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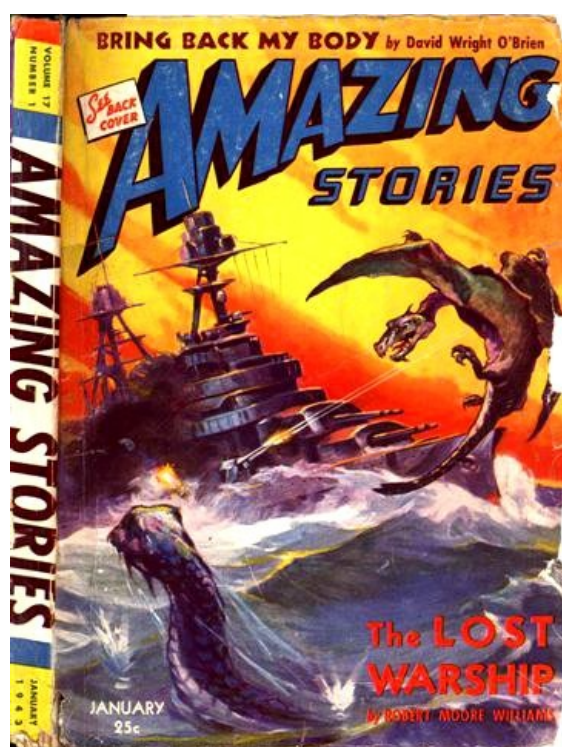
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## DEATH MAKES A MISTAKE

By P. F. COSTELLO

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When Reggie Van Fiddler sauntered into the cool somber depths of the Midland Club's lobby, he was feeling in an exceptionally amiable mood. There was a song in his heart and a bland, dreamily vague smile on his long, narrow face.

This state of blissful tranquility could be attributed to the fact that Reggie's tan and white shoes were taking him directly toward the Club Bar, where he planned to while away the day sipping various long, cool drinks. And Reggie was always happy when the immediate future held the prospects of a drink.

He nodded brightly to a uniformed attendant.

Mr. Demise had Reggie Van Fiddler's name in his book, but Reggie didn't want to be on any list, so he set out to correct the mistake!

"Glorious morning, isn't he?" he said.

"It was a glorious morning," the attendant corrected politely.

Reggie looked blankly at a clock on the wall and a puzzled frown spread over his equine features.

"Well, well," he muttered, shaking his head, "how'd that happen?" He sauntered on toward the bar, nibbling at a hang nail. The morning had slipped away from him somehow. Here it was two o'clock in the afternoon already. It was quite a blow.

He remembered then that he had slept until twelve thirty and he brightened considerably. That explained it. Whistling merrily he strode on into the dim cool bar, with its heavy brown fixtures and solid atmosphere of masculinity.

The bartender set up his usual drink and with knowledge born of long experience, immediately began the preparation of a second.

Reggie sipped his drink and relaxed.

For several moments he stood at the bar, lazily contented, his brain slowed to about one revolution per minute. Finally he happened to glance toward the end of the bar and he noticed a small, dark, narrow-eyed man watching him closely.

Reggie smiled uncertainly and returned to his drink. The dark man at the end of the bar was the only other customer and Reggie knew that he was not a member of the club, for he had never seen him before in his life.

Reggie finished his drink and when the bartender set another before him he glanced again toward the end of the bar. The little dark man was still there, regarding him, it seemed, with a steady fixed stare.

Reggie coughed nervously and gulped his drink. There was something in the dark little man's beady-eyed gaze that disturbed him. He had another quick drink and peeked from the corner of his eye at the little dark man.

There was something sinister about the chap, he felt sure. Reggie was the owner of an extremely lurid imagination and now, warmed by the glow of alcohol, he began to envision all sorts of wild possibilities.

After his fourth drink he was certain that the man was an Axis agent. Just why an Axis agent would be staring at him he had no idea, but he still felt sure the man was a Nazi.

