

THE MYSTERIOUS MR. E

Jack Storm

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The crouching, crawling figure of the man moved through the dank mist of the river front, slowly but with the stealthy silence of a jungle beast.

He wore a cap, pulled down over his forehead. His clothes were cheap and dirty, like the clothes of the rat pirates that infested the river front, stealing a little from one boat, a little more from another. Never more than a piece of anchor rope which could be sold for a few dollars, or a crate of freight that could be sold to the same fence for another few dollars.

He slithered along the river bank, toward the old and deserted warehouse that stood like a ghostly memory of other days when river business was flourishing.

He reached the door of this old warehouse, slipped inside; then he stopped suddenly. Somewhere in that dank darkness he heard a sound, the soft creaking of an old board as a man tiptoed over it.

Then the river rat moved forward, feeling the board floors with his hands to make sure that he didn't step in a hole or on a rotten board. He came to the wharf faintly outlined against the blue mist that reflected off the water.

A powerful motorboat, hidden under the wharf, cast shadows dancing over the water.

The river rat crouched lower, trying to hide his body against the rotting planks of the wharf floor. He didn't move as the men passed him.

And then—

A man gave a cackling laugh in the darkness. A belying pin swished the air. It thudded with a sickening crash on the head of this river-rat pirate!

He had started to rise to meet the man with the cackling laugh. The belying pin had met him and he went to the floor of the wharf with a muffled groan.

"O.K., Spud," a voice said in the darkness. "Get this lug in the motorboat. We aint got no time to waste here. The boss is waiting."

Two men came out of the darkness and picked up the inert body, carried it down to the motorboat and tossed it in the rear compartment.

A minute later, the motorboat was skimming over the water, its muffler choking all sounds from its powerful engine.

It shot out into the middle of the river, took a sharp turn to the right and went downstream until it coasted to a silent stop at the side of a luxurious yacht.

The inert form in the rear of the motorboat was picked up, carried up a ladder and across the deck into a room in the aft quarters of the yacht.

Here he was thrown on the floor, at the front of a large black teakwood desk. A man sat behind this desk. He was tall and well-dressed and had the earmarks of a playboy; yet his face was thin and cunning and his eyes held a peculiar expression.

"We did as you ordered, boss," one of the men said. "We caught this guy sneaking around the old wharf."

The man on the floor stirred and his eyes fluttered, then opened. He was still stunned from the blow on the head, but stark amazement crept into his eyes as consciousness came back.

His dirty cap was gone and his hair was a flaming red. His face was young and boyish and freckled. His eyes were blue and dare-devil.

He shook his head weakly, raised his body up on his right elbow and stared at the man behind the teakwood desk. He blinked once and then again as he stared at the face of the man.

"Well, my young hero," the man behind the desk said in a softly modulated voice, "your curiosity and your

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excellent police work have finally landed you where you wanted to be—on the yacht of the mysterious Mr. E."

Patrolman Danny O'Rourke now blinked the third time. He struggled weakly to his knees and then finally got to his feet. He stood swaying weakly in front of the teakwood desk.

The mysterious Mr. E! Danny shook his head slowly, trying to make sure he wasn't in a grotesque nightmare. The mysterious Mr. E., the man that had swept across the city for three months in one of the most amazing crime waves in the history of the city.

Banks were robbed in broad daylight in daring and amazing robberies. Guards and tellers were left dead, murdered with ruthless brutality that seemed almost diabolical. Children had been kidnaped, and hundreds of thousands had been paid in ransoms. Payrolls had been robbed, and more men and women had been killed.

The only clue the police had to this strange creature of crime and death was a letter E he always left behind in some form or other. The police dubbed him "Mr. E."

The city was covered by hundreds of special detectives, but no clue to the hide-out or headquarters of this mysterious Mr. E. had been found. He seemed to disappear with his loot like a phantom in the night after each robbery and each kidnaping.

It was fantastic and unreal, and the police were as helpless as children. And the public's cries of rage and indignation were answered with other brazen and brutal crimes.

Danny was a rookie. A month before he had graduated from the policemen's school and had been assigned to duty at the famous 17th Precinct, officered by most of the hardened veterans of the force.

These hard-boiled veterans had not taken to Danny. His enthusiasm irked them. Danny had left the university to enter the police officers' school because the name, O'Rourke, had always been on the roster of the police department.

