished the bowl on the sleeve of his coat.

"The beginning of the business was in the summer of '97," he began presently. "I left Chicago at a moment's notice. Eventually I found myself in Turkey, hobnobbing with a wicked old pusha of my acquaintance. One day I was with him in his house, which was more like a palace, when a dealer brought some newly captured slave girls for his inspection.

"My friend rejected the majority with scorn; but one beautiful Greek girl found favour in his sight, and after a lot of haggling with the dealer he purchased her.

"The girl, when she learned of her fate, was terrified, and made a painful escape."

"I am not, as you know, a ladies' man, but I confess the scared look in the girl's eyes made me feel qualmish.

"At the pusha's request I spoke to her in her own language, but could get nothing from her except a despairing request to save her from her new master.

"The end of it was that I offered to re-purchase her. My friend was amazed and much amused, but he good-naturedly consented, and so Nada became my property.

"I offered to send the girl back to her people, but it appeared that they had been ruthlessly slaughtered when she was captured, and she swore that she would never leave me. The situation was embarrassing, and I anticipated all sorts of trouble. But Nada behaved splendidly. It is true she followed me about like a dog, but she never obtruded herself upon my notice, and yet was always at hand to render me any service within her power.

"All went well for a time, and I had got quite used to her being about the place, and even found myself missing her when she was absent.

"Then, in the autumn of '99 I went to Paris. There I found a certain M. Ionides leading it in fashionable society. He was, it appeared, a Greek merchant, who had made a fortune out of currants. He occupied a magnificent hotel, kept a retinue of servants, had a gorgeous equipage, and entertained in a most lavish and princely fashion.

"He was enormously rich, enormously fat, and as ugly as a satyr. We had been in Paris about a week, when this M. Ionides saw Nada, and at once took a fancy to her. I think I have told you the girl was really strikingly pret-

ty. People turned in the street to look at her. Well, the Greek was fascinated by his countrywoman, and the result was that one day Nada came flying to me for protection. I soothed her, and thought no more of the matter, but on the morrow I had a visit from the great man.

He was pretty frank, talking like a man accustomed to pay for what he wanted and to get it. He understood the young lady was my ward. Would I transfer my office to him? Between men of the world, any sum I might name, would I mention a figure, and so forth.

"I looked at his ugly face, his great pendulous cheeks, the puffy mounds of flesh under his beady eyes; and then I thought of Nada, delicate, innocent, childlike.

"In the end I told M. Ionides cautiously that to my extreme regret the matter could not be arranged.

"He smiled and shrugged his fat shoulders; but as he went out he remarked softly that in his experience he had always found it possible to arrange such matters.

"A few days later I had to leave Paris on business. I was away about 48 hours. When I returned I was informed that Nada had disappeared.

"Immediately I suspected the fat Greek, and decided to call upon the gentleman when I had dined.

"However, I had just finished the meal in my own house in the Rue Barbet de Jouy, and was sipping my coffee alone, when the door of the room was unceremoniously flung open.

"I sprang to my feet and confronted a wild, mad-looking creature. Her hair was dishevelled, her clothes torn and wet, her face distorted, her eyes fixed and glaring. Nevertheless, it was Nada.

"The girl was quite mad. At times she would fall on the ground at my feet moaning piteously, then in a frenzy of hysteria she would rave at me, and then again she would turn shivering from me, and crouching in a corner, would sulk in silence. No connected story, hardly an intelligible sentence, could I get from her. I sent for assistance, and she was put to bed. The good woman whose services I had requisitioned came to me in about half an hour, and her face was grave. She told me that the girl had been terribly ill-used. She was a mass of bruises, and across her shoulders were the livid marks made by the lash of a whip.

"When I heard that I gave instructions that she should be properly cared for, then lit a cigar, and walked across to the hotel of M. Ionides.

"I found him alone in his magnificent apartment, seated behind a richly inlaid oak table. I thought I detected amused expectation in his tiny eyes, but there was certainly no shadow of fear in them. Evidently the fat rascal felt secure behind his rampart of gold. Evidently, too, his creatures were near at hand to protect him from present violence, perhaps crouching behind the heavy curtains which hung at his side.

"Indeed, as I drew near to the table his great puffy right hand rested on it within an inch of a button of an electric bell.

"I took all this in at a glance, and between the door and the table, a matter of five paces, I had made up my mind how I should kill this oily, smug-faced villain, for I knew that if I challenged him he would not fight.

"I apologised for the lateness of my call. 'The fact is,' I said, laughing, 'I am devoured by curiosity. You kept your word and you have got the girl; but how the dickens did you manage it?'

"He was taken aback a little, I think, but he readily fell into my humour. He laughed and chuckled over his achievement till his great sides shook. Then he offered me money. I would not listen to this, assuring him that I considered myself fairly beaten, and congratulated him on his adroitness.

"He was delighted. 'You are a man after my own heart,' he declared. 'But you need not congratulate me. The business turned out most unfortunately. The girl was a fool. Why, my dear sir, she tried to kill me! Of course, I had to give her a lesson, but it did no good.' He raised his fat, beringed hands in a gesture of disgust. 'You know my little place on the Seine? She was locked up in a room high above the river, but she jumped out of the window and was drowned.'

"From that time," went on Munro, in his queer, emotionless monotone, "I cultivated the acquaintance of M. Ionides, and we became inseparable. Do you know I found him an amusing companion?"

