

Death Dines Out



by PAUL ERNST (Author of "They Wear Death's Face," etc.)

They were jaded, satiated with the ordinary pleasures of life—those patrons of the Café Styx. But there are some thrills that mortals are not permitted to experience—and live . . .

THEY said it was the soup. They put the chef through the official wringer in an investigation that lasted for weeks. They checked all the ingredients used by all the food manufacturers that went into the consommé that night. The police turned hand-springs trying to pin the blame on somebody for what happened. Naturally! Anything as cataclysmic as that is pretty important!

In the end they reiterated that it was the soup. You read about it. It was my story you read in the papers months ago. I laid the blame on the consommé, too, though I was there that night and

know better. But I couldn't have given the real yarn. Hell, they'd have put me in a straitjacket.

I covered the thing throughout. It was just a matter of chance. I was the guy nearest at hand when the city editor bawled out from his desk that some bird was starting a new kind of café and somebody'd better hop over to his place and get the dope on it.

I hopped. Publicity gag, I thought with a shrug as I took a taxi for the address the city editor had given me. But I had to admit there was a good story in it.

A guy named Macey, retired restaurateur with a little dough to play with, had opened a novelty joint. Rather, he was going to open it next night, and was having a final rehearsal today.

He was calling his place the Café Styx. It was copied after a place in Paris known as the Café Morgue. You've all heard of the Paris joint, probably. Everything in it had something to do with death. The waiters wore undertaker's black. Table linen and drapes were black. Coffins stood around the walls, upended, and the waiters stood in the coffins when they weren't circulating around among the tables which, by the way, weren't tables; they were coffins, too, resting on trestles, with four to six people seated around each. Light was given from candles, church tapers, of the sort used at a wake.

Old stuff on the Continent, but kind of new in New York. There ought to be a half-column in it, I thought, as I got to Macey's place.

His address was that of a fair-sized office building on West 45th Street. But he wasn't holding his rehearsal in the café room itself. The decorating on that wasn't quite ready yet. He was holding it in a vacant display room on the street floor of the building.

MACEY, a plump little man of sixty with snow-white hair and red-apple cheeks met me at the door. He greeted me profusely, and was only sorry there weren't about ten of me. Publicity is everything in a venture like his; and the more reporters the merrier.

"The main feature of the new Café Styx will be its exclusiveness," he said, as he took my elbow and guided me into the vacant storeroom off the building lobby. "I'm only going to have tables for forty people. The cover charge will be twenty dollars to ensure the right kind of patrons. Such a small attendance won't give me much profit, but the café is a plaything rather than a business venture."

I swallowed my grunt at that. Plaything? Forty people at twenty bucks a copy is eight hundred bucks. Eight C's a night isn't a bad take in any man's language!

"I think I'll have the mob clamoring at the doors," Macey said smiling, "in spite of the charge."

Well, there was a good chance of that, too, I conceded. Put a terrific price on something,

publicize the prize broadcast, and sometimes the gang goes nuts over it. The Café Styx might fall into this category if everyone in New York knew it cost so much to go there.

You know how that works. "The boyfriend took me to the Café Styx last night," a girl could say, off-handedly. At once whoever she told it to could look at her with envy because she knew a guy who'd pay out forty fish just to get her and himself seated someplace where he could mingle with a lot more suckers! The ladies would devil their men to take them there, and the men would like to be known as guys who could afford that much.

"I guess you won't have much trouble collaring forty an evening," I nodded. "Let's see the works."

"You'll have to use your imagination," Macey said, pointing around the bare room. "The place downstairs will be very weird. Weird enough to give the most jaded nerves a thrill. Without the trimmings up here it might look kind of silly."

And it did seem kind of silly at first. But not later!

There were six waiters in the storeroom. They were dressed in regular street clothes, but you'd know they were waiters just the same. And there was a pretty little red-haired girl who I soon divined had something to do with hat checks. And there were two gorgeous blondes, almost like twins, who were to regale the forty exclusive customers at regular intervals with song and dance.

The nine were standing around the big bare place looking kind of sheepish.

"We'll start," Macey said in a loud voice. And they snapped to attention.

