

New York Gothic

Cary L. Friedman

It is a dark night in New York City, and that mysterious costumed adventurer, the Night Watchman, and his faithful young partner known only as “the Squire”—implacable, indefatigable foes of crime and injustice—patrol their city in their sleek black roadster, the Hellion.

“It’s getting chilly,” the Squire remarks. “I can feel it in the air.”

The Watchman, not one for small talk, merely nods his head.

“Times like this, I wish this costume had long pants. I thought—” But before he can finish his sentence, their conversation is interrupted by a pulsing searchlight stabbing through the night sky, announcing trouble.

Four minutes later, the duo arrives at police headquarters, heading straight for Commissioner Frank White’s office.

“What have you got for us, Commissioner?”

“That’s my problem. I might not have anything. I just don’t know what to think.”

“Oh no!” The Squire’s youthful exuberance is unrestrained. “What does that mean? We get enough puzzles from the Puzzler! Not you, too!”

“I don’t mean to be cryptic, Squire. Quite frankly, I don’t know what I mean. That is, if I have a crime or not. It might just be air.”

“It must be something if you signaled us via the Beacon. Why don’t you let us decide, Frank?”

“Well, just before I set off the Beacon, Murray Levine was in again, making a big to-do about his father’s death.”

The Squire grimaces. “His father’s death? His father was 96 years old! He passed away due to natural causes. What does the guy want?”

“Well, we certainly have no evidence to the contrary. Nevertheless, he claims his father was murdered.”

“What do you mean? Who would stand to profit from his passing? Murray surely doesn’t need the cash. Unlike his father, he is one of the wealthiest men in New York. Mr. Levine was just a simple old man, the last person I would target for murder.”

The Commissioner gives the Watchman a thoughtful look. “I would tend to agree with you, but listen to this fragment from a conversation we had here in the office yesterday.”

He presses the button on a tape player on his desk.

“Mr. Levine, you’re understandably upset. Your father’s death—”

“Murder, Commissioner.”

The Commissioner stabs the “stop” button.

“Not much to go on, wouldn’t you agree, Frank? Old people die every day.”

“I know. I have nothing solid.” He taps slowly and deliberately on his desk. “Just call it a hunch.”

“Based on what?”

“I did some homework. In the last fifteen years the statistics governing the mortality rates of elderly people in the Lincoln Park section have been—I don’t know—off.”

“What do you mean, ‘off’? It’s not a bad neighborhood. True, the composition has changed over the years since the 40’s when it used to be called ‘Little Jerusalem,’ but not for the worse. No motives, no evidence, no crime. What is it, Frank?”

“It’s the...I don’t know...the timing, I guess. Quite simply, old people only seem to die there in the fall—or, at any rate, most of the time they do. In the Lincoln Park district, the incidence of elderly people dying in the late fall skyrockets. I did a statistical analysis on the numbers, and there’s something definitely strange about the whole thing. Even allowing for seasonal factors, it’s still way out of proportion.” The Commissioner shakes his head. “The number of old people who die—it’s just too many. My gut is acting up—and it’s not just my ulcer. Or,” and the Commissioner looks sheepish, “it could be the fact that Murray Levine is one of the most powerful men in City politics!”

“I’ve learned to trust your instincts. We’ll look into it.”

A few hours later, the crime-fighting duo holds counsel in the subterranean war-room:

“Frank’s papers show that Max Cohn’s mother recently died at the age of 89 in the Lincoln Park neighborhood. In my civilian identity I know Max Cohn. We’ve been involved in some civic projects, sat on a few boards together. It would be entirely appropriate for me to make a condolence call.”

Entering the Cohn’s modest home, the Watchman—in his civilian identity of Steven Byrne—is greeted warmly.

“Thank you so much, Steven, for coming. But I’m afraid I’ll have to bring our visit to an abrupt end. I have to run to the synagogue, for the memorial prayers.”

“I understand. What a beautiful ritual. May the Almighty comfort you along with all those who mourn for Zion.”

