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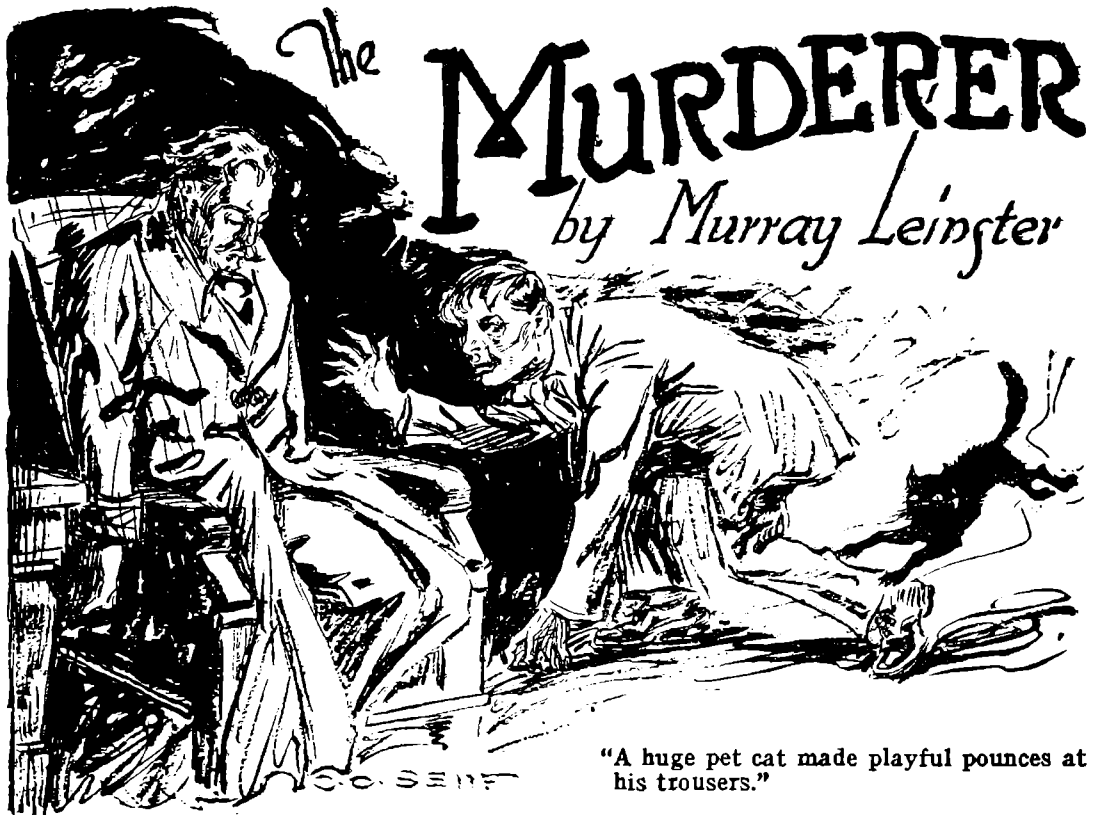
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# The MURDERER

by Murray Leinster

"A huge pet cat made playful pounces at his trousers."

**T**HE murderer's hair lifted at the back of his neck. A crawling sensation spread down his spine. There was something moving in the room! It was pitch-dark, with vague rectangles of faint grayishness where windows opened upon the rainy night outside. The murderer had left this room half an hour before, maybe only twenty minutes before. He'd gone plunging away through the darkness, knowing that before dawn the rain would have washed away the tire-tracks of his car. And then he'd remembered something. He'd come back to pick up a thing he'd left, the only thing that could possibly throw suspicion upon him. And there was something moving in the room!

His scalp crawled horribly. He had to clench his teeth to keep them from chattering audibly. . . . He heard the sound again! Something alive in the room. Something furtive and horrible and—and terribly playful! It

was amused, that live thing in the room. It was diverted by the one gasp of pure terror he had given at the first sound it made.