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Reggie finished his drink and set the glass on the bar. Then he casually sauntered toward the door. A few paces from the room's only exit, he paused and under the pretense of inspecting a faded sports print on the wall, sneaked a quick glance at the dark little man.

The dark little man was still staring at him with narrowed, shaded eyes.

Reggie yawned ostentatiously and inched closer to the door. He was going to make a break for it, but it would have to be fast and clever. His heart was pounding with more gusto than usual and there were bright spots of excitement in his pale cheeks. This new role of dodging the Gestapo appealed enormously to his comic strip sense of melodrama.

Headlines popped before his mind's eye.

### **REGGIE VAN FIDDLER MAKES ESCAPE!**

From what he was going to escape he wasn't quite sure, but he felt that the details would be in the body of the news story. Headlines didn't tell everything, did they?

Within a foot of the door he turned casually and took one last look at the little man who was staring so intently at him. Then, with a sudden slithering motion, he slipped through the door.

He collided heavily with a small figure.

"I'm sorry," he stammered. "I'm in a bit of a hurry."

He turned and started away, but he had barely taken three strides when he jerked to a stop. An expression of dazed amazement stole over his face and his sleepy eyes opened wide.

Wheeling suddenly he stared back at the small figure he had collided with. The man was still standing in the corridor that led from the bar, regarding Reggie with a fixed, thoughtful expression.

And he was the same dark little man Reggie had left *inside* the bar room seconds before!

Reggie gulped audibly. His adam's apple bobbed in his throat like a mouse in a sock.

*How had the dark little man gotten out of the bar ahead of him?*

Reggie didn't know and he had no inclination to wait and ask questions. With one last incredulous

look over his shoulder he wheeled and loped across the lobby, down the marble steps, through the club's revolving doors and into the street.

He walked swiftly, mopping his forehead with his handkerchief.

The experience had been an unnerving one. When he reached the end of the block he hailed a cab and gave the driver the address of another bar.

As the cab rolled across the Loop Reggie settled back and gnawed nervously at his finger nails. Thoughtful meditation and analysis were not his strongest suits; in fact any thinking at all was an annoying chore to him, but he felt now that he had better bend his brain to the problem of the dark little man whom he'd seen at the club.

The chap was obviously interested in him, but why? There was no reasonable answer to that question, and there was no explanation to the way the little fellow had popped up *outside* the bar, when Reggie had seen him, a split-second before, *inside* the bar.

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Reggie was still stewing over these matters when the cab came to a stop before a swanky glitter joint which catered to afternoon revellers and jitterbugs of both sexes.

Inside the smoky, dimly lighted den of din and discord Reggie forgot his troubles long enough to order a drink, his fifth of the afternoon. He was conscious of a vague buzzing between his ears and there was a pleasant mellow glow in the region of his solar plexus.

Had it not been for his disturbing experience at the Midland club, he would have been feeling very, very fine.

When his drink arrived he sipped it appreciatively and glanced about the crowded bar, looking for a familiar face. In one corner of the room he saw a tall young man in tweeds lounging against the wall with a drink in his hand. With a glad cry Reggie scrambled from his bar stool and lurched across the crowded floor, weaving his way with drunken dexterity through the jitterbugging maniacs.

"Hi!" he cried, when he reached the tweed-clad young man's side. "How've you been, Ricky? Have a drink?"

"Been fine," the young man answered. "Got a drink. Name isn't Ricky."

"Not Ricky?" Reggie shook his head frowning. "Could've sworn you were good old Ricky Davis, chap I knew at school. Well, how're things?"

"Good," the young man answered. "Have a drink?"

"Got one," Reggie said. "Got to go now. It's been nice seeing you again, Ricky."

He started to weave his way back to the bar. Suddenly he stopped, his eyes focusing in fascination on the figure of a man at the bar. A man who had appropriated the seat which Reggie had vacated.

The man was small and dark. His eyes were narrow and inscrutable. He was the same person Reggie had seen at the club.

The breath left Reggie's lungs in a rush.

Obviously the man had followed him here!