As they walk out together, the Watchman notes the rapid pace at which Mr. Cohn walks toward the synagogue. As Mr. Cohn enters the building, the sounds of the service beginning waft out the window.

Later that night, on patrol, within the cockpit of the Hellion:

“Can you believe, two days later and I’m still black and blue from our tussle with the Grinning Gargoyle and his lackeys?”

“I’m not surprised. That was quite a death trap.”

“That was the least of it. His henchmen fight like the devil. And he seems to have an inexhaustible supply of them.”

“That wicked madman, how he inspires such loyalty in his minions... You’re lucky it’s just black and—wait! Of course! What a fool I’ve been!”

With that, the Nocturnal Avenger swerves the car into a 180-degree turn. Tires screaming, the car careens around a corner.

“What’s going on! Where are we going?” his youthful partner inquires. “Am I missing something here?”

“I know who killed those old people, and why,” the Watchman declares.

Despite the Squire’s pestering, he sets his jaw grimly and refuses to say anything more about it.

Just one hour later, the officers lead a little man to the waiting squad car. Watching from the shadows, the Squire turns to his mentor. “I still don’t get it,” he admits. “I mean, who is this guy, anyway? And how’d you peg

him as the murderer? His name didn't come up anywhere and he has no record or anything. It's like you pulled him out of the air!"

"He's the sexton—*gabbai* in Hebrew—of the last remaining synagogue in Lincoln Park," the Watchman explains. "He arranges the services."

"I still don't understand—"

"Ask him yourself."

The Watchman leads the way to the squad car, and then confidently signals the officer to wait.

The Squire asks the eternal question. The *gabbai's* eyes meet his, and never waver as he tells the gruesome tale:

"In every case it was an old person who was ready to die soon, anyway, and the shul needed a minyan. So many families moved away, and our members got older. Their children were successful, busy, forgot about coming to shul. It was a new generation. The only way they would come every day is to say kaddish for their dead relatives."

"But what's the significance of the season? Why kill them in the late fall?"

"It's when our regular members—all of whom are getting older—head to Florida for the winter. When October sets in, I know it will be nearly impossible to get a minyan together."

"How long have you been doing this, getting members to attend services in this fiendish manner?"

"Twenty years—since I read about the murder of a couple. They left a young son. I remember thinking, 'How convenient—he'll say kaddish for both at the same time.' It seemed perfect. And," he adds triumphantly, "we've never failed to make a minyan since!"

Their patrol ended, in their sleek roadster heading for their sanctum sanctorum—the ultra-secret Watch Tower—the Squire rubs his jaw where he has been hit.

"Pretty strong for an old guy," he remarks ruefully. "I can't believe he put me out with one punch."

"Try lifting a Torah scroll for *hagbah* using only the strength in your wrists, and you'll know what real power is."

"How do you know so much about this religious stuff? If I didn't know better, I'd swear that you've done it before."

His companion remains silent.

Breaking the silence, the Squire bursts out, "One thing still bothers me. What tipped you off, and sent us into that death-defying spin before?"

"Your comments about the Gargoyle's henchmen—his *minions*. All the children of the elderly who were murdered were interested in observing the mourning rituals properly. That includes saying the memorial prayers for the dead with a quorum—*minyan*—in the synagogue."

Squire remains quiet for a long time; then, shaking himself out of his reverie, remarks, "He's insane."

"Most *gabbaim* are. It's the power."

"What about those poor people who lost their parents? Hit you pretty hard, didn't it—with what happened to your own parents and all that?"

"No question about it. This was personal."

"You wish you'd had a chance to say kaddish? Would it have made a difference, you think?"

"I've been practicing my own brand of kaddish for the last twenty years, since my parents were murdered."

"That couple the gabbai read about. You don't suppose—?"



The author, a rabbi in New Jersey, would like to thank the gabbai of his synagogue for his heroic efforts in ensuring a minyan.