The murderer stood teetering upon his toes, with his hand outstretched and touching the wall, fighting against an unnamable fear. He was in the right house, certainly. And in the right room. He could catch the faint acrid reek of burnt smokeless powder. His senses were uncannily acute. He could even distinguish the staling scent of the cigarette he had lighted when he was here before. . . . This was the room in which he had killed a man. Yonder, by the wide blotch of formless gray, there was a chair, and in that chair there was an old man, huddled up, with a bullet-wound in his throat and a spurt of deepening crimson overlaying his shirt-front. The murderer who stood by the wall, sick with fear, had killed him no more than half an hour before.

And there could not be anyone else in the house. The murderer listened, stifling his breathing to deepen the silence. Nothing but the shrill and senseless singing of a canary-bird that was one of the dead man's two pets. The bird stopped, began again drowsily, and was silent. In the utter stillness that followed, the vastly muffled purring of his own motor-car reached the murderer, and the slow, drizzling sound of rain, even the curious humming of the telephone wires that led away from the house.

But then he heard the noise again, such a sound as might have been made by a man drumming softly and meditatively upon a table with his fingertips. A tiny sound, an infinitely tiny sound, but the sound of something alive. The murderer stifled a gasp. It came from the chair where the dead man was sitting!

There was cold sweat upon the forehead of the man by the wall. It seemed, insanely, as if the dead figure, sitting upright in its chair, had opened its eyes to stare at him through the blackness, while the stiff fingers tapped upon the table-cloth as they had done in life.

A surge of despairing hatred came to the murderer, while icy-cold crawlings went down his spine. Those finger-tappings . . . those furtive, stinging fingers that were always so restless, always touching something, always fumbling desirously at something. . . . Why, he'd shot the old man when he was fumbling with his cigarette-case, avidly plucking out a cigarette to smoke in secret, being too miserly to buy even the cheapest of tobacco for himself.

The murderer felt some of his fear vanish. He'd shot the old man. Killed him. He was dead. He'd made only one mistake. He'd made sure the bullet went just where he intended, and then he'd fled, out to the car and plunged away. No need to stop and rob. The dead man was the murderer's uncle, and the state and

the courts would deliver his wealth in time. Everything was all right, except for one mistake, and he'd come back to rectify that.

He deliberately fanned the hatred that had helped so much in the commission of his crime, and now was crowding out his terror. He had only to think of the old man to grow furious. Rich—and a miser. Old—and a skinfint. He wouldn't keep a servant, because servants cost money. He wouldn't keep a watch-dog, because watch-dogs had to be fed. It was typical of him that he kept two pets as an economical jest—a canary because it would eat bread-crumbs, and a cat because it would feed itself. The murderer by the wall had seen the old man chuckling at sight of the huge cat stalking a robin upon the lawn. . . .

**T**HE murderer moved forward confidently, now. He'd shot his uncle as the old man was fumbling cigarettes out of the nephew's case. He'd made sure that death had come, and he'd fled—but without the cigarette-case. Now he'd come back for it. It had been foolish of him to feel afraid. . . .

He heard the drumming of reflective finger-tips upon the table-top. Stark terror swept over him again, and he pressed on the button of his flashlight. . . . The old, unprepossessing figure was outlined in full. Grayed, unkempt hair, bushy eyebrows, head bent down, hand extended toward the cigarette-case on the table. . . . All was as it should have been. But the coat, the long, dingy coat that hung down from the extended arm—that was moving! Muscles in the sleeve had been flexing and unflexing. The coat was flapping back and forth. The man in the chair was alive!

With a snarl, the murderer sprang forward, his hands outstretched. An instant later he fell back with a rattle in his throat. The flesh he had touched was cold and already rigid.

He stood still, fighting down an impulse to scream. The man in the chair was dead. And then he heard that insane, deliberate tapping again. He could feel the dead eyes upon him, gazing up from a bent-forward head and looking through the bushy brows. A strange, malevolent joy was possessing the dead thing. It was gazing at him, tapping meditatively, while it debated a suitable revenge for its own death.

