

# Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"The hand felt like a ring of ice tightening inexorably upon his throat."



# The Unborn

By RONAL KAYSER

*'A vivid and fascinating story of a weird pursuit that dogged the footsteps of Polectoff with doom inescapable*

**G**REGORI POLECTOFF is about to die. He knows that, although he cannot get anyone else to believe. These doctors do not understand the case of Gregori Polectoff. They tap

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his chest, they listen to his heart, they take his temperature, they send dabs of his sputum and his blood on little glass plates to the laboratory; and the upshot of it all is that they declare Polectoff to

be as healthy as themselves. To be sure, Polectoff is a healthy man. Death is not in his tissues and organs and bloodstream. Death is outside of him, and it follows him, death does.

Only God and Polectoff understand this case.

That is not Polectoff's fault. He has tried to explain it—so many times. He tries to tell the doctors about it. The trouble is that they continually interrupt him with foolish questions, questions that have nothing to do with the matter. Polectoff is an obliging chap. He would gladly chat about glands and germs, just to please these doctors. But he hasn't time. He is going to die—very soon now. . . .

Dear God, Polectoff is a dying man. Things flash through his mind so fast, much faster than he could tell of them. . . .

**T**HERE was that night when he sat at the piano on the stage of the great auditorium. To Polectoff, the great shadowy hall beyond the stage looked like a halved, dark melon, seeded with dim yellow lights above the boxes and around the horse-shoe sweep of the balconies.

The music of Polectoff's piano yearned out into that darkness. It was the *Love Call* that he played. The music was molten gold, cadenced with tripping silvery notes. Truly, it was so beautiful that Polectoff himself almost wept.

Or perhaps it was the memory which this *Love Call* always evoked in him that brought tears to his eyes. Always when he played it he saw his studio, its tall windows varnished with frost and the blaze crackling in the fireplace. Indeed, the sound of flame singing on the wood was in the music. And the sobbing bass was Polectoff's own voice:

"Carlotta!" cried the voice. "Be mine!

I love you. Carlotta, marry me—marry me!"

The music ached with this sweet, hot longing. Polectoff played like a madman. He saw the firelight paint its soft and rosy shadows on the woman's body; he felt the warmth of her flesh upon his own; and the piano throbbled forth the great wild pulse that filled all Polectoff's being, until at last his hands fell from the keyboard.

Perhaps half a moment passed before he realized that he was not in the studio, but here, on the stage. . . . A little start ran through his body as the lights flashed up in the auditorium, and he saw the enormous, applauding crowd. People were cheering like mad. Polectoff bowed and bowed again as he walked off the stage.

What an ovation! What a triumph!

After each bow, Polectoff looked up with a smile to the box where Pauline Brand sat. All over the house, women were turning to stare at Pauline, envying her; for what woman could resist this handsome young Polectoff, this dark-eyed god who played like an angel?

The men also looked at Pauline, and envied the pianist. Pauline sat tapping her folded fan against the rail of the box. Her lips smiled imperiously. Her eyes gleamed greenly. Diamonds in a necklace glittered around the slim stalk of her throat. Her arms and bosom, emerging from the evening gown, had the hard and shining perfection of Dresden china. Even the shadow which parted her breasts had a hard look, as if painted there with glossy lacquer.

A woman of ice, perhaps. Nevertheless she was very beautiful; and she was also very rich. And Polectoff was a lucky dog.

The moment he walked into the wings, he was surrounded by admirers who had pushed past the ushers. Polectoff bowed

and smiled in a dozen directions at once; began to scribble his name on the programs that were thrust toward him.

Suddenly he saw Carlotta squeezing through the crowd. He wondered how she had scraped together the money for a ticket. She'd written to him, asking for a theater pass. And he had replied, severely, that he didn't think a recital was quite the place for a woman in her condition.

He looked at her angrily. How shabby her threadbare white cloak appeared among all these ermine wraps! She had scarcely combed her hair at all. Her eyes were red with weeping, her cheeks sunken and wan. As for her body—why, she was disgustingly swollen. . . .

Polectoff would have fled, only the crowd hemmed him in; he had to face her.

"Go to my dressing-room!" he stammered. "I will talk to you later."