As he stood, transfixed, in the middle of the floor, the man turned and looked straight at him, a peculiar thoughtful expression on his dark face. After studying Reggie for a long interval he turned slowly back to the bar.

Reggie swallowed what was left of his drink in one gulp, but the liquor had no effect on him. After the shock he'd received it would take liquid dynamite to bolster him up.

He reeled back to the tall young man who was leaning against the wall.

"Ricky!" he cried hoarsely. "I'm being followed. Axis agents are after me."

"Name isn't Ricky," the tall young man said. "Why?"

"Why what?" Reggie said blankly. He seemed to have fumbled the conversational ball. He wished the young man would speak with more clarity and add a few articles and pronouns to his sentences.

"Why are they following you?" the young man said peevishly. "Nothing better to do?"

"That's just it," Reggie said. "I don't know why I'm being followed. But everywhere I go this little man sticks to me like a postage stamp."

"Where is he now?"

Reggie pointed dramatically at the dark little man.

"At the bar. He took the stool I left. He's right between that fat old man and that young girl with the red hair."

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The tweed-clad young man stared in the direction of Reggie's pointing finger, then he frowned and glanced down at Reggie.

"Any pink elephants, yet?"

"I'm not drunk," Reggie said indignantly. "That man has been following me like a conga partner all afternoon."

The tall young man patted Reggie patiently on the shoulder.

"Sleep and rest will make a new man of you," he said. "Go home. Go to bed. You've got hallucinations."

"Hallucinations!" Reggie cried over the din of the orchestra. "What do you mean? Don't you see the man I mean? Right between the fat old man and the girl with the red hair?"

The tweedish young man shook his head.

"The stool between the fat old man and the red-haired girl is completely unoccupied," he said in the patient voice of a man instructing a very young child.

Reggie shook his head bewilderedly. There was a sudden cold hollow in the pit of his stomach. He opened and closed his mouth several times without producing a sound.

"Are you serious?" he finally managed to gasp.

"Certainly," the young man answered. "There's no one on the bar stool you left. You're just seeing things. Take my advice and go home. You've had too much giggle water."

Reggie set his drink down hastily. For a long deliberate moment he studied the back of the dark little man at the bar. Then he shook his head dazedly. Maybe this was all some wild product of his imagination. Maybe he *was* having hallucinations....

He shook his head again and then he shook hands with the young man in the tweed suit.

"I'm going home, Ricky," he said firmly. "Say hello to all the gang for me."

"Name isn't Ricky," the young man said, sipping from his drink, "but I'll tell the boys you were asking."

"Good," Reggie said.

He left the crowded bar by a back entrance. The warm sunshine was pleasant and reassuring. People hurried past him, traffic surged in the streets, and everything was quite normal. He breathed a deep sigh and hailed a cab. He gave the driver the address of his apartment and then settled back against the soft leather cushions.

Sleep was all he needed. That was all.

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When he reached his apartment on the near North Side he had succeeded in convincing himself that his peculiar experiences of the afternoon were only products of his fevered imagination.

As he let himself into his apartment he had firmly resolved to strictly ration his reading of comic strips and spy magazines. They were pretty strong meat if they weren't handled with discretion.

The pleasantly furnished living room of his apartment was shrouded in late-afternoon semi-darkness and, when he closed and locked the door behind him, he switched on the lights.

The first thing he saw when he walked into the room was the little dark man whom he'd seen at the Club and at the bar a few minutes previously.

The dark little man was sitting in a straight chair, his hands resting on his knees. There was a faint smile on his face as he studied Reggie with calm, inscrutable eyes.

Reggie staggered back a few steps, clapping one hand hysterically to his forehead. He couldn't believe his eyes. He had left this man at a bar in the Loop, but here he was now, sitting calmly and unconcernedly in the living room of his apartment.

"How did you get in here?" he gasped.

The dark little man stood up and smiled.

"Is that important?" he asked softly. "I am here and that is all that matters."

Reggie swallowed loudly. There was something disturbing about the calm ambiguity of the man's statement. He rubbed his damp palms together nervously.