The murderer cursed hoarsely and groped for the table. He was livid with terror and a queer, helpless rage. He hated his victim, dead, as he had never hated him living. His fingers touched the cigarette-case—and it was jerked from beneath his touch.

The murderer choked. He had to have the cigarette-case. It was proof of his presence—proof against which his carefully prepared alibi would be of no use. He'd been seen to use it no more than an hour since, when he left the house in which he was a week-end guest to come hurtling across country for his murder. He had to have it!

And the tapping came again, insanely gleeful, diabolically reflective. The man in the chair was beyond reach. No more harm could come to him. And he could toy with the living man as a cat toys with a mouse.

Numb with unreasoning terror of the thing that was dead, and yet moved, that was not two yards away and yet was removed by all the gulf between the living and the dead, the murderer pressed the flashlight button again. He clenched his teeth as he seemed to sense the stoppage of a stealthy movement by the thing in the chair. His cigarette-case was gone, missing from the table.

The flashlight beam swept about the room in a last flare of common sense. It was empty. No one, nothing. . . . Nothing in the house except the dead man, to seize that one small article which would damn the murderer.

He remembered suddenly and switched off the light. There were neighbors. Not near neighbors, but people who would notice the glow of a flashlight if it met their eyes. They knew the old man for what he was, and probably whispered among themselves of buried treasure or hidden money. They would suspect a robber of like mind if they saw the flashlight going.

They might have noticed it then! He had to get the cigarette-case and go away quickly. . . .

Forcing his brain to function while he was stiff with a terror that he could not down, he masked the bulb with his fingers and let a little ray trickle over the table. The old, claw-like hand. It seemed to be nearer the telephone than it had been. The cloth table-top. No monogrammed case. It had been there. He had seen it not two minutes since. But it had vanished utterly.

The living man could have screamed with rage. He seemed to feel the thing in the chair shaking with silent laughter. The chair was shaking! God! It *was* shaking!

The murderer fled to the doorway upon caving knees, his whole soul writhing in panic. And then he heard the reassuring purring of his motor-car, waiting to carry him away. Outside was sanity. Only within was nightmarish horror. He could not go away and leave that case to hang him. . . .

He was grinding his teeth as he came back. He was doggedly desperate in his resolution. He got down on his hands and knees and let a little trickle of light slip between his fingers. Instinctively he kept out of reach of the dead fingers. Not yet had he come to think of danger there. The thing in the chair enraged him while it terrified him, because it mocked him. But he would get this one thing and go. . . .

THE floor was bare. The case had not fallen from the table to the floor.

He let his light go out again, while his scalp crawled. But he could not go without the case. Leaving it, he left safety—perhaps life—behind. There was no single thing to connect him with this murder save that. His alibi was prepared, was perfect. But he had been seen to use that case an hour ago. Found here, it would damn him. If it were carried away, he would be unsuspected.

He had planned it perfectly. That was the only flaw in the whole plan, and he had only to pick up the monogrammed case of silver to be both safe and rich. Why, he'd even planned out the funeral! He would be dutifully grieved. Some of the neighbors would be there—some because it was the proper thing, but more from curiosity. The only person who would really regret the old man's death would be the telephone-girl. The old man paid her a small extra sum to give his line special attention. It was, he said, his burglar-protection. And every month, grudgingly, he paid her a small sum, with a deduction for each time he could claim to have been kept waiting for a number.

There was a scratching sound from the chair. The murderer sprang to his feet, his terror making his throat dry. The scratching came again, like a fingernail on rough-polished sheet metal. The telephone! The thing in the chair was reaching for the telephone!

The murderer acted without thought, in pure sweating fear. He sprang like a wildcat. The table toppled heavily to the floor and the telephone went spinning against the wall. He flung the extended wrist aside. . . .

It resisted his hand. And he jerked away and stood moaning softly, in an ecstasy of fear and desperation.