"No, Gregori," she said. "You promised that last time. Then you ran away to your hotel and left the porter to fetch your coat. . . . You have got to talk to me here, Gregori."

"Well! What is it—money?" He looked around anxiously; yes, people were staring at them. He whispered, "Give me your program, and I'll pretend to autograph it, I'll write an I O U!"

Polectoff wanted to handle the matter quietly, but Carlotta laughed in his face.

"I already have your I O U," she said grimly. She talked like a third-rate actress. "I've come to demand payment. Tonight."

He stared at her, thunderstruck.

"You promised to marry me, Gregori," she said, exactly as a third-rate actress would have said that. "Well, I've got the license. We'll climb into a cab. There's a clergyman waiting in my apartment."

Someone in the crowd laughed. Some-

one else remarked, "I say, this *is* melodrama!"

**P**OLECTOFF gritted his teeth. So she expected him to marry her, after all—and with the papers filled with accounts of his approaching marriage to Pauline Brand! That showed how selfish Carlotta was. She didn't think of Pauline, nor of him, nor of his career. Only herself!

"Very well," he said, taking her arm. But wait until they got out of the building! If she thought she could get him into any cab, how mistaken she was!

Her voice rattled on. "I'm sorry, Gregori. I don't expect you to live with me—not even support me. You can have your divorce as soon as the baby—*our* child—is born. . . ."

Did she have to say that, then? Right in front of all these people! There passed over his face a black look of hate. She must have known then that he didn't intend to go through with it. For she broke away from him and ran.

Yes, Carlotta ran out onto the great stage and screamed at the audience which was still only moving into the aisles—screamed horrible and obscene things, as it seemed to Polectoff, about him!

Oh, the melodrama of it! But also, the scandal of it. . . .

Polectoff ran after her.

But what was that in Carlotta's hand? She had snatched a knife out of the pocket of her white cloak!

Polectoff saw it too late. He had not even time to turn his face. There was only the glimmer of steel before his eyes, and then the hot slash in his cheek and the cold tick-tock of the blade dragging over his teeth!

He got the knife away from her, Polectoff did. It was clasped in his hand when he struck her. . . . He struck her, and in one blow paid her back for

the agony of his bleeding face, for her blackmailing threats, for everything.

Carlotta sank down on the stage. She tried with her fingers to stanch the wound in her breast, but the blood spurted all over her hands. Her lips moved, and her dying whisper seemed to reach the farthest corner of the auditorium.

"Your child!" said Carlotta to Polectoff. "*The little unborn child!*"

**H**ow could they charge that Polectoff murdered this woman? It had been she, not he, who brought the knife into the auditorium. It was she who struck the first blow. He had acted only in self-defense—he had been crazed with pain—he hadn't even realized that the knife was in his hand! So Polectoff swore when they put him on the stand.

But perhaps the jury didn't believe him. There was that horrible, haggled white scar on his cheek—it gave his face such a twisted, brutal, and murderous look!

Perhaps also the jury was influenced by the crowd—that great courtroom full of faces which uttered a sigh of hatred and contempt when the handcuffed prisoner was led before the stern, black-robed judge.

Who did not hate Polectoff? His own lawyers could scarcely forbear to sneer at him—he told his story with such a wretched, hang-dog air. He had not one friend left in the world. As for Pauline Brand, she had not spoken to him since that awful night, and his letters were returned unopened.

Everything went against Gregori Polectoff. But the worst was the way the prosecuting attorney kept dragging the child into it—although Polectoff was not on trial for killing the child.

"Gentlemen of the jury," the prosecuting attorney said, "two murders were committed on that stage. Two lives were snuffed out when Gregori Polectoff

plunged the knife into this young mother's breast. To be sure, as Polectoff says, Carlotta struck him first; but did the little unborn babe strike him, too?"

"Objection!" cried Polectoff's lawyers.

"Nevertheless," said the prosecuting attorney, "the babe is dead, and all your objections will not restore it to life. The little child will never coo and gurgle in its crib. The little rosy feet will never take their first tottering steps. The tiny, rosebud mouth can never lisp those precious words, *Mama* and *Daddy*——"

"Objection sustained!" exclaimed the judge.

Nevertheless, the jury had heard the words. They frowned, for they were family men. The State had seen to that.