"This gentleman and I will be customers," he went on. "Go through your parts as I've told you how to do."

He led me back to the door, and turned the light switch there. The big room got pretty dim, with only the late afternoon light coming in at the far windows. The six waiters lined up along one wall, and stood with arms folded and faces blank.

Macey walked me forward from the door as though escorting a woman.

"We cross a bridge here," he said. "In the real café room there's a little river, water with a couple of gallons of ink in it to make it black. It circulates around and comes under a small bridge. That's the River Styx. See?"

I said I saw.

"I thought for awhile of having a little boat take

the customers across, with an old guy dressed up like Charon to push it. But that would be too expensive, so we just cross a little bridge. Now we're in the café room." We were in the center of the display room. "We seat ourselves here, at a table made of a coffin."

We sat down in two stained oak chairs looking lonesome in the big room.

"Waiter," said Macey loudly.

The nearest of the six standing with their arms folded walked to us. And I got a kind of shiver at the way he acted.

He was a tall, thin guy, as were the other five. He sort of stalked instead of walking, coming at us stiff-legged, with his arms still folded. His eyes looked glassy, and his face was dead white with deep lines in it.

"He's supposed to be a walking corpse, like the rest," Macey told me. He didn't have to tell me—I could guess that!

The man never said a word. He just came to the "table" we were supposed to be sitting at, and stood there.

"Very good," said Macey to the man. "Cigarettes!"

The red-haired girl started at that, and walked toward us.

"A little economy," Macey said. "The hatcheck girl is also the cigarette girl."

"She's also a kind of sick girl right now, isn't she?" I said, staring at her.

I've said she was pretty. She was more. She was beautiful. Not as statuesque as the blonde entertainers, but good looking enough for any guy. But she didn't look right at the moment. Her face was white as a sheet, and her eyes were wide and starry.

Macey's lips twisted.

"I'll have to fire her, I think. No, she isn't sick; she's just superstitious. She thinks this death business might mean bad luck."

She came up to our chairs.

"I'll have two packs of cigarettes," Macey said.

The girl went through with her act. She didn't blink an eyelid or move a muscle. She stood there, playing dead on her feet. Macey pretended to make change, and take cigarettes from a tray she wasn't carrying.

"You're not very talkative," he said with a grin.

It was a cue line, I saw; something a customer might say.

"Corpses are never talkative," the girl came back docilely, her voice a monotone. "And I am a walking corpse in this place of the dead . . . *Oh!*"

For a second her self-control cracked. She stared at Macey and me with wild eyes. Horror was in her face. Then, as Macey glared, she bit her lips and came out of it.

"If you're a corpse I'm an undertaker's assistant," said Macey, still in his role of fresh customer. "How about a date?"

"It isn't wise to make dates with death," said the little red-haired girl.

Then she gasped and fairly ran from us, cowering in a dark part of the room. The two blonde beauties laughed aloud, and a couple of the waiters snickered. But the girl paid them no attention. She cowered there, staring with wide, wild eyes at empty air.

"Yes, I'll have to fire her," said Macey. "Now we'll go through with the main feature of the evening. The midnight novelty."

He raised his voice. "It is now one minute to twelve," he said.

The dancing blonde looked as tragic as a girl can look when she's chewing gum. The singing one sang more sorrowfully. The waiters were like ramrods.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Macey said, addressing a non-existent crowd. "In thirty seconds we shall enter the land of the dead. At midnight all in the Café Styx become only animated bodies. Prepare and beware!"

He said to me out of the corner of his mouth: "How do you like it?"

Well, I didn't like it. But I saw no point in saying so.

"It'll be a novelty," I said.

Macey straightened up and stared around. He began knocking on the back of his chair. One, two, three—twelve strokes.

"It is now midnight." I heard the strained breathing of the others in the place. "Twelve! The witching hour! Ladies and gentlemen—*death is here. . .*"

There was a scream. I hope I never hear another one like it. The hair on my neck crawls when I think of it.

The scream was followed by a flopping thud. The waiters began running toward the dark corner where the red-haired girl had retreated, and Macey and I joined them.