But Danny's temper was like his hair—a flaming red. He didn't like the jokes the older men played on the rookies. He told the older men as much. They laughed at him and called him "Professor O'Rourke." They made his life miserable, and this misery became unbearable when Danny boasted that he could track down the mysterious Mr. E.

Danny had not been talking wildly. His mind was razor-keen. He had been the honor student in his class in the police officers' school and knew tactical science better than some of the instructors. He grasped the principles of crime detection with amazing ease.

His first beat had been near the river. He had seen several things that interested him. The first was the fact that at three o'clock each morning a truck stopped at an old warehouse. He had seen shadowy forms around the old warehouse.

Blunt and hardboiled Captain Bill Hudgins, in command of the 17th Precinct, had laughed at his theories about the warehouse and told him that all he saw were the river-rat pirates that infested the water front.

Danny decided to make sure. He decided to be a river-rat pirate at night. Three nights at this work enabled him to learn many things. He knew that somehow and in some way the mysterious Mr. E was using the river.

He didn't know how because he had checked every ship and boat on the river. The river patrol, under the command of Captain Hudgins, had twenty boats on the river, watching every ship and motorboat that passed out to sea.

Now, Danny knew the strange mystery of Mr. E. When the first flush of stark amazement had passed, he realized that there wasn't much mystery about it after all. The only man that could possibly have done what this strange crook had done and gotten away with it without suspicion from the police was the man sitting behind that teakwood desk.

And this man was Richard Flemming, the multimillionaire playboy whose escapades had filled the columns of the national press for years. The yacht was as famous as Flemming, himself. It had figured in countless scandals and had been the scene of many riotous parties.

No police officer would remotely suspect that this yacht harbored the gang of the mysterious Mr. E. Richard Flemming who owned most of the city's river front. He controlled the tenants of twenty warehouses. He could almost control the entire river; and with this control, he could operate as the most brutal and amazing crook the city ever knew, with an ease and impunity that made the police look foolish.

All this flashed through Danny's mind as he stood weakly in front of the teakwood desk and stared at the face of Richard Flemming. It wasn't a pleasant face. It never had been. It had always been too thin, too selfish, too

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cruel.

Years had brought dissipation to that face and made the lines deeper. Dark splotches were under the eyes. The cheeks were flabby and a sickly white. His hair was tinged with premature gray. His eyes were heavy from liquor, but in that heaviness was a satanic cunning and brutality.

Flemming was leaning back in his chair, smoking a cigarette. He was dressed immaculately, as he always dressed.

"A rookie cop!" he said. "The only cop in the city that had sense enough to suspect that old warehouse—amazing and interesting. In a few minutes the yacht will start out to sea, and somewhere out there this kid's body will touch bottom with plenty of weights to hold him down."

Danny's face remained expressionless. His eyes took in the room. Five of Flemming's henchmen were standing at his side. They were thugs and killers, but they had intelligence in their thin and cruel faces—far more intelligence than most thugs have.

The room was small. There was a door at Danny's rear. He didn't know where it led. There was a door to his right that led to the deck. Several long windows filled one side of the room, and Danny knew that he was on the top deck of the trim yacht.

As he stood there, he also knew that he was as good as dead!

His eyes remained on the door that led to the deck. He had one chance in a thousand if he got beyond that door.

Suddenly the yacht started to vibrate. It was a faint and almost indistinct tremor that seemed to come from the floor. Danny knew the yacht was moving slowly on the five mile course down the harbor that would take it out to sea—and to his doom!

He said: "Your plan to kill me sounds good, Flemming. But you have overlooked one thing. This paper here will tell you how much the cops know about what I suspected."

He took a paper from his pocket. Flemming got up. He snuffed his cigarette out and walked around the desk. Danny was holding a paper in his hand.

Flemming got near him, bent over to look at the paper—

Danny's arm went around Flemming's neck. Before any of the five henchmen around him knew what was happening, the body of Richard Flemming went hurtling over Danny's shoulder and crashed into the faces of two of his henchmen.

Danny then lunged in a headlong dive that carried him within a few feet of the deck door. He hit the floor, skidding on his right shoulder.

Two guns roared behind him! Two bullets clipped the floor near his head!

He crawled for the door. Suddenly from the rear came the shrill voice of Richard Flemming. The next thing Danny knew, two bodies crashed down on him. A blow caught him in the back of the head.

He twisted his body over on his right side, his knees coming up under him. His body went up, throwing the two men off him and his right shot out in a paralyzing blow that caught one of the men in the groin. He went down with a moaning groan.