"Gentlemen of the jury," the prosecutor went on, "the charge is murder in the second degree, because we cannot prove that Polectoff premeditated his crime. Therefore I cannot ask that he be hanged by the neck until dead——"

"Objection!"

"Sustained!"

"Very well, I do *not* ask that he be hanged!" the prosecutor shouted. "But I do ask that he be locked up for the rest of his natural life. The State asks it. Society demands it. The voice of Carlotta sobs from the grave and asks for a life sentence. And gentlemen, fathers all of you, do you not hear one other tiny voice that cries from Carlotta's coffin? Oh, gentlemen, I hear that voice—the voice of the unborn—and it cries, '*Guilty! Guilty!*' "

The jury found Polectoff guilty.

The judge sentenced him to twenty years at hard labor.

"With time off for good behavior," Polectoff's lawyers reminded him, but they did not offer to shake his hand. "We did our best for you," the lawyers said, "but we couldn't beat the child—*the little unborn child*——"

**N**OBODY could say that Polectoff behaved as other than a model prisoner. He was a gentleman, he cared nothing for the prison riffraff; only one man in the Big House did he ever speak to, and that came years later. This man had once been a respectable banker. Polectoff and the ex-banker fell to walking together in the exercise yard, and soon found that they had something in common.

"See!" the ex-banker would boast, taking a letter from the pocket of his striped jacket. "My little girl writes to me, and she is only nine years old!"

And Polectoff found himself saying, "Mine would have been eight this spring, had she lived." For he never doubted that the unborn child would have been a girl.

"My little one is a red-head, her curls are like a ball of fire," said the other.

"Mine had straight, black hair, surely," said Polectoff, thinking of Carlotta.

"Mine is named Theodora," said the ex-banker. "What did you name yours?"

"She had no name," Polectoff faltered.

The other looked at him queerly. "Ah, she must have died very young?"

"Very young!" sighed Polectoff.

The child would have been twelve years old when one day Polectoff was summoned to the warden's office. "Gregori Polectoff," said the warden, "here is your parole. You have behaved well here; see to it that you go straight on the outside." Then, seeing the convict's downcast and troubled face he added, "Hold up your head, man! So far as human society is concerned, you have expiated the crime for which you were sentenced. The rest is between you and your God."

It was true, Polectoff felt that he had atoned for Carlotta's death. But what of that other murder? Had he atoned for it? Was that between him and God, then?

**T**O BE sure, Polectoff's concert days were over. Besides the horrible twisted scar on his face, his fingers had stiffened under hard labor in the prison. He no longer had the concert pianist's touch . . . his fingers dragged on the keys and gave to his playing a weary, sad, and haunted sound. His taste in musical scores had changed, too. He never cared to attempt Brahms or Chopin or Liszt in these days; neither did he compose any more *Love Calls*. He wrote a sentimental melody called *Little Maid in My Heart*, and another, *Daughter of Mine*.

Polectoff got employment in a St. Louis radio station, where he was billed as the "Prison Pianist." Something in his music appealed to thousands of listeners; strangely enough most of all to those who had recently lost a dearly loved child. . . . He got much fan mail, and a salary of one hundred and fifty dollars a week. The papers related that he gave most of his salary, and all the royalties from his songs, to the Fund for Homeless Children.

Truly, Polectoff had turned a new leaf, people said.

Then the thing happened which changed the course of his life. One wild, windy, bitter night he left the broadcasting studio and walked swiftly through the deserted streets toward his apartment. In this neighborhood of tumbledown factories, he saw a sight which caused his heart to melt with pity.

In the doorway of one of the buildings cowered a shivering child of perhaps thirteen years. She wore no cloak, nor any bonnet, and the wind flattened her scant, thin white cotton dress against her piteously emaciated body. Polectoff clenched his warmly gloved hands in anger against a world where such things could be. At once he stripped off his own coat and held it out to the child.

"Come, little daughter," said Polectoff, whose teeth chattered as the freezing blast pierced him. "Let me get a cab and take you home."

From the darkness a thin voice answered. "But I have no home."

"No home!" cried Polectoff. "Good God, no home to go to on a night like this!" He remembered the asylum to which he had given so many dollars. "You shall come with me, then, to a very nice place where there are many little girls to play with—you will like that, won't you?"