"Can I get you a drink?" he blurted.

The dark little man shook his head slowly.

Reggie looked at him uneasily, noticing him in detail for the first time. He was small, hardly more than five feet two and he was slenderly built. His hair was jet black and it combed straight back from a high, delicate forehead. He wore severely tailored black clothes that fitted his small frame without a wrinkle. But his eyes dominated his entire personality, for they were a cold chilling black, lusterless and unwinking, as unrevealing as twin diamonds.

Reggie shivered slightly and looked wistfully toward the door of the apartment. He coughed nervously.

"Sorry to seem rude," he said, laughing weakly, "but I've got to be toddling off now. It's been nice—er—running into you. There are magazines on the table, liquor in the ice box, so just make yourself at home."

He backed cautiously toward the door, smiling nervously.

"Don't wait up for me," he said. "I've—"

"Wait," the dark little man said quietly, "I must talk with you."

"Some other time," Reggie said, feeling behind him for the door knob. "Awfully rushed just now. Sorry but—"

"Wait!" the little man said again, but this time his voice cracked like a whip. "Didn't you hear me? I must talk with you?"

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Reggie jumped at the cracking tone of the man's voice. His hand jerked away from the door knob as if it were red hot.

"Oh, you want to talk to me?" he said foolishly. "I didn't understand you."

"My name," the little man said, "is," he paused and smiled cryptically, "Demise."

"Glad to know you," Reggie said. "My name is—"

"I know your name," Mr. Demise said. "I know everything about you, Reginald Van Fiddler. I know things about you that you don't know yourself."

"Do you now?" Reggie said, becoming interested in spite of himself. "For instance?"

"I know that you are about to take a long trip," Mr. Demise said.

"That's not news," Reggie said. "My draft board just classified me 1-A. I'll be taking a long trip very shortly."

"That is not the trip I am referring to," Mr. Demise said. "You are going on a trip with me."

Reggie blinked. He couldn't think of anyone with whom he would rather not take a trip than this dark, sinister little man who called himself Mr. Demise. What did Demise mean, anyway?

"It's nice of you, and all that," he said, "but I don't think I'll be able to make it. My draft board might not like it."

"They will understand," Mr. Demise said.

"I don't know about that," Reggie said. He was beginning really to worry. There was something damnably inevitable about Mr. Demise's calm statements. "They're pretty ticklish about such things. I think we'd just better forget the whole idea."

"That is impossible," Mr. Demise said.

Reggie rubbed his moist palms on his trouser legs.

"Who are you?" he asked hesitantly. "Have you been following me around all day just to sell me on the idea of a trip? Are you from Cook's tours?"

Mr. Demise smiled and shook his head.

"I am not interested in selling you the idea of a trip. I am simply telling you that you are going on a trip. I have already made all the arrangements. There is nothing that can possibly change them."

"Where am I going?" Reggie asked. His voice was a whisper.

"With me," Mr. Demise said.

"That's no answer," Reggie said, clutching at straws. "Who are you? Where are you going?"

Mr. Demise smiled again, very faintly. He walked slowly to the mantelpiece and plucked a rose from a vase. His hand closed gently over the flower as he turned to face Reggie.

"Perhaps this will answer your questions," he said softly.

He opened his hand and dropped the flower to the floor at Reggie's feet. Reggie's eyes widened in sheer amazement.



**Reggie looked at the seared rose, and then he knew...!**

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For the soft glowing beauty of the flower was faded forever. It lay on the floor, a blackened, dead reminder of its former glory.

"It's dead," he said incredulously. "It withered at the touch of your hand."

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Mr. Demise nodded slowly and there was a wistful sadness in his face.

"All living things die at my touch," he said. "For I am Death!"

"Death!" Reggie echoed. For an instant he stared blankly at Mr. Demise. "Death!" he repeated. "Why that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." He actually felt a sensation of relief in the realization that he'd been entertaining some loony instead of an Axis agent as he'd feared. "You're off your trolley," he said to Mr. Demise. "You'd better get moving before your keeper finds you. Death! What a gag!"