Something crashed against the side of Danny's head, sending him sprawling back across the floor to the teakwood desk. He struggled to get to his feet. His senses were flying wildly. His body was numb and weak.

He got to his knees, Two men charged at him from opposite directions! They collided with him simultaneously and he went down with a feeling of nausea at the pit of his stomach.

Flemming was over him shouting orders for his men to tie Danny up. Ropes went around his wrists and then his ankles.

He was picked up, carried across the floor and then thrown through the door at the rear. He hit the floor with a sickening thud and the door closed with a bang.

It took him several moments to get his mind working again. There was a sickening pain in the back of his head. The feeling of nausea was still in his stomach. His arms and legs ached from the ropes around them.

He was lying on his back. The room was dark, so dark that he could not make out any outlines of furniture. The vibrations of the engines made the floor shudder. Somewhere out on the river came the shrill blast of a police tag.

A police boat! Danny struggled against the ropes around his wrists but they didn't give. Flemming's yacht was

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moving slowly down the river, past the twenty police boats that lined the five miles to the sea, checking on every suspicious boat.

Flemming's yacht wouldn't be a suspicious boat. It was known to the police because it was one of the most famous yachts in the city. It would move slowly down the river with its grim load of death, and no warning blast of a police siren would rent the air.

Danny twisted over on his back. It would take the yacht less than fifteen minutes to get beyond the river and the police boats.

The ropes around Danny's wrists cut deep in the flesh and he felt the warm blood flowing over his hands. He yanked at them again. A sharp pain shot up his arm, but the ropes didn't give. He flopped over on his side to get in a better position for leverage against the ropes.

Three minutes later beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. The pains in his hands and arms made him sick all over. But he continued to jerk and yank and twist his wrists.

The ropes were near his knuckles now and they would go no farther. The yacht was picking up speed. In a little while it would be beyond the police boats and into the ocean and then—

Danny gave one final yank of his right hand. The pain that followed him made him limp all over. He yanked again. The rope slipped over the knuckles. A third desperate yank and his right hand was free.

He lay on his back, breathing heavily. His arms and hands were numb, now. Every part of his body felt weak and sick.

The hands were free, but beyond that door was Flemming and his killers. Danny could hear them talking. Several times a man had come to the door, opened it, threw a flashlight on Danny and then closed the door quickly.

Danny sat up, reached down to untie the ropes around his ankles. There was no feeling in his fingers and he couldn't tell if he were touching rope. Feeling came back slowly. He got the rope half untied when the door opened. He flopped back on the floor and lay inert.

He heard the man say: "He's O.K., boss. Maybe we'd better get the weights ready."

Danny didn't hear Flemming's answer. The door closed quickly. Danny sat up, his fingers working on the ropes around his ankles frantically. He got them loose.

He struggled to his feet and took several steps, his hands outstretched ahead of him. They touched a table. Silverware fell to the floor! But they fell on a carpet, and the noise they made was too faint to carry through the door.

A can turned over and something cold touched Danny's hand. There was an acrid smell. Danny raised his hand to his face. The odor caused his head to whirl, but, suddenly, he felt better and his brain cleared.

The voices beyond the door grew louder. Danny grabbed the can that had turned over. There was only a small opening in the top.

He turned to the right and took three steps. A wall stopped him. His hands touched the large windows of the room. He realized that he was in a small dining room, at the rear of the top deck. The room was really a sun room, with huge windows that were covered with drawn shades of a soft, porous fiber.

Danny's hands went over these shades in a large circular movement. His fingers traced the glass behind these shades. Again his hands went over them in the same circular movement.

He got to the rear of the room. The loud voices continued beyond the door. The yacht had picked up speed. It was nearing the end of the river.

Danny's hand went to his pocket and pulled out a match. He wasn't risking anything, now, because in a few minutes he would be dead. He walked back to where he had started tracing the glass.

He struck the match and—the door to the room opened. Two of Flemming's men saw the figure of Danny outlined in the weak glow of the match,

They gave a yell of alarm and two other men came charging into the room. Danny swerved, saw the bodies of the men silhouetted against the light that came through the open door.

He dove for their feet. His shoulder hit two pairs of legs and two men went tumbling over him! He came up with the speed of a bouncing ball and with a headlong lunge, went through the door and out into the room where Flemming was standing near the teakwood desk.