She lay in a queerly huddled heap on the floor with her tapered silken legs bent at the knee as if she wanted to run. And Macey cursed as he straightened up.

“Dead! Damn it! She must have had a heart like a leaky sieve, for a little playacting like this to get her. Oh, damn it!” He snapped his fingers in agitation that had all too little to do with the dead girl. “Well, I’m not going to put off the opening for this. It’s not my fault she scared herself to death. Come and have some champagne. Have anything—only be easy on this part of the story when you write up my café!”

I left without the champagne—and I did not shake Mr. Macey’s plump white hand on the way out.

That girl, lying there dead, got me. . . .

I THOUGHT the whole thing was pretty lousy. A joint where you were served by supposed corpses and ate off coffins! It was about the bummiest taste possible. But there had been an underlying eeriness about it—even in the rehearsal in a bare display room—that made me feel a little cold when I thought of it. I could understand how a person with a weak heart like the little hatcheck girl had let her nerves get keyed up to a point where the manager’s whiplash sentence, “*Death is here. . .*” could knock her over.

I wrote a story about the Café Styx that held every sentiment I had against it. I knocked that joint from here to breakfast. I told in detail how the red-haired girl had passed out from the shock of the rehearsal—how play-death had become the real thing. I intended to kill Macey’s place before it was ever born.

And I was a sucker for trying it! I forgot the adage that only one kind of publicity beats the favorable kind, and that’s unfavorable publicity. The mugs were falling over themselves next night to get in at the opening. . . .

I GOT there at eleven with Alice Carter. Bring a girl, Macey had said, so I’d fit in with the crowd and not be a stag and therefore conspicuous. Bring a good-looker, he had added. So I’d phoned Alice, who has copper-brown hair and brown eyes you could light cigarettes at, and streamline curves that, in the white satin evening dress she wore, made the other dames bite their lips and hate her. Alice Carter, who is the future missus—but, I’d had a job

getting her to come.

“How morbid!” she exclaimed over the phone when I gave her a little description of the atmosphere of the Café Styx. “That’s not my idea of a good time—to eat off coffins and be served by dead men. It’s blasphemous, somehow!”

I felt as she did. I could see how such a joint would thrill jaded senses. But the prospect didn’t thrill Alice’s or mine. Guess our senses aren’t jaded, because we both hated the idea, and I only went because the paper told me to, and she only came along because she kind of likes me—naturally.

We entered the lobby of the office building in which the café was located. At least three hundred people were there, having read my half-column in the paper and being anxious to be among the forty allowed inside. It was an odd crowd, top-hatted and colorful, in a lobby devoted during the day to soberly-clad business people going up in elevators to their offices, and at night deserted save for the bunch going through it and to the basement where Macey had located the weird café.

Downstairs, Macey himself was at the door, behind the red plush rope that kept the crowds back. He let the first forty in, and then shut the door. And Alice and I got our first good look at the joint.

It wasn’t much like the bare display room upstairs in which I’d seen the rehearsal! It was, as Macey had boasted—plenty weird.

Around the underground room were six coffins standing upright against the walls. In them the six waiters stood, glassy-eyed, frozen-faced, with arms folded across their chests. They were not in waiters’ clothes. They were clad in black tights which fitted their bodies like skins and on the fronts of which were faintly to be seen the outlines of skeletons.

The café room was draped in funereal black throughout; the linens were black; even the dishes had black bands around them. Ten coffins on trestles surrounded a scrap of dance floor, with four chairs around each coffin. The hatcheck doorway was shaped in the outline of a skull, with the counter painted to represent the top of a row of decaying teeth. Between it and the room was the little black River Styx Macey had mentioned.

Alice and I walked over the bridge and seated ourselves at one of the coffins. Opposite us were an oldish young man with a silly grin on his face and a

pretty black-haired girl, who was staring around with large eyes and making wisecracks that didn't sound as if she quite meant them.

Alice looked at me with eyes in which there was no humor.

"This is blasphemous," she said, as she had over the telephone. "Meeting in a crypt of a place like this to dance and be entertained, with burlesque death all around us. It's just too sickening!"