"I assure you it is not a gag," Mr. Demise said slowly. "Your time is near at hand and I have been sent to take you to the land of Darkness."

"Think again, chum," Reggie said emphatically. "I'm not going to Harlem with you or anyone else and that's final."

"It is useless to protest," Mr. Demise said. "Your destiny is sealed. You must come with me."

"You are plain balmy," Reggie said. "I've never heard a sillier yarn in my life. So you're Death, are you?"

Mr. Demise nodded. "I am one of his agents."

"Changing your story a little, aren't you?" Reggie said triumphantly. "Well, since when has Death been announced by personal messengers? A man steps in front of a car. He's killed. That's all there is to it. There aren't little black men standing on the curb pushing him into the street, are there? And they don't come around a couple of hours in advance tipping him off, do they? No!"

"When a mortal passes over," Mr. Demise said, "there is always an agent of Death present superintending the details. But he is not always visible to his charge."

Reggie poured himself a drink and lit a cigarette.

"Well, thanks just the same," he said, "but I don't want any special effects when I pass over. If there's a messenger of Death around I don't *want* to see him. Just let him stay invisible. That's the way I *want* it."

Mr. Demise looked slightly pained. There was an embarrassed look on his normally expressionless features.

"Usually the agent of Death is invisible," he said. "In fact his orders are to remain invisible under all circumstances."

"Okay then," Reggie said. "You're breaking orders. Be a nice obedient chum now and fade away."

Mr. Demise shrugged and stepped backward—and suddenly he was gone! He had disappeared into thin air, soundlessly, instantaneously.

"Why what?" Reggie said blandly. He started to sip his drink when suddenly the full realization of what had happened burst on him. The drink fell from his nerveless fingers with a crash.

He stared frantically about the room.

*Mr. Demise was gone!* It was incredible! It was unbelievable! But it was a fact!

He poured himself another drink and drained it in one breathless gulp. He felt his reason tottering as his gaze swung desperately about the room.

"Mr. Demise!" he cried. "Come back! Where are you!"

"I am here before you," Mr. Demise's voice sounded in the air. "Are you convinced now?"

Reggie mopped his forehead weakly.

"Yes," he gasped. "I'm convinced."

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Mr. Demise reappeared as suddenly as he had vanished. He smiled faintly at Reggie. He was apparently completely unruffled by his transformation.

Reggie poured himself another drink with trembling fingers.

"D-don't do that any more," he pleaded.

"As you wish," Mr. Demise said agreeably. "I am sorry if I shocked you. I can see now that it was a mistake to let you see me in the first place. I understand now why it is strictly forbidden."

Reggie drained his drink.

"I wish you hadn't decided to break regulations," he said moodily. "I've never been so upset in all my life. Why didn't you remain invisible, if you're supposed to? You aren't going to creep into people's hearts if you pop up and announce yourself as an agent of Death and start making speeches about whisking them off to the Land of Darkness. People just don't like that sort of thing. By all means stay invisible in the future."

Mr. Demise shuffled awkwardly and for the first time his poise seemed deserting him.

"You're absolutely right," he said gloomily. "But I was curious."

"That's a fine excuse," Reggie said scathingly. "I should think they'd get a man of tact and diplomacy for your job. Not some nosy person whose curiosity runs away with him."

"You see," Mr. Demise explained miserably, "you happened to be my first assignment. I've had no experience at all in this work and I was curious to see what kind of person I was going to take back with me. And I wanted to get a first-hand reaction from you."

Reggie mixed himself another drink. He was beginning to feel belligerent.

"So?" he cried. "They sent an amateur down to get me, did they? I suppose I don't rate an experienced escort. So they sent you. I'm surprised they didn't just tell the office boy to do the job."

"Your levity is poor taste," Mr. Demise observed frigidly. "I can assure you that I am perfectly qualified to act as your guide to the Other World. I have studied hard to perfect myself for my work and I was considered one of the outstanding pupils in the class which just graduated. You do not have to relieve your spite by making slighting references to my professional ability."