The men that had charged in the room for him came back through the door. Danny had lunged for Richard

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Flemming. Flemming quickly side-stepped and Danny's head crashed into the desk.

The last man out of the dining room slammed the door behind him. Danny rolled over on his side, caught his breath, but before he could move, Flemming had yanked out his automatic and had brought it down with a quick snap of his wrist.

The rookie saw Flemming's finger start to squeeze the trigger. Danny's feet shot out; the heels of his shoes hit Flemming on the shins. Flemming's gun roared, but the bullet went high; then Flemming came crashing down on Danny.

Danny whirled his right shoulder around, caught Flemming's weight and threw the famous playboy killer off. The gun dropped from Flemming's hand. Danny scooped it up, squeezing the trigger as he did!

A man aiming an automatic at Danny grabbed his throat as the gun roared and sank to the floor in an inert heap. Danny squeezed the trigger again. Another henchman went down with a bullet in his leg.

Danny whirled on the floor, propelled his body with his right leg and went sliding under the center of the huge teakwood desk. He threw himself to the right, out of range of bullets that could come under the opening.

Guns blazed and bullets came through this center opening! One grazed Danny's ankles, but the others thudded into the wall.

Flemming was screaming orders. Two men came leaping on the top of the desk. Danny didn't waste bullets on them. His fingers shot out, grabbed two ankles and his hands yanked toward him. Two men went flying back off the desk in a backward somersault.

The desk was sitting across the corner of the room, and Danny didn't have to worry about his two flanks. But he did have to worry about the grim fact that he only had three bullets left in his automatic.

Three bullets to stop four men; four men that didn't show any intention of making targets out of their bodies.

The barrage of bullets thudding into the desk suddenly stopped. Danny twisted his cramped body into a half-sitting position, waiting for the next move of Flemming and his killers.

The move came suddenly, without warning! The great desk started to move, Two men at the end were pulling it away from the wall. It moved slowly, inch by inch.

Danny whirled around to face this attack from his right. He saw a man coming through the narrow opening between the desk and the wall. Danny let him have a bullet and the man went down with a weak groan.

The desk moved more. It was three feet away from the wall. Danny couldn't see the men moving it, and he couldn't stop them. Then he heard a sound at his rear. The other end of the desk was being moved.

It was being moved faster. A man showed his shoulder, Danny let him have a bullet and he went down screaming with the pain of a shattered arm.

Only one more bullet remained in Danny's automatic!

Danny had no time to realize this fact. Three men were still out there, ready to kill him. One of these men was Flemming!

Danny didn't wait for them to charge his two flanks. He went over the lifeless body of one of the killers that lay in the space between the wall and the desk.

His unexpected charge caught Flemming and three killers off guard. Danny landed out on the floor. He was five feet from the door that led to the dock, with one of Flemming's men between him and the door.

The shrill blast of the yacht's whistle cut through the night, signaling that the yacht was heading into the high seas and to Danny's watery grave.

Danny didn't have time to think about that watery grave. He came up on his knees. Two guns roared at his rear! A bullet thudded into his back, sending him down on his face, blood spurting from his mouth.

His head was swimming and everything was blurred in front of his eyes. He whirled over on his back. He had one bullet left.

He brought his gun up. His finger squeezed the trigger. The gun jumped in his hand. The bullet hit the wall, two feet from Flemming or his men.

Flemming gave a sneering laugh and strode toward Danny. He looked grotesque and misshapen through the grayish film that was forming over Danny's eyes.

Danny saw him standing over him. He saw a gun come up. Danny's feet went out, cracked against Flemming's ankles. Flemming leaped back, cursing vilely.

"Want me to finish him, boss?" a voice said to Flemming. "A bullet through his head; then we'll put the chains

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on him and dump him overboard."

Danny didn't hear Flemming's answer. His ears were ringing and sounds came to him with a distorted strangeness. He was coughing blood. He knew the end was a matter of less than a minute.

He thought about Captain Hudgins—blunt and gruff and red-faced. He thought about the other old men at the precinct house. They would never know what happened. They would never know that he had discovered the identity of the mysterious Mr. E. and had been aboard his yacht.

Nobody would ever know what happened to him. Danny rolled over on his left side. Consciousness was leaving him.

Then he realized that Flemming was standing over him again. Through Danny's blurred vision he saw the gun come up. Danny didn't have strength to move an arm or a leg.

He couldn't stop that bullet that was going to crash through his head. He was too weak and too tired to want to stop it. His eyes were riveted on the little round hole at the end of the automatic. He waited for the spurt of fire and the bullet that would end his life.