"I don't know," said the child. "I have never played with other children."

"But that is monstrous, little daughter!" exclaimed Polectoff. Then, as the child still hesitated, he added kindly, "Come, tell me your name."

"I cannot," said the girl. "I think that I have no name."

Was it the cold which made Polectoff shudder? He bent over and peered closely into the child's white, wan, piteous face. . . . Two screams shrieked down the wind. One was the girl's. She had been frightened, perhaps, by his scarred and twisted face. But why did Polectoff scream?

He sprang back—not too soon, for at that moment a great coping-stone crashed down from the roof and smashed the sidewalk to a thousand pieces right in front of the doorway.

Polectoff ran. His feet hammered the sidewalk like pistons. His heart was another piston thumping against his ribs. He ran all the way to his apartment, locked and barred the door behind him, and threw himself into a chair—then leaped to his feet and began to pace the floor.

All night Polectoff walked the floor. He called himself a fool a hundred times over. He told himself that he was a sick man, because his head ached as if a band of iron had been riveted around his skull.

He argued that he was drunk with the great tumblers of whisky he swallowed. Things would look very different in the morning, thought Polectoff.

In the morning, without a word of explanation to anyone, he fled from St. Louis and the child—that little child.

ON THE San Francisco waterfront, Polectoff got a job in an outlandish restaurant where his twisted face only added to the "atmosphere." His music suited the place, also. Nowadays he never played *Little Maid in My Heart* nor *Daughter of Mine*; in fact, he played no music that could be recognized at all. Continually his fingers improvised as they strayed over the keyboard—improvised strange, weird and fearsome melodies which sounded like the wind shrieking through graveyards, like the sobbing of banshees over lonely moors, like the rattle of chains on the gallows. Family parties never dined here, for at the sound of Polectoff's music children invariably burst into frightened tears; the very newsboys, hardened as they were, gave the place a wide berth. The restaurant reaped a great harvest from the jaded thrill-seekers, but Polectoff got only twenty-five dollars a week.

He held this job for a year and a half. Then very late one night, just as he left the restaurant, his way was blocked by two men quarreling in front of the café. One had drawn a pistol and was threatening to kill the other. At the same instant Polectoff glimpsed the girl leaning against a lamp-post watching the scene.

A dreadful chill shuddered through his veins. It was the same girl, no doubt of it; although she had grown taller, and now her small breasts sprang forward and made points against the cheap white frock.

Polectoff ran. . . . In almost the same instant, the gun barked and the

bullet drilled through the restaurant's glass door. This time he had just escaped being shot through the heart!

Polectoff fled to New York. Afterward, he could not remember all of the cities where he had lived. . . .

**H**ERE in Chicago, he lived for a while that summer on West Goethe Street. He liked that because he could easily walk over to the big beach. Oak Street Beach they called it, though actually the swimmers congregated all the way up to North Avenue. He enjoyed beaches. The noise and smell and feel of a crowd gave him a feeling of safety. The sun and the hot sand warmed the prison chill which had come back into his bones. Sometimes, instead of lying in the sand, he turned north along the embankment where the good swimmers went because the deep water permitted diving.

Polectoff could sit by the hour watching the firm bodies of the young women as they came up on their toes, arched gracefully high in the air, and then sped like straight arrows into the water.

Many men liked to ogle these girls, Polectoff's eyes were different. They were like the eyes of a proud, wistful father. . . .

Why should he not sit here? He had nothing else to do. Polectoff had long since given up playing in public because that invariably meant night work; and now at night he locked himself in his room. He gave music lessons, but not many: he was not a popular teacher. Boys complained that he was a great, ugly, impatient bear. And girls complained that he looked at them in such a queer way! And besides, it would happen sooner or later that when they tapped at the door he would not let them into his "studio."

"Who is there?" Polectoff would cry.

"It is I, Marguerite," the student might say.

"Ah, I know better. I saw you last night when I peeked out of the window, just once. Your name is not Marguerite. You have no name!" Polectoff would sob.

Nevertheless, in spite of these fears, he had never actually seen the girl by daylight until this day at the lake.