"Bah!" Reggie said. "If you have any professional ability it hasn't been noticeable so far. You're just out of some college, aren't you? You talk like a college boy. You don't make sense."

Mr. Demise looked hurt.

"I'm sorry you're taking this attitude," he said. "I had hoped we could be friends."

"Friends!" Reggie shrieked. "Am I expected to be friendly with some ghoul who comes prowling around threatening to whisk me off to Eternity? What more do they expect of me? To pay my own way too, I suppose."

"Your passage will be taken care of at the other end," Mr. Demise said. "Since you have taken such an ungracious stand we will not dally further."

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"Now wait a minute," Reggie said. He felt his throat getting dry. The prospects of Death were not pleasant. He didn't want to die right now. He had things to do. There was that badminton match next week with Snuffy Smith....

"Can't we put this thing off a while?" he asked hopefully. "There's no sense in rushing things, I always say. Why don't you go off and get yourself a lot of experience and then come back for me?"

"That is impossible," Mr. Demise said flatly. He drew from his inside coat pocket a slim black book which he opened to the first page. "You are first on my list and I must carry out my orders to the letter. All the information as to person, place and method is contained in this book and it would be impossible to change it."

"Place and method, eh?" Reggie said weakly. He ran a finger around the inside of his collar. "You mean you've got the dope there on how it's going to happen and when it's going to happen?"

"Certainly," Mr. Demise replied. "We don't use a hit-or-miss method. Everything is worked out to a science. You, for instance, are—" Mr. Demise paused and shook his head. "No," he continued, "I can't tell you. That is also against instructions."

"You haven't paid much attention to instructions so far," Reggie said sulkily. "Can't you give me a hint as to how I'm going to get it?"

Mr. Demise shook his head firmly.

"That would be an unthinkable breach of conduct," he said, shaking his head severely and frowning. "Absolutely unthinkable."

"All right," Reggie said resignedly. There was no point, he realized, in arguing with this inhuman icicle. "But let's have a drink before we get down to—er—business."

"I am not allowed to drink while on duty," Mr. Demise said primly.

"For gosh sakes," Reggie said disgustedly, "you weren't thinking about your precious orders and regulations when you followed me around, scaring the hell out of me. Oh no! That was all right. But when I ask you to do a little something outside the letter of your instructions it's no soap. If there's anything fair in that I can't see it."

Mr. Demise shuffled uncomfortably.

"It was indiscreet of me to allow you to see me," he said thoughtfully. "Perhaps your objection is justifiable. It might square things a bit if I would take a drink with you. Not that I would expect to enjoy the stuff but it seems the fair thing to do."

"Fine," Reggie said.

He mixed two drinks in somber silence. Because he realized that it was probably the last time he would ever perform that pleasant chore, he put his heart and soul into the task and when he finally handed Mr. Demise his drink it was a veritable masterpiece.

Mr. Demise drank the drink—it was a double Martini with a splash of Quantro—in one long appreciative gulp. He set the glass down and sighed contentedly.

"Another?" Reggie suggested hopefully.

"No," Mr. Demise said, "one is plenty. As a matter of fact," he said, "that's the first drink I ever had. Alcohol is one of our finest helpers but we aren't supposed to touch it. Personally I think its intoxicating effect is greatly overrated."

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Reggie leaned forward and there was a peculiar gleam in his eyes.

"So that was your first drink, eh?" he asked. "And you don't feel anything?"

"Not a thing," said Mr. Demise. "Of course I notice a certain glow, but that's all."

"Just a certain glow, eh?" Reggie said.

"Thash all," Mr. Demise said. He sat down suddenly. "And my tongue ish a lil' thick."

"Well, that's only natural," Reggie said. He mixed another drink and there was a cryptic smile on his lips. "Alcohol is a peculiar thing. One drink will addle a person's wits and the second will act as an antidote. Strange, isn't it?"