He didn't hear the blast of the yacht's whistle again. He heard nothing and only saw that strange little round hole and waited for death.

Then came the explosion! It seemed to shake the floor he was lying on. There was another and then another.

He didn't see the little round hole of the gun barrel anymore. He didn't see anything. Consciousness had left him.

A vague and faraway mumble of voices was the first sounds that came back to him. They seemed strange and unreal. They grew stronger, and Danny started to remember what had happened.

He didn't open his eyes. The last thing he had seen was the little round circle of the barrel of the automatic in Flemming's hand. Flemming's finger had started to squeeze that trigger.

There had been a roaring explosion and everything went dark. He wondered if the bullet had passed through his brain. He wondered if he were dead—

"He's coming around," a voice said over him. "He's got a nasty wound but the bullet didn't hit a fatal spot."

Danny opened his eyes. A light blinded him at first, but slowly his eyes grew accustomed to it.

He blinked in amazement at the face he saw. He closed his eyes to make sure that what he had seen was real. He opened his eyes again.

The face of the blunt and hardboiled Captain Hudgins was directly over him!

The captain's arms were holding his head up. A police doctor was standing next to Captain Hudgins. Danny looked around him. He was still in the room of Flemming's yacht.

The room was filled with policemen. Flemming was there, too; but he stood against the wall, handcuffs on his wrists. Two of his men were with him, also handcuffed, and detectives were at their side.

"How did you do it, Danny?" Captain Hudgins said softly. "We saw your signal. We couldn't believe our eyes; but when we boarded the yacht and heard the shooting, we got here just in time to save your life. We found bonds and other loot from robberies; so now we know that Richard Flemming was the mysterious Mr. E."

Danny looked at Captain Hudgins and grinned. "I guess I stuck my neck out and came near getting it chopped off," he answered. "I figured the mysterious Mr. E. was using that old warehouse and that if I snooped around, he would conk me on the head and take me to his ship or headquarters."

"I didn't figure what I'd do after I got here. I guess I'm just crazy—a rookie who thinks he is a hero. Anyway, I did get conked on the head and was taken aboard Richard Flemming's yacht. Then I knew Flemming was Mr. E. That didn't do much good, though, because he had no intention of letting me get away alive. I tried to make a break but he threw me, with my hands and wrists tied, in that dining room. It was there I got the idea about that signal."

Captain Hudgins' face was still puzzled. "How did you do it, Danny?" he said. "You could have seen that signal a mile away. One of my boats was near this yacht when the signal flashed. They radioed the rest of us and we got here in time to stop the yacht before it got out to sea."

"That signal?" Danny said with a weak laugh. "Didn't you ever play with fire ink when you were a kid, captain?"

Captain Hudgins shook his head.

"It's very simple," Danny replied. "All you need is some wet potassium nitrate. Take a pen, a small brush or, if

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you want a wide flame, use your finger. Smear the potassium nitrate over a porous cloth or paper; then light the potassium nitrate. It will burn but the paper and cloth won't. And when the potassium nitrate burns, you get a fire ink that can be seen at night for a long way.

"When I was thrown into that dining room, I knocked some silverware off a table and spilled a can of silver-cleaning fluid. The best fluid for cleaning silver is potassium nitrate. I knew that this was what was in that can when I smelled it. So I smeared it on my finger and wrote Mr. E across those large shades which were made of a soft porous substance. I wrote it large enough so it could be seen for some distance. Then I lit a match and touched off the end of one of those letters. As I did, Flemming's men came rushing in the room.

"It takes potassium nitrate a little while to fully ignite; so, when I charged out of the room and the men followed me, they didn't see that fire ink when the potassium nitrate started to burn, writing in red flame the name of Mr. E. I hoped you would see it and investigate. It was my only chance and I took it."

Captain Hudgins did something he rarely did. He laughed heartily and looked at Flemming, whose hate-twisted face was deathly pale.

"I don't know what started you on this crime career, Flemming," the captain said. "You have everything in the world—perhaps too much of everything and you needed a new thrill. It's funny, though, that you'd be trapped by a kid trick, and by the youngest rookie on the force."

Danny said weakly: "You're right, captain, I'm only a rookie—a crazy one at that—but I'll grow up."

"You mean you were a rookie, Danny," Captain Hudgins said. "A first-class patrolman isn't a rookie and that's what you are from now on."