She was almost naked, as girls go to the beach nowadays, with just the tiniest strip of white swim-suit on her pale body: pale, for in spite of the sun her skin had the whiteness of milk. . . . Polectoff almost wept, for all of his fear. The girl was nineteen now. Her breasts lifted proudly, taut and straining against the knitted tightness of the swim-suit; her lips were fresh, dewy, and scarlet; her hair fell in a black cascade to her shoulders.

"I am sorry," Polectoff wanted to say to her. "I, who cheated you of life, could weep for your lost beauty. I could weep because you will never dive like the other girls, and never feel the cool lake divide about your body. Because no lips can touch your mouth, or the face of a lover be buried in your hair. . . ."

How could Polectoff speak to her? He did not even know her name!

He ran. . . . Only he had gotten down too close to the embankment. The girl put out her hands—you might have thought, to snatch him from some great danger, but really she pushed him, and Polectoff fell into the water. He couldn't swim. He floundered, and the dark wet green strangled in his nostrils and throat; it burned like acid. His head filled with an agonizing pain. An expanding pressure seemed to burst his skull. "I am dying," thought Polectoff. "That is her revenge on me."

As he sank deeply into the lake, his wide-open eyes saw the girl leaning out over the embankment to stare at him. She smiled. Or was that the rippling of the water?



The next moment a powerful red-clad body rushed through the depths toward Polectoff. Strong hands lifted him onto the embankment. The life-guard spoke angrily. "Whatsa idea, yuh old fool? Suicide?"

Polectoff muttered, "I was pushed in."

A crowd collected. Dozens of people had witnessed the incident, and their voices brawled in Polectoff's ear. "He's a liar!" the voices exclaimed. "He just ran and jumped in!"

Polectoff was glad to close his mouth and say no more about it. Trembling, sick at heart, and with water dripping from his soaked garments, he crept back to the place on West Goethe Street.

The terror of this happening! He had never been so frightened before! He could see that daylight offered him no protection now; and besides, this was the first time the girl had actually raised her own hand against him. Always it had been an accident, before—or something that looked like an accident. More and worse, this time he could not really run away, for he had no money. He could move to another rooming-house, but she would find him—as she always did.

Polectoff sank into a chair. How was it that she always traced him? He buried his face in his hands. His face! Of course! What could be easier than to trace a man with a face like his? He had tried to grow a beard; but then hair never grew on the scar, so that was useless.

A cunning idea came into Polectoff's mind. But now he needed money—a great deal of money. \* \* \*

**T**HE best he could get was a job pounding a tinny piano in the back room of a Clark Street saloon. A change had come over his music; he never played those strange, weird, and frightening improvisations any more. On the contrary, he hammered out dance tunes—ribald,

wild, intoxicating rhythms which sobbed a feverish sex hunger. When Polectoff played these melodies, the bodies of the dancers in the back room of the saloon fused together, the men paled with desire, and the eyes of the women glazed as if in some ecstatic trance. Showers of silver tinkled in the glass tumbler on the piano. Polectoff counted the coins anxiously.

One night his fingers groping over the discolored keys picked out the *Love Call*; only this was not the *Love Call* as he had played it in the great auditorium years before. Now the music was fool's gold, decorated with quicksilver. It belonged to the world of illusion, the world of never-will-be. The sound of flame singing on the wood was a song that would never be sung, and the sobbing bass was the voice of a lover who would never speak.

"Oh, Nameless One!" cried the voice. "You cannot be mine, for you were never born! I cannot love you, for you never were!"

The music ached with this sad, lost love—the love which could not be, because Polectoff had killed it so long ago. . . .

His hands lay like crushed things on the keyboard. Someone thrust a whisky glass into his fingers. Polectoff started, and raised the glass to his lips. The stuff seared his mouth, and an odor of burnt almonds stung his nostrils. With a scream, Polectoff hurled the liquor to the floor, turned from the piano, and stared across the little room.

Yes, there she sat! Alone, at that little table in the corner—her eyes like sharpened points of carbon, her scarlet mouth cruelly smiling, her bare shoulders and bosom rising out of a white fluff of gown. Dear God, she had tried to poison Polectoff!

And this was the first time he had ever seen her *inside* a building. Perhaps the music had lured her in—or perhaps it was

merely that she had gotten older, and more used to the ways of living men.

Polectoff stumbled between the tables, braced himself at the bar. "Water!" he gasped. "Water—my mouth is on fire——"

"Wassamat'?" the saloonkeeper asked. "Wassamat' you no make duh music?"