Mr. Demise rocked slightly in the chair. His coal-black eyes were a bit glazed. "Ish very strange," he conceded.

"Possibly you'd like to try the antidote?" Reggie said casually.

"Might not be a bad idea," said Mr. Demise.

Reggie handed him the second drink and watched contentedly as Mr. Demise drank it down. Mr. Demise set down the glass.

"You wush right," he said, slumping against the back of the chair. "Absolutely right. Second drink ish an antidote. Jush what I needed."



"Absolutely," Reggie agreed solemnly.

Mr. Demise closed his eyes but he opened them almost immediately. He struggled up to a sitting position.

"I hash something to do," he muttered. His hand groped into the inside of his coat, returned with the slim black book. "Very important," he mumbled. "First assignment. Can't have any slip ups."

Reggie moistened his lips nervously. He eyed the little black book carefully. That might be the way....

"How about another drink, old boy," he said heartily. He mixed one quickly, handed it to Mr. Demise. Mr. Demise took it in his left hand and Reggie deftly plucked the black book from his right hand. Mr. Demise appeared not to notice the exchange. He drank the drink methodically.

Reggie tossed the book under a coffee table.

Mr. Demise climbed unsteadily to his feet.

Reggie took him by the arm. "What say we go out and have a few quick antidotes?" he suggested.

Mr. Demise nodded stupidly. He mumbled something unintelligible and allowed Reggie to lead him to the door. Reggie's brain was working at full speed. If he could just ditch Mr. Demise and get back to the book everything might be saved. His idea was sheer brilliance....

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Their first destination was a bar. Reggie found a cab, shoved Mr. Demise inside and ordered the driver to one of the dozens of friendly bars with which he was familiar.

At the first stop Mr. Demise had two more drinks. When he had drained the second Reggie hauled him to his feet and started for another palate palace. His object was to keep Mr. Demise so bewildered and drunk that he would forget his job.

For a while he succeeded. Mr. Demise followed him helplessly from bar to bar and sat tottering on high stools happily pouring fiery intoxicants into his already overburdened stomach.

But finally he reached the state of saturation where the liquor produced a steadily diminishing effect. Reggie watched him worriedly and ordered more and more drinks.

But it was no use.

In spite of the enormous quantities of liquor he had consumed, Mr. Demise was slowly sobering up. His face was losing its blank expression and an intelligent gleam was creeping back into his eyes.

He began to fumble uncertainly through his pockets, a worried expression settling over his features.

Reggie slapped him on the back resoundingly.

"Have a drink!" he shouted into his ear.

Mr. Demise shook his head stubbornly.

"Got a job to do," he muttered. He went slowly through his pockets and an expression of horror replaced the worried look on his face.

"Where's my book?" he gasped. "I've lost my book! This is terrible. I've got to find it!"

"What book?" Reggie asked innocently.

"The book with all the names and places and dates and methods," Mr. Demise moaned. "I've lost it."

Reggie shrugged philosophically.

"Too bad," he said. "But things are never as black as they seem. Maybe it'll turn up somewhere. The thing to do is just sit tight until someone finds it and reports it."

"I can't wait," wailed Mr. Demise. "These things have to happen on schedule. There'd be an awful rumpus in the complaint department if I started sending people up there haphazardly. And I don't even remember whom I've got on the list. You're the only one I'm sure of."

Reggie choked on his drink.

"Yes," Mr. Demise went on obliviously, "you're the first. I'm sure of that much. And I'd better send you along right away. I'll do that much correctly, at least."

"Now, just a minute," Reggie said, "how're you sure you've got me right? I looked at that book and I don't think I'm the man you want at all."

"You looked at the book!" cried Mr. Demise with sudden suspicion. "So that's where it went. That's why you got me drunk. You stole my book, hoping to evade your destiny, didn't you?"

"Nothing of the sort," Reggie said, forcing a note of outraged indignation into his voice.

"Yes you did," Mr. Demise said. "I'm not going to wait a second longer in your case. Mr. Fiddler, prepare yourself for a long trip and don't plan on coming back."