I shrugged. It was pretty terrible. The dim light from a score of great candles flickered over, the polished black lids of the coffins which were our tabletops. It shone dully on the staring eyeballs of the "dead" waiters. It glinted from the inky black waters of the River Styx, and made dancing distorted shadows behind the forty seated people; shadows like monsters ready to leap and devour them. If I'd thought the rehearsal was eerie, I was nuts. It wasn't in it compared to this!

"I keep thinking of the girl who dropped dead yesterday afternoon," murmured Alice, as if she'd read my thoughts about the rehearsal. "Do you suppose it could have been some sort of punishment for playing such a part. . . .?"

"Punishment?" I said, frowning.

"Yes. I don't think Death would like this playacting, this burlesque of the grave."

"Death isn't a person; it's only what happens to you when you stop breathing," I said, acting more hardboiled than I felt. "I don't go for this graveyard stuff at all, but I guess there won't be any 'punishment' coming out of it."

The orchestra, five men in black tights like the waiters, started playing. Alice and I danced, with nineteen other couples dancing cheek to cheek around us. The music was a funeral march set to foxtrot cadence.

The people in the place were glittering of eye, hectic of color. The women's voices were shrill and feverish as they laughed at the corpselike waiters and exclaimed at the novelty of eating off of coffins. The men's were almost as high, almost as hysterical. Macey had got his jaded crowd, all right! And their night-worn nerves were getting the kick from it that he had foreseen.

Alice pressed my arm as we walked from the floor back to our table, or, rather, our coffin.

"These people laughing and dancing," she said with a shiver, "with death all around them. It's almost biblical. It's obscene, defying death, making fun of the tomb. Some orgy like this must have

been going on in the temple when the letters of fire appeared on the wall. People like these must have filled Sodom and Gomorrah, before the great destruction."

"Hey, you're getting pretty highbrow for a reporter." I tried to laugh, but my laugh was a flop; for I felt just as she did.

The whole business of the Café Styx was too much like getting drunk and disorderly at a funeral to suit me. Drunk and disorderly were precisely the terms to fit that crew.

All of them—men who lived only by electric light after ten in the evening, and girls who were their companion-moths—were going rapidly haywire. The burlesque of death was intoxicating to their satiated senses, where it would have been only frightening and disgusting to normal people.

It was passing rapidly from make-believe to a sort of frenzied philosophy. Eat, drink and be merry, for death is all around us. Live fast, for you won't live long.

BY a quarter of twelve the choice bunch of night-rounders in the Café were having themselves an orgy that would have abashed the Romans.

The waiters in their gruesome black tights were kept busy stalking back and forth with drinks. Macey was trying to serve a dinner, too; but few people wanted food. They all wanted liquor, and were tight to the eyebrows and getting tighter all the time.

I remember small glimpses of those people. They are etched on my mind unforgettably.

The tall blonde girl in a blue dress cut low, with one shoulder strap slipping every few minutes, who chucked one of the death's-head waiters under the chin while the rest at their coffin-table laughed uproariously. The reeling man who tried to make a date with the new hatcheck girl, just as Macey had rehearsed the act with the one who had dropped dead, and was told that it was unwise to make engagements with death. The plumpish woman in black who stepped to one of the coffins, in which the waiters stood when not busy, and told her escort to please take the measurements, as it fitted her perfectly and she wanted a stylish fit after she was gone.

"Let's get out of here," said Alice, staring at a fat man who had a girl on his lap and was thumping his empty glass on the coffin lid in front of him to

attract the attention of the walking dead man who served them.

I looked at my watch. "Wait a little longer," I said. "At midnight the big blow-off comes."

"What's that?"

I told Alice what I'd learned at the rehearsal yesterday.

"At midnight the lights go dim. A spotlight plays out with this special kind of light that picks out a certain paint and makes it phosphorescent where you could hardly see it before. The skeletons you can dimly see painted on the waiters' and musicians' tights are of that paint. So you'll get the pleasant illusion that skeletons are waiting on you and playing music for you. Also Macey announces that it's the witching hour, and death is here and how do you like it?"

Alice caught her lip between her teeth. I'd never seen her so pale.