"I've been poisoned!" Polectoff stammered. "The girl—the one in the corner—she tried to kill me again."

The saloonkeeper, breathing heavily, looked past Polectoff's shoulder into the back room.

"You beega fool!" he said. "Damn beega fool! Isnuh gurl in duh corner!"

Polectoff tottered out of the saloon.

FOUR weeks later the plastic surgeon removed the bandages from Polectoff's face. Polectoff crept to the mirror and stared long at his own image. . . . It wasn't a handsome job, surely. The quack had bungled the business badly. The new skin grafted on Polectoff's cheek had a gray, glued-on look. Stretched tight, it showed the wasted collapse of the muscles underneath. One might have thought that this one side of Polectoff's face had been mummified, or that a part of him had died and dried up while the rest went on living.

But Polectoff smiled. Or rather, the living half of him smiled.

"At least you have changed me!" cried Polectoff. "No one will recognize me?—say, someone who has seen me only a dozen times in the last seven years? And then usually at night? For just a few seconds?"

"My dear man," said the surgeon, "your closest friend won't know you now."

It was true. And it became even truer with the passing of a few days. Polectoff's face seemed to shrink as it healed. His

whole countenance was drawn askew, puckered, and deformed. All of his features seemed to be twisting around in an effort to get a good look at the sunken place where the scar had been.

How happy Polectoff was! His step quickened joyously in the street, and often he stopped to gaze at his reflection in the shop windows. Or while he strolled in the park, he bent over the circular basins where fish swam and eagerly scanned the watery replica of himself. At these times he laughed softly. And when Polectoff laughed he became unrecognizable indeed.

Now at night he flung himself down to such glad sleep as he had not known in twenty long years.

Yet this one night he awakened. . . .

Without making a sound, Polectoff turned his head. . . . The room was utterly dark, for he had long ago got into the habit of fastening his windows and tightly drawing the shades. Also it was second nature to lock and bar his door, and he remembered distinctly that he *had* locked the door, and barred it, too! But for all that, Polectoff was not alone in the room. . . .

His limbs felt like sticks of wood, his tongue hung as a leaden weight, his very eyes froze in their sockets. His scalp prickled. A horrible icy shudder laved his spine.

Dear God, but Polectoff could not even scream out in this moment of mortal peril! He could only stare at the girl who bent over his bed. She wore a frothy negligee of white which revealed her snowy shoulders and her breasts. He could see that, for Earth knew no darkness black enough to blot out her whiteness. Her hand, too, was queerly radiant—yet cold as hoarfrost when she touched his face. . . .

Yes, her fingers like five little icicles went prowling over Polectoff's face, ever

so lightly until they found the papery stiffness of his new cheek. Then the fingers began to palp his flesh, taking it up in tiny rolls, kneading it, until their chill tips found the old, buried scar tissue. Now, with a firm pressure which ached its cold deep into his flesh, a single finger traced over the parchment skin, traced the corded seam running from Polecotoff's mouth up to his cheekbone, between the eye and the ear.

A little sigh parted her lips, and Polecotoff saw the flash of her white teeth.

He lay perfectly still while again the cold, small hand traveled down his face. His teeth chattered involuntarily; he made no other sound.

The hand fumbled over the man's bare throat. Polecotoff could not sense the fingers individually, now. The hand felt like a ring of ice tightening inexorably upon his throat, mashing the cartilage, constricting the windpipe, blocking the great arteries. . . .

Then Polecotoff screamed. The grip of the fingers bleared the sound, thinned it to a fantastic wail of terror. Polecotoff began to thrash his limbs about in the bed. The rusty springs shrieked. Their sound was more human than the curdling sobs that jangled over Polecotoff's protruding tongue. Suddenly a chink of light fell through the crack beside the door. Fists pounded on the panel.

Polecotoff sat up in bed. He was alone in the room. Moving stiffly, like a puppet on strings, he tottered to the door and flung it open.

"You came just in time!" he groaned.

The landlady gathered her robe more tightly about her broomstick figure.

"In time!" she said angrily. "After you've waked up every soul in the house? What's going on in this room, anyway, I should like to know!"