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Reggie realized that the jig was up. Mr. Demise had a grim business-like note in his voice and there was no hope of prolonging things further. Drastic action was needed, not discussion.

With a leap like a startled gazelle Reggie left his stool and bounded for the door. Before Mr. Demise could turn around, he was in the street, shouting frantically for a cab.

A cab pulled to the curb and Reggie leaped into its dark interior. Over his shoulder he saw Mr. Demise stagger from the bar, a wrathful expression stamped on his dark features.

The cab started away with a roar. Reggie shouted his address at the driver and squirmed about to peek out the rear window.

He saw Mr. Demise clambering into another cab.

"Hurry!" he shouted to his driver.

"Life or death, eh?" the cabby said conversationally.

Reggie winced. "You said it."

The cab caromed around corners, hit the Outer Drive and hurled along like a frightened cottontail until it reached the near North side, where it swung west and sped through the labyrinthine streets that led to Reggie's apartment.

From the rear window Reggie could see Mr. Demise's cab speeding after them, steadily closing the gap. His palms were moist and the effects of the liquor had completely faded, leaving him horribly sober. There was nothing funny about this predicament.

His cab jolted to a stop and Reggie threw a bill at the driver and leaped out and raced into the foyer of his building.

By a miraculous stroke of luck the elevator was not in use. He slammed the door and jabbed the button and the car started upward with a jerk. He breathed a long shuddering sigh of relief. Maybe there would yet be time....

The elevator stopped at his floor. Just as he opened the door and stepped out, the elevator suddenly dropped back down the shaft. One of his legs dangled down the shaft. With a startled squawk he pulled himself onto the floor landing.

Mr. Demise obviously meant business. If he'd been in that elevator everything would be all over now. As it was he still had a chance.

He let himself into his apartment, switched on the light and dove underneath the coffee table. The black book of doom was still there. Frantically Reggie opened it to the first page, found his own name.

He jerked a pencil from his pocket....

He was still scribbling furiously when the door of the apartment banged open and Mr. Demise strode into the room, his face black as a thundercloud.

Reggie dropped the pencil and hid the book from view with his body.

"So!" Mr. Demise cried. "You would try to escape?"

He raised both hands commandingly in the air.

Before he could move again Reggie wheeled about.

"Just a minute," he shrieked. He held out the slim black book to Mr. Demise. "I was sure a mistake had been made. Here! Look for yourself."

"I want no more of your tricks," Mr. Demise warned ominously.

"This is no trick," Reggie said. "You should be grateful to me for catching the error in time."

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Mr. Demise took the book from Reggie and examined it carefully. The frown gradually faded from his face as his eyes lingered on the page. He shuffled his feet awkwardly and cleared his throat.

"It seems," he said in a small, chastened voice, "that a mistake has been made."

Reggie's heart pounded with hope.

"It certainly has," he said. "This entire affair should be reported to someone. That's what happens when you put inexperienced men on the job. You wind up with a bungled mess."

"I don't know how it happened," Mr. Demise said miserably. "All I can say is I'm sorry."

"Fine thing," Reggie said stuffily. "Mess up your job like this and then say you're sorry. I'd advise, Demise, that you lay off the liquor when you're supposed to be working."

"I will in the future," Mr. Demise said humbly.

"See that you do," Reggie said sternly. "Now I'd say you'd better get to work on that first assignment."

"Yes, I will," Mr. Demise said. With drooping shoulders he moved slowly to the door. With his hand on the knob he turned again to Reggie.

"I hate to be a pest," he said, "but I'm afraid I don't know how to go about this job. Maybe you could help me. Where can I find this fellow?"

Reggie chuckled and began to mix himself a drink.

"I'd advise you to try Berchtesgaden," he said. "Just ask anyone you meet. They'll tell you where you can find Adolf Hitler."

"Thank you," Mr. Demise said gratefully. "I won't slip up on this one."

"See that you don't," Reggie said.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DEATH MAKES A MISTAKE \*\*\*

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