"This is—horrible!" she burst out, loudly enough so that the other couple at our coffin-table heard—and sneered. "How can people do this!"

She looked at me, seemed about to say something, then stopped.

"Go on," I said. "Get it off your chest."

"I've never felt before as I do now," she said finally. "I feel as though—something is going to happen here. Something awful!"

"A raid'll happen if Macey lets his guests get as mellow as this every night," I retorted. "Look at the jane in green, and the bald-headed bank president, or whoever he is, she's with!"

"Don't joke," Alice said. I could see the pulse in her throat pounding unevenly. "This has got far past a joke, or novelty. Look around you! Those waiters—are they acting, or are they really dead men waiting on us? The two blonde girls who entertain—are they alive and warm, or are they cold corpses?"

"Pretty hot corpses, I'd say," I joked, trying once more to be flippant. The two girls were in costume consisting only of several narrow strips of black. I'd never seen such enticing complexions or so much of them.

Alice's eyes made mine waver.

"Something dreadful is going to happen here," she repeated, "and I'd like to leave before it does."

"Now you're getting into the state the hatcheck girl must have reached yesterday when her weak heart knocked her over," I began. Then the distress, the dim horror in Alice's brown eyes stopped me.

"We'll go—right after twelve," I said, reaching across the coffin and squeezing her hand.

I WANTED to go right away. I'll admit it now though I wouldn't have then. I didn't want to wait till midnight. I kept remembering what had happened yesterday afternoon. I could see Macey standing up at the rehearsal and addressing the non-existent crowd: "Ladies and gentlemen, in thirty seconds we shall enter the land of the dead. At midnight all become only animated bodies. Prepare and beware!"

And then I could recall him saying: "Twelve! The witching hour! Ladies and gentlemen—death is here!" I could hear the scream of the unfortunate girl who had been cowering in the shadows, and hear the thud of her body as it fell. . . .

But I couldn't leave before midnight. I was covering this place, a not important assignment, but one I felt I must go through with.

I stole a look at the girl, now selling cigarettes from table to table, who was taking the place of the red-haired girl. This was a redhead too, more coarsely featured than the other. She was frightfully pale; but I knew that she, as well as the other employees, was made up for pallor. Would she scream and—

"I think I'll have another drink," I said.

At my glance, the waiter who took care of our table stalked up. He stared at me out of glassy, unblinking eyes. His hand touched mine as he took my glass, and I thought it was colder than a hand should be—like a dead man's hand. So much for nerves and what they can do to you!

The rest were through with their pretense of eating a dinner. They were all drinking more and more heavily. As for Alice and I—we hadn't even pretended to touch food. We'd had only a highball apiece. The fact that we were probably the only ones in the cafe who hadn't eaten anything was made much of later by the police in their persistent search for a natural explanation of what happened there that night. . . .

At five minutes of twelve the two blonde girls came onto the scrap of dance floor, to do another of their numbers. I felt a little chill go through me as they began the act they'd pulled at the rehearsal yesterday, just before the red-haired kid passed out and on.

One began singing the lugubrious song about the river being her destination because her sweetie

had left her. The other began a lithe, slumbrous dance to the funereal strains of the song.

The men and women, packed in the room and all doing figuratively what the one girl had done literally—chucking death under the chin—leaned forward to stare with lustful eyes at the nearly nude bodies of the two. The waiters, relieved for a moment of their duties, stood with folded arms and dead faces in the upright coffins.

Then, at two minutes of twelve, with a suddenness that brought a universal gasp, the candles in the café room flickered out. I don't know what device Macey had thought up to extinguish them all at once, but it was done. For a second the room was in darkness, and then a spotlight burst into flame from over the door, and another gasp came from the crowd.

These revelers were struck with something more than surprise, even though they were so tight by now that you wouldn't think they could tell light from darkness. The spotlight was the one I'd described, picking out the phosphorescent paint on the black tights of the employees.

Instantly the orchestra became five skeletons, thumping at piano and drums, drawing bowstrings over violins, playing the saxophone. In the six coffins, upended along the walls, six skeletons stood. The hatcheck girl, dressed in black silk tights, became a stiffly perambulating skeleton. At the center of the room, dancing and singing to funereal music, were two dazzlingly white, almost nude feminine bodies.