"One forenoon we were drinking wine together in a famous cafe—he ate and drank at all hours—and he happened to turn his ponderous bulk away so as to stare in comfort at a pretty woman at a distant table. I took the opportunity to drop a little white pellet into his glass.

"You know I have made a study of poisons. In this country there is a prejudice against them nowadays. I know, but it was not always so. The drug I used was an old Italian poison. I believe originally it came from the East, but it owes its fame to the extensive use made of it by the Borgias in Italy. Its peculiarity, which is also its great virtue, is that it does not kill its victim until the expiration of thirty days or thereabouts.

"I stayed with M. Ionides until he had drained his glass. Then I left him.

"My next step was to persuade Nada to write a letter to her countryman in which she prophesied his early death. The girl was still quite out of her senses, but with me she was submissive and obedient.

"Every day a letter to the same purport was sent to the Greek, and each letter was signed 'Nada of the Seine.'

"A week passed before I saw M. Ionides again. He was greatly changed. He was paler, and less grossly fat, and his great face had lost its complacent simper. He confided in me, whom he declared to be his one true friend in Paris. He told me that he experienced queer and alarming pains in his head, and he admitted that he was worried by an anonymous letter writer. Of course, it is ridiculous," he declared; "but she—that is, I mean the writer of these confounded letters—says I shall not live beyond the 29th of this month. And—well, it is now the 8th. I tell you, my friend, I don't like it!"

"The days went by. The Greek grew thinner, more worried, and the pains in his head became more frequent. The most famous doctors of Paris could make nothing of his complaint, and asked him if he had any secret worry.

"Every day I called upon him to watch him as he slowly died. It was, I remember, on the 23rd that he met me in a stormy and rebellious mood. 'I will throw this thing off,' he shrieked. 'Six more days to live! Bah! I am searing myself into the grave.' This cursed scribbler tells me I shall die on Friday next. Well, it is a lie. I will live! On Saturday next I shall give a banquet such as Paris has not seen for many a year and all society shall be present. Thus will I celebrate my triumph!"

"I cordially approved of the plan, telling him that in the preparations for the banquet he would forget his vain fears. With feverish eagerness he pursued the idea. The short week went swiftly by. The fatal Friday came and went, and the Greek still lived. I found him Saturday morning almost mad with delight. A great weight seemed to have been lifted from his soul. All fear of death had passed away from him. Even the pains which had been his constant companions for a month appeared to have vanished. That night I attended the banquet at the Ionides mansion—a banquet still talked of in Paris. It is easy to sneer at the vulgarity of wealth, but it is hard not to be fascinated by the splendour it can purchase.

"The cream of Paris fashion, beauty, and talent assembled round the Greek merchant's table.

"Never had I seen the man so exultant, so vivacious, so full of life. He and I were probably the two happiest persons in the room. He did not know, and I did, that in an adjoining room a woman, closely veiled, was awaiting my signal.

"She sat alone, swaying gently to and fro, and crooning softly to herself.

"The hours passed swiftly with good

food, good wine, and good talk. The affair was at its height. Some one proposed the toast, 'The Giver of the Feast.' It was drunk with acclamation, and the unwieldy Greek rose to reply.

"Then I gave my signal, and at the same time slipped quietly out of my seat at the foot of the table.

"My place was taken by a figure dressed wholly in black.

"All eyes were turned upon her as she drew off her veil. White as the danish cloth on the table, but more beautiful than I had ever seen her, she stood silent and motionless.

"Ionides leaned heavily on the table with both hands, and stared at her with eyes almost as wild and fixed as her own.

"Then she raised a thin, delicate arm slowly, pointed at him with a gesture quite mechanical, and uttered the one sentence I had rehearsed to her a thousand times during the last week—'The Seine gives up its dead.'

"The Greek's jaws moved, the muscles of his face were convulsed, and the veins stood out on his forehead. Again and again he tried to speak, but no words passed his lips. Then suddenly he straightened himself up, his great arms sawed the air, his flashing fingers clawed at nothingness, and at last a cry, shrill, piercing, and blood curdling, escaped him, a cry of mingled agony and horror.

"Then he fell forward and crashed down upon the table among the gold, silver and shattered glass, and there he lay like a great, lathsome frog, ugly and disgusting. He was quite dead. I touched Nada on the arm and she followed me like an obedient child. I had thought the shock might restore her. That was my chief reason for confronting her with her countryman. But it was not a success. She never recovered her sanity."

Munro ceased speaking and began to refill his pipe.

Masters yawned and rose to his feet. "Did you ever try to write a novel, Munro?" he asked with his irritating drawl.

Tufnell and I laughed, both a little relieved, I think, at being brought back to the sane world after the gruesome recital.

Munro said nothing, but, taking a letter from his pocket, flung it over to me. I caught it, and the other two leaned over my shoulder as I read.

It was a brief notification from the superintendent of a private asylum, and it ran thus:

"Dear Sir,—I have to inform you that the patient known as Nada is seriously ill. If you care to see her you may do so at any time of the day, or night on presentation of this paper."

I noted that the letter bore a date two days old.

I handed it back to Munro in silence. He twisted it into a spool and took a light for his pipe from the fire. Then he moved towards the door.

"You went, of course," I said impulsively. "Is she better?"

"Yes," he replied simply, "she died in my arms last night."

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