Once more the feeling as if the thing in the chair were laughing, shaking in silent, ghastly laughter. The one thing that held the murderer

in the room was the cigarette-case that could hang him. And the thing was tormenting him and shaking in horrible mirth. . . .

Long past the power to reason, the murderer brought forth all his will-power. It was really a conflict between two fears, a panic-stricken horror of the dead thing before him, and terror of a noose that awaited him. He flashed his light despairingly—and saw the cigarette-case.

It was projecting invitingly from the pocket of the thing in the chair. It had been on the table. It had been filched from beneath his descending hand. It was in the dead man's pocket, as if tucked there by stiff and clumsy fingers—or as if left projecting to lure him to a snatch. And the extended hand, with its clawing fingers outstretched, quivered a little as if with eagerness for him to make an attempt to get it.

He whimpered. It was trying to get him to reach for the case, invitingly in sight. But if he reached, he would be within the length of its arms. And they would move stiffly but very swiftly to seize him. . . .

He whimpered. He dared not go without that case. He dared not reach in his hand to seize it. He sobbed a little with pure terror. Then, glassy-eyed with horror, he swung his foot in a sudden, nervous kick. If he could kick the case from its insecure position, he could retrieve it from the floor. . . .

He was quivering. The kick failed. The thing remained motionless, but it seemed to him that it was tensing itself for a sudden effort. . . . The murderer wrung his hands. He kicked again, and sheer icy fear flowed through his veins as he felt the soft resistance of the cloth against his foot. But he missed.

He heard a curious little chuckling sound that could not possibly have come from anything but a human throat. It was a human voice. It was syllables, divided to form words, but

words in a strangled, distant, ghastly tone. . . .

Drenched in the sweat of undiluted horror, the murderer swung his foot a third time, desperately, with his eyes glassy and the breath whistling in his throat.

Then he screamed. . . .

The flashlight dropped to the floor. There was utter darkness. There was no noise for seconds save those chuckling sounds. They were louder, now. The murderer stood rigid, balanced upon one foot, his eyes terrible. He screamed again. Something had hold of his foot. Something grasped at his trouser-leg and tugged at it gently. Not strongly. Gently. But it was tugging. . . .

The murderer screamed and screamed, with his eyes the eyes of a man in the depths of hell. Not because his foot was caught, but because something was pulling him, weakly but inexorably, in furtive little tugs, toward the man in the chair—who was dead.

Then sharp nails sank in his flesh and the murderer broke away. He fell, and in falling his slipping foot crashed against the leg of the chair, and that turned over upon him. . . .

THE telephone operator had been listening since the receiver was flung off its hook by the fall of the telephone. She had spoken several times, asking what was wanted, and the sound had issued from the re-

ceiver on the floor like—well—like the chuckle of a man amused in a horrible fashion. When she heard screaming, she sent men to investigate. And they found a dead man tumbled out of the chair in which he had died, and another man crawling about the room. The living man was crawling about on his hands and knees, his eyes wide and staring and terrified, while a huge pet cat made playful pounces at his trouser-leg, tugging at it, worrying it, pulling backward upon it. And whenever the cat pulled at the bit of cloth, the living man screamed in a sickly, terrified fashion.

They never did get at the rights of the matter, but the coroner was somewhat annoyed by the cat, during the inquest. He was sitting in the chair the dead man had sat in, beside the table on which the telephone stood. And the cat buffeted his coat-tails, hanging down, with playful pats of its paws. The sound was very much like that of a man drumming softly and meditatively upon a table.

But it was not that which annoyed the coroner. He liked cats. What did annoy him was the fact that he had put his lighted cigarette on the edge of the table for an instant, and the cat sank its claws in the table-cover. With the jerk, the cigarette fell from the table into the coroner's pocket, and burned a hole through to the skin.

"If that cigarette had been in its case, now," said the coroner, smiling at his own feeble joke, "it wouldn't have done any harm."