THAT last touch added ghastliness to the picture in a way it is hard to describe. Had all there become skeletons, it would somehow have been less nerve-racking than to have these two remain as they had been, to dance and sing with bodies so white they looked blanched among skeletons of the long-dead.

"My sweetie's gone and left me so I'm gonna die," crooned one of the two, while the other writhed in a dance representing the last spasms of death.

"My God, I can't stand it," whispered Alice. "Get me out of here!"

Macey's voice suddenly sounded out. At the sound of it the two entertainers stood still on the dance floor. The waiters stiffened more than ever like waiting skeletons in their gruesome sentinel boxes. The hatcheck girl became motionless,

leaning over a coffin-table while a man took a cigar from her tray. I felt a wave of cold sweep over me.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "In thirty seconds we shall enter the land of the dead. At midnight all in the Café Styx become only animated bodies. Prepare and beware!"

The crowd shrieked and laughed hysterically. "Beware!" a dozen people mocked, booing after they had rasped the word in a mock villain's hiss. Macey grinned, too.

But I saw the piano player get up suddenly, as though a cold hand had touched his shoulder, and slide through the curtained doorway in the rear through which the almost nude blonde entertainers had come. It was a retreat that was almost a flight, as if he couldn't bear any more of the grim masquerade.

"Prepare and beware," the drunks and their shrilly laughing women kept echoing.

Then Macey held up his hand again, and there was silence. He had his watch in his hand and kept looking at it.

From somewhere concealed behind the sable drapes of the walls a clock chimed. One, two, three—slowly twelve notes rang out. As they sounded, one by one those seated at the coffin-tables turned to look deeply into each other's eyes, as Alice and I were doing at the moment. And in the gaze of all there was, for the first time, doubt and a vague realization of the unwholesomeness of the thing they were doing.

But Macey didn't seem to catch any of this, or to hear the strained way the breathing of most in the room sounded.

"It is now midnight," he called, after the last stroke of the clock. "Twelve! The witching hour!"

I saw the piano player come back into the room, silently, and take his place again; and as I saw his tall, emaciated figure, I was bewildered. He seemed to have recovered very quickly, because only half a minute had elapsed since he had left, hurriedly, as if he could bear no more of the tragic burlesque.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Macey cried. "*Prepare . . . death is here. . .*"

THE emaciated piano player slowly turned on his stool.

I don't know how it was I happened to be looking at him. Pure chance, I guess. Anyway, I was. There was something about him. . . .

I couldn't see his face, of course. With the

spotlight, the employees had dropped black masks over their faces on which were painted skulls, to go with the skeletons their bodies had become. So all I saw of the piano player's face was a gleaming, phosphorescent skull.

"I can't stand it!" Alice's shrill whisper rang out.

Macey said once more: "*Death is here!*"

He faced the orchestra and lifted his hand. . . .

There are moments that beggar language, and this was one of them.

With that lift of the hand, the orchestra was again to start playing a funeral march. The waiters and the hatcheck girl were to parade around the dance floor, seven skeletons with the smallest skeleton leading.

But none of that was done. Nothing happened.

The orchestra didn't begin to play. The waiters didn't parade, nor did the girl. Everyone was moveless, and everything was silent.

Silent? God, it was quiet! You could hear the clock behind the drapes tick. You could hear the hoot of a taxi up on the street. You could hear an elevator somewhere carrying a lonely night office worker down from his overtime.

That was all you could hear. In the café itself, there was not one sound.

"Well," I said to Alice, not quite recognizing my own voice, "why don't they start something? Is this a gag?"

My voice fell. It had sounded like a trumpet call in the ghastly silence. Alice was staring at me with parted, blanched lips and dazed eyes.

No one else in the place looked at me, or moved, or said anything!

I could feel my heart begin to hammer in my throat, and the salt sweat sting my forehead. This silence! This motionlessness!

"Macey!"—I called, my voice high and cracked.