"She was choking me to death," Polecotoff faltered, "That girl——"

The woman gave her gray braids an indignant jerk. "I don't allow no girls in my gentlemen's rooms," she said indignantly. "You send the hussy a-packing, do you hear?"

Polecotoff wet his lips. "You don't understand——"

"I understand plenty!" Her voice was tart. "I'll be asking for this room tomorrow, Mr. Ugly-Face. Now you get your floosy out of here, or I'll be calling the police——"

The police! Why had he not thought of them before? Polecotoff hurriedly flung on his clothes, rushed from the house. He reeled along the street. His face and throat burned like fire where the fingers had touched. . . . What could the police do for Polecotoff? He hardly thought of that—not until he found himself in the precinct station, being stared at by a big Irish desk sergeant.

What could the police do, indeed? Polecotoff did not even trouble to try to explain the case. He turned away from the desk, stumbled blindly toward the door.

"Hey!" cried the sergeant. "Where 're ye goin'?"

"I am going to—die," said Polecotoff.

"You can do that more comfortable-like in a hospital," said the sergeant, and reached for the telephone.

\* \* \* \* \*

**H**ERE is Polecotoff in the consulting-room, at last, putting on his shirt now that the doctors have finished with thumping his chest. These are all young doctors, very smart in their interns' garb, three or four of them practising on Polecotoff all at the same time. Clearly these young men do not see a case like Polecotoff's every day. It is strange that they do not pay more attention to what he says.

"Come," says Polecotoff, and walks to the window. "You can see her down

there on the street! The woman in white, with the great black eyes—she keeps staring up at us."

The doctors cannot see anyone in the street. But then, Polectoff is used to being told that. . . .

"I know her well," says Polectoff. "She is always following me. Once she tried to poison me—and once she pushed me into the lake——"

"You should have her arrested, then," the youngest doctor thinks. "What is her name?"

Polectoff is staggered by the question. He does not know her name. He tries again, doggedly, to make them understand. "And tonight she came to my room—she had me by the throat!"

Says one of the doctors, "You are going to have that feeling of being caught by the throat many times, mister. Whoever patched your face severed the nerves——"

These young doctors are suddenly silent as an old man with a beard walks into the consulting-room. Again Polectoff tells his story. . . .

"Ah!" cries the bearded man. "I know how it is, my friend." And he slaps Polectoff's shoulder. "We'll get around that young lady. We'll send you to a place where she can't get at you, Polectoff. Where the windows are barred and the doors are made of steel, and there are guards about. Would you like that, my friend?"

Polectoff knows that neither steel doors nor guards can keep out the girl. But the old man has a kind face, and Polectoff does not wish to offend him.

"One place or another, it is all the same to me," says Polectoff.

The old man laughs. "But there are papers to be signed," he says, and winks waggishly. "You understand, it is not everyone who can get into this exclusive

place. So, for the time being, you had better go up to the men's ward on the sixteenth floor."

Polectoff shrugs his shoulders and follows one of the young doctors into the elevator.

The ward is a large room, filled with beds from which white faces stare at Polectoff. Fully dressed as he is, and walking on his own two feet, what is he doing here? They do not know that Polectoff is going to die before they do.

He lies down on a bed at the end of the room. The breeze from the open window stirs over his face; and it is a good breeze, when one is not going to feel it much longer. Polectoff lies very still and thinks the long thoughts of a dying man.

Five or ten minutes pass. Suddenly Polectoff sits bolt-upright on the bed.

"Dear God!" cries Polectoff. "*Who is that?*"

"It's only the nurse," says the man in the next cot.

Polectoff doubts that. This girl is dressed in white, she has black hair, and her lips are a scarlet thread. Polectoff jumps off the bed. The girl drops whatever it is that she is carrying, and hurries toward him. Her hands are outstretched.

It does not seem to be the same girl, after all. Polectoff lets her put her hand on his sleeve. . . . The next instant he has wrenched his arm away from her, for her fingers are cold as ice, as cold as if they had been dipped in ether. . . .

There is a smell of ether about her, too, as if that were what she had spilled on herself.

But Polectoff is not to be fooled twice. "I know who you are!" he shrieks. "Your name is Death!"

The girl tries to seize him in her cold hands. But he is too fast for her.

He jumps out of the window, Polectoff does.