Macey paid no attention. He stood where he was, facing the orchestra, hand upraised. And the orchestra sat rigid, no hand touched to instrument, five skeletons in the eerie beam of the spotlight. . . .

No, not five. Four. I saw hazily that the piano player was gone again, somewhere, somehow.

"Oh, God!" whispered Alice at last. "These people—look around—see . . ."

Seconds to realize what had happened! Seconds to believe it. For some things are unbelievable in spite of the proof of the eye!

THE two at the table with us had frozen into immobility as absolute as that which held Macey and the orchestra. The man sat upright in his chair, staring straight ahead at empty air. The girl, elbows on coffin-lid, chin on hands, also stared blindly at nothing. All the others were the same way—men and women like life-size dolls with the springs unwound—only somehow more terrible than any dolls.

Then, like an echo of Macey's words—save that an echo cannot come a minute after sound—came the dim whisper: "Ladies and gentlemen, death *is* here. . . ." At least I thought I heard it, and Alice thought she did, too, though neither of us could swear to it.

Then things began to happen. . . .

Alice's scream ripped out, awful, hoarse—the scream of one whose reason is tottering. And I saw what she was looking at, and shouted, too.

Macey!

His plump, white hand was sagging, and as his arm lowered from the signal the orchestra had never followed, his body lowered too. It sagged toward the floor, hit it. I'd heard a thud like that before—the zopping thud of the hatcheck girl's lifeless body, yesterday afternoon.

Macey lay where he had fallen. There was another thud, and I saw, with eyes that seemed to see through red mist, that one of the orchestra had slumped from his chair. The same awful thud came from behind us somewhere, and then still another, as a waiter fell slowly out of his coffin, like a leaning skeleton, and smashed squarely on his face on the floor.

"*God in heaven!*" screamed Alice. "*They're all—They're all—*"

The girl opposite us sagged sideways, slowly. Her chin slipped off her hands, her elbows slid from the coffin-top. In an arc that seemed to take ten seconds to complete, her body bent oddly in the chair. She thudded to the floor head first, body following in grotesque and angular curves.

Panting, with her hand squeezed to her breast and her eyes maniacal, Alice sobbed out the words that were turning my own brain to molten lead that seared my skull.

"They're all—*Oh, God, they're all dead!*"

This time the dim whisper I thought I had heard came again—and it *was* an echo. Though this, also, is something I'd hesitate to swear to.

"*All dead—all dead. . . .*"

But while the dim whisper was sounding I was stumbling, with the unconscious body of Alice in my arms, toward the door.

As I walked I had to step carefully, to avoid trampling on expensively clad forms that lay in heaps among the coffin-tables and on the dance floor, like worms whose pallid lengths dot the spring sidewalks after a heavy rain. . . .

YOU read the headlines months ago: *Poisoned Soup Kills Fifty*. And the further account: “Last night at the Café Styx, opened for the first time, fifty men and women died from poisoned food. The café, decorated to resemble the famous Café Morgue of Paris, became in tragic truth a morgue when all the diners, the waiters and the entertainers, collapsed and a doctor, called in from the street, pronounced them dead. It is almost a certainty that poison put in the consommé is responsible for the wholesale murder.”

Sure, I wrote that. But now I’m writing what really happened that night, and you can take it or

leave it. Poison in the soup! The waiters didn’t drink any soup, nor did the orchestra; and they were found dead. Nor could any autopsy discover definite traces of any poison. . . .

No, I don’t know the straight of it. I only know that Macey said, “Death is here,” and from that moment on no one moved. And I know I seemed to hear a whisper, “Death *is* here,” when I saw the piano player leave the room and seem to come back again in a few seconds and turn his skeleton face slowly on the assembly in the Café Styx.

But that can’t be possible because the man was found later in a rear dressing room so deep in a fainting spell that he couldn’t possibly have moved—did not, indeed, move for many hours afterward. But if it wasn’t he, then who—?

Oh, hell, I give it up. I can’t even figure out why Alice and I were spared, unless it was because we didn’t participate in spirit in the deathly burlesque. But you can see now, I guess, why I fell in with the prosaic poison theory of the police, even though I was there that night